

# Deciphering Aborigines and Migrants from Cognation and Topography in North-Western Edo

‘Demola Lewis

It is often easier to see what was wrong with earlier explanatory frameworks, with their emphasis on migration and diffusion, than it is to develop consistent and compelling alternative explanations.

Renfrew (1994: 34)

The prehistory of North-Western Edo (N.W.E<sup>1</sup>), Nigeria is laced with frequent drifts of population, consequent contact and subsequent lexical diffusion. There are speakers of twenty four odd North Edoid languages dispersed around the N.W.E. southerly plains of Owan and northerly hills of Akoko-Edo. This paper sketches prehistoric patterns of migration and aborigine settlement of North Edoid populations as gleaned from vocabulary cognation percentages and geographical variables. Three aborigine axes were identified: Okpella, North Ibie and Somorika, situated in hilly Akoko-Edo; and the pair of Uokha and Ghotuo are fingered as early Bini migrants into plain land Owan. The remainder groups have alternated fleeting uphill drafts during pestilence with downhill migration at pacific times. It was shown that the terrain was a capital factor in making Akoko-Edo a migrant’s magnet and epicentre of linguistic diversity.

**Keywords:** Prehistory, Aborigine, Migrant, Cognation percentages, Geographical variables, North-Western Edo (Nigeria).

La prehistoria del noroeste de Edo, Nigeria, está relacionada con frecuentes movimientos de población, con el consiguiente contacto y la posterior difusión léxica. Hay hablantes de veinticuatro idiomas extranjeros del norte de Edoid repartidos por todo el noroeste de Edo, hacia las llanuras del sur y las montañas del norte de Owan Akoko-Edo. En el artículo se describen los patrones prehistóricos de la migración y el asentamiento de las poblaciones aborígenes del

norte de Edoid según se deduce de los porcentajes de cognados léxicos y de las variables geográficas. Se identificaron tres zonas aborígenes: Okpella, el norte de Ibie y Somorika, situado en el montañoso Akoko-Edo, y el par de Uokha y Ghotuo, como los primeros migrantes en Owan Bini. Los grupos restantes han alternado el aumento de corrientes efímeras durante las plagas con la disminución de la migración en tiempos de paz. Se demostró que la geografía era un factor fundamental para hacer de Akoko-Edo un imán de los migrantes y epicentro de la diversidad lingüística.

**Palabras claves:** prehistoria, aborígenes, migrantes, porcentajes de cognados, variables geográficas, noroeste de Edo (Nigeria).

## Introduction

The migrationist antecedents of many North Edoid populations inundate lore as well as contemporary collective memory. Quite how these migrations took place may never be precisely accounted for. However, plausible proposals are made here by way of tracking population shifts. Given the dynamic nature of language in North-Western Edo, it is imperative to first determine which factors should serve as indicators of migration and for that matter, aborigine. Trite to mention, such factors are not restricted to linguistic domains. Therefore, in the following paragraphs, statistical and topographical parameters, as well as patterns of settlement are deployed in tracking migrant and aborigine populations.

### 1. The North Edoid People and North-Western Edo

The Edoid speak languages classified by the same name and reside in all of Edo and parts of Delta, Rivers, Ondo, Kogi and Kwara States of Nigeria. This work is concerned with the North Edoid (NE) division, largely as described by Elugbe (1989: 26). The people of NE dwell in the hilly terrain of North-Western Edo, and its high density of languages (24 in 566Km<sup>2</sup>) fits perfectly with prototypical homelands as advanced by several scholars (Elugbe 1979; Hill 2006) and particularly for Benue-Congo (Elugbe 1992; Schaefer *et al.* 2005). For that matter, the collective name for the hills in this region is *Afenmai*, which means ‘our home’. Likely, North-Western Edo served as prehistoric refugium, and its geographical layout is germane to linguistic diversity. Thus, the expression *Afenmai* is an Okhamheri term, which is inclusive of all the

groups that sought refuge in the hills during eras of slave trade and other forms of pestilence. Some of these groups, as would be shown, were migrants from Owan and other south-western regions.

Lewis (2013: 232) puts the language densities of Akoko-Edo and Owan as one language per 12km<sup>2</sup> and 39km<sup>2</sup> respectively. Older members of North-Western Edo tend to be bilingual speakers of an Edoid language and Yoruba. A good many also transact business in some variety of Nigerian Pidgin.

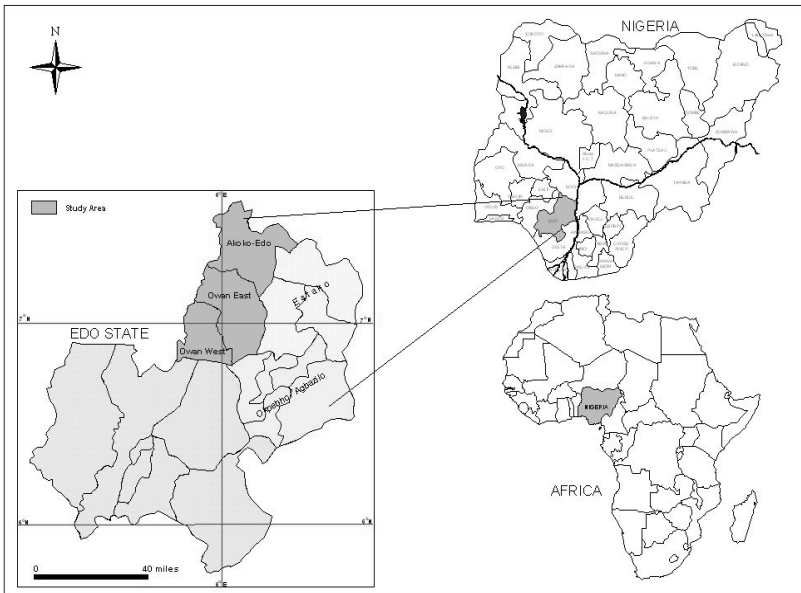


Figure 1. *Study Area: North-Western Edo, Nigeria*  
(Courtesy of Odemerho F.)

From the sociolinguistic perspective, the Edoid are a minority group within Nigeria's large population of West Benue-Congo. Most of Nigeria's southern populations speak Benue-Congo languages; while northern Nigeria is largely Afro-Asiatic. The three main languages of Nigeria are Yoruba, Igbo (of Benue-Congo) and Hausa (of Afro-Asiatic). While Afro-Asiatic is one of Africa's four main language groups (the others being Niger-Congo, Khoisan and Nilo-Saharan); Benue-Congo is the largest subgroup of Niger-Congo (Williamson and Blench 2000). Like most minority groups, the Edoid often affiliate with the politically relevant Yoruba strong group; from whom they claim, by oral tradition, to have migrated north-easterly. However, such claims often occlude aspects of prehistory and create the impression that there

are no aborigine Edoid groups; more so, that all migrations were from Yorubaland. Indeed, there have been intra-Edoid migrations which this paper intends to point out.

### 1.1. Relief

North-Western Edo is characterised by conical and dome formations round and about the Afenmai Hills, which rises to 2000 feet above sea level and extends from the River Osse on the west to the River Niger on the east (Schaefer and Egbokhare 2010: 34).

North-Western Edo relief declines from north to south (see Figure 2). Akoko-Edo towers with mountain walls 800-2000 feet above sea level. The hills are dissected by broad valleys which in the past served as paths for fleeting populations; and today are migrant settlements. Owan East is in the range of 156-500 feet higher than sea surface, and Owan West has just about 16-100 feet elevation. Akoko-Edo is characterised by rocky domes and arable ridges which for centuries supported terrace farming. The terrain changes southerly. High plains and sparse hills typify Owan East, and Owan West at the bottom of the gradient is distinguished by its low plains.

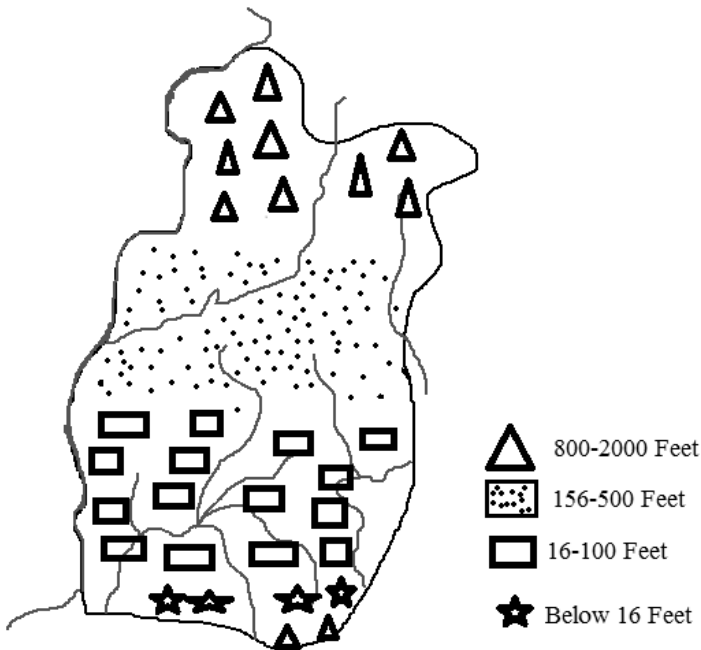


Figure 2. *North-Western Edo Topography, plus Valley Settlement Path*  
(Courtesy of Odemerho F.)

## 1.2. Irrigation

North-Western Edo is irrigated by four main rivers and their tributaries, all of which meander the topography, flowing south-westerly. River Osse outlines the western border of North-Western Edo, travelling the entire length of the region. River Onyami (Ojirami) dissects North Western Edo in half; it then flows westward into the Osse River at about midway in the region. The Orle River takes its root from north-east Akoko-Edo and travels southward to exit the region again at about halfway. Most of Owan irrigation is from a river by the same name. River Owan sources out from an inselberg in the Ikhin-Arokho axis; and it has three eastern tributaries and a fourth which joins it from the west. River Edion runs parallel to River Owan to the east, and its distributaries bifurcate perpendicularly eastward and southward.



Figure 3. North-Western Edo Villages and Rivers

### 1.3. North Edoid Populations

North-Western Edo is home to aborigine and migrant ethnic groups, who engaged in inter-ethnic wars during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and have maintained considerable peace and calm thereon. There are estimated 285,000 inhabitants in North-Western Edo, and a population density of 85 pers./km<sup>2</sup> (Edo State Government 2004). Schaefer *et al.* (2005:171) put the number of village settlements at 85. This area inhabits high density language varieties in contiguous settlements. For instance, if you drove 41.5 km from Igarra to Ososo (see Figure 3), you would meet speakers of at least six distinct languages, Etuno (Ebira in Igarra); Enwa; Akuku; Okpamheri; Uneme and Ososo. Many of their villages have physical demarcations none other than a patch of domestic farm between two buildings.

Despite intense interaction largely through trade and limited inter-marriage in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, each ethnic group has tried to maintain its language by faithful intergenerational transfer. This has been possible because non-Edoid languages like Yoruba and Nigerian Pidgin serve as languages of wider communication. North-Western Edo people have a profound sense of ethnic identity, resulting from an antecedent of wars and migration. That is not to say that language barriers are watertight, as considerable feature diffusion has occurred especially with large groups like the Okpamheri who inhabit pockets of villages round and about Akoko-Edo, and whose claim to a common language has degenerated to mere political correctness. Somorika, Ibilo, Aiyegunle and Dagbala have been shown by Elugbe (1989) and Lewis (2004) as distinct languages still claimed as one by locales largely for the benefits of collective numerical strength. There is a bit of discussion on Okpamheri dispersal in section 3. Other North Edoid populations in Akoko-Edo aside from those mentioned above are North Ibie, Okpella, Atte and Ikpeshi. The Uneme, famous for blacksmithing, are in ten diaspora villages across Akoko-Edo. Their language is classified as belonging to North Central Edoid (Elugbe 1989; Lewis 2013).

In Owan there is a 100,000 strong population which greet with *Eese* and speak a cluster of dialects called Emai, Ora and Iuleha. Each of the three members of this cluster is governed by autonomous kings. The claim is made that Emai-Ora-Iuleha people are recent migrants into Owan. Closely linked with this cluster are the Ake, who also greet *Eese*. Like Ake, Uokha, Ikhin and Arokho are middle-belt settlements in Owan. Going by the unanimous testimony of informants, Uokha has an uncontested proprietary claim to being the earliest settlement and therefore the most senior group in Owan. They assert a dynastic descent from Benin Empire and maintain that when the entire Owan

groups congregate, it is the people of Uokha that break the kolanut; thus symbolising seniority. Okpuje, Ihievbe and Warrake are south-eastern settlements; while speakers of Ghotuo and Igwe occupy the north-westerly parts of Owan.

## 2. Data Acquisition and Cognation Computation

The data analysed in this paper derive from basic vocabulary as specified by Swadesh (1952; 1955). Hock (1991: 215) defines basic vocabulary as “...indispensable for human communication... no matter the accidents of cultural surroundings”. By implication, items of basic vocabulary are of universal relevance; and the words are hardly borrowed because every language has native terms for such items and concepts. A typical list of basic items includes obvious body parts like head, nose, eye and hand; life’s necessities like water, air, food and housing; environmental and weather features like sky, sun, moon, rain, mountain, tree and animal; verbs of daily life; low numerals, kinship terms and pronouns.

It was conceived by Swadesh (1952: 456-457) that basic vocabulary is not likely to be borrowed and is resistant to change. He therefore put forward an initial list of 200 basic items, which he later reduced to 100 items based largely on persistence of the items to change and on intuitions about their universal relevance (Swadesh 1955: 133-137). The bulk of statistical comparisons in this work were based on the 100 and 200 wordlists of Swadesh. Traditionally, the Swadesh list is used to determine genetically related languages and to draw up phylogenetic trees. In this paper however, the use of basic vocabulary is extended to systematically identifying aborigine and migrant populations by interpreting the results of cognation percentages of basic lexicon.

An expanded list of 400 items inclusive of commonplace cultural concepts was convened in 1966 by experts at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The compilation was necessitated by the need for more penetrating prehistorical investigations among languages already proved to be genetically related; such as the Benue-Congo language family. This Ibadan 400 wordlist was acquired as a supplementary database. Some commonplace cultural items contained in the Ibadan Wordlist include local weather terms like rainy season, dry season, mist and dew; tropical animals like leopard, lizards and elephants; aspects of fetish worldview and basic vegetation.

Historical linguists refer to words of different languages that are proved to be of the same origin as cognates. The criteria by which cog-

nates are identified are (i) similarity in phonetic form and function; and (ii) plausible phonological derivation of one form from the other. The number of cognate words shared by two languages is an indication of how genetically close the languages are. Thus, to obtain the values in the cognation tables that follow, we computed cognation percentages between languages in this survey by pair-wise observation of each item in the Swadesh 100 and 200 Wordlists (as well as the Ibadan 400 wordlist) across all the languages.

### 3. Cognation Statistics, Aborigine and Migration

The posture adopted in this work is that any language which has an even and moderate cognation nearly across the board is likely aborigine. Williamson (1989) supports this equation of equidistant cognation with autochthony. That and the possession of conservative forms of the lexicon provide sufficient grounds for its speakers to be considered aborigine. In determining equidistance, we align with the posture of Dyen (1964), which states that equidistance may be assumed if there is 10 or less percentage difference in cognation.

Even at that, the closer the cognation values obtained the better for equidistance. It was discovered however that geographical factors of remoteness and proximity may enable more than one level of equidistance. This is usually the case when there are drifts of immigration to a region which has several aborigine groups; such that each aborigine group approximates equidistance with the immigrants while maintaining another level of equidistance with other aborigine groups. Equidistance dichotomy may also result from different periods of immigration whereby populations that arrive earlier have higher equidistance with aborigine groups than those who arrived later.

Thus the parameters which determine which group is aborigine or migrant, and for that matter how early or late the migration took place, are the presence or lack of (i) equidistant cognation; (ii) different levels of equidistant cognation with suspected aborigine and non-aborigine groups; (iii) evidence of archaic forms of lexicon; and (iv) geographical proximity and remoteness.

As to the question of how far back in the ages aborigine goes, it should be noted that the ascription is meant for those who inhabited North-Western Edo prior to ethnic wars, slave trades, colonialism and evangelization. It is by no means intended that groups branded here as aborigine were the first *homo sapiens* to inhabit these regions. Details as far back as that are eclipsed by the primarily linguistic nature of this



investigation. All cognation computations here discussed are within the Swadesh 100 and 200 wordlists.

### 3.1. Owan Settlement Chronology and Migration

Uokha tallies in 74 to 79 percentages with Uroe, Eese, Ihievbe, and Ake, and it scores another level of equidistance (61% to 69%) with Ghotuo, Ikhin and Warake (Table 1). The fact that Uokha tallies in the percentile of 70s with the first group and 60s with the second is a pointer to early migrant settlement. Thus the 60% cognation range could be put to the fact that there are rivers and thick forests which make Uokha less accessible to Warake and Ghotuo. The submission that Uokha is the earliest settlement in eastern Owan quite fits the claim of Uokha people to seniority in Owan; an assertion supported by other populations of Owan.

Following the logic of levels of cognation, one would expect that the languages that fall in the 70 percentages with Uokha (i.e. Uroe, Eese, Ihievbe, Ikhin, Ake and Arokho) are recent migrants, while those in the 60s bracket (i.e. Ghotuo and Warake) are earlier settlers if not aborigine. These assumptions may only be affirmed if the languages so listed measure well with the four criteria summarised in section 2 above.

	Eese	Ihievbe	Ghotuo	Ake	Arokho	Uroe	Ikhin	Uokha
Ihievbe	78							
Ghotuo	54	55						
Ake	75	74	66					
Arokho	71	70	62	71				
Uroe	79	75	57	63	72			
Ikhin	71	67	52	61	70	78		
Uokha	76	75	61	79	70	74	63	
Warake	72	67	54	62	62	63	59	69

Table 1. *Owan 200 Wordlist Cognation Percentages*

Let us start with Ake and Arokho, which seem to have similar cognation patterns as Uokha. Both languages record two levels of equidistant cognation (60s% and 70s%) with all of Owan, save Uneme in Table 2a. As for Arokho, it ranks 70 to 72 percent with Eese, Ihievbe, Ake, Uroe and Ikhin; and 62% to 69% with Ghotuo and Warake. Ake pairs lexicon 70% to 79% with Eese, Ihievbe, Arokho and Uokha, and 61 to 66 percent with Ghotuo, Warake, Uroe and Ikhin. Curiously, the conservative 60 percentages of Ake, Uokha and Arokho are mutually exclusive of one another. Indeed Ake's conservative cognation, save for the

inclusion of Uroe is identical to that of Uokha; and that of Arokha compared with Uokha is only missing Ikhin. A simple explanation for this pattern would be the proximity of Ake, Arokho and Uokha settlements. But beyond the appeal to proximity, this mutual exclusiveness and common inclusiveness may derive from being cognate village settlements from the same early migrant party. And by virtue of southerly location, Uokha is fingered as the initial settlement.

To further strengthen the position of Arokho as one of the early settlements in Owan it is worth paying a bit more attention to cognation. All of Arokho values may be roughly lumped together as one level of equidistance (62%-72%). This type of even cognation is typical of early settlers who have integrated properly in a diffusion region. Going by this, it would be in order to infer that Arokho was in the same party as Uokha, and broke away to settle north-westerly shortly after migration into Owan region. As for Ake, its 79% cognation with Uokha also betrays strong genetic affiliation. Thus Ake, Arokho and Uokha are sister early migrant settlements in Owan.

Ghotuo (spoken in Utuo) quite noticeably has conservatively equidistant cognation across the board. This suggests that its speakers have occupied the area for a long period. Indeed, Ghotuo cognation with Uokha, Ake and Arokho is in the 60 percentile; while with other groups, Ghotuo tallies in the 50 percent range. This pattern validates the early settlement status of Ghotuo by virtue of being itself equidistant in higher cognation with other longstanding early settlers.

It would be seen straightaway that the Eese have high equidistant values across the board, save for Ghotuo. Yet it will not be right to name Eese an Owan aborigine or early settler group, because there is no clear-cut dichotomy of equidistance as is the case with Uokha. The low cognation which Eese has with Ghotuo is an outlier figure of 55% which derives from remoteness, and not shared-autochthony. If it were borne off early settlement, Eese would measure just as low with groups like Uokha and perhaps Warake. That not being the case, the submission is that the equidistance of Eese is that of a large group of immigrants (comprising Emai, Ora and Iuleha) ready to loan and exchange lexicon as part of social integration in a new area. When Eese's cognation with Ghotuo is compared with those of Uokha, Ake and Arhokho, it becomes clear that the speakers of Eese have not been in Owan long enough to share 60% cognation with Ghotuo. This further supports the submission that Eese was originally a large party of subsequent migrants from Bini who settled in small groups at Afuze (Emailand), Ora and Uzeba (Iulehaland). Thus, Uokha and Eese parties were part of the initial and subsequent population shifts into eastern Owan from Bini. Thus, they are not considered aborigine to

Owan; rather, they are migrant settlers in Owan, with Uokha as the earliest settlement.

Aside from Ghotuo, Igwe is also an outlier group situated in the north-western outskirts of Owan. In order not to obscure the true picture of mainstream Owan, Igwe cognation values are presented in Table 2b. Notice that there is a dichotomy of even cognation: a thin 62% to 63% with Eese and Ihievbe; and 43% to 52% with the rest (including Ghotuo and Uokha). The explanation for this can be found in migration. Igwe speakers immigrated into Akoko-Edo. That made for greater lexicostatistical divergence from the Eese stalk. When tensions mollified in Akoko-Edo, and hidden populations came downhill to settle, the Igwe also embarked on a southerly descent. This trajectory is supported by oral lore. What is captured in the equidistant 62 to 63 percent range is the formal lexical convergence consequent upon southern descent to the plain, and their reintegration into Owan. The higher shared cognation with Eese and Ihievbe again points to the region of initial emigration of the Igwe. Thus, the Igwe are returnee immigrants.

Ghotuo and Igwe form an interesting pair in Owan. They are distinctly alike in some lexical<sup>2</sup> forms (see example 3.1), yet Tables 2b reveals that they are distant in statistical counts. The convergence of lexicon between Ghotuo and Igwe can be put to interactions after the Igwe descent from Akoko-Edo.

(3.1) Showing the affiliation of Ghotuo and Igwe, despite Igwe being in the Uokha/Arokho Language cluster

Gloss	Ghotuo	Igwe	Uokha	Arokho/Ake
know	<i>né</i>	<i>né</i>	<i>heó</i>	<i>éxò</i>
tie	<i>gélè</i>	<i>gèné</i>	<i>gbàlò</i>	<i>gbálò</i>
pull	<i>fí</i>	<i>tí</i>	<i>wóri</i>	<i>vúrò</i>
sleep	<i>džērā</i>	<i>zá</i>	<i>méhè</i>	<i>màì</i>

One of the puzzles before us is how the Uneme have recurrently low cognate tallies with most Owan groups, and in fact, all of Akoko-Edo; yet the same Uneme speakers record a 74% cognation with Eese (Table 2a). How is it that the Uneme who do not dwell in Owan are undoubtedly North Central Edoid (NCE) by evidence of high cognation with Eese? Indeed, Uneme presents a classical telltale pattern of cognation in Table 2. Whereas the Uneme live in Akoko-Edo, they tally in cognation only up to 53% (with Akoko-Edo's North Ibie); and despite the complete absence of Uneme in Owan their cognation values with Eese and Ihievbe are 74% and 72% accordingly. Though other Owan groups compare low with Uneme, the figures remain higher than

those of Akoko-Edo where the Uneme reside. These figures evidently track the migration path of the Uneme around and about North-Western Edo. A northerly climb into Akoko-Edo would explain the contraction of cognation between Uneme and the rest of Owan. Uneme pairing highest with Eese is a pointer to the area in Owan from which speakers of Uneme emigrated. The fact that Uneme stems from Eese axis (which includes Emai) is not unconnected with Emai inscriptions such as *Egbokhare* on the lintel of a house at Somorika, the homeland of the Okpamheri. Indeed, Uneme is one of Akoko-Edo remnants of NCE migrant groups. Certainly, Uneme people migrated to Akoko-Edo and have had no need to return when things pacified because their blacksmithing skills are just as relevant in wartime as in peacetime. Thus, the Uneme are internal migrants in North-Western Edo.

	Ate	Okpe	Sasa	Etuno	Enwa	Akuku	Okpmr	Ososo	N.Ibie	Ikpeshi	Okpella
Uneme	50	39	49	24	51	51	51	45	53	40	47
	Arok	Uroe	Igwe	Ake	Uokh	Ghot	Ikhn	Ihie	Eese	Warak	
Uneme	41	53	32	49	61	38	40	72	74	60	

Table 2a. *Uneme Across Owan and Akoko-Edo*  
(Swadesh 100)

	Eese	Ihievbe	Ghotuo	Ake	Arokho	Uroe	Ikhn	Uokha	Warake
Igwe	63	62	49	46	51	45	43	49	52

Table 2b. *Igwe Cognation across Owan*

Now, why would the Uneme who migrated from Owan to Akoko-Edo maintain their lexicon while the Igwe who returned to borderline Owan present with relatively conservative cognation values across Owan. The rationale behind this is that the Igwe were more susceptible to vocabulary diffusion because their settlements were in the heart of Akoko-Edo. They had to encourage lexical and feature diffusion since their sojourn in Akoko-Edo was a matter of survival. The Uneme on their part were not compelled to migrate northward by hostile groups; being blacksmiths, their movement was in quest of clients for their skills. For the Uneme, it did not matter whether it was invader or aborigine who needed weapons; they equipped both sides of the war. Till this day, they are ostracized in satellite villages around Akoko-Edo and native populations still hold the Uneme in high suspect. For this reason, there was and still is little interaction with the Uneme beyond patronising their trade; and such excommunication has made for maintenance of lexical affiliation with Eese and Ihievbe.

How do we deal with the figures of Warake? On the one hand they tally high with Eese (72%), Ihievbe (67%) and Uokha (69%). On the other hand, they measure low with Ghotuo, Uroe, Ikhin, Ake and Arokho (54% to 63%), the latter two of which are cognate villages with Uokha. By implication, Warake belongs to the Eese party. They integrated well with Uokha upon arrival in Owan and later split with Eese to settle in the eastern fringes of Owan. The easterly drift has made for loss of high cognation with westerly settlements all of whom are captured in the lower cognations of 54 to 63 percent. It is in fact instructive to note that cognation with Warake diminishes in the east-northerly direction - the least value is recorded with the most west-northerly Igwe.

To capsulize indications from the foregoing paragraphs, there is a clear pattern of settlement longevity in Owan. Uokha is the oldest settlement (early immigrants), and the two main offshoots of the Uokha party are Arokho and Ake. These three related villages skirt a tiny stretch of isolated hills and are sandwiched between Rivers Edion and Owan; a typical picturesque homestead endowed with basic needs. There was an independent western settlement by the Ghotuo (also early immigrant), with whom it is suspected there have been recent close interaction with Igwe (returnee immigrants), with whom they share lexical innovation despite scoring low in cognation. Eese (subsequent immigrants) is a second massive population shift into Owan with cognate villages in Afuze, Ora, Iuleha, Ihievbe and Warake. The Uneme were part of the Eese group, but have since moved on to Akoko-Edo; along with Ososo, and Sasaru (internal immigrants).

### 3.2. Akoko-Edo Settlement Chronology and Migration

In teasing out Akoko-Edo migrant and native groups, it should be borne in mind that the hilly terrain makes for low cognation values. Even at that, Okpella and North Ibie, and to a large extent Atte exclusively score high in cognation. The former two actually have markedly high values together (77%), while North Ibie shares 71% with Atte. No other pair in Akoko-Edo hit as high as 70%. Atte on its part has no matching less than 50%; which is modestly high, going by Akoko-Edo figures. The very pattern described for the NCE archaic cluster of Uokha, Arokho and Ake is played out by this set of North-Western Edoid (NWE) languages, indicative of long settlement. However North Ibie and Okpella display additional evidence of archaism which point them out as aborigine settlements on the east side of Akoko-Edo. By way of underscoring this claim, a good many of the sounds which areally distinguish Akoko-Edo are used by languages of North Ibie and Okpella (see enlarged symbols in (3.2)).

## (3.2) Archaic preservation of sounds typical of North Ibie and Okpella

Wing	Wet	Bird	
íβà	βò	áβì	
N.Ibie/Atte	N. Ibie	N.Ibie	
Rope	Fire	Eye	Give
úíì	èf'è	íraf'ò	f'óná
Okpella	N.Ibie	Akuku	N.Ibie
f <sup>v</sup>	t <sup>w</sup>	s <sup>w</sup>	
Push	Push	Push	
f <sup>w</sup> áfià	t <sup>w</sup> abò	s <sup>w</sup> ábò	
Okpella	N.Ibie	Atte	

Much of west side Akoko-Edo is occupied by the Okpamheri. As claimed by Lewis (2006: 176), the homestead of the Okpamheri language cluster is Somorika. The reasons advanced in support of this claim are that Somorika has extant archaic forms, it is situated in a remote hill, its lexicostatistical values are modestly even across the board, and the village is famous for aged priestly practices of the Okpamheri. An additional good reason for safely regarding Somorika as homeland is that wherever cognates are found between eastern Akoko-Edo aborigines –Okpella and North Ibie–, likelier than not, their forms are the same as that of Somorika, especially with North Ibie (see example in Table 4). When this is not the case, eastern aboriginal forms are more archaic. By implication, the chronological order of Akoko-Edo settlements is first Okpella, then North Ibie to the east; and, in third place, Somorika to the west. All three autochthonous settlements are strategically pitched at the higher points of Akoko-Edo and close to river sources.

	Atte	Okpe	Sasaru	Enwa	Akuku	Okpamheri	Ososo	N. Ibie	Ikpeshi
Okpe	50								
Sasaru	58	51							
Enwa	67	51	61						
Akuku	58	51	59	60					
Okpamheri	58	58	58	55	71				
Ososo	59	45	51	56	54	58			
N. Ibie	71	40	55	68	53	62	57		
Ikpeshi	62	39	46	62	49	58	52	58	
Okpella	70	40	56	65	51	58	55	77	57

Table 3. Akoko-Edo Cognation Percentages

NWE	Salt	Road	Sea	Sleep	Moon
Okpella	ún <sup>w</sup> erì	àtòdè	òkè <sup>n</sup> ofìjì	īrēsíá	ùkì
North Ibie	ún <sup>w</sup> e	átòdè	òf <sup>i</sup> imìlì	óvèsè	ùkì
Ikpeshi	òmi	ùwùrè	òkú	óvè <sup>f</sup> ìjì	úrò:kì
Atte	úwèlì	ódè	óxè	lìfà	ùt <sup>f</sup> ì
Enwa	úwè <sup>m</sup> ì	órèyì	òmòtògbé	ùlè	ùkìyì
Akuku	ún <sup>w</sup> e	úgbódè	áménòdídzé	óβìsè	ù:t <sup>f</sup> ì
Somorika	ún <sup>w</sup> e	wofodè	òfìmirè	óvè <sup>i</sup> sè	ùkì

Table 4. Cognates showing affiliation of Somorika, North Ibie and Okpella

The cognations for Ososo and Sasaru range similarly, with Ososo ranking expectedly highest with North Ibie (62%), and Sasaru reaching 61% with Enwa. These peaks of cognation are motivated by proximity. Altogether, Ososo and Sasaru values may say little, but Lewis (2013: 150-154) used lexical and sound affinity to pitch them with the NCE languages of Owan.

It has been established (here and drawing from Lewis 2013) that Ososo, Uneme and Sasaru are Owan migrants into Akoko-Edo (internal Immigrants). It remains to determine that category of settlement to which Akuku, Enwa and Okpe belong. As Table 5 points out, there are no statistical bases for classifying Enwa as NCE, despite oral claims of their link with Emai, Sasaru and Igwe Sale. Whereas Enwa and Sasaru cognation fall in the neighbourhood of 60% on the 100, 200 and 400 word scales, Enwa-Igwe figures drop to the 50% axis. This is a clear case of proximity begetting higher cognation between Enwa and Sasaru. In addition, Enwa pairs still higher with North Ibie and Atte (68% and 67% correspondingly), both of which are much further away from Enwa than Sasaru. It therefore follows that the relatively higher values between Enwa and the eastern Akoko-Edo aborigines did not come about by mere proximity. Enwa originally belonged to the eastern borders of Akoko-Edo. The people migrated westward, where they formed some close association with Sasaru immigrants from Owan. The same argument of western migration may be advanced for Okpe, which tallies 71% with North Ibie, 70% with Okpella and 67% with Enwa, despite its location in the far west of Akoko-Edo.

a. (400)

	Sasaru	Igwe
Igwe	65	
Enwa	64	53

b. (200)

	Sasaro	Igwe
Igwe	65	
Enwa	60	50

c. (100)

	Sasaro	Igwe
Igwe	68	
Enwa	62	53

Table 5. *Cognation Percentages for Igwe Sale-Sasaru-Enwa*

The case of Akuku is peculiar (Table 3). It pairs highest with Enwa (60%) and Okpamheri (i.e. Somorika, 71%). It seems in close affiliation to both eastern and western Akoko-Edo aborigines. Now this is not surprising considering the fact that Akuku is situated in the valley axis of highest accessibility in Akoko-Edo. The Akuku speak an independent language which has blended much with its contact speech forms to the extent that it is nearing even cognation with the east and west blocs of Akoko-Edo. Akuku is an aborigine Akoko-Edo settlement related to Somorika, which descended further down the hills than other aborigine groups. This descent into the valley has occasioned massive vocabulary exchange to the extent that their language is converging with Enwa.

## 4. Physical Geography and Spatial Distribution of the Okpamheri

A further indication of the effects of physical separation can be gleaned from the internal statistics of Okpamheri – the largest and most dispersed linguistic group in Akoko-Edo. Twenty-three Okpamheri villages scattered around Akoko-Edo spoke one language before descent and dispersion. Recent lexicostatistics however presents cognation values between 50% and 84%; to the effect that Okpamheri has been split into four distinct languages (Lewis 2004: 69). So what happened? All of Okpamheri was initially situated uphill, and contact was severely limited by an assortment of hills and boulders, which also served to keep intruders off and guarantee some measure of security. As was bound to happen through dynamic conventions in small groups, each settlement continued to innovate with little reference to the others. By the time of valley descent, the differences were so pronounced that intelligibility



had dwindled remarkably. Further divergence has occurred as many other groups now intersperse the Okpamheri in their valley locations, and feature diffusion is now the norm.

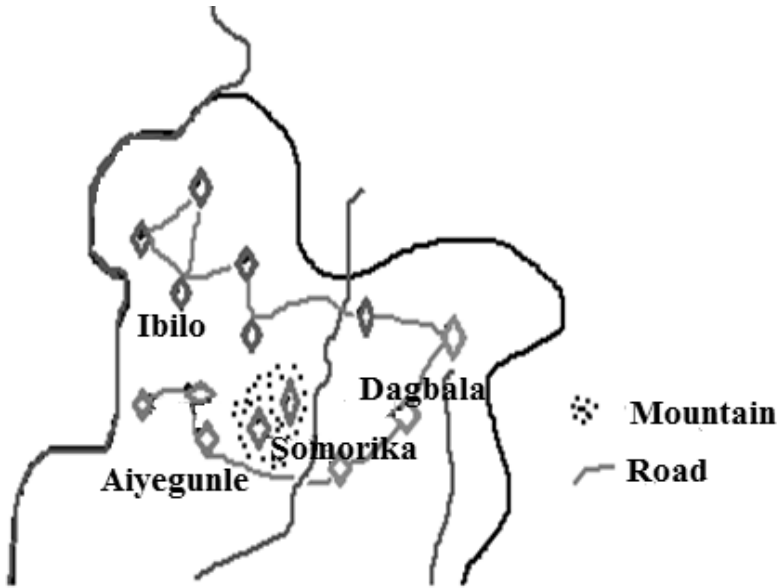


Figure 4. *Distribution of Okpamheri Language Cluster*

As Figure 4 shows, even as things stand now, village affiliation to the four *new* Okpamheri languages is based on the presence of physical geographical obstacles or the lack thereof. Notice that the villages which speak Ibilu trend in the north-westerly valley and are easily accessible by road. The same accessibility can be said of Aiyegunle-speaking villages, which extend south-westerly up to the Ojirami River. The Ojirami River marks off Dagbala-speaking villages from Aiyegunle. As for the speakers of Somorika, their villages –Ogbe and Somorika– are still very remotely situated uphill.

## 5. Owan and Akoko-Edo Settlement Chronology

In a chronological investigation of North-Western Edo a burden of proof lies in articulating a position about which settlement predates another between Owan and Akoko-Edo. This assessment is approached from the perspective of the interplay between topography and migration.

## 5.1. Migrations and Topography

Migration compromises autochthony. The logic is simple: in prehistoric times, agrarian populations were sedentary, subsistent needs were met and there were little threats from raiding neighbours. Naturally, land played a capital role in determining whether a population migrated or remained in one place. To start with, the soil had to be endowed enough to sustain enduring cropping and grazing. The land would have been spacious enough to allow for buildings and other municipal requirements. To add to that, since the likelihood of invasion was by infantry or at best on horses, chronologically primary settlements were essentially elevated to assist in spotting and apprehending incursions.

Perhaps the most eloquent proof of a chronological pre-eminence of Akoko-Edo settlements over Owan is the presence of NCE villages in Akoko-Edo whereas no NWE groups sojourn in Owan (Elugbe 1989; Lewis 2013). It should be kept in view that the journey from Owan to Akoko-Edo is uphill. Despite the prohibitive climb, Owan populations still penetrated Akoko-Edo. A number of factors combine to make Akoko-Edo the migrant's dream. For one thing soil richness is sustained by its closeness to bedrocks with their generous supply of exchangeable minerals. For this reason, hilltop soil despite being thin is highly productive (Odemerho 2006: 7). Although Owan soil is also enriched with nutrients from several centuries of cretaceous sediments, unlike Akoko-Edo, the region has enjoyed dual season rainfall. This has allowed for decades of double cropping, which in turn has depleted nutrients, and diminished output. This conspiracy of factors readily make Owan an axis of emigration, if only to let the land fallow. So it is that Akoko-Edo has been a safe haven for Edoid populations. Its terrain is not only vantage, its land is fertile; there are plateaus for extensive farming and rock shelters for sniping invaders. There is therefore nothing unusual in the drift of populations uphill at times of turbulence, or in the decision of aborigine populations to remain there.

An additional good reason for asserting the refugial and homestead status of Akoko-Edo over Owan is that in most cases where there are two forms for an item; Akoko-Edo languages present both forms, an indication that the region has accommodated populations to the extent that native and foreign forms cohere. There are a few exceptions like the word for *bite* (Table 6), for which Owan has two forms as opposed to one by Akoko-Edo. In such situations, the agents of one of those forms were Owan populations who descended from their Akoko-Edo migrant settlements. Thus the forms shared by Akoko-Edo and Owan were add-ons to Owan's NCE languages during sojourns in Akoko-Edo, which diffused into Owan following the southern descent. As proof of this pattern, Owan

settlement in Akoko-Edo –Sasaru, Uneme and Ososo– usually have the Akoko-Edo form. The Akoko-Edo form for ‘bite’ was likely imported into Owan on the hills of the Igwe descent.

NCE	Dig	Big/Large	Sea	Knee	Egg	Bite
Warake	rēmíkḍ	ḍgbai	édalḍx <sup>w</sup> ā	ùḡ <sup>w</sup> áluwè	kpékó:xḍ	faríkḍ
Okpuje	tḥnḍ:	ḍgbà	ólòkū	úḡ <sup>w</sup> àì	ékè	giākḍ
Sabo	tḥnutḍì	nḍgbāi	édénḍk <sup>w</sup> à	ógeá:hè	ékè	dóxiākḍ
Ihievbe	<b>gua</b>	ḍgbàì	ó:kè		ékéwḍkḍ	faìkḍ
Ososo	sḥñ	ūdē	ókè	ík <sup>w</sup> énkpò	ékè	rómì
Ora	tḍ:	ḍgbāi	òkū	ixèìkpò	ékè	híākḍ
Ghotuo	tḥnḍ	gbādì	òkpédà	òkpò	ékéhḍ	n <sup>w</sup> í
Sasaru	tḥnì	òdò:gbè	ókótòbì	òjà	éké	jḍmì
Ikhin	tḥnḍ	òkpa	ókù	ūgbḍwè:	ékèḍḍxḍ	jḍ
Arokho	tḍ	ḍùkpádi	òkpédà	wējà	ékíḍxḍ	<b>jā</b>
Uroe	dḍḍnḍmì	ìgbámì	òkpédè	ūḡ <sup>w</sup> è:	íkíḍxḍ	ḍxiahḍxḍ
Igwe	tḍ nḍ	ḍkperì	ókèḍòkpa	k <sup>w</sup> ējà	ékóḍxḍ	<b>n ḍwí</b>
Ake	tḥnḍ	ḍgbāi	òkū	ūḡ <sup>w</sup> ḍ:	ékè	<b>kḍjāmì</b>
Uneme	rìmìni	ímégbì:	<b>āmènu<sup>w</sup>ḍ</b>		ékèni	<b>mègèwàrè</b>
Uokha	tḥnḍ	ḍgbā	édalḍgbā		ékéxḍxḍ ò	ná ḡḍ
NWE						
Okpello	<b>gùàgùā</b>	ìgbéḡì	òkènotìfì	íkómèkpè	ékperì	<b>rèrè</b>
North Ibie	tḍmhì	gbà	<b>òf imìlì</b>	ìhómìḡ <sup>w</sup> à	ékè:lì	<b>nòmì</b>
Ikpeshi	kḍ	ò:rè	òkū	àḡ <sup>w</sup> ég <sup>w</sup> è	ìrḍkḍ	<b>nèmì</b>
Okpe	kḍrì	ḍrémì	ólòkū	òkpò	<b>ètḥáì</b>	<b>rémì</b>
Atte	tḥnḍ	<b>lèmì</b>	òxè		ékèrì	
Enwa		ótḍgbè	<b>ḍmótḍgbé</b>	eho	ékèlì	<b>nòmhì</b>
Akuku	<b>guà</b>	dìdḍè	<b>ámènodìdḍé</b>	ìlèva	<b>ètḥá</b>	<b>nḍnì</b>
Okpamheri	<b>guà</b>	kpḍru	<b>òḥimìrè</b>	ìrèva/òkpò	<b>èratḥá</b>	<b>nomimì</b>

Table 6. Some words for which multiple forms exist

Having established the advantages of seeking refuge in the hilly terrain of Akoko-Edo, it remains to show how sheer topography still aided migration. To do this, it helps to observe the locales of three Owan settlements still within Akoko-Edo; Sasaru, Uneme Osu and Ososo. They each moved from southern Owan to northern Akoko-Edo. One wonders how immigrant populations would traverse as far into Akoko-Edo as the present

location of Ososo. The reason becomes obvious when a path is drawn linking the three extant Owan internal immigrants to Akoko-Edo. All three settlements can be accessed through a valley passage from northern Owan. Naturally, if people are forced into hilly regions, they would seek to travel the paths of maximum ease. That trajectory is provided by the valley (i.e. the bold trace) which snakes through the Akoko-Edo hills. Despite being more elevated than Owan terrain, the valleys served as straightforward access into Akoko-Edo. Little wonder then that migrant settlements line its path.

## 5.2. Diversity and Topography

Despite heavy vocabulary mobility in North-Western Edo, a lot can still be said about the pre-valley era by comparing patterns of cognation in the two regions. Raw values for the 100 wordlist range between 32% and 98% (66%) in Owan. In Akoko-Edo the range is between 14% to 77% (63%). Akoko-Edo mean cognation is 50%; that of Owan is 68%. Notice that regardless of their close ranges (66% and 63%), the mean cognation for Akoko-Edo is significantly different from that of Owan. If we take the cognation mean bars in Figure 5 as indicative of intelligibility, then there is markedly more mutual intelligibility in Owan than obtains in Akoko-Edo. The pattern of divergence thus observed is largely dependent on the ease with which the terrain permits contact among speakers of the languages that inhere in it. In a nutshell, language divergence in Akoko-Edo is in tandem with height and remoteness of its terrain.

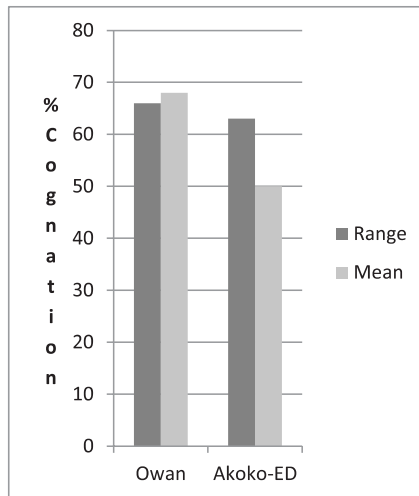


Figure 5. *Comparing Range and Mean of Owan and Akoko-Edo Cognation*

Suffice it to say that this trend patterns that described by Hill (2006) for Numic hilly accretion zone and Takic plain spread zones of California. As for the play out of similar upstream-downstream patterns in North-Western Edo, the region fits neatly with the premise that uphill populations preserve archaic forms. For instance, aside from enjoying less torrential rains than downhill populations (Odemerho 2006), hilltop settlements in Akoko-Edo comprise of small communities separated by physical restrictions like boulders, rivers and thickets. This is just the right geographical template for conservative preservation of linguistic forms. The southern lowland region of Owan, with its relatively easy accessibility, is fraught with feature adaptations and huge substratum effect from contact with speakers of other languages.

## 6. Conclusions

The foregoing sections have utilised cognation percentages, topography and etyma vocabulary to cast North-Western Edo in shades of aborigine (Okpella, North Ibie, Somorika); early immigrants settlers in Owan (Uokha, Ghotuo); subsequent immigrant settlers in Owan (Eese, Warake); internal immigrants who continued northerly to Akoko-Edo (Uneme, Ososo, Sasaru); and returnee immigrants who first entered Owan climbed northerly and subsequently drifted southerly (Igwe). Figure 6 aptly captures this prehistoric state of affairs.

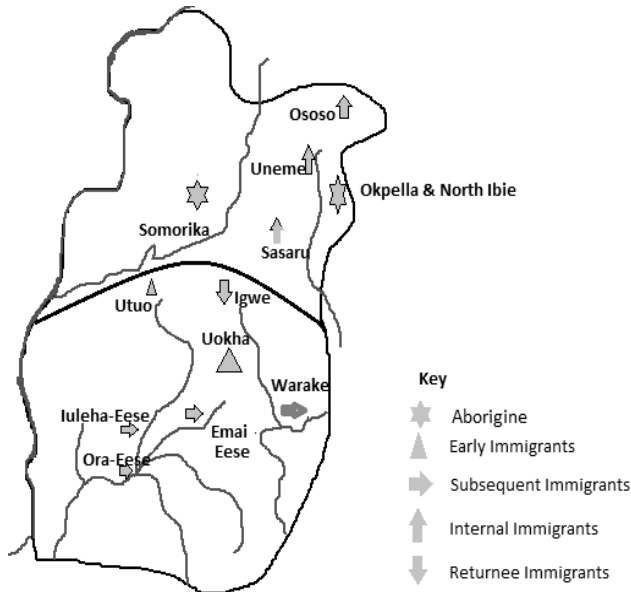


Figure 6. Main Aborigine and Migrant Settlements of North-Western Edo

It was also shown that aborigine groups have geographically elevated settlements of Akoko-Edo, while migrant settlement troop mainly in the plains of Owan. While sharing a familiar sameness with Tadic-Numic patterns, the identification of aborigines in Akoko-Edo resonates well with the orthodox notion that the cradle of Benue-Congo is the Niger-Benue Rivers confluence.

'Demola Lewis  
Department of Linguistics and African Languages  
University of Ibadan  
Ibadan – Nigeria  
demola.lewis@ui.edu.ng

Recepción: 13/08/2014; Aceptación: 13/01/2015

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The periods differentiate the place, North-Western Edo (N.W.E.), from the classification North Western Edo (NWE) / Los periodos diferencian el lugar, noroeste de Edo, de la clasificación del noroeste de Edo.
- <sup>2</sup> Igwe, Uokha Arokho and Ake all belong to the same migrant party comprising a language cluster. However, Igwe aligns with Ghotou in certain lexical items due to contact.

## References

- Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages. 1966. *Ibadan 400 Wordlist*. Ibadan.
- Dyen, Isidore. 1964. "On the validity of comparative lexicostatistic". In: *Proceedings of the 9th International Congress of Linguistics, Cambridge, Mass. 1962*, Horace G. Lunt (ed.), 239-252. The Hague: Mouton.
- Edo State Government. March, 2004. *Edo State of Nigeria: The heartbeat of the Nation*. Retrieved 15 April 2006. Available at <<http://www.edostateofnigeria.net/index.php?page=modules&name=articles&action=view&artid=306>>.
- Elugbe, Ben O. 1979. "Some tentative historical inferences from comparative Edoic Studies". *Kiabàrà Journal of the Humanities*, 2:1. 82-101.
- Elugbe, Ben O. 1989. *Comparative Edoic phonology and lexicon*. Delta Series, 6. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Elugbe, Ben O. 1992. *The scramble for Nigeria: A linguistic perspective. An Inaugural Lecture*, Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press. Rpt. 2011. Ibadan: DB Martoy Books.
- Hill, Jane. 2006. "Uto-Aztecan Hunter-Gatherers: Language Diversity in the Tadic Spread and the Numic Spread Compared". Paper presented at "Historical Linguistics and Hunter-Gatherer Populations in Global Perspective", Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, Germany 10-12 August 2006.
- Lewis, 'Demola. 2004. *Sound tracking the Okpamheri*. M.A. Project. Dept. of Linguistics. University of Ibadan.
- Lewis, 'Demola. 2006. "Cognates tell prehistory of the Okpamheri". In: *Globalization and the Future of African Languages*, Francis Ogbokhare Egbokhare and Clement Kolawole (eds.), 162-185. Ibadan: Ibadan Cultural Studies Group.
- Lewis, 'Demola. 2013. *North Edoic relations and roots*. PhD Dissertation, University of Ibadan.

- Miller, Wick R. 1984. "The classification of the Uto-Aztecan languages based on lexical evidence". *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 50. 1-24.
- Odemerho, Francis. 2006. "The physical environment and implications for human occupancy of Northern Edo in Edo State, Nigeria". Paper Presented at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.
- Odemerho, Francis. 2011. "Northern Edo topography and its role in language diversity and settlement location". In: *Edo North: field studies of the languages and lands of the Northern Edo, essays in honour of Ben. O. Elugbe*, Francis O. Egbokhare, Kola Olatunbosun, and Mathew Emerson (eds.), 1-30. Ibadan: Zenith Bookhouse.
- Renfrew, Colin. 1994. *Archaeology of language: The puzzle of Indo-European origins*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schaefer, Ronald P. and Francis O. Egbokhare. 2010. "Language endangerment and Edo North as a residual zone". *The Journal of West African Languages*, 37:1. 33-44.
- Schaefer, Ronald P., Francis O. Egbokhare and Demola Lewis. 2005. "Marginalization of Northern Edo vernaculars". In: *Creating outsiders: Endangered languages, migration and marginalization; Proceedings of the ninth FEL conference Stellenbosch South Africa*, Nigel Crawhall and Nicholas Osther (eds.), 168-176. Bath: Foundation for Endangered Languages.
- Swadesh, Morris. 1952. "Diffusional cumulation and archaic residue as historical explanations". *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 7. 1-21.
- Swadesh, Morris. 1955. "Towards accuracy in lexicostatistics dating". *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 21: 2. 121-137.
- Williamson, Kay. 1988. *The pedigree of nations*. Inaugural Lecture. University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Williamson, Kay. 1989. "Benue-Congo overview". In: *The Niger-Congo Languages*, John Bendor-Samuel (ed), 247-274. New York: University Press of America.
- Williamson, Kay and Roger Blench. 2000. "Niger-Congo". In: *African languages. An introduction*, Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse (eds.), 11-42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.