

Indigenous Etsako Names Among Auchi People

The Influence of Islam on Their Current Naming Practices

By Mohammed Enaikele, Ph.D. and Suleiman Momoh

ABSTRACT

The name or names that an individual bears is an important aspect of his or her social identity. Among the Etsako people of Auchi, Edo state, Nigeria, their indigenous names are not just couched in abstract or without justification. The article explores the influence of Islam on various Etsako names among Auchi people. This study uses an in-depth unstructured interview (IDI) to collect indigenous Etsako names, employing an accidental sampling method with a cross-section of twenty (20) key informants in each of the five indigenous communities of Auchi. The key informants are heads of households/families. The study provided several indigenous Etsako names and their literal meanings. It also revealed that before the introduction of Islam to the Etsako people of Auchi, parents gave their children indigenous Etsako names at birth. Later, however, parents started giving their children Muslim names together with indigenous Etsako names. But lately, indigenous Etsako names are increasingly endangered because the names are no longer being given to children at birth but have significantly shifted to Muslim names. The study thus concludes that the challenges of redeeming, resuscitating, and stabilizing the culture of indigenous Etsako names should be the collective responsibility of the Etsako people of Auchi.

Keywords: Auchi, Etsako names, influence of Islam, current naming practices, cultural preservation

Introduction

The Chamber Dictionary (2005) defines a name as a noun and further expatiates that a noun is the name of a person, a thing, or a place, or what a person, a thing, or a place is called or identified as. It is the nomenclature used in making reference to all things: living or

non-living, tangible or intangible, concrete or abstract, liquid or solid. Human beings are instinctive and rational thinking beings. Of all terrestrial creatures, only human beings are endowed with the initiative and self-consciousness to give things individual names (Eboh, 2011). Naming is a universal practice—there is virtually no known society in which

newborn babies are not given names. Across all cultures, the individual name is a unique aspect of life common to all human societies. Another important fact about names is that only human beings have the gift of naming a child with a specific name (Yusuf et al., 2014). A name is an essential part of human identity, deeply tied to the perception of intrinsic value and the essence of humanity.

The name or names that an individual bears is an important aspect of his or her social identity. Anthropologically, in Africa, the belief is that a name does not only serve as a social or cultural identity, but it is also an essential part of an individual spiritual being because it influences several aspects of human life, the general lifestyle and life prospects of an individual (Liseli, 2012). A name can influence an individual lifestyle and mold and shape the character, personality, and prospects of success in the life of the bearer. This is why Africans generally attach importance to giving a child a good name—the name assigned to a child could determine a lot about the child's present and future (Yusuf et al., 2014).

African names are an important component of the African culture because they are indigenous. Indigenous African names are given with deep reflection before settling for what is considered appropriate, relevant, and meaningful. The etymological meaning and relevance of Indigenous African names lie in the embedded wisdom and philosophical character they carry. Some of these indigenous African names are aesthetically wrapped in native proverbs, poetic dignity, and cultural nuances and are artistically cultivated to reflect an event so that a mere

mention of the name evokes memories of it. In the typical traditional Yoruba society, the name that an individual bears could obviously reveal his or her place of origin or root, family background, family occupation, and political and economic class. Some names could also reflect the kind of deity worshipped in the household of the bearer (Yusuf et al., 2014). Names are also used to immortalize late grandparents. Thus, when a child is named after his or her grandparents who have passed on, it serves as a form of remembrance and appreciation for a life well spent by the deceased (Akintoye, 2021). Some other names are panegyric names, otherwise known as praise names (Oriki). Such names are used to spur the bearer on occasions, at moments of great expectations, or in times of challenges (Olatunji et al., 2015).

Among the Etsako people of Edo state in Nigeria, their indigenous names are not just couched in abstract or merely given; they are reflections of the people's worldview, cultural heritage, social interactions, and social constructions of experiences of everyday social life. Parents, grandparents, or family members who give names to a newborn baby do so after careful reflection before settling for what is considered apt. In most cases, the philosophical meaning and relevance of these names are so complex that the essential need for such names cannot be understood except when their etymological meaning is appreciated within the context of the culture of the people. This naming pattern is evident in African socio-cultural interpretation of names, the people's worldview, and the social constructions of the experiences of

the people's everyday social life and memories of events that some names try to invoke (Muguti & Mutani, 2014).

Though studies on indigenous African names are not a new academic interest, limited anthropological and sociological research has been done in this field compared to other allied disciplines like history, theology, philosophy, and socio-linguistic studies. It is perhaps not out of place to say that philosophy and other academic disciplines like history, theology, and socio-linguistic studies only took an academic interest in this field of study for their aims and presuppositions. Over and above this, the present study pedagogically unveils and explores various indigenous Etsako names and the influence of Islam on the people of Auchi's current naming practices. The study also provides the literal interpretations or meanings of these indigenous Etsako names and the social significance of assigning such names to a newborn baby. It is important to appreciate the people's naming practices as a reflection of their worldview, cultural heritage, and the social constructions of their everyday social life. Above all, this study places a premium on Etsako names, primarily because most academic studies on Etsako culture have paid little or no attention to it.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural theory is a prominent framework in cultural anthropology. It generated significant academic interest, particularly in the 20th century, among social scientists who studied the Black Africans' indigenous worldview and the social constructions of their everyday social lives

(Oke, 2004). However, most of the analyses and discussions on the theory have primarily been associated with the concept of culture. Hence, the importance of adopting cultural theory for this study lies in the fact that in Africa, names given to newborn babies are not just couched in the abstract; they are guided by culture. In anthropological usage, culture is the complete way of life for a group of people. It encompasses people's beliefs, institutions, and other life patterns, including their social worldviews. The social worldview of any human group is a reflection of their culture; it defines and shapes their thought, mindset, understanding, and explanation, which inform the social constructions of experiences of their everyday social life (Ademowo, 2017).

In most cases, names conceived with indigenous worldviews or experiences of the everyday social life of a people are deeply embedded in their culture, so the etymological meaning and relevance of such names can only be understood and appreciated within the culture of the people, mainly because indigenous names are very meaningful, so much so that the literal or metaphorical beauty of many of such names is often lost in an attempt to translate their meaning and relevance into another language.

Anthropologists are essentially sensitive to the relativity of cultural patterns of names across cultures to avoid being ethnocentric. This is because names given to newborn babies are primarily informed by people's indigenous worldview and social constructions of experiences of their everyday social life. These names have deep philosophical meanings. An ethnocentric

individual from another culture may not be able to appreciate the philosophical reasons or, better still, the literal or metaphorical meaning, relevance, and etymological beauty of the indigenous names of another culture.

Materials and Methods

Ethno-Historical Profile of Etsako People of Auchi

Figure 1
Map of Auchi



Note. Etsako West. Google Maps, 2024. (<https://maps.app.goo.gl/EpsStj94wzDutJgV8>). [Accessed May 2024].

The study was conducted among the indigenous Etsako people of Auchi, which consists of five major communities: Usogun, Aibotse, Akpekpe, Igbhe, and Iyekhe. Auchi is one of the thirteen clans in Etsako. Located to the north of Auchi is Aviele, to the south is Uzairue, to the west is South-Ibie, and to the east is Ivbiadoabi.

Auchi is the most prominent and popular town in Etsako. After the 1978 Local Government Reforms, Auchi became the Local Government Headquarters of Etsako West. Historically, Auchi people, like other Etsako people, migrated from Benin Kingdom in the 16th century during the reign of Oba Ewuare of Benin (Yakubu, 2021). The people of Auchi are traditionally understood to have been led by a man named Uchi. Uchi had the present Auchi Villages—Usogun, Aibotse, Akpekpe, Igbhe, and Iyekhe—named after his children. These villages, which are separated, are located at the foot of Uchi Hill, while at the top of the hill is the Uchi market. The indigenous administration of Auchi town was initially a gerontocracy, where the most senior man (Odion) presides over the affairs of Auchi. However, this system was replaced by a monarchical traditional administration after the Nupes invaded and introduced Islam to Auchi (Yakubu, 2021). Presently, Auchi is organized under a Paramount Chief called Otaru, who traditionally presides over its five major communities. The Etsako people have unique peculiarities in history, language, names, indigenous worldview, social experiences of everyday life, traditional belief systems, culture, norms, values, taboos, and superstitions.

Research Instrument and Sampling Method

A primary source of data—an in-depth unstructured interview (IDI)—was employed for the study to collect indigenous Etsako names. An accidental sampling method was used to conduct the IDI with a cross-section of twenty (20) key informants in each of the five indigenous

communities. The key informants are heads of households/families that live in the five Auchi communities and are very familiar with Etsako names and culture. Informed consent was obtained from the key informants, and they were duly informed of the objectives of the study and their right to quit or withdraw their participation at any time. Also, they were assured of their privacy of identity and confidentiality of the information shared with the researcher. The IDI questions were not arranged as a fixed questionnaire. Answers to the questions were also gently probed, only where necessary, to give respondents a moment to reflect and gather their thoughts for clearer responses and information. All the data gathered were qualitatively analyzed. This is a fact-finding qualitative study, as Indigenous names may seem unfamiliar due to the philosophical meanings embedded in many of them. This study aimed to focus on the literal interpretative understanding of the names, as they vividly reflect the worldview and culture of the Etsako people, to avoid any distortion of their meaning—whether etymological or philosophical.

Results and Discussion

One hundred (100) indigenous Etsako names with their literal meanings were collected. The names were sorted to avoid duplication, and seventy (70) were selected for analysis.

Most of our respondents confirmed that indigenous Etsako names are no longer commonly given to children at birth as before.

This is why the younger generations are more popularly known and addressed with Muslim names, which they were given at birth. Before the introduction of Islam to the Etsako people of Auchi, parents were giving their children indigenous Etsako names at birth. Over time, however, Muslim names began to be given alongside these indigenous names. While older generations continue to carry both indigenous Etsako and Muslim names, a key informant noted a recent shift towards exclusively Muslim names, as parents no longer place as much importance on giving their children indigenous Etsako names. The people's strong adherence to Islam as a way of life may have largely accounted for this.

Common Indigenous Etsako Names of the People of Auchi

Although names are a symbol of indigenous identity and family roots, among the Etsako people of Auchi, names do not just serve as indigenous identity; they constitute an integral part of the people's culture. The preservation of a people's identity is inherently determined by their ability to maintain their cultural heritage through indigenous names, amongst other aspects. No Etsako name is given without justification, as each name is a product of thoughtful consideration. The philosophical, religious, and indigenous worldviews of most Etsako names are so complex that the essential need for such names may not be fully understood except when the etymological meaning or philosophical value of such names is appreciated within the context of the culture of the people. These indigenous names could be categorized as shown below:

1. Names Bestowed by the Circumstances of Birth

An example of such names is those given to twins. These names include:

Odion: The first-born twin

Omoh: The second-born twin

Other names derived from the circumstances of birth are those given to children born into families where previous infants have died shortly after birth. Etsako people of Auchi believe these types of children are mischievous-spirit-incarnate infants who burden their parents by dying soon after birth. These children are sometimes given names such as Ugwuri, Oghumah, Ikhazeoboh, Ighera, Ananagbo, Ananomo, Oghiato, and Aziku to deter them from dying young.

The literal meanings of these names are:

Ughwuri: Vulture

Oghumah: Slave

Ikhazeoboh: I won't let you go again.

Ighera: I won't go again.

Ananagbo: Don't run away from the world.

Ananomo: I can't run away from a child.

Oghiato: Thief

Aziku: Refuse dump-pit

Apart from giving them these names, frequently, parents of these infants also perform other forms of ritual sacrifices such as burying the child's umbilical cord and placenta with other native substances in a pot near a stream, refuse dump-pit, or beside plantain trees to

deter the infants from dying young. Yakubu (2021) reports that the Etsako people of Auchi believe in reincarnation and the visible and invisible worlds of spirits. These two worlds are not separate; they are interconnected, commune, and interact spiritually, allowing spirit-incarnate infants—who burden their parents—to reincarnate repeatedly, only to die shortly after birth. The native doctors, diviners, priests, and priestesses, endowed with spiritual awareness or understanding, often recommend these ritual sacrifices to appease the visible and invisible world of spirits. At times, the sacrifice is complimented with a deep facial cut/mark (indigenously known as *Azokpa*) on the infant to prevent him/her from dying young again. *Azokpa* is a deep facial cut/mark that runs from the ridge of the nose to the cheekbone.

For anthropologists, the efficacy of non-empirical beliefs in ritual sacrifice, the visible and invisible worlds of spirits, and the facial cut/mark used to deter spirit-incarnate infants from dying young serve as clear evidence of the people's belief system. This belief should be recognized and appreciated within its cultural context as a way of life. Therefore, it is not the role of anthropologists to condemn or debunk the efficacy of these rituals, as doing so would risk bias or ethnocentrism. The belief in these rituals helps the people adjust to and cope with their social and physical environments while also providing an explanation for the frustrations associated with the repeated deaths of infants shortly after birth.

2. Names Couched on Bravery/Strength

Names like Ekpe, Oduma, Inih, and Imoudu philosophically represent bravery. People who are strong and very brave often bear these names. Sometimes, these names could also be acquired as titular names to honor an individual as a fearless warrior.

The literal meanings of these names are:

Ekpe: Tiger

Oduma: Lion

Inih: Elephant

Imoudu: I am brave, or I am not afraid.

3. Names That Represent Nobility or Royalty

Names like Ogie, Egiegba, Egietsemeh, Egieiya, and Aidonogie are names associated with nobility or royalty in the child's lineage. For example:

Ogie: King

Egiegba: Assembly of royalty

Egietsemeh: It is my turn to the throne.

Egieiya: I am on the throne.

Aidonogie: You don't change throne.

4. Names Rooted in a General Worldview

Names like Agboeyegbeni, Agbomehe, Anakhuagboh, Anavherokha, Ikhade, and Ariakhue are borne out of interpretations of human experiences that significantly shape their worldview. For example:

Agboeyegbeni: People don't wish other people well.

Agbomehe: I will wait for my time.

Anakhuagboh: Don't be in a hurry about life.

Anavherokha: You can take refuge in the home of a hero.

Ikhade: I won't fall.

Ariakhue: Nobody knows tomorrow.

5. Names Derived from Social Experiences in People's Daily Lives

Names like Akhagiemeh, Oghosomi, Monofi, Izuagie, Igenegba, Imohagene, Imoitsemeh, Enaikele, and Agbonosimen are borne out of social experiences in people's daily lives and patterns of social interactions.

Akhagiemeh: I won't be laughed at.

Oghosomi: It is going well in my life.

Monofi: I have someone who can fight back.

Izuagie: You can't laugh at me.

Igenegba: Assembly of men

Imohagene: I have a man.

Imoitsemeh: I have my own.

Enaikele: This is my choice, or this is what I want.

Agbonosimen: You don't fight the person rescuing you.

6. Names That Symbolically Represent Wealth

Omokhefue: A child is wealth.

Efuetsemeh: It is my turn to be wealthy.

7. Names Derived from Proverbs

When names are couched in proverbs, they reflect the complex nature of particular issues or events, often explaining them formally

or informally through the use of proverbs. Sometimes, information that one is not willing to share directly with other people is indirectly expressed through names embedded in proverbs. Such names can only be understood when the philosophical meaning of such proverbs is appreciated within the context of the people's culture.

Some examples of these names are:

Akhanene: When we talk.

Akhamemeh: People will not say any evil about me.

Ogboanoh: You ask a question.

Akhamotse: I am counted among the beautiful ones.

8. Circumstantial Names

Etsako people take great interest in events and circumstances surrounding the birth of a child. Circumstantial names are given based on what the parents experienced before or during the birth of the child. Such experiences may occur simultaneously or immediately after the birth of the child.

Ikhazuagbe: No one can kill me.

Ikhago: I won't cry.

Ogheghe: Joy

Avbuenegbe: Let's keep each other's secret.

9. Names That Reflect Reverence for God

These names serve as a way of reverencing God, particularly as a means of expressing gratitude for what God has done for the parents

of the newborn child. In general, names with the prefix Osi, Esi and Osho are names that reverence God.

Some examples of these names are:

Danesi: I submit to God.

Esikpemi: I thank God.

Emosohke: God's gift

Esihogie: God is king.

Esiomohmo: Is God that gives the child

Oshone: God is the highest.

Oshomah: God decides.

Oshore: God knows.

Osirama: I beg God.

Agionomoesi: You don't laugh at one who has God.

Osiano: Is God you should ask.

Oshoremeh: God gives me.

Anoghena: Nobody is greater than God.

Amanosi: You don't decide for God.

Osighuwe: I am focusing on God.

10. Names Based on the Value of the Family

These names are often given to a child whose parents have been avoiding their hometown or family. Grandparents or family members who give these names to a newborn baby do so after careful reflection on the neglecting attitude of the child's parents to their family roots or hometown. They are names that encourage bonding and mutual interpersonal relationships among members of the same family. In most African societies, the value placed on family is fairly similar. Family provides emotional support and true companionship to its members. In times of grief

and celebration, family members give support. Family provides security and protection to its members against injury, assault, frivolous intimidation, subjugation, and deprivation. Any injustice suffered by any family member may be seen as an injustice against the entire family.

Some examples of these names are:

Ananafe: Don't run away from your family roots/home.

Afegbua: We have expanded our family.

Igbafe: I don't fight with my family.

11. Names Reflecting Fairness Toward Humanity

These names are a clear reflection of the indigenous worldview that there are retributions attached to evil doing. These names also reflect on social experiences of everyday life and social interactions of the people.

Examples of such names are:

Iruobe: I will not harm or do anything evil to anybody.

Ikhelebe: I don't want enemies.

12. Names Based on the Value of a Child

These names are given as a reflection of the value attached to having a child. Having a child is a continuity of oneself and the family. Etsako people place great importance on childbearing, believing that for an individual to find true fulfillment, having a child is essential; without it, they feel their life would be in vain.

Some examples of these names are:

Omokhupo: A child is the cloth that covers me.

Omokhefue: My child is my wealth.

Omohukwu: My child is my possession.

Omokhua: A child is important, or a child is great.

13. Names Couched on the Need to Trust or Look Up to God and the Efficacy of Prayers

This category of names is a clear reflection of Etsako indigenous worldview of the supremacy of God and why we should trust, pray and look up to him for everything.

Examples of these names are:

Okhuliaghwe: Trust or look up to God.

Itseowa: Prayers don't get lost.

14. Names Based on Conflict-Free Relationships With In-Laws

The whole idea of tolerance and a culture of peaceful coexistence manifests in these names, where man's conduct is regulated within the virtue of tolerance and respect for in-laws. The name projects a philosophical and ideological culture of mutual co-existence, which is expected to translate and infuse people's ways of life and their social relationships with their in-laws.

Examples of such names are:

Agberua: You don't beat or fight your in-laws.

Eruaagha: In-laws are meant to be adored.

15. Names Used as Appellations

These names are not usually given to a child

during a naming ceremony. They are nicknames or praise names given by family or friends after observing one or more unique physical characteristics, features, or other behavioral traits. Such nicknames reveal a lot about the bearer. In most cases, their indigenous or Muslim/Christian names become unused, as they are replaced by the nicknames by which people now address them.

Some of these nicknames are listed below:

Ukpomoh: Big boy

Okpomosi: Big girl

Emoh: My friend

Udo: Stone

Omosiotse: Beautiful girl

The Influence of Islam on Current Naming Practices Among Etsako People of Auchi

The axiom that culture is dynamic and adaptive is clearly exemplified in the naming practices of Etsako people of Auchi, Nigeria. Their indigenous naming practices are now largely interwoven with Islam. Islam has a great impact on the people of Auchi in general. Islam is a complete way of life for the people because it covers all aspects of their cultural life, including the adoption of Muslim names. The study observes that Auchi people are prominently Muslims—though most of our respondents have indigenous Etsako names, they are more popularly known and addressed by their Muslim names. Islam, as the dominant religion among the Etsako people of Auchi, has a long history associated with the Nupe Jihadists who brought

Islam to the present Edo State through the Edo North corridor where the Etsako people are geographically located (Yakubu, 2021). Before the Etsako people of Auchi were converted to Islam, everyone was known and addressed by their indigenous names within and outside the community. These names were given at birth and were couched to reflect the people's worldview, cultural heritage, social interactions, and social constructions of experiences of everyday social life of the people (Yakubu, 2021). But lately, this culture of indigenous Etsako names seems increasingly endangered as Etsako people of Auchi now bear Muslim names given to them at birth. Some of these Muslim names and meanings include:

1. **Abdullah:** The servant of Allah
2. **Farooq:** One who can tell right from wrong
3. **Basiru:** Bringer of good news
4. **Jaffar:** Most forgiving and merciful Allah

The study observes that the strong adherence to Islam as a way of life by the Etsako people is the major cause of this shift to Muslim names, which are more popularly known and addressed. More so, they see Muslim names as a symbol of brotherhood. The epistemological processes underlying the threat to Etsako minority language (Enaikele, 2014) could also be major reason why the culture of indigenous Etsako name is now being endangered.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The individual name is a unique aspect of life common to all human societies. The name that an individual bears is not just an important

aspect or means of their social identity; it is also an essential part of an individual's spiritual being because it influences several aspects of human life, such as the general lifestyle and life prospects. In African societies, names are an important component of culture because they are indigenous. Indigenous African names have deep meanings and are a product of insightful thoughts. The etymological meaning and relevance of indigenous African names are the embedded wisdom and philosophical character of these names.

The philosophical, religious, and indigenous worldviews of most indigenous Etsako names are so complex that the essential need for such names may not be easily understood except when the etymological meaning or philosophical value of such names is appreciated within the context of the culture of the people. Islam has a great impact on the people of Auchi. Islam is a complete way of life for Muslims—it covers all aspects of their cultural life, including the adoption of Muslim names, which are generally known and addressed. Today, the culture of indigenous Etsako name seems endangered because these indigenous Etsako names are no longer being commonly given to children at birth as before. Rather, most Etsako people of Auchi now bear Muslim names given to them at birth. They take notable pride in bearing and being addressed by their Muslim names as a symbol of brotherhood. This may strongly imply that the Etsako peoples' cultural heritage and identity could be lost if nothing meaningful is done collectively by the people to resuscitate the culture of Etsako indigenous

names in particular because the preservation of peoples' cultural heritage and identity is inherently determined by their ability to maintain their cultural heritage and roots through indigenous names, amongst others.

The epistemological processes underlying the threat to Etsako minority language (Enaikele, 2014) may also be a notable factor or reason why the culture of indigenous Etsako names seems increasingly endangered. The potential loss of the indigenous cultural heritage and identity of Etsako people of Auchi is imminent if nothing is done collectively by the people to begin to resuscitate and promote the culture of indigenous Etsako names. This study, therefore, recommends that the challenges of redeeming, resuscitating, and stabilizing the culture of indigenous Etsako names should be the collective responsibility of Etsako people of Auchi. Since the preservation of a peoples' identity is inherently determined by their ability to maintain their cultural heritage through indigenous names, for example, Etsako indigenous names could be redeemed or resuscitated by promoting the intergenerational transmission of the indigenous names through naming and addressing a child by his or her indigenous names. This is an important solution to saving Etsako indigenous names.

As the home remains the major and important agent of socialization, it is the contention of this paper that parents, guardians, and members of the child's family have an important role to play in the intergenerational transmission of indigenous names. One of the ways they can

achieve this is by naming and addressing their children by indigenous names. Thus, there is a need for a general re-orientation on the psyche of parents and the community at large against ethnocentric attitudes against African culture by Africans themselves that indigenous African names are inferior to Muslim names! Parents, guardians, family members, neighbors, and Islamic clerics and scholars, in particular, should prevent their children from perceiving their indigenous names as inferior to Muslim names by encouraging them to take pride in bearing and being addressed by their indigenous names because Etsako indigenous names have their

unique cultural and philosophical meanings, which should be made to stimulate the interest of the younger generation towards reviving or resuscitating indigenous Etsako names. So, more attention and time should be given to children to learn and appreciate the etymological beauty, proverbs, culture, and philosophical meanings embedded in their indigenous names. This is because when a child can appreciate the unique beauty of his or her indigenous name, the child will take pride in the indigenous name. It is only by this that intergenerational transmission of Etsako indigenous names can stand a meaningful chance of survival.

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This article may be cited as:

Enaikelé, M., Ph.D., & Momoh, S. (2025). Indigenous Etsako Names Among Auchi People: The Influence of Islam on Their Current Naming Practices. *Fourth World Journal*, 24(2), 24–36.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Mohammed D. Enaikelé

Mohammed D. Enaikelé, B.sc, M.sc, PhD, AMNIM, is a professor of Rural Development with a Ph.D. in Rural Sociology from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. Passionate about indigenous cultures, his dissertation explored rural fishing communities' practices in sustainable marine resource management. With over 29 years of teaching and research at the Federal College of Fisheries and Marine Technology, Lagos, Dr. Enaikelé serves as Deputy Provost. He has authored and co-authored numerous books and research articles in local and international journals. His research interests include Rural Sociology, Indigenous Studies, Cultural Anthropology, Sociology of Agriculture and Food Security, Human Trafficking, and Conflict Studies.



Suleiman Momoh

Suleiman Momoh, B.Sc., is an Assistant Lecturer at the Federal College of Fisheries and Marine Technology in Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria. He is passionate about indigenous cultures and traditional practices. As a dedicated advocate for human rights and social justice, he also demonstrates a remarkable interest in politics. He has contributed to several edited volumes and research articles published in academic journals.