

African Proverbial Names: 101 Ilaje Examples

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Oruko mi ro ñen, apeja mi ro ñen.
(Ilaje Proverb)

As the name, so is the bearer,
as the nickname, so also the bearer.

Ule a mi gho ja i ho oma oruko rin.
(Ilaje Proverb)

The prevailing condition in the family determines the name we intend to give to the child.

Most names that traditional African peoples bear belong to one of the following categories:

1. Lineage-names
2. Names of the royal clan
3. Place-names
4. Events-names (for instance, arrival of the White Man, e.g., Hausa: Matan Bature—wife of the White Man)
5. Occupational-names
6. Stereotype-names
7. Nick-names
8. Day-names
9. Names derived from gods or goddesses and natural phenomena
10. Names derived from titles, hereditary and non-hereditary
11. Praise-names. This is a general term embracing many honorific and flattering appellations performing the same function as Homeric epithets, and
12. Proverbial-names. These are names which are closely related to proverbs and proverbial phrases. Many are, in fact, abbreviations or restatements of existing proverbs and indeed partake of their stylistic characteristics

The primary aim of this paper is to examine the last category using

Ilaje examples, and give an account, where necessary, of the social and cultural situations under which they are used.¹ Secondly, it is hoped that the paper will generate further similar studies.

The importance attached to names makes the study of them a valuable means of appreciating various aspects of African cosmological views, e.g., their religious ideas. A child's name might express disappointment of or gratitude to some god(s). Similarly, some names express grief and awareness of the ills of life.² An historical study of names also enables us in some measure to trace the development of African ideas, while some historical events of past centuries may be summed up in some short name.³

Many names also derive from sayings which reflect the African philosophy of life.⁴ A good number of names in this category have deeper meanings than are generally apparent.

Some express the state of mind of the parents who give the names.⁵ Hence the saying that "the name we intend to give to our child is kept in our mind" (Ilaje). Some still express a sense of personal aspiration for the bearers.⁶

More than that, it is believed that some names influence the character of their bearers. This is suggested by the following two proverbs:

Oruko mi ro ñen, apeja mi ro ñen
Like the name like the name's owner,
like the nickname like the bearer.

and

Bitso lebe ke seromo
A bad name is ominous (Sesotho)

¹In the present article it will be unnecessary to examine these names in any exhaustive manner. For example: who gives names? which names are borne by males, which by females? the type of naming ceremonies; does a younger person address his elder by name and how many names can one bear? etc. Each of these points is important in itself. In fact each of them is sufficient topic for a paper of reasonable length. But this is not the place for that.

²Junod, H.P., *Bantu Heritage* (Johannesburg, 1938), p. 53.

³Nsimbi, N.B., "Baganda Traditional Personal Names," *Uganda Journal* 14 (1950), p. 204.

⁴Ennis, E.L., "Women's Names among the Ovimbundu of Angola," *African Studies* IV, 1 (March, 1945).

⁵Beattie, J.H.M., "Nyoro Personal Names," *Uganda Journal* 21 (1957), p. 100.

⁶Lifchitz, D. and D. Pauline, "Les noms individuels chez les Dogon" in *Memoires de l'Institut français d'Afrique noire* XXIII (1953), p. 332; Grise, G.C., "Patterns of Child Naming in Tennessee During the Depression Years," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* XXIII, 3 (1959), p. 150.

Says Mohome:

In a wider sense this means that a person usually behaves in accordance with the meaning of his name. For instance, if a person by the name of Motsamai (lit., "the traveler or the-one-who-travels") happens to be fond of travelling or visiting, it is believed that he is such because of the influence of his name.⁷

It is safe to surmise that this is a universal belief.⁸ The Romans likewise believed that luck is associated with names. Sulla, for instance, called his twins Faustus and Fausta because the names meant "auspicious and a happy omen" (Plutarch Lives, Sulla).

It is probably true also that the reason why Romans, who sought soldiers for their legions actively looked for men with such lucky names as Salvius and Valerius is because the names derive from the words meaning to be "safe and sound" and "strong," respectively.⁹

"Must a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully.

"Of course it must," Humpty Dumpty said. . . . "My name means the shape I am. . . ."

"With a name like yours, you might be any shape almost."

Through the Looking Glass

Additionally, many names mirror the African social phenomena. They constitute a system of communication within the society. Thus some names are determined by socio-cultural factors.¹⁰ In this way they depict the structure of the society, especially the prevailing conditions within that society. Whereas some fulfill a psychological function of providing assurance or dispelling tensions within the family or society, others, particularly nicknames, are used as a succinct and periphrastic or oblique way of commenting on their owners or on others.¹¹

As among the Greeks, African nicknames are very widespread, especially those suggested by physical characteristics. While the Greeks

⁷Mohome, P.M., "Naming in Sesotho: Its Sociocultural and Linguistic Basis," *Names* XX, 1 (March, 1972), p. 171.

⁸Cf. Ernst Pulgram, *Theory of Names* (Berkeley: American Name Society, 1954), p. 1: "The name of a man is like his shadow. It is not of his substance and not of his soul, but it lives with him and by him." Cf. also Hartman, A.A., "Name Styles in Relation to Personality," *Journal of General Psychology* (October, 1958), pp. 289-294, and Leach, M., *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (London: New English Library, 1975), p. 782.

⁹Lewis, C.T. and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 1623 and 1955; cf. also McCarthy, E.S., "Folklore Heirlooms" in *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters* XVI (1931), p. 121ff.

¹⁰Mohome, p. 184.

¹¹Junod, pp. 54-56.

have names like Batalos (Stammerer), a nickname given to Demosthenes (Aeschines 2.99), and Oedipus, a name given to the bearer on account of his swollen foot (Sophocles O.T. 496), the Hausas have names like Babban Kai (Big Head) and Maika(r)rifi (The Strong One).¹²

There are also what may be called "obscene" nicknames. For example: Bokoosi (= Bi oko o si ẹlẹ o suwọn)—without the penis, vagina is useless (Ilaje). This too, I venture to say, is a universal practice as the research of Rennick seems to indicate.¹³

Further evidence of the importance which Africans place on names is revealed in their proverbs on names.¹⁴

In a word, the traditional African name is much more than a means of identification. It is an essential part of the bearer.

But the study of proverbial names is particularly important because, like proverbs, they indeed mirror the life of Africans as already indicated. Proverbial names reflect what the Africans do and how they live; what values they abhor or uphold; what they think, what joys and what grief they experience. In short, proverbial names, like proverbs themselves, reflect the volkpsychologie and, using them as his data, a researcher can also unveil the weltanschauung of the people among whom the proverbial names have evolved.

I am luckier than the kind of researcher that Professor Nicolaisen¹⁵ has in mind, in that my chief informant is my father,¹⁶ an old man of seventy-three. Thus I had no headache as to the "selection of suitable informants."

¹²Tremearne, A.J.N., *Hausa Superstitions and Customs: an introduction to the folk-lore and the folk* (London, 1913), p. 181.

¹³Rennick, R.M., "Obscene Names and Naming in Folk Tradition," *Names* XVI, 3 (September, 1968).

¹⁴For example: (i) The name which we intend to give to our child stays in our minds (Ilaje); (ii) Without reason a woman does not bear the name Kumolu (because women never bear that name); (iii) A free man's name is never lost (Ashanti); (iv) Family names are like flowers; they blossom in clusters (Ashanti); (v) An ancient name cannot be cooked and eaten; after all money is the thing (Ashanti); (vi) The name is a useless thing. From our ancestors came our names, but from our virtues our honours (Kikuyu); (vii) If you can't spread my fame, don't besmirch my good name (Jabo).

¹⁵Nicolaisen, W.F.H., "Field Collecting in Onomastics," *Names* XXVII, 3 (September 1979), p. 177.

¹⁶I must express my gratitude not only to my father but to every Ilaje man or woman who has contributed his mite to make this article a reality. I found it very easy to obtain my information from the bearers of most names listed in this paper—easy because the bearers (though not all) still remember under what circumstances their names were given to them.

I have chosen Ilaje¹⁷ believing that what is true of the Ilaje is also true of the Yoruba as a whole, and, in most cases, of other African societies. I dare say that all African societies possess repertoires of proverbs and proverbial phrases, although some have lesser stores than others.¹⁸ Proverbial names are also widespread among these societies, as the researches in some areas—though regretably few—have shown.¹⁹ Further studies in onomatology may show too how worldwide proverbial names may be. The Melanesians of the South East Solomon Islands, for example, use proverbs and proverbial phrases as names customarily given to pigs, such as “Stowing away water in the inner room,” “Gad-about when the husband is away,” and “A widow who blackens her teeth.”²⁰

One characteristic of Ilaje proverbial names, like most other African proverbial names,²¹ is that only the first half—or at times the second half—of the name is normally given. For instance, the Okrika²² name Tamuno is a shortened form of Tamunonengiyeofori (= Tamuno nengi ye ofori) which means: “There is nothing greater than God.” The reason is mainly because the full name is too lengthy to be conveniently pronounced. But it will be seen that some of these names are expressive enough in their brevity. A good example of this is the Ozalla name Aiboni²³ which means: “You do not play (i.e., consult) an oracle for an elephant.” That is, the elephant is strong enough to do almost everything for himself.

Readers, who expect me to arrange the names according to the sentiment they express will be disappointed. This, I admit, is a popular method used by paroemiographers, and I also have used this method in

¹⁷The Ilaje, a sub-section of the Yoruba race, inhabit villages and towns in Ilaje—Eso Odo Local Government Area of Ondo State along the Atlantic litoral about 176 km east of Lagos, Nigeria. Their population is about 100,000.

¹⁸Bosner, W. and T.A. Stevens, *Proverb Literature* (London, 1930), xi; Whiting, J.B., “The Origin of the Proverb” in *Harvard University Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* XIII (1931), pp. 59–62; Champion, S.G., *Racial Proverbs* (London, 1958), xciv.

¹⁹See, e.g., Ennis, *op. cit.*; Nsimbi, *op. cit.*; and Omijeh, J., “Bini Proverb—Names: An Aspect of African Oral Literature” *Nigerian Field* XXXVIII, 2 (June, 1973).

²⁰Ivens, W.G., *Melanesians of the South East Solomon Islands* (London, 1927), p. 408.

²¹Omijeh, pp. 90–91.

²²I am indebted for this information to Miss Jumbo whose first name is Tamuro, a teacher in a local school in Jos.

²³I am also indebted for this information to my colleague Dr. S.A. Aiboni, a lecturer in Law at the University of Jos.

one or two articles.²⁴ But experience has shown that even when one uses that method there are still overlaps, because some proverbs indeed may be applied to more than one situation. I have therefore listed them alphabetically, in the manner of a dictionary.²⁵ This is the method recommended by the participants at the symposium on par-oemiology held 19–21 June, 1974 in Helsinki, Finland.²⁶

I have endeavored as much as possible to explain the difficult proverbial names. As for the rest whose meanings only need but a little bit of imagination to get at, I have deliberately left them to the readership, because I believe with the Ashanti that it is only

when a fool is told a proverb, (that) the meaning of it has to be explained to him.

Now to the proverbial names.

1. Agbateminuro = A gba temi ni uro.

Take mine (i.e. idea) as food for thought.

A person, who is generally despised and so whose suggestions at meetings are generally rejected, his wisdom notwithstanding, will express his feeling by giving this name to his child.

Cf. No. 48.

2. Aghobomureṅ = Aghan gho ubo mureṅ.

Look elsewhere (not at me).

3. Aghorunse = A ka gho urun ji a ri se.

Examine closely a thing before you do it.

Look before you leap.

4. Aghoṅeṅ = A gho oṅeṅ ba reṅ.

One should be careful in choosing one's companion.

That is to say, you will be judged by the companion you keep.

5. Aiyeboḡban = Aiye bi oḡban.

To live one needs wisdom.

Cf. Nos. 9 and 67.

6. Aiyeghuneḡjije = Aiye ghu neṅ jije.

²⁴Ojoade, J.O., "God in Nigerian Proverbs," *Nigerian Field* XLIII, 4 (December, 1978), pp. 171–174; "When in Rome do like the Romans," *Midwest Language and Folklore Newsletter* I, 4 (1978–1979), pp. 13–18; "African Proverbs on Proverbs," *Folklore Forum* X, 3 (Winter 1977), pp. 20–23.

²⁵Whiting, J.B., *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (Cambridge and London, 1977).

²⁶*Proverbium* XXIV (1974), p. 929.

There is no one who does not wish to (continue to) live (I guess comfortably).

7. *Aiyejunukanje* = *Aiye e ju nukan je*.

One cannot go through life all alone. He must live in society with others.

This is exactly what Aristotle had in mind when he said that man is a political animal—a saying which was probably older than Aristotle himself.

8. *Aiyemobuwa* = *Aiye oghun mo ba uwa rin*.

Before I was born people have been behaving (well).

Before you reach a place the inhabitants of that place have been operating some codes of conduct with which you are expected to conform.

9. *Aiyenunmelo* = *Aiye nen umelo*.

Life requires slow movement.

Festina lente.

Cf. Nos. 5 and 67.

10. *Aiyeomanenoghunamiwarin* = *Aiye oma nen oghun a mi wa rin*.

It is on account of one's children that one comes to this world.

It is the duty of the parent to provide for the child.

11. *Aiyerengwakan* = *Aiye e ren gwa kan*.

Life does not move in only one direction. It may be bad today but good tomorrow. Just press on.

A child born when the parents are in distress can be given his name as a consolation to them. The condition may still change for the better.

12. *Aiyese* = *Aiye e se temi nukan*.

The world does not belong to me alone. Therefore I should live and let others live too.

13. *Aiyetan* = *Aiye e tan*.

The world does not end. It is its inhabitants that go.

14. *Aiyetimiya* = *Aiye ti mi yipo*.

The earth is still moving round.

That is to say, don't lose hope.

15. *Aiyeyiwa* = *Aiyeyi wa oghun a mi se rin*.

We move with the times.

This is used in the sense of "Tempora mutantur et nos mutamus in illis." In other words each succeeding generation of people has its own life style and code of conduct. Cf. the English "Other times,

other manners.” The Igobo say: “We dance the dance that is prevalent at a particular time.”

16. *Ajagbomọ* = *A e ja gba omọ*.
If God does not give you a child, you cannot fight for it.
Cf. No. 39.
17. *Ajimise* = *Aghan ji mi ba ghan se oja ghan*.
Let me live with you in your village.
If a stranger comes to settle in a village and is having difficulty with some of the inhabitants initially, he may give his name to his child to commemorate this experience.
18. *Ajiolurunse* = *Aghan jẹ ji olurun se urun rẹ*.
Let the owner of the thing do his own thing.
This is used in the sense of “Don’t move Camarina” or “Let sleeping dogs lie.”
19. *Ajomireṅ* = *A jo mireṅ sugbon a ma origho ologho*.
Although we all move together, no one knows the head that will have money.
20. *Amajofodon* = *A ma jẹ ji ofo don*.
Let not your speech hurt others.
21. *Amigho* = *A mi gho ghun oju sugbon a gheadon gha*.
We just look at his face but we dare not slap it.
This can be used as a name or an alias.
A wealthy family that can do anything within the society and go scot-free can give this name to its child.
22. *Amupenṅ* = *A ma upen ṅen*.
No one knows his fate.
23. *Amuwa* = *Amuwa Olorun e ju ko*.
What God gives must be accepted.
A mother that begets a deformed child would give this name to the child, implying that it is God who has given her the child in that form and so she has no choice but to accept it with resignation. The proverbial name can also be given to a child born when a misfortune befalls a family, a misfortune sent by God against which they cannot do anything.
24. *Arikueghaiye* = *Ariku e gha na’iye*.
There is no one who will live for ever.
25. *Aseyitoghunghan* = *Aghan ka se eyi ghunghan*.
Let them do as they like.
This is an Itsekiri proverbial name which is adopted by the Ilaje. The Itsekiri of Bendel State and the Ilaje have been trading with

each other from time immemorial, resulting among other things in one borrowing from the other's culture.²⁷

26. Atikaghaye = A ti ka gho aiye.

Let us continue to watch life.

The Latin version of this is *Nil desperandum* and the English version is "Never say die." As long as there is life, the proverb suggests that one should still hope. A child born in a poor family may be given this name as a consolation to the parents, implying that there is still hope for the improvement of their condition. A facilely consolatory proverb to one in despair!

27. Bẹbiẹkutan = Bi ẹbi e ku tan, a rẹn iworiwo yu ọrọn.

As long as one's relations are still alive one does not walk naked into heaven.

When someone dies the body must be wrapped, usually with a white cloth, before burial. This cloth must be provided by a close relation. It happens that some people may be so unlucky as to lack such relations. Hence the proverb. The name can be given to a child for example, by a poor person who in spite of his condition has succeeded, perhaps after borrowing money, to give a befitting burial to his father or mother. Burial ceremonies in Africa can cost a fortune, and a poor man out of social pressure would more quickly borrow money and remain in perpetual debt than provide a stingy burial for his parents.

28. Bẹri = Bẹ ba ri nẹn, a gbọ oghun ẹrun nẹn.

If you do not see a person you do not hear his voice.

This is a very old proverb, well before the introduction of telephone!

29. Bohan = Bo ba han tewa dede.

If it turns out well it will benefit all of us.

If a joint project is being supported half-heartedly by only some sections of a family, the devoted members might give this name to a child born during this period of uncertainty, implying that every member of the family should cooperate to ensure the success of that project. After all if it succeeds every member of the family, including the reluctant ones will stand to gain from the project.

30. Bojuegbo = Bi oju e gbo e jẹ aiye.

If one is not courageous, one cannot live (comfortably).

If one is not sufficiently courageous, one may not be able to face successfully certain vicissitudes of life.

²⁷Ojoade, J.O., "Some Itsekiri Proverbs," *Nigerian Field* XXXVIII, 2 (June, 1973), pp. 91-96.

Cf. this with a Bini proverbial name, Amadin (= Amadin, ainyagbon) which means "If one is not courageous, one cannot live."²⁸

A father who had to put up with some courageous act at one time or other when his child was still in the womb may give the child this name implying inter alia that, but for the courage which he had shown, he probably would not have lived to see the birth of this child.

31. Ebu = Ebubu e ho iyogho e kɔn agban.

Abuses do not produce fruits, ridicules do not fill baskets.

That is, nobody gains by abusing and ridiculing his opponents. When two families quarrel they let loose a plethora of insults, abuses and curses on each other, each party trying to reveal the secrets or shortcomings of the other. For example, family A may tell family B why the latter has no children or is poor or the like, the idea being to hurt the feelings of family B. Now, another family may settle the quarrel. But as the saying goes "although we clear the matter from the floor (i.e. the matter may be settled) it still lives in the memory." So if eventually the family that has been hurt by the other family's insults and abuses has a child this name is given to it to memorialize the quarrel.

32. Esoma = E si-oma-lo'le-la-gba-ehi-wa.

He is not the go-home-and-bring-back-the-answers type of child.

That is, he is wise on his own and can answer questions posed to him unaided. There are some children that are known to be intelligent enough to make a useful decision without any assistance from an elder within the family, whereas there are others who need to seek advice even on simply matters. A child who is supposed to bring this quality from heaven might be given this name.

33. Eyaro = Eyi aghan ro e se.

Their (evil) wishes have not materialized.

This proverb finds application when a person against whom evil has been planned eventually succeeds. For example, a barren wife of a polygynous man may be praying and making "juju" to the effect that the pregnancy of her co-wife might abort. If the pregnant wife knows about this and the child is born alive then it can be given this proverbial name.

34. Eḅiesuwa = Eḅi e se uwa.

Although we have many relatives, if we have no manners

²⁸Omiyeh, p. 91.

it is all useless. (The Ilaje place good character above materialism.)

35. Egbagbe = E gbagbe oṅen nḗn oṃa.
 A person who has children is not forgotten.
 That is, even when he dies, his children will survive him and so the name of the family continues.
 Cf. Nos. 77, 79 and 86.
36. Egbaiyegbe = E gbe aiye gbe.
 No one lives for ever.
 Cf. No. 37.
37. Egbaiyelọ = E gbe aiye ọ.
 We do not carry this world with us when we die.
 Cf. No. 36.
38. Egbọghan = E gbọ ghan.
 We do (need) not listen to them.
 Family A which is a traditional enemy of family B may be gossiping about family B unnecessarily. If family B finally is told this it might disregard the information quoting the proverb. Similarly a child born during this period might be given the name. This may remind classical readers of this article about the episode involving Leotychidas and some gossips: "Leotychidas, the son of Aristo, was told that certain people were speaking ill of him. 'I am not surprised,' said he. 'Not one of them knows how to speak well.'" (Plutarch, *Leot* I)
39. Ejagboma = A e ja gba oṃa.
 You do not fight to get a child from God.
 The Ilaje, like other Africans, believe that children are given by God. (This is a variant of No. 16.)
40. Eminonomanen = E ma inon omọ nḗn.
 One does not know the mind of one's child.
 Cf. Nos. 41 and 45.
41. Emoruwa = E ma uru uwa.
 We (gather together but) do not know each other's character (mind).
 The Zulu say: the mind is a forest. That is, it is so deep that you do not know what is in it.
 Cf. Nos. 41 and 45.
42. Emubohan = E ma ubo oḗan nḗn gha.
 No one knows where his fortune lies.
 With this we may compare the Latin "Ubi bene ibi patria." A

person who becomes prosperous in a place other than his own fatherland might quickly give this name to the child born during that period. This means that while he left his fatherland to seek fortune elsewhere little did he now where he might get that fortune. He may have worked in several places before finally settling down where he now acquires his new wealth.

43. *Ẹmugbẹyinaiye* = *Ẹ ma ugbẹyin aiye*.

No one knows the end of one's life.

This, I think, is similar to the advice which Solon gave to Croesus, king of Lydia: "Call no man happy until he is dead; he is at best but fortunate." The idea of course is that anything good or bad can happen to one, as the case of Croesus indeed clearly shows, before one's death.

44. *Ẹmulodi* = *Ẹ ma ule odi nẹn*.

No one knows the house of his enemy—because some of one's enemies may disguise as one's friends.

45. *Ẹmuroghan* = *A ma uro ghan*.

We do not know what is in their mind.

Cf. Nos. 40 and 41.

46. *Ẹrẹnaiyetan* = *Ẹ rẹn aiye tan*.

We cannot walk the entire globe to the end.

This indicates the Ilaje knowledge of geography. The earth has no limit.

47. *Ẹyinẹsaranẹn* = *Ẹ yin nẹn e se ara nẹn*.

One's back is not part of one's body.

Once you put your back to a place, you don't know what happens there.

Cf. No. 68.

48. *Gbọfọnuro* = *A gba ọfọ ni uro*.

Accept my suggestion and take it as food for thought.

Cf. No. 1.

49. *Inọejulagho* = *Inọn e ju la gho*.

The belly (i.e. mind) cannot be sliced open for one to see.

A person who has been accused of doing something and who continues to deny in spite of much pressure might give this name to his child implying that if there is any surer way of knowing the truth—for example, if it were possible to slice open his belly or mind to be able to ascertain the truth—he would do so just to vindicate himself.

50. *Jaiyeoyibo* = *A jẹ aiye oyibo*.

Let us enjoy the life of Europeans.

In other words, let us seize the opportunity. When the Europeans came to Africa—for some Africans had predicted that Europeans would not stay in Africa forever!—the life style of the natives changed, some people preferring the new type of life to the traditional one. A child born by such a family that liked the western type of life might be given this name.

51. J̄oļ̄osemi = J̄oļ̄o ka se mi.

Do me as much (wrong) as you can.

A person who is being unnecessarily maltreated can give this name to his child implying that he has placed his case in the hand of God who in turn will deal with his adversaries.

52. Jurunmas̄oma = Ji urun ma se ̄oma ada agba.

If nothing happens to the child he will grow old.

This is used in the sense of “While there is life, there is hope.”

53. Magba = A ma gba temi. Bi we mu ghun mi ma gba temi.

If you don't give me at least don't take away what I already have.

This is self-evident—and a true state of affairs indeed.

54. Mayomi = Ma yo mi.

Don't laugh at me.

55. Mebaghandun = Me ba gha dun t'eghan.

I do not fight to share with others what belongs to them.

In other words, I am contended with what I have.

Cf. No. 56.

56. Mebīoļ̄aghan = Me bi ̄oļ̄a n'̄owo ghan.

I am not asking for wealth (or honour) from them. I am satisfied with what I have.

Cf. No. 55.

57. Megbaleghan = Me gba le (uwa) ghan.

I don't rely on their behaviour.

Cf. No. 61.

58. Megbantoghan = Me gban to ghan.

I am not as clever as they are.

This is not so much a praise as a ridicule. If family A behaves as if it is cleverer than family B which is of course much cleverer than family A, family B can laughingly give this name to its child.

59. Mek̄o = Me k̄o ule mi.

I do not reject my family.

There is another cognate Ilaje proverb:

̄Oma burukun re mi fi ̄owo ohi ju'we ule 'ba re rin.

It is a bad child that shows his father's house with the left hand.

60. Mekuleyi = Me ku le eyi.

(No matter how hard) I will not die (or on) this.

A child who is born with difficulty culminating almost in the mother's death may be given this name.

61. Meretighan = Me r'eti ghan.

I do not mind them. That is, their plan will have no impact on me.

Cf. No. 57.

62. 'Nabi = Ọnẹn yi a bi rire o ghan ju ọnen a bi gheṅwa.

A well born child is better than a beautiful child.

63. Ogholabi = Ogho oghun a bi rin.

It is money that we have begotten (and not a child).

If a parent spent more money than is necessary on a pregnancy, the child which is the result of that pregnancy would be given this name. It is, as it were, a Pyrrhic victory for the parents, for they won in the end by having the child though they had spent almost all their resources!

64. Oghonemi = Ogho nẹn ẹmi.

Money has life or Money is a living thing.

The way money comes and goes to the spender suggests to the Ilaje that it is a living thing.

65. Ọjatonwase = Ọja tọn uwa se.

The village guides one's character for the better.

In those days among the Ilaje, like among other Africans, the training of the child was the responsibility of the entire village. It was incumbent on any senior person even outside the family to correct an erring junior. This role is confirmed by another proverb: Untrained and intractable children would be corrected by outsiders.²⁹ Starr³⁰ reported a practice where "it is a common custom, when a younger person meets an older or wiser one, to ask the aged or wise man for an ekolongo (i.e. a proverb).

66. Ọjabinenni = Ọja yi a bi nẹn oghun a mi se rin.

Behave as they do (in the town) where you are born.

²⁹ Arewa, Ojo E. and A. Dundes, "Proverbs and the Ethnography of Speaking Folklore," *American Anthropologist*, LXVI, 6 (December, 1964), p. 74.

³⁰ Starr, F., "Ethnographic Notes from the Congo Free State" in *Proceedings of the Dakenport Academy of Sciences*, XII (1909), p. 176.

This is the Ilaje congener of the Latin "Si fueris Romae, Romano vivito more; si fueris alibi, vivito sicut ibi (Augustine, *Epist.* II, 18; XXXVI, 32.³¹ The idea is that you should adapt yourself to the (new) surroundings in which you find yourself.

67. Ojuekanmi = Oju e kan mi.

I am not in a hurry. Festina lente.

Cf. Nos. 5 and 9.

68. Ojueteyin = Oju e t'eyin.

The eyes do not see the back.

That is to say, one's eyes do not see what happens behind one.

Cf. No. 47.

69. Ologho = Ologho e ri oma ra.

Even the rich cannot obtain children by purchasing them.

70. Ologhomuro = Ologho ma uro ogho re.

The owner of money (i.e. a rich man) knows how to count his money.

That is, the owner of a things knows his thing.

71. Oṅapan = Oṅen yi a mi pan e ma pe a mi pan oghun.

A person who is praised does not know that he is being praised.

There are some people who have many virtues which others admire. Such people may not be aware of this until some incident brings them face to face with their fans who now seize the opportunity of praising them in their presence.

72. Orighoye = Origho oloye e gbe n'oko.

The head of a chief does not stay in the bush.

If a chief dies on a journey or in a battle field he must be brought home for a burial befitting his status. This name derives from a popular song.

Origho oloye, e ma ri gbe n'oko.

Chorus: A gbe, a gbe r'ule o, a gbe.

Meaning: The head of a chief does not stay in the bush.

Chorus: Let us carry it, let us carry it home, let us carry it.

73. Orisamudanṅen = Orisa ma uda ṅen.

God knows how one is created.

74. Owoṅeturo = Owo e to uro.

The hand does not reach one's thought.

This is the Ilaje version of "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride."

³¹For other African parallels, see Ojoade (1978) and (1979), *op. cit.*

75. *Qja = Qja ju nən.*

The village is greater than a single individual.

The name can be given in the following situation: Suppose an argument arose between members of a village and Mr. A also a citizen and A holds a view quite different from other members of his village. No matter how reasonable A's view is, the majority of the village will always win, even if in the end the view of the majority leads the village into a crisis. A, whose wife was pregnant when this was happening, can memorialize this occasion by naming his child *Qjajunə*.

76. *Qmadun = Qma dun tenən.*

It is (only) your child who can struggle for your well being.

77. *Qmaejulerun = Qma e jə ji ule run.*

Children prevent a family from perishing.

When a family continues to bear children that family is sure to have a long history. On the other hand, a family that does not produce children will most likely cease to exist after some generations. A family with many children will quickly give this name to one of its children.

Cf. Nos. 35, 79 and 86.

78. *Qmapə = Qma pə n'inən.*

The child stays long in the womb (but cannot be longer than twelve months).

This means that no matter how long a pregnancy lasts it does not last longer than twelve months. The *Ilaje* would not worry about a delayed birth until after twelve months.

The child that bears this name chooses the name, as it were, from heaven. The proverbial name has the same application as the English "The longest day must have an end."

Cf. also "It's a long lane that has no turning."

79. *Qmoəjuseribi = Qmo e ju se ari bi.*

We must have to produce children.

The *Ilaje* people, like other Africans, believe one of the reasons for existence is to produce children. Family planning therefore is a foreign invention to the typical *Ilaje* couple. If you ask a mother of say ten children when she intends to stop bearing, she retorts by saying until the number of children which God gives her is exhausted.

Cf. Nos. 35, 77 and 86.

80. *Omiyegha = Omiye e ju gha konən n'ara nən.*

One does not separate one's siblings from oneself.

Cf. "What God has joined together let no man put asunder."

Cf. No. 94.

81. *Ọnẹghẹgho* = *Ọnẹ yi e gbe gho, e ma bi o wowo.*

The person who has not lifted or carried it does not know how heavy it is.

That is, it is only a person who has personally experienced a thing that can appreciate the magnitude of the situation. Normally, as a proverb, if A is suffering from something and B tends to make light of it, A can throw this proverb at B implying that it is because B has not personally experienced the situation that B is treating the matter as B does. In a similar way a couple who has been complaining about a problem which their neighbors think is being exaggerated will quickly give this name to the child who is born soon after.

Cf. Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.

82. *Ọnẹkansulu* = *Ọnọkan e se ulu.*

One individual cannot make a village.

With this idea we must compare Aristotle's "Man is a political animal" (Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk I, ch. 1, sec. 10). For what Aristotle means is that one human being must by nature join his fellow man to make a society. Seneca echoes this by saying that man is a social animal (*sociable animal*). William Blackston puts it vividly: "Man was formed for society, and is neither capable of living alone, nor has the courage to do it." Aristotle has also added that a being who lives alone is either a god or a beast.

83. *Ọnẹkuemeyin* = *Ọnẹn ku e ma ẹyin.*

A dead man does not know what is going on among the living that he has left behind.

A dead man does not know, for example, how he is buried.

84. *Soṃatan* = *Aghan se ọma tan, sugbọn aghan ma ẹda kẹta ghan.*

They think that they are absolutely free born, but their third generation may have had its root in slavery.

This is used in the sense of "Every family has a skeleton in the cupboard."

85. *Temenon* = *Temi e non.*

Mine is not lost.

That is, there is still some hope.

86. *T'ọlọmaenon* = *Ti ọlọma e non.*

The one who has children is not lost.

A person who has children, even if he dies, still lives, his representative on earth being his children. Because his children still

bear his name therefore part of him does not pass into oblivion.
Says Horace: "I shall not wholly die, a part of me will escape death."

Cf. Nos. 35, 77 and 79.

87. Tɔmamogho = Ti ɔma oghun mo gho rin.

It is the condition of the children that I consider.

A man who wishes to revenge a wrong done to him and who is finally dissuaded from doing so on account of his children can give this name to a child born during that time. The name means that he has changed his mind on account of his children who might later be harmed by his enemy.

88. Ukuebɔlati = Uku e bu ɔla ti.

Death does not discriminate in favour of the rich.

That is, just as it takes the poor so also it takes the rich away.

Cf. No. 92.

89. Ukuegbẹbẹ = Uke e gbọ ebẹ.

Death does not listen to pleas.

So also says Franklin in *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1742): "Death takes no bribes." But Aristophanes, as early as the 5th century B.C. put it more vividly:

Alone among the gods Death loves not gifts.
Neither sacrifice nor libation avail with him.
From him, alone of gods, Persuasion stands aloof.

(*The Frogs*, ll. 1392ff.)

90. Ukuejamọfọ = Uku e jẹ ja ma ọfọ.

The thought about death makes it impossible to speak.

There are many things which one would have liked to propose but the thought that death may intervene makes one hesitate to make such proposals.

91. Ukuejuyọnen = Uku e ju fi yọ nẹn.

One should not laugh at another person because someone related to that person happens to die.

After all everybody will pay the price.

92. Ukuemọla = Uku e ma ọla.

Death does not recognize wealth.

Cf. No. 88.

93. Ulenẹn = Ule nẹn uku gha rin.

(The cause of) one's death is under one's roof.

The Ilajẹ believe that when a member of a family dies the death is primarily caused by someone within the family.

94. Uleomiyegha rin = Inoḷe oghun omiye gha rin.
Siblings stay under the same roof.
Cf. No. 80.
95. Ureṇomanen = Ureṇ ona nen oghun a mi reṇ rin.
We go about in order to provide for our children.
Cf. No. 101.
96. Ureṇyeṇoṅkan = Ureṇ e ye ṇoṅkan.
Travelling alone is not good for a person.
Cf. Two heads are better than one.
97. Uromoroeyeghan = Uro yi mo ro, e ye ghan.
They do not understand my thinking.
98. Urunari = Urun yi a ri n'owo oghun a mi dun rin.
It is that which one sees (i.e. holds or has) in one's hand that one struggles to keep.
This is the Ilaje version of "a bird in hand is worth two in the bush."
99. Urunnen = A ma tori urun nen pe nen ejo.
You cannot sue one for what is one's rightful possession.
This in fact derives from a song:
A ma ma tori urunnen pe nen ejo o.
Chorus: Urun nen o, urun nen gelegele.
You cannot sue for what is one's rightful possession.
Chorus: One's rightful possession, one's rightful possession indeed.
100. Uruyiaghanje = Uru yi aghan je, aghan ma fi se ṇoṇmuren.
What they don't tolerate let them not do to others.
That is, "Do unto others as you would be done by." Cf. (1) The loveliest fairy in the world; and her name is Mrs Doasyouwould-bedoneby, and (ii) Mrs Bedonbyasyoudid (Charles Kinsey, *The Water Babies* 5). Aristotle, when asked how we ought to behave to our friends, replied: "As you would wish them to behave toward us" (*Diog. Laert.* Vol. I, 21).
101. Uyajeye = Uya oma nen a mi je ye rin.
Although we suffer in rearing our children, in the end (that is, when they have grown up and we are old) we profit from our previous toils.
African parents struggle to put their children on their feet. When this has been achieved and the parents get old, they then look up to their children to take care of them. This is confirmed by an Ilaje proverb "Bi okete ba dagba eyan oma re oghun ghu mi yan

rin”: When the bush rat gets old it is the breasts of its young ones that it sucks.
Cf. No. 95.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the usefulness of this article which is by no means definitive or exhaustive³² lies in the fact that it has delineated some areas that require research, and furnishes raw materials which can be utilized by folklorists and onomatologists, philosophers, anthropologists, linguists—to mention just a few—who may be interested in cross-cultural studies. I strongly believe that the article will be followed by similar studies among both Africans and non-Africans. This done, the secondary aim would have been achieved.

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³²No paroemiographer, to the knowledge of the writer, has ever made a complete collection of the proverbs of any given nation. John Heywood made such a claim which was quickly disproved by Queen Elizabeth I. To do such a thing will be an impossible task, for, in addition to the fact that the existing ones are not easily accessible, especially in a pre-literate society, new ones are being coined daily. See Archer Taylor, “How Nearly Complete Are the Collections of Proverbs?,” *Proverbium* XIV (1969), pp. 369–371.