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# The Symbolic Connotations and Functional Relevance of Nicknames among the Bakor Speaking People of Northern Cross River State, Nigeria

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## Abstract

Listening to nicknames performed in Bakor community arouses a lot of curiosity about their meaning and usage. At first glance, the nickname sounds like an ephemeral composition that serves an immediate need and is discarded or relegated to the background. On a closer look and curious contact with the composers and performers of nicknames, particularly in traditional context however, one discovered the intricate reflection of culture that the nickname embodies. This writer's curiosity was allayed by Elders who told him emphatically that linguistically, nicknames serve as a veritable tool for the verification of the several levels of paradigmatic and syntagmatic manipulation of linguistic resources in a given language. Culturally, they are veritable reflections of the cultural norms and practices that authenticate and give credence and uniqueness to a particular culture; while ecologically, the nicknames serve as a means for the verification of landscape and ecological regions of an ethnic entity where they are used because the nickname conjures up images of the environment. The nickname, therefore, has symbolic and/or connotative implications in every culture where it is used. For this reason, traditional societies, more than all else, value the import of the nickname. This value is however not restricted to traditional cultures alone. Modern cultures have also come to imbibe the importance of the nickname particularly in computer technology and political or social life. The realization of the importance of the nickname has prompted this write-up on a survey of Bakor nicknames in an attempt to place them side by side with other Bakor literary artifacts and to determine how much value the Bakor attach to nicknames. The findings are that as linguistic and literary models, nicknames occupy the same place of importance in Bakor cultural lives as the famous monoliths since they also serve as vehicles for linguistic and cultural transmission as well as the depiction of Bakor geographical environment. The nickname thus becomes an invaluable facet of Bakor life.

**Keywords:** Nicknames, Symbolism, Functional relevance, Cultural authentication, Linguistic models, Ethnic identity

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*"Nne li tuba ebimbing, a tibaekane"*

*If a man calls you a bad nickname, he teaches you wisdom*

Ekajuk Proverb

## 1. Introduction

In today's conceptual framework of the world as a global village, culture serves as the defining yard stick for the delineation of all human races and the determinant of the distinction or similarity between peoples of the world. Among human races, therefore, there are traits or distinguishing features which may be totally different or which may dove-tail into each other in the social interactions between communities particularly in today's world. One such feature of human beings in the world is the practice of nicknaming, which, in itself, has different patterns and traditions throughout the universe but which seems to thrive best in predominantly oral environments that rely on the spoken word to enliven and dramatize speech in human interaction. This is because, oral tradition, rather than maintain static conditions, allows for innovations and the realization of implicit creativity in every culture. Nicknames, therefore, afford oral cultures the opportunity to indulge in the creative use of language or manipulation of linguistic resources to achieve different meanings for different purposes and situations, apparent or hidden. Conversely, written cultures which maintain a comparatively high degree of stability have tended to play down on the uses of nicknames since writing does not permit the full expression of the creative versatility of the nickname creator or user. Brett and Kate McKay (2012) posit that while the use of nicknames may be declining in cosmopolitan or metropolitan centres, where people have been individualized and isolated in their behavioral patterns, they (i.e. nicknames) offer the basis for interactional possibilities particularly in semi-educated or traditional societies because they are regarded as the spice of life and serve to enliven traditional discourse. This is particularly so as nicknames aid the flavoring of speech especially in the delineation of family or personal character traits within a designated environment or culture to aid or facilitate easy identification of objects or persons as well as provide added meaning to otherwise banal and ordinary words or phrases in the linguistic utterances of a particular community. This investiture results in graphic or symbolic representations which beautify the language while enhancing its appeal. Brett and Kate further argue that sociologists and anthropologists have studied nicknames and posited that they "can, infact, offer some fascinating insights into manliness and the bonds between them," which can only be deciphered beyond literal meanings of words. Nicknames are, therefore, significant not because of their literal meanings but as a result of the largely symbolic connotations they arouse in the consciousness of the composer or even the

audience who operate within the same linguistic environment where the nicknames are composed. Their meanings depend on the several associations they conjure beyond the literal meanings of the words in the language of composition and usage. The nickname's added meaning is often veiled just like the meaning of the symbol which is either public or private but becomes relevant when used in relation to the culture which provides meaning through the images that sustain the symbolic connotation of the nickname. Whether public or private, the meaning is culture bound or environmentally determined. Many other studies have been carried out on nicknames but mostly from the perspective of sociolinguistics. Mashiri (2004) and Khuboni (2003) centre on the social and linguistic functions of nicknames in Shona and Zulu communities; Morganet al. (1979) have examined the psychological potential of nicknames while Bechar-Israeli (1995), Lakaw (2006) and others have looked at the internet value of nicknames. There is also the Philipson and Huspek (1985) bibliographical entry on nicknames. Davey and Mackinnon (2001) have also explored patterns and traditions of nicknaming and the socio-cultural implications and interactional value of nicknames and their implications for societal cohesion and/or disintegration.

Following from Mashiri's assertion that "despite this fascination with nicknaming, little serious research has been done on African communities," this study attempts to examine the symbolic and functional relevance of nicknames with particular reference to Bakor community in Ogoja and Ikom Local Government Areas of Cross River State in Nigeria. The study is also aimed at revealing the content of nicknames as coded symbols of cultural practices that reflect the various facets of Bakor cultural life particularly the creative impulse evident in linguistic manipulation. The Bakor constitute a sub-unit of the Ejagham nation who occupy the Northern confines of the Geographical entity known as Cross River State in Nigeria (see Sandy Onoh: 1994; and Ganyi: 2009). Though Brett and Kate McKay aver that nicknames are no longer popular in modern day society, traditional societies still value them as Davey and Mackinnon (2001) have described them as the "storehouse of a culture's identity and values that are often different from the corporate perspective," (Acadiensis P.1). The usefulness of nicknames as storehouses of a communities cultural identity is not limited to traditional or rural communities and as pedzisi Mashiri (2004) has rightly observed "urban Shona speakers often use nicknames as linguistic resources to perform a variety of social functions in every day informal interactions." This means that the use of nicknames persists even in literate society but perhaps to a lesser degree than in traditional society which places emphasis on orality as the primary medium of communication. It is obvious that in a predominantly oral environment, there will be a prevalence of nicknames with associated symbolic meanings which surface from the various nuances of semantic or lexical manipulation of linguistic resources. V. De Klerk and B. Bosch (1997) have also argued that "the use of nicknames is socio linguistically complex as they serve a range of functions over and above the merely referential function fulfilled by the first name," and one is inclined to accept this assertion, but their position that nicknames offer avenues for users "to break the rules of language" remains highly contentious and unacceptable. This is because a study or analysis of nicknames in their context of creation and usage reveals much more to them than mere word play. One is as such more inclined to accept Mashiri's position that nicknames are no "mere verbal play," but through their symbolic connotations, contribute to an understanding of not just the cultural and social background of a community but also the ecological make-up of the environment or community where they are created and realized. In this parlance, Bakor nicknames can

be considered as useful indices for the study of the history, geography and migratory patterns of the people to their present day locations. This will, however, constitute a more comprehensive research requiring a heavy layout of resources to be kept for a later date. For this paper, I have chosen to limit myself to an analysis of selected indicative nicknames that, through their symbolic contents, serve as indices for the depiction of Bakor cultural norms and practices. I have also chosen to limit the collection of data for my analysis to Ekajuk, Nkum, and Nkim in Ogoja and only Nnam in IkomBakor communities. Further restriction to Ekajuk community became necessary to facilitate ease of collection in terms of proximity. Also, because the dialectical differences between these four communities are very minimal particularly between Nnam and Ekajuk while Nkim and Nkum are almost alike but close to Nnam and Ekajuk. I have not bothered about the minor linguistic differences since all of them emanate from a common ancestry (Yoder et al., 2008;Crabb, 1965). For the same reason also, the symbolic meanings of nicknames in these Bakor communities is similar and may have very minute differences if any while their analysis definitely offers an insight into the functional relevance of these names in Bakor communities generally. The study also aims at corroborating the assertion by Yoder et al that another intention of their socio linguistic survey of Bakor languages of Cross River State was "to verify whether the Ekajuk literature would be comprehensible and acceptable to speakers of other Bakor speech varieties (Yoder et al., 2008).

This is possible because nicknames possess the capacity to reveal not only the literary and linguistic richness of a language but also the degree of creative manipulation of linguistic and literary resources that is possible in a language that can help enhance graphic presentation of ideas and images inherent within that linguistic entity. Nicknames also easily portray the flexibility of language and literary variability evident in a language through their adept manipulation to reflect not only the milieu of their creation but also past events in the history and culture of the people who use them.

## 2. Origin and definition of nicknames

### 2.1. Definition

There is a plethora of definitions proffered for nicknames and the practice of nicknaming throughout the universal study of onomastics or onomatology as it was known in the past. Reference is made to the encyclopedia, Dictionaries and several Onomastic scholars, prominent among whom are Leslie Dunkling (1993), De Klerk and Bosch (1997), Dorian (1970), Leslie and Skipper (1990), Mcdowell (1981), Morgan et al. (1979) and several others. However, all of these definitions can be summed up in the single definition put forward in Wikipedia. Perhaps, what one needs to note here is that each of the definitions provided emanated from the peculiar interest of the scholar(s) and the need to satisfy a particular perspective from which he/they wish(es) to look at nicknames and why people indulge in their creation. For our purpose therefore, I wish to adopt the Wikipedia definition but quickly add that among the Bakor, the nickname is often totally unrelated to the proper name yet implicitly reflective of the cultural activity or character traits of an individual cherished by the community and peculiar to the individual. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia defines a nickname as

*... a usually familiar or humorous but sometimes pointed or cruel name given to a person or place as a supposedly appropriate replacement for or addition to the proper name, or a name similar in origin and pronunciation from the original name... but it is not interchangeable with the term "short for." It can also be the familiar or truncated form of the proper name, which may sometimes be used simply for convenience.*

With this definition in mind, one can then attempt to explore nicknames in Bakor as the definition seems to fit Bakor names that are not considered as birth names but which exist as venerable artistic depictions of Bakor life. They exist as monuments of not only individual but also societal depictions of cultural identity.

## 2.2. Origin of nicknames in Bakor community

The origin of nicknames in Bakor society like most African or other societies of the world can be traced to many cultural activities or human indulgencies that are prone to articulation through graphic representation. Nicknames become age old or ancient means of articulation of cultural predilections. Some nicknames are therefore as old as customs of the people who create them while others are transient and easily obliterated by changing circumstances. In this vein, several situations warrant the creation of nicknames including:-

- 1. PEER GROUP NICKNAMES:** Peer group nicknames are created by members who belong to the same group or age sect. In Bakor community, the most significant and easily identifiable group is the age sect which also remains the easiest source of nickname creation. Nicknames are here created for either the group or individual members who possess peculiar traits. Such nicknames are restricted to members while outsiders are forbidden to use them. These groups consist of members usually born about the same time or sometimes within a period of about five year's interval. Age sect nicknames sometimes ridicule or mock behavioral traits of members and laugh at their failures in life. Such names are created and given to individuals known to be prone to certain behavioral traits whether positive or negative. However, there are collective age sect names that denote characteristics of the group and/or portray their dominant features. Collective age sect names include "EbimNnang" or "the seating of the scorpion." Others are "Akpi" or "the Eagle," "Etaang" or "hired out," "Akpikpate" or "open arse," "Enyakinjam" or "tattooed backs" and "Mbokin" which meaning is not easily decipherable or is lost in history. Each of these nicknames has a long history behind it that reflects the contributions of members of that age sect to societal cohesion or portrays the peculiar indulgence of that group that marks them out as distinct or reflects a historical event that largely affected the lives of people at the time of their birth. "EbimNnang" is the Ekajuk age sect to which this writer belongs. The name simply serves as a warning to anyone who crosses or may wish to annoy a member of the age sect believed to be made up of young virile and active males who could easily react to the annoyance like a scorpion. Within the age sect also, close friends could still coin names by which they refer to each other. This writer has friends for whom he has coined nicknames and vice versa. "Eshi nob ikpo" meaning "the head that fits a cap" NOT "the cap that fits a head" is a name for a close friend. This implies that his head was too fat to fit any cap. "Okaibolo" meaning "wide ears" was his own nickname for me.

2. **FAMILY NICKNAMES:** These exist at two levels. There are the personal family nicknames and the family grouping or ward names. Though not very common, personal family nicknames do exist and they are coined by parents to describe childhood peculiarities of their children. Such names may stick and in few cases temporarily replace the birth names of the children. In Ekajuk community, “Agbomba” and “Ngaranjam” are nicknames designating twin birth and may not necessarily be birth names given by parents but are often used as replacements for birth names. Family ward names are group nicknames which include “Eshamjok”, “Eshamfung”, and “Agba” etc, all of which symbolic or functional meanings I have tried to explain later.
3. **WORK/SCHOOL NICKNAMES:** These are created to designate comraderie in work places or school environment. The nicknames indicate close knit relationship between work or school mates which again could be a guarded secret between the group members and closed to outsiders who may discover and use them at their own peril. E.g. “Mpi” meaning “bed wetter” which this writer and his classmates used to describe a close friend who was a bed wetter. Or “Lekpang” meaning “wide nostrils” for another close friend of ours. “Lekpang” is actually short for “nkpangheanwulanahnwol” i.e. “wide nostrils like the “nwol river”
4. **INHERITED NICKNAMES:** This category of nicknames is inherited either from ones family lineage or through the possession of the same birth name with an elder who is or was identified by the particular nickname in his praise or ridicule. This writers birth name is “Mowang” but in Ekajuk community, all those whose birth names are “Mowang” are also called “ AyukAbulu”, derived from a onetime Bakor tribal warrior who was notorious for stubbornness. His nick name was “AyukAbulu” to denote his constant refusal to stop fighting each time an inter-tribal war was called off. “AyukAbulu” simply means “to pay deaf ears”. The interesting aspect of the nickname however is that “AyukAbulu has gone beyond “stubbornness” to denote “deafness” hence a deaf person is easily called “AyukAbulu.” Young people who are unaware of the origin of the name restrict its usage to deaf people and so “AyukAbulu” symbolizes different degrees of deafness in Ekajuk, either deliberate or congenital.

In modern society, nicknames can be categorized into referential, sports, private, public or generic nicknames and are derivable from occupational practices. Brett and Kate McKay again opine that generally, group nicknames tend to solidify or test group relationship and solidarity so that even derogatory nicknames are condoned within the group and douse negative reaction. The nick name here enhances group assurance of well placed trust and loyalty.

In Ekajuk community in particular and Bakor generally, the creation of a nickname indicates intimate knowledge of/or association with the person or object so nicknamed. However, the nickname does not replace the original name permanently. For a nickname to become relevant and generally accepted, it must distill and tell a story about the nicknamed person which requires knowledge of the genesis or origin of the nickname. The nickname thus becomes a veritable instrument for the perpetration of Bakor life and culture through embellishment and symbolic references to past events initiated and actualized by those personages for whom these nicknames have been created. The nickname is here seen as a historical document and a

valued resort of accomplished artists or griot whose job it is to compose and recite the genealogies of Kings and warriors in most African Kingdoms or Chiefdoms. Since the Bakor are a warlike and story loving people who value achievement and courage, these exploits become the sources for the creation of nicknames. The nicknames in turn enhance the immortalization of warriors and Kings whose exploits led to the establishment of the several communities that make up the Bakor Union. Such nicknames of noble or famous Bakor sons include “EgburugburuNgidi” and “Mojo,” apparently adulterated forms of “brigadier” and “major” used to describe two illustrious sons of Bakor who supplied ammunition to the EkajukBakor during the British expeditions against the so called “warlike and stubborn Akaju” according to P. Amaury Talbot. This way, the nickname, as oral tradition, becomes a source for historical documentation while telling a story about certain individuals within the society. Creators and users of nicknames are therefore versed in the history and culture of the community from which these names are coined, because they coin names to reflect the background of the society. Usage outside a nicknames immediate context of creation is often determined by appropriateness and similarity of purpose or context of usage. Nicknames are mostly created and given by admirers sometimes outside the immediate family usually songsters or musicians and elders who keenly observe the personality traits or disposition of an individual which are aptly represented in the said nickname. Peer group members who are close knit friends also coin nicknames for their friends. Traditional or rural communities like Bakor therefore favor or enhance the effectiveness of nicknames because of the close knit nature of rural dwellers amongst whom everyone is known and about whom a story can emanate and diffuse within the environs thus necessitating a nickname. Traditional societies also emphasize satire as a mode of correction of deviant behavior. For this reason, praise or ridicule becomes an effective tool for societal control. Praise songs, maiden songs and satirical songs along with several dance patterns and nicknames easily become effective media of praise and ridicule reflecting societal approbation or disapprobation of personal or group idiosyncratic peculiarities. Nicknames also become symbolic representations of society’s disavowal or sanctions against misdemeanor or abhorrent behavior. Instances include a name like “eblikon”, which when used as a nickname represents a ragged and unkempt individual undesirable in the society and who people find difficult to do away with but which is actually the name of a bird in Ekajuk ecology. “Eblikon” is however detested for its ritual or premonitory associations. “abanashingatem” is an epithetical or descriptive nickname given to every accomplished dancer and simply means “best dancer”. As a nickname, it eulogizes or praises dance accomplishments but the name is derived from a small bird in Ekajuk environment often seen dancing or prancing about on a lonely road. The belief is that the little bird celebrates life alone and dances happily because he has not been spotted for destruction by human beings. “mrikpa” literally means “wasp” but is often used as a nickname for hot tempered individuals whose actions cause pain and hardship to others in the community. “njenaborndi” is a beautiful nickname for a thief.

The effectiveness of nicknames as symbolic representations of cherished or abhorrent behavior in a close knit society like Bakor arises from the fact that the closeness creates a bond of unity which allows for the sharing of similar ideological standpoints that help to define the cultural identity of the Bakor unit. The nickname is thus easily configured as being symbolic of a facet of Bakor life which is projected for approval or disapproval. In Bakor society, nicknames therefore reflect different aspects of life and their uses portray

degrees of institutionalization as reflected in the dichotomy that sometimes exists between the original or supposed real name and the nickname of the bearer which reflects either his occupation or character trait and disposition. Nicknames become embedded in societal life as they conform with the communal or group affiliation that portray the norms cherished by the community or group in question. The nickname must therefore be deft, solicit the enhancement of humor which can be harsh and finally build up a nuance, and, like satire, become an integral societal mode aimed at ridicule and correction of deviant behavior in society through mockery and laughter. For this reason, Mashiri's (2004) observation that "nicknames are referred to as transient because they may be short-lived while Some are used as address terms in certain settings and not in others, and sometimes at a certain stage in one's life and then abandoned and forgotten at a later stage," may not be entirely applicable to the Bakor environment where the nicknames are more often than not symbolic of or derived from past cultural practices which still bear relevance to contemporary situations. Such names become fairly stable even though seemingly transient, e.g. "Ajade" which is an old regular Bakor or Ekajuk birth name but which is also used as a nickname for one who steps on people's toes irreverently or disobeys rules. As a birth or nickname, it has become institutionalized. Also, "Njan" and "Njok" are Bakor birth names meaning "Iroko" and "elephant" respectively. However, used as nicknames, they symbolically denote "strong willed" and "robust" or "bulky" personalities. Nicknames can also embody restricted codes of communication amongst close peer group members who may wish to encode their intentions in names that symbolize certain indulgencies of the group. Bakor family ward nicknames come under this category of nicknames. "**Eshamjok**" family ward is known as "**the children of the Elephant**" because the family constitutes the largest ward in Bakor so they are as large as the "Elephant". "**Eshamfung**" are "**the children of the Buffalo**" which connotes wildness while "**Eshamkpen**" depicts a troublesome ward which has become disgusting. "**WobKpen**" in Bakor means "**you are disgusting**" so "**Eshamkpen**" are the children of the disgusting one. What this simply means is that the ancestral ward leader of this ward was a notorious person hence; members of his ward inherited that nickname for identification. However, this significance is lost to history and the family unit is simply known as "**Eshamkpen**" ward without any derogatory connotation.

### 3. Symbolic and functional significance of Bakor nicknames

Having tried to ascertain how nicknames originate or are created in Bakor community, we can now turn to the importance of these to mankind and to the average Bakor man in particular and how the names function in the society. Koopman (2002) along with Dent and Nyembezi (1980) have argued that the nickname is principally meant to play or to amuse. They posit that the nickname creator's main concern is amusement and/or to tease the person for whom a nickname has been coined or created. Though this can be considered a succinct reason for nickname creation generally and even in Bakor society, it certainly isn't a major reason for that indulgence. There are several reasons that could be adduced for the creation of nicknames and each society may have its own emphasis on a different reason for its attraction to nicknames. Researches have established that the nickname is an extra name and different communities have their own methods, patterns and purposes for the coinage or creation of nicknames. Khuboni (2003) has therefore argued that "zulu nicknames tend to be bestowed as a result of behavior, attitudes, personality traits or physical features." This

assertion also fits the exercise of nicknaming in Bakor society and one may add, as already stated, that in Bakor, nicknames also reflect the ecology of the environment and the culture of the people which accounts for the interest in them. “nkon” literally means “bee” but the bee is almost always found where there is palm wine and there is much palm wine in Bakor community so “nkon” has become a Bakor nickname for the “drunkard” but the nickname is not just applied to every heavy drinker, it is, instead, restricted to those who drink heavily but cannot produce the palm wine. The bee provides something else – honey; in the same way, the drunkard provides amusement and entertainment. Since palm wine is a common product of the Bakor people and is used for ceremonial purposes, the drunkard who feeds himself from the palm wine becomes an invaluable asset of entertainment to the people and derives from the ecology his catalyst for action. Similarly, “akankul” is a nickname for a powerful or hard worker. It simply means he who sleeps in the bush. The person may not literally sleep in the bush but returns home late and so “akankul” could be used to describe him though it could also be a derogatory nickname for a lazy person who spends much time on the farm but produces no food. The same “akankul” could be used to denote a thief who stays late in the farm after others have gone home, not because he is working but so that he can steal from other people’s farm produce. Bakor nicknames rather than serve principally as entertainment or amusement also predominantly serve as a reflection of the culture and the ecology of the people. Most, if not all Bakor nicknames therefore describe behavior, attitudes, personality traits as well as physical features and are as such symbolic of several cultural attributes of the Bakor people. The scenario for their performance or their articulation is, in most cases, a meeting between a young man or woman with very fond relations or elders who impulsively resort to a string of praise names that are symbolic of achievement or describe the personality traits of the individual being so addressed. Sometimes the nickname is derived from a late family ancestor who possessed those traits and applied to a young man as a spur or catalyst to ginger him into achievement as well. In some cases, the nickname may evoke laughter because of the contrast with what is on ground. “ekpideguv” is a Bakor nickname which, in the past, was associated with a huge or bulky person. That ancestor’s birth name was “Nkayuk” and so people whose birth names are “Nkayuk” are also often known by the nickname “ekpideguv” despite their size. This writer has two very skinny friends whose birth names are “Nkayuk” and who often solicit laughter in age sect meetings because they insist on being referred to as “ekpideguv” meaning “the bulky one” as a contrast to their skinny selves. This apart, the nickname has the potential of affecting the individual positively because people have actually attempted to live by the characteristics expounded in their nicknames. Generally, Bakor nicknames are full of humor particularly in their context of realization especially as they ridicule or boost the ego of the recipients. In these contexts, the nicknames reflect only those aspects of culture which are salient and cherished within the community. Agantem is a popular birth name in Ekajuk specifically and Bakor generally and even beyond Bakor confines but is also a famous nickname denoting strength and achievement which everyone admires and strives for. Agantem simply means “he who excels” or “Greater than all.” Everyone strives to be greater than his companion in life and so an achiever is easily nick named “Agantem.”

“Congo” is a nickname that was given to a young man as a result of his love for music and dancing. As a result, he became so fond of the name that he strove to find out who the Congolese were. Consequently, he developed a strong affinity for music and was always found in every dance arena. He eventually grew up to

be an accomplished dance and songster in the community and since the Bakor are a music loving people, though no one makes a livelihood out of music, Congo made a name for himself in the area of entertainment and the community eulogized and celebrated him at his death. "Egarebi" is also a popular Bakor nickname which means "trouble-shooter". "Yeb gar ebi" means "he has defeated or overpowered evil." This is simply shortened to "Egarebi" and applied to those whose birth names are "Gaga" in Bakor community. In this case, the nickname is actually derived from the birth name. "Gaga" means he who overcomes and is therefore related to "Yeb gar ebi" which is the extended form. The Bakor are a peace loving people and predominantly agriculturists who spend more time on their farms than at home. The nickname "Egarebi" therefore relates to the occupational background of the people and symbolizes the Bakor man's desire for a peaceful environment which allows him to spend time tending his crops. There are other nicknames that mock or laugh at unacceptable behavior or even physical deformities. Such nicknames may be derogatory or simply created to enhance fun as Dent and Nyembezi have observed. Such names include "Olotor" which is a nickname for someone with deformed feet and is derived from a man who once possessed twisted feet and who often used "Olotor" as a maxim for anything spectacular or amusing which could cause him to attempt to move in excitement. Being unable to move, he always ended up with the exclamation "Olotor" which signified the sound of his heavy feet on the ground. "Olotor" therefore came to symbolize extreme excitement of a lame man. In this parlance, the nickname is informally created and assigned to someone who fits certain features being described while at the same time reflecting cherished ethnic or cultural features that depict the unique identity of the people. "Olotor" is actually a twisted weed that grows in swampy places. As stated earlier, Bakor nicknames are not always derived from first or birth names, they are rather created to reflect attitudes, behavior or environmental and ecological peculiarities. "ntob" is a nickname for a muddy place literally called "ediadop". "Mokuru" is a nickname for a patch of land with many dead palms literally called "emangakuru" meaning grass land with dead palms. "Emang-atan" is "ant hill bush," while "abaghe-elu" is "yam sharers." Nearly every patch of land in Bakor community is designated by a nickname for easy identification and the nicknames accord with prevalent physical features found therein. Van Langendock (2001) has therefore argued that "nicknames do display some emotive augmentative meaning [and] may also show some associative or connotative meaning due to transparency of their etymology." Among the Bakor, there are general nicknames known and used by everyone which arise out of intimate relationship and are therefore emotion packed and serve as temporary replacements for birth names. In this parlance, they carry more meaning than is usually apparent. Nicknames aid the definition of reality through the transportation of the user and the receiver beyond the immediate, sometimes dramatic context, into a creative functional realm where the listening audience are made to interpret their cultural background based on the imagery conjured up in their consciousness by the nickname composer. The audience is also transported into a perception of not just the ordinary environment but also the symbolic connotation of all objects and events under reference during the realization of the nicknames or during a session of performance or production of nicknames. At this point, the consciousness of the artist or composer of the nicknames, the receiver or object of performance, and the audience operate within the dictates of the same aesthetic experience that allows them to appreciate their milieu and the symbols and images aptly created and utilized by the artist to give credence to the culture of the Bakor people. The nickname is, therefore, not just a process of name calling for

identification. The meaning of the nickname goes beyond the name itself. While the purpose of the birth name is satisfied simply by the identification it accords the person or object associated with the name, the meaning and purpose of the nickname go far beyond its immediate application to connote other cultural ideas. The nickname conjures up several associations which may not immediately be easily understood by everyone except those familiar with the culture and the environment within which it is created and used. The nickname, just like the birth name, is therefore, culture bound but the nickname has the added advantage of telling a story beyond mere identification or immediate usage. It explains the historical background, the geographical landscape, the cosmic world view and the linguistic transformations of a particular people. The nickname becomes an invaluable cultural heritage which binds a close-knit society who express their fondness for each other through the creation of these names that depict an inner relationship between the group of people who have interacted and come to understand the emotions and predilections of those they move with. Nothing depicts the closeness or fondness in Bakor culture more than the nickname. Such nicknames include

- “njankun” meaning “handsome man”, used for admiration
- “ekpuli” meaning “heavy eater”, derogatory description
- “ngbame” meaning beautiful lady, used for admiration
- “ekpaljen” meaning restless or unsteady person, also derogatory
- “nbarankang” meaning “greedy one”, derogatory
- “akorim” meaning “beloved one” indicative of intimacy, a lover
- “eshinkarrnkarr, njamarabearabe” meaning “one with bushy hair and devil beamed back”, denotes bravery or a great hunter.

There are also nicknames which serve as contrast with the generally accepted modes of speech or more formal modes of address in Bakor cultural milieu. Such nicknames are realized either in repetitive form or used in rapid succession.

- “Efubiafuabiefu” meaning “the hot one” symbolizes great strength as well as hot temperedness
- “Arilobakankoh, ayukabulu, atungmfemayukamgbadantame” all denote stubbornness

On the contrary,

- Ayakam, nkubim, ajenndonndon

all contrastively denote gentility and orphaness.

Nicknames could also depict skills and attributes of an individual peculiar to him but cherished in the community. These are used to solicit emulation by younger generations.

- “ngbuk-aya” is the seaman and denoted bravery on the sea

The name was used when the means of trade was through the river. One needed to be powerful and brave to traverse the river route from Northern Cross River down to Calabar for exchange of goods. An ancestor whose birth name was “Ekam” and nicknamed “ngbuk-aya” or the canoe man who crosses rivers excelled in this trade and bequeathed the nickname “ngbuk-aya” to his namesakes.

- “akangkul”, as earlier observed, is either known as an accomplished farmer, a lazy person or a thief which are all derogatory appellations not worthy of emulation.

The nickname therefore serves as a means of referring, in a veiled manner, to peculiar attributes of people as well as societal or cultural traits. In the Bakor traditional society, the nickname becomes an aid to communication which allows for an in-depth or graphic presentation of cultural or personal traits without soliciting adverse reactions or the wrath of the affected person(s) if the nickname implies ridicule or mockery. The nickname is thus anecdotal and alludes to certain characteristics or mythical features of individuals as well as cultural entities. They become a mark of distinction. It is also observed that among the Bakor, song composers are mostly associated with the coinage of nicknames while elders are the greatest users and next to songsters in coinage since they are the repositories of cultural norms. Amongst them, accomplished artists stand out as the “performers” in the art of nickname realization. I use the term “performers” because there is artistry involved in nickname articulation. Between the performer and the recipient of the nickname, there is a rapport, created either by long absence or through the accomplishment of a spectacular deed. This opens up excitement which culminates in the use of descriptive epithets, adjectives, proper nouns and such other expletives that can easily constitute nicknames. A wife who has not seen the husband for long resorts to such nicknames as “akorim” meaning “my lover”; “mfontak” meaning “owner of the homestead” and “nde-abon” meaning “father of the children” which are all adjectives of endearment. A good dancer is also described by his admirers as “mfonoelom” meaning “owner of masquerades”; “akpadejaal” meaning “the fast footed on.” The recipient is also expected to reciprocate in the affirmative between short breaks which allow the performer enough time to think of other associated nicknames. This enhances the dramatic realization of nicknames as below:

Performer: “efubiefubi” meaning the hot one

Recipient: “eh”

Performer: “arilobakankoh” meaning lost in history

Recipient: “eh nshor” meaning eh my father

Performer: “ngbada-ntame” meaning wielder of matchets

Recipient: “me wornshor” meaning it’s me my father

Performer: “ayuk-abulu” meaning the one who pays deaf ears

Recipient: “ye wor-a nshor” meaning he is here father

Performer: “atungmfemayuka” meaning the ear that hears no fracas

Recipient: “nnokorkpem li nshor” meaning there is none other than me father

This exchange sustains the beauty of the performance and enlivens participation through dramatization in short dance steps which are easily realized when the person nicknamed has the qualities of the nicknames. This dramatization has spurred FredSanders (2008) to argue that “when a nickname really fits somebody, it catches-on and comes to mind easily. But when somebody doesn’t have a good nickname, it’s no good forcing things”.Gottberg (2012) on her part posits that

*... A person is not only a personality, but they are experiences, hopes, joys, passions and foibles all rolled up in one little package.*

Though Crissy here refers to writers in the creation of character portraits, one also finds that the assertion fits nickname creators in Bakor, who, though acting spontaneously, are expected to reflect the experiences, hopes, joys and passions of the community in the nicknames they create for individuals amongst whom they live and interact. This, in fact, is the difference between the nickname and the pseudonym. While the pseudonym is a masker or a form of disguise of the personality involved, the nickname articulates and portrays the characteristics or traits of the bearer of the nickname. Ciuraru (2011) in her "The Rise and Fall of Pseudonyms" however, argues that like the nickname, the pen-name or pseudonym "can assume a life of its own [and] many writers have been surprised by the intimate and even disorienting relationships they have formed with their alter egos." While the pseudonym hides the real person and his sometimes unsavory self, the nickname brings out certain qualities in the character portrait of the individual. Carmela illustrates this essential dichotomy by contrasting the character of Samuel Clemens with his pseudonym "Mark Twain" thus,

*... Mark Twain is universally regarded as a genial, avuncular prankster, but his creator Samuel Clemens possessed a bifurcated identity whose ugly fissures became more prominent as he got older. Twain buried the vitriol and shame of the tormented Clemens.*

The apt user of the nickname is, in fact, an accomplished literary artist who, through his nickname creations, portrays the literary and linguistic potentials of his community. But there are sometimes inappropriate nicknames and as Fred Sanders (2008) again points out "some of them [nicknames] are so inapt, clumsy, or inscrutable that I got laughing fits from reading them aloud." For a nickname to be an appropriate representation of an individual and his milieu and be relevant as a reflection of the cultural norms and values in a particular community, the creator must be a skilled user of language and a versatile and perceptive artist in his environment. The personality of the nickname creator accounts for the dramatic nature of nicknames in Bakor culture. Occasions that warrant nickname creation and realization in Bakor community include:-

- a. Long absence from home or community
- b. Achievement of some sort, something extra-ordinary
- c. Warfare
- d. Satire or ridicule of deviant behavior
- e. Praise of children to spur them into action
- f. Dancing or dance accomplishments and
- g. Comparison of individual's moral standpoints

#### **4. Conclusion**

In Bakor society, nicknames are a veritable medium for the articulation of the literary potentials of the people evident in the poetic and dramatic content of the nicknames. Their efficacy as aids for the expression

of endearment by admirers is unquantifiable. Equally, the extent to which they serve as abusive or derogatory address is almost unlimited. Nickname addresses symbolize a high degree of communal acceptance and are thus considered very desirable as repositories of communal values as well as the portrayal of same. The nickname equally serves as a source of ridicule and satire thus highlighting cultural traits that serve as cohesive instruments in the maintenance of peace and tranquility in Bakor land. Furthermore, the nickname serves communicative purposes as a means of depiction of the various ways language can be inflected in the expression of communal values. Ecological nicknames as well serve the purpose of communicating the geographical environment to people who possess the linguistic competence to decipher the connotative and denotative meanings implied in the ecological nicknames. On the whole, what the nickname stands for in Bakor culture is that it is suggestive and creates, in the consciousness of the language users, symbolic and associative levels of language use open to listeners and users of the nicknames. Their symbolic and connotative meanings underlie the functional value of the nicknames and aid the perception of the cultural values being mirrored in the composition of the nicknames.

Though their value in traditional societies tends to be better appreciated than in cosmopolitan environments, the usefulness of the nicknames as vehicles for linguistic and cultural transmission in both traditional and modern parlance seems to be gaining grounds rather than diminishing. The only difference is that while in traditional society the nickname is verbally realized and dramatized, in modern society, it has fast penetrated the computer world for several reasons. Wikipedia (2009) asserts that

*... In computer networks, it has become a common practice for every person to also have one or more nicknames for the purposes of anonymity, to avoid ambiguity or simply because the natural name or technical address would be too long to type or take too much space on the screen.*

One can thus easily surmise that the potentiality of nicknames in almost all facets of human endeavor are invaluable and that the practice of nicknaming will continue to hold sway both in traditional and modern circles. What this writer aims to achieve is a more comprehensive survey of the symbolic and connotative meanings of many more Bakor nicknames which, like the famous Bakor monoliths at Nkarasi, Alok and Esham, speak volumes about Bakor cultural background. But perhaps, one should here heed Dr. Clive Emsley's admonition to Anton Blok that "perhaps too, Bloks treatment of nicknames would benefit from moving out of the village and small town community contexts." This way, the value of Bakor nicknames as linguistic and literary models can be better appreciated universally like their monolith counterparts.

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