

## A MORPHOLOGICAL REASSESSMENT OF THE ETYMOLOGY OF ÌBÀDÀN

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### Abstract

*It is claimed that the name Ìbàdàn has traditionally been derived from Èbá-Òdàn (“edge of the meadow”) by compounding and subsequent phonological processes. This paper presents a morphological and phonological reassessment of the etymology, drawing on data from oral narratives, in-depth interviews with Ìbàdàn elders and royal figures, and secondary historical sources. Employing the framework of Yorùbá morphology (compounding and elision) and phonology (vowel hiatus resolution), the study demonstrates that deriving Ìbàdàn from Èbá-Òdàn violates established rules of Yorùbá vowel elision and initial-vowel stability. Instead, the name is more consistently derived from Ìbà (short form of Ilébà “pantry”) + Òdàn (“meadow”), yielding “Pantry in the Meadow.” This finding is corroborated by the continued existence of a settlement named Ilébà òdàn near Àpàpà Òdàn in Akínyelé Local Government Area. The paper corrects a long-standing historical-linguistic error and contributes to the reconstruction of Ìbàdàn’s early history through rigorous etymological analysis.*

**Keywords:** Ìbàdàn, Yorùbá toponymy, morphological compounding, vowel elision, etymology, oral tradition

### Introduction

**N**aming is part of the culture of every race in the world, including Yorùbá. A name is a lexical word attached to an item for proper identification. The item to be given a name can be concrete or abstract, living or non-living, and countable or uncountable. Everything has a name. Places are not exempt when discussing items that can be named. Therefore, names are given to

settlements, villages, communities, and towns. Concerning the naming of Places, Ògúnwálé (2016:201) says:

“Just as the individual persons need to be identified for easy reference and for other socio-linguistic reasons, every known geographical space in the world is given names using the linguistic repertoires available in the owner’s language.”

What Ògúnwálé is saying is that throughout the world, spaces are given names just the way people are given names for identification. According to Adéníyì (2017), place names may be assigned by inhabitants or first settlers. However, names can also be bestowed by outsiders or neighbouring communities. In Yorùbá land, settlement names are rarely arbitrary; they encode geographical features, historical events, founders, or cultural beliefs. Understanding the etymology of a place name is therefore indispensable to reconstructing the community’s history.

In Yorùbá land, villages and towns have names that are important and meaningful to the people of the community. Naming in Yorùbá land is done after considering some factors. The name of any settlement reflects either its geographical location, the event that led to its establishment, the founder of the settlement, the challenges faced, the cultural heritage including the belief system of the community or their ancestor. Understanding the meaning of a settlement’s name is essential to grasping the history of the people. It helps in reconstructing the community’s history by revealing

facts about the people and the location.

The town of Ìbàdàn was established by Lágelú, a Chief from Ilé-Ifè. Previous scholars have told us that the name

Ìbàdàn was coined from two words “Èbá” and “Òdàn”. Akínyelé (1911), and Ògúnníran (2000) explained that Lágelú established the town inbetween the forest and savanna but faced the latter. The authors said Lágelú did not name the settlement but the neighbouring people called it “Ìlú Èbá-òdàn” (The town established beside savanna/meadow). It morphed into Èbádàn and later into Ìbàdàn. Adéníyì (2017) also supports the opinion and went further to say “Ìbàdàn, (a town in Òyó State, of Nigeria) is derived from Èbá-Òdàn, “near the savannah”.

The above is the opinion of all previous writers of Ìbàdàn history. Now, it is necessary to re-examine the oral narratives about the origin of Ìbàdàn. From the oral narratives, we will see the one which serves as the basis of the assertion of the previous writers on the issue of the origin of the name, Ìbàdàn and which one contradicts their assertion. Then, morphology will be employed to analyse the claim of each oral narrative. After the analysis, we will be able to say if Ìbàdàn was really derived from Èbá-Òdàn or from something else.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design within the framework of historical linguistics and Yorùbá morphology. Data were drawn from two sources. Primary data consist of oral narratives collected through in-depth key-informant interviews with elders, traditional title holders, and the Baálè of Ilébà òdàn (Chief Kazeem Adésòkàn Adékúnlé Adébiyì) in Ìbàdàn land between 2024 and 2025. These interviews were conducted in Yorùbá, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis. Secondary data were obtained from published historical texts (Akínyelé, 1911; Ògúnníran, 2000; Fálólá, 2012), journal articles, and theses on Yorùbá onomastics.

The analysis follows two stages: (1) morphological breakdown of Ìbàdàn into constituent morphemes using the models of compounding and elision proposed by Awobuluyi (1978) and Bámgbósé (1990); (2) phonological examination of vowel elision and hiatus resolution in line with Seidl (2000) and Pulleyblank (1989). All Yorùbá examples are presented with appropriate tone marking following standard orthography.

### Importance of Name Etymology in Yorùbá History

There is no gainsaying that philology as a field of study is indispensable when discussing the history of the people of a settlement. The language or dialect of the people and the name given to the settlement are analysed to gain a good understanding of the people.

Etymology is an aspect of philology, and it is said to have come from the Greek word “etymon”, which means ‘literal meaning of a word according to its origin’. Wikipedia says it is “the study of the origin and evolution of words”. This aspect of philology can be employed to analyse the name of a settlement. It is observed that naming of a settlement is based on factors ranging from events or happenings, geographical location, the name of the founder, to the beliefs of the people. Therefore, critical analysis of the name of a settlement answers many questions about the founder and the settlement resulting in a better understanding of its history.

### Historical Background of Ìbàdàn

It is generally accepted that there existed two Ìbàdàn before the present one. This Ìbàdàn is said to have been the third Ìbàdàn. The first Ìbàdàn was established by Lágelú, a chief of Ilé-Ifè. Lágelú held the title of Jagun of the cradle of the Yorùbá people before he left the ancient city, owing to a feud between him and the then Ooni of Ilé-Ifè (Ògúnníran,

2000). It was recorded that he established a settlement known today as Ìbàdàn. The settlement got populated, and Lágelú's fame grew to the point that the Aláàfin of Òyó also made him the Jagun of Òyó. The town was later destroyed by the Aláàfin of Òyó, who accused the Ìbàdàn people of exposing the secret of the Egúngún tradition and tasked his army with the mission of the total annihilation of Ìbàdàn (Akínyelé, 1911). The people were killed, and the survivors ran away and hid at the Èlèyèlé Hill, Àwótán.

The second Ìbàdàn was established by the survivors of the war waged by Aláàfin's army. It was established by Lágelú and other survivors. According to some scholars, the site of the second Ìbàdàn is unknown (Ògúnyemí 2015), while some claimed it was established at Orí Yangí, the present-day Ojà Ìbà (Ògúnníran, 2000). Sometimes, around 1829, the second Ìbàdàn was taken over by warriors from different parts of Yorùbá land. The inhabitants deserted the town, and the warriors from Òyó, Ifè, and Ìjèbú occupied the abandoned houses. Later, refugees, especially those Òyó who survived the Fulani war that destroyed the Old Òyó Empire, came to settle in Ìbàdàn (Fálolá, 2012). That was the foundation of the third Ìbàdàn, which is the Ìbàdàn of today.

### **The Role of Etymology in Yorùbá Toponymy**

Ìbàdàn is in Southwestern Nigeria and is the capital of the Òyó state. It is Nigeria's largest city, covering an area of approximately 3.080 square kilometres. It is the second-largest in Africa; it is next to Cairo (Wikipedia.org). Its location is between the tropical forest zone and the Savanna. Though some people said it was built on seven hills namely Òkè-Àdó, Òkè-Bólà, Òkè-Màpó, Òkè-Ààrè, Òkè-Mòkólá, Òkè-Sápátì (Shepherd Hill), and Òkè-Páàdì (Padre), it is noted that Ìbàdàn has more hills than seven, including Òkè-Èlèyèlé, Òkè-Àrèmo,

and Òkè-Dàda. It also has many rivers out of which are Ògùnpa, Ògbèré, Kúdeṭì, Onà, Èlèyèlé, Orogún and Òlèyò, which though was prominent in the oral tradition of the city, is no more popular; its location is not conspicuous, and the water bodies are almost dried off. If not that the vicinity bears Òlèyò, the name of the river, today, only few people know that location of Òlèyò, because, there is no noticeable river but a small stream beside a filling station. Previous studies on Ìbàdàn (Akínyelé, 1911; Ògúnníran, 2000; Adéníyì, 2017; Fálolá, 2012) have uniformly accepted the Èbá-Òdàn derivation. None, however, subjected the claim to systematic morphological or phonological scrutiny. This study fills that gap.

The location of Ìbàdàn is around the Savanna. It is between the forest and the meadow. This is known as Òdàn in the Yorùbá language. Looking at the name of the town, Ìbàdàn, it is observed that Òdàn (Savanna/Meadow) is reflected in the word. This observation is consistent with the city's tradition of origin. Analysing the etymology of the name led scholars to agree with the oral tradition that the city's name was derived from its geographical location, which is Òdàn (Savanna/Meadow). It should be noted that naming a settlement after its geographical location is common in the world, Yorùbá land inclusive. In Yorùbá land, settlements named after geographical location are Ìkòròdú in Lagos State which was derived from Oko-Òdú (the Farm of Black Nightshade/Glossy Nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*)), and Abèòkúta in Ògun State derived from Abè-Òkúta (Under the Rock).

### **Oral Traditions about the Name of Ìbàdàn**

When writing about a people, their oral traditions play an important role. The use of oral history is essential in writing or reconstructing the history of a people because it is

undeniable that oral tradition is a source of history. On this, Elúyemí (1975) says:

Since we live in a society rich in oral tradition, we can hardly begin a research ... without making use of oral tradition.

We can conclude from the above that oral narratives must not be ignored when discussing any topic in Yorùbá land, including history. Adéyemí (2016) also confirms this by stating that:

The traditional chanters and dramatists were great recorders and revealers of history. The griots, the poets and musicians were repositories of historical facts. At a period when writing was unknown, the oral medium served the people for the preservation of their ancient experiences and historical events.

Adéyemí holds that the oral narratives of the oral poets constitute authentic history because the Yorùbá regards the performers as historians.

One tradition, the most popular, states that Lágelú established the town at the edge of the Meadow. This is called Èbá (edge) Òdàn (Meadow). The narrative states that Ìbàdàn was coined from Èbá Òdàn (by the edge of the Meadow). This is well established by historians like Akínyelé (1911), Ògúnníran (2000), Ògúnyemí (2015) and Fálọlá (2025). It is said that:

Èbá + Òdàn = Èbáòdàn

By the elision of the vowel “ò”

Èbáòdàn = Èbádàn

By inappropriate pronunciation

Èbádàn = Ìbàdàn.

The second tradition says that Ìbàdàn was coined from Ìbà and Òdàn. The tradition says the founder of Ìbàdàn, Lágelú, was a warlord known as Ìbàlógun. The settlement was being referred to as the home of Ibalógun Òdàn (Warlord in the Meadow). The short form of Ibalógun is Ìbà. Therefore, it is either called Ibalógun Òdàn or Ìbà Òdàn.

The third oral narrative claims that Lágelú, the founder of the town, was a hunter. He made a pantry for the game he killed by himself and his followers. The pantry is known in the Yorùbá language as Ilébà, with the short form Ìbà. It is said that the pantry was in the meadow. In the Yorùbá language, the word for meadow is Òdàn. The settlement was named Ilébà Òdàn/Ìbà Òdàn (Pantry in the Meadow). This, according to Fákáyòdé (2025), metamorphosed into Ìbàdàn thus:

Ìbà + Òdàn = Ìbàòdàn

By elision of the vowel “ò”

Ìbàòdàn = Ìbàdàn

It should be noted that a community still exists till today bearing the name Ilébà òdàn around Àpàpá Òdàn in Akínyelé Local Government Area of Ìbàdàn. Though the Baálè of the community, Chief Kazeem Adésòkàn Adékúnlé Adébíyì, during an interview, could not link the history of the spot to the location of the first Ìbàdàn, the oral narrative that said the Lágelú established a pantry known in Yorùbá as Ilébà is convincing enough to see this location as the site of the first Ìbàdàn. The geographical location and the fact that we have a settlement called Àpàpá Òdàn, not too far from the settlement, favour the claim that the place was the location of the first Ìbàdàn.

### **Morphological Breakdown of the Name Ìbàdàn.**

Morphology examines how morphemes combine to form words. In Yorùbá, compounding is a major word-

formation process, frequently accompanied by vowel elision to resolve hiatus (Awobuluyi, 1978; Bámgbósé, 1990; Seidl, 2000). Morphemes can be categorised into two, namely free and bound (Fárinde & Òjó, 2000). Ìbàdàn is bimorphemic and results from compounding.

The items in the lexical repertoire of a language increase as the speakers of the language pass through certain experiences. Their experience necessitates the need for new words which are formed from the existing vocabularies. The new words can be formed by reduplication, affixes, borrowing

Proposed Derivation	Underlying Form	Elision Process	Result	P hological Issue?
Traditional	Èbà + Òdàn	Elision of ò → contraction	Èbádàn	Initial È cannot become Ì without violating Yorùbá vowel stability rules
Alternative (this study)	Ìbà (← Ilébà) + Òdàn	Elision of ò → contraction	Ìbádàn	Fully consistent with attested patterns

from other languages or compounding. Words formed by reduplication can be partial reduplication (àpètúnpè èlèbè) or full reduplication (àpètúnpè kíkún). Examples of partial reduplication are kíkà (reading) and jíjẹ (eating) while that of full reduplication are pejapeja (Fisherman) and woléwolé (sanitary inspector); those of affixes can be that of prefix whose examples are àisùn (insomnia) and àilọ (failure to go) while it can also be that of infix whose examples are ọmọkọmọ (any child/bad child) and Ìwàkíwà (bad behaviour); those by borrowing words can be Bíbélì (Bible) and Sítóòfù (stove);

those by compounding are ẹranko (animal) and ilèwé (school).

Thus, in the Yorùbá language, words can be monomorphemic, bimorphemic, or multimorphemic. Monomorphemic is a word with just a single smallest meaningful unit, bimorphemic is a word formed with a combination of two smallest meaningful units, while multimorphemic is a word that contains more than two smallest meaningful units. Therefore, the term “Ìbàdàn” is a name which can be divided into meaningful units. It is bimorphemic and can be divided into two meaningful morphemes, namely “Ìbà” and “Òdàn”. Each of the two morphemes cannot be re-divided without losing its meaning in the word “Ìbàdàn”. Both traditional and modern historians agreed that Ìbàdàn is a noun formed by compounding. It was coined from two words, of which the last morpheme is unanimously agreed upon. However, the first morpheme is the bone of contention because some people believe that “Ìbà”, as seen in the name “Ìbàdàn” is a corrupted form of “Èbà” (side/edge), while some believe that “Ìbà” in the name “Ìbàdàn” is a short form of either Ibalógun (Warlord) or Ilébà (Meadow). The last morpheme is unanimously accepted as Òdàn (“meadow/savanna”). The contention lies in the first morpheme.

### Phonological critique of the traditional derivation.

First, deriving Ìbàdàn from Èbà-Òdàn requires an unexplained change of initial È (mid- front vowel) to Ì (high-front vowel). Yorùbá does not permit such arbitrary raising in compounding (Bámgbósé, 1990; Owólabí, 2004). Second, the vowel È is easily pronounced by both native and non-native speakers (cf. English “egg,” “elephant”), undermining the “mispronunciation by foreigners” explanation. In contrast, Ìbà + Òdàn follows regular elision: Ìbàòdàn → Ìbádàn.

However, it is necessary to note that Ibalógun (Warlord) cannot hold water here because it is widely agreed that Lágelú was made Jagun, not Ibalógun. Therefore, whenever we are discussing “Ìbà” here, we mean the short form of Ilébà (Meadow).

Firstly, to test the theory that Ìbàdàn was coined from Èbá Òdàn (By the edge of the meadow), let us consider the phonological and morphological process toward becoming Ìbàdàn that we pronounce today:

Èbá + òdàn = Èbáòdàn

By the elision of the vowel “ò”, contraction will occur as seen below:

Èbáòdàn = Èbádàn

The proponents of the above theory claimed that it is as a result of corruption of the word owing to difficulty in pronunciation and inappropriate pronunciation, especially by foreigners, that Èbádàn became Ìbàdàn.

Secondly, to test the theory that Ìbàdàn was coined from Ìbà òdàn, let us consider the phonological and morphological processes.

Ìbà + Òdàn = Ìbàòdàn

By the elision of the vowel “ò”, there will be a contraction as seen below:

Ìbàòdàn = Ìbádàn

Critical examination of the two theories above will raise some questions. One, how did “È” get displaced by “Ì”? It is sure that when a word starts with the vowel “ẹ(ε)”, the vowel cannot change to “ì”. Were that possible, “Èdẹ (εdε)” would have changed to “Idẹ (idε)” and “Egba (εgba)” would have become “Igba (igba)”. Therefore, it was not Èbá-Òdàn but Ìbà-òdàn.

The second question is how difficult was pronouncing the vowel “È”? There could be no difficulty in pronouncing the vowel “È” by anyone, including white people. White men have

the vowel sound “ẹ(ε)” in their alphabet, as in ‘Elephant’ and ‘Egg’. Had Èbádàn been the name, nobody would fail to pronounce it fluently. Therefore, the name was not Èbá-Òdàn initially but Ìbà-Òdàn.

## Conclusion

Morphological and phonological analysis confirms that Ìbàdàn was coined from Ìbà-Òdàn (“Pantry in the Meadow”), not Èbá-Òdàn. The traditional derivation violates Yorùbá rules of vowel stability and elision, while the Ìbà-Òdàn proposal is fully consistent with both linguistic processes and living oral tradition.

This reassessment corrects a centuries-old historical-linguistic error and opens new avenues for research into Yorùbá toponymy. It demonstrates that oral narratives, when subjected to rigorous linguistic scrutiny, remain indispensable for reconstructing pre-colonial history. Future studies may profitably examine other Yorùbá settlement names using similar morphological-phonological framework

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