

# Personal Name as a Reality of Everyday Life: Naming Dynamics in Select African Societies

by

Abdulganiy Olatunji, Moshood Issah,  
Yusuf Noah, A.Y. Muhammed, and Abdul-Rasheed Sulaiman  
rasheed\_sulaimon@yahoo.com  
Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Ilorin, Ilorin-Nigeria

## Abstract

Despite the cross-cultural variations among human societies, there are some aspects of life that are common to all. One of these is name, a phenomenon that is acknowledged as universal, although it is also remarkably particularistic. It is particularistic in the sense that the **style** and pattern of naming varies across human societies. In Africa, personal names play a significant role in virtually all aspects of human life. Among African people, it is conceived that the name an individual bears can exert enormous influence on their general lifestyle and life prospects. On a societal level, the names people of a particular region are reflections of series of issues regarding their socio-cultural existence. However, despite the sociological importance of name in virtually all African societies, little academic work has been done by African sociologists. With the aid of certain sociological theories, this introduction provides practical examples from various African societies to show that a name does not only have sociological connotations, but it is also a reflection of the dynamic nature of everyday life among African people.

## Introduction

A name is what somebody or something is called, it is a term or phrase by which somebody or something is known and distinguished from other people or things. According to the *Chamber Dictionary* (2005), name is a word or words by which an individual person, place or thing is identified; it is the nomenclature used in making reference to all things, - tangible or intangible, living or non-living, concrete or abstract, liquid or solid.

The Creationist theory of evolution claimed that the ability of Adam to know and identify the name of all things positioned him to have dominion over other creatures (Quran 2, Verses 30-33). Hence, name has important role in the evolution of human being since the time of the first creations, and Agyekum (2001:211) asserts that:

*“naming can be considered as a universal cultural practice; every human society in the world gives name to its newborn as tags majorly as a means of identification, but how the names are given, the practices and rituals involved and the interpretations attached to the names differ from society to society and from one culture to another”.*

In African societies, great importance is attached to names, because in general, the belief system of African people is often anchored in a name given to an individual which determines his or her personhood and character (Chuks-Orji, 1971; Suzman, 1994). Jayaraman (2005) asserts that the meaning attached to name plays a significant role in the definition of human self, since it is believed that a given name does not only serve as a social identity, but it also influences several aspects of human living. Thus, names are expected to influence, mold and shape the character and personality of its bearer.

Name is a universal phenomenon, for instance in the Arabian culture, name and naming is an important cultural practice among that they have specific name codes, usually referred to as ‘book of names’ (Guma, 2001). Similarly, in African societies, name culture (i.e., the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired in the course of generations) is an important component of the cultural system in that it is conceived among the African people that a good name should be given to a child because the name assigned will determine a lot about the present and future of the child (Agyekum, 2006). Although naming is a universal culture, the processes involve patterns of naming and types of names common in all societies varies across cultures. For example, in most Western societies, names to be given to an infant are predictable because few socio-cultural factors influence naming dynamics in those societies. This might have influence the conclusion that ‘there is nothing in a name’. Similarly, among Indians, a name has some socio-cultural relevance to people’s socio-cultural characteristics as class, caste, religion and deities which could be observed from a person’s name. Also in Africa, people’s name can be a source of information regarding a person (Yusuf, Olatunji, & Issah, 2014).

In the African context, name is not taken with levity since a huge socio-cultural importance is attached to it. For instance, among the *Yoruba* of south-western Nigeria, there are many proverbs which reflect the importance given to a name. Some of the sayings are: ‘*Oruko rere san ju Wura ati Fadaka*’ – meaning, ‘good name is more precious than gold and silver’. And similarly, among the *Akan* of Ghana, a name is not just given to a person, but rather there are some important factors that are considered first.

For instance, it is common to hear among them saying ‘*ne din ne ne honam se*’ (his or her name befits his or her body). Also, the *Swahili* of East Africa gave so much value to individual’s name in a way that they believe that a name is an essential part of a person’s spiritual being, a *Waswahili’s* proverb says: ‘*Wewe na jina lako*’ (You and Your name; you are what your name has made you). Among the *Basotho* of South Africa, a name is considered a social virtue; this conception is evident in one of their proverbs which say: ‘*bitso lebe keseromo*’ (bad name is ominous).

Inferring from the above, it could be observed that a name and the naming patterns of many African societies is a dynamic socio-cultural practice which reflects the social reality of everyday living. However, despite the socio-cultural relevance of naming practices in Africa, little sociological research has been geared towards this importance in human living. Indeed, African naming is a dynamic socio-cultural phenomenon influenced by numerous socio-cultural factors, thus, sociological examination of these factors will bridge the gap of insufficient existing sociological literatures on the subject and serve as a means to understand the reality of everyday living of people in Africa. Based on this observation, this work intends to examine the unique socio-cultural dynamics of African naming using selected African societies as a basis of exploration. Hence, towards these ends, this paper is divided into five sections: introduction, conceptual discourse, theoretical explanation of the importance of name as an important symbol which makes social interactions possible, explored names as a reality of everyday life, and a conclusion.

## **Conceptual Discourse**

Technically, a name is a noun; a noun is a name of any person, place, animal or thing. The above definition gives the general philosophy behind a name, and the social significance of assigning a name in human society. As could be reflected from the definition, there is virtually no known phenomenon without specific name(s); it is only the unknown phenomena that their names are not known to humans. This is a reflection that names are social constructions and are reflections of human social experiences; this assertion could be buttressed by the fact that names given to the same phenomenon differs across societies. For instance, the name given to the same specific object in the English language differs from the name given to it in Arabic, French, and Chinese or Yoruba.

Name serves as the socio-cultural expression and elucidation of self-concept. From the interactionist perspective, names are not just abstract terms couched in indefiniteness, they are more than mere labels, but loaded with meaningful and symbolic connotations. Another important fact about name is that, it is only human beings that have the gift of naming individuals with specific names. In other words, the naming pattern used by human beings is unique only to the human species (Yusuf, Olatunji, & Issah, 2014).

Although, all known and unknown phenomena have names; a human name possesses more social significance than the name of mere objects. Human name is an important issue that lots of factors influence it and it (name) also influences lots about human social reality. For African people, a name is part and parcel of person's being (Liseli, 2012). Mwaniki (2013) argued that names are not only given as a means of identification, but also imposes ethical standards and social values in an indirect way. The *Yoruba* believed that given names have profound and powerful effects, and that the name a child bears can influence his/her entire life cycle from sundry behaviour, integrity, professions, success and so on (Yusuf, Olatunji, & Issah, 2014). According to Ryan (1981:146), 'the name given to human infant distinguishes him or her socially and incorporates him or her fully into the wider society'. And according to Laham et. al (2011), names are rich sources of information.

In a typical traditional African society, the name an individual bears would likely reveal his or her socio-economic and cultural characteristics, family background, family occupation, place of origin and political and economic class. Some names could also reflect the kind of deity worshiped in a household (Yusuf, Olatunji, & Issah, 2014). Also, there are some African names that people give to their children as praise names (*Oriki*). Such names are used to spur the person at moments of great expectations or in time of challenge. Symbolically, they are a means which an individual would be identified and a mechanism that regulates individual behaviour socially and spiritually. In Africa, a name sometimes signals gender, ethnicity, and class; they may connote personality characteristics and often reflects of the person's cultural dynamics. But it is important to note that names are a social emblem designed for and attached to every human irrespective of his/her creed, sex, ethnic affiliation, nationality or his/her cultural characteristics (Oladunloye & Adeyemi, 2012).

It could be deduced from the foregoing that there is much in a name since it is an important aspect of human social life. Without it, many social activities would not have easily been done or be possible. This is because people use names to refer to each other, to identify each other, and it is also used among people to engage in a series of social activities as people interact with one another in their everyday living. In this regard, a name is an essential reality of everyday life and it is so complex that the dynamic reality cannot be well conceived except when the dynamics in name culture are examined.

## **Theoretical Underpinning**

In order to give a better sociological outlook, we can use 'symbolic interactionist perspective' via sociology to explain the important link between societal existing cultural practices and patterns of naming in African society.

Hence, symbolic interactionism is one of the three major analytical perspectives in sociology. While the first two perspectives focus on macro level of analysis, symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on the micro level of analysis. As the name implies, its major focus is on the influence of person to person social interaction in the making of the human social whole, or the importance of social interactional tools in human social relationships.

It also presupposes that social interaction among people is only possible through construction of symbols (Geertz, 1966; La Fontaine, 1980). These symbols according to this perspective play very important roles in making social relationship possible. Another basic assumption is that self-concept develops through one's awareness of the perspectives of others over one's behaviour (looking glass self) and of how one's feelings about oneself (pride or shame, for example) reflect one's sensitivity to the positive or negative reactions of others (Cooley 1902; Kenny & Albright, 1987). Some of the proponents of the symbolic interactionist theory include Ervin Goffman, George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, and Herbert Blumer.

In the words of Blumer (1969), society is in constant process of being created through social interactions, interpretations and definitions of actors in situations, and thus, society influences the individual's self through its shared norms, values and beliefs. According to Stryker (1980), the self-concept is an embodiment of cognitive and affective components; the cognitive component includes the given collection of identities; while the affective component is self-esteem, however, self-concept emerges out of the reflected cultural definitions of members of a society (Gecas & Burke, 1995).

Using this theory to analyze the symbolic importance of names among African people, it could be said that names generally constitute symbols through which people identify themselves (Yusuf, Olatunji, & Issah, 2014). In other words, a name symbolizes a lot about a person; it is a symbol from which someone's personality, gender and many socio-cultural characteristics as religion, social class, geographical location, and spiritual status is reflected. For example, among the *Yoruba* of Nigeria, *Ikumolu* (death has taken the successor) is a name believed to be a name exclusive for males and that a female could only bear it if all the males of a family are deceased.

Technically, naming in an African context is considered to represent symbols of relationships, events, spatial units, and beliefs, ethical and social values (Ota, 2002). Names also carry some aspects of telepathy among African people (Agyekum, 2006). According to Zawawi (1996) cited in Agyekum (2006: 208) "*a name constructs a person because the name one bears may create an attitude in those who hear it before they meet the name bearer*".

Among the *Akan* of Ghana, a name symbolizes the appearance of an individual who bears it. This is shown in one of the *Akan* maxim which says: '*akoa yi de ne din nam*' (this man walks with his name) or '*wo din ben wo*' (your name is closer to you). This means that a person's name symbolizes his personality, hence, like a means of conveyance that convey the character, attitude or behavioural status of its bearer. Thus, according to Stryker (1980), human behaviour is dependent upon a 'named' or classified world and that names carry meaning in the form of shared responses and behavioural expectations that grow out of social interactions. The symbolic importance of a name in African culture can be seen in the interaction that take place in the naming ceremony of the *Akan* of Ghana, hence:

*Baby, you are welcome to this world. Have a longer stay, just do not come and exhibit yourself and return. Your mothers and fathers have assembled here today to give you a name. The name we are giving to you is Afua Ataa Boakyewaa Agyekum. You are named Afua because that is the day your soul decided to enter into this world. We are naming you after your grandmother Afua Ataa. Your grandparent is Ataa because she was born a twin. Her real name is Boakyewaa the feminine form of Boakye. Remember that your grandmother is a twin and therefore a deity and sacred figure that must be kept hallowed. In view of this, come and put up a good moral behaviour. Again we are attaching your father's name Agyekum to your name. Follow the footsteps of your father and come and study hard ... (Agyekum, 2006:218)*

Inferring from the above, it could be said that a name play symbolic function in the interactional process among human being by making personal identification and social interaction possible. Apart from its symbolic in making every day social interactions possible, a name is also a dynamic phenomenon in the sense that different names are given to people in different interactional situations and that people are so dynamic in their naming that they use names as a means of symbolizing dynamic social situations that hover around the birth and life of a child (Norton, 2005). According to Guma (2001), the naming dynamics in Africa has a socio-cultural interpretation, expression or manifestation of historical events, individual life experiences, socio-cultural norms, values, occupational and social status and personage or selfhood of individuals. And furthermore, Ali Mazrui also points out that empirical illustrations of how African names are believed to symbolize the personality of their bearers is present through an Ilaje proverb which says: '*Oruko mi ro nen, Apeje mi ro nen*' (As the name, so is the bearer; like the nickname, like the bearer).

According to Akinnaso (1980), the fundamental reason for naming in human society is to provide a symbolic base for social interaction through a formal means of individual identification. Similarly, Mondende (2009) submitted that the naming process in African society is to pass a message or information from the name-giver to the entire family and the community at large. Also, according to De Pina-Cabral (2008:5), the '*naming processes carry with them social implications concerning what a person is and how he or she should be placed in the world*'.

It could be deduced from these theoretical discussions that a name constitutes an important symbol used in making social interactions possible. This is true since we use name virtually in everyday life situations (in all social interactions and most social situations). However, a name is not just a symbol or a means of identification, or a mechanism for social interactions; but instead, it is a very dynamic component of everyday social reality. Thus, we can present an empirical justification of the dynamic nature of naming in human societies, using some African societies as basis for analysis.

## Exploration of Naming Dynamics in Some African Societies

As implied above, a given name is a universal socio-cultural practice, and its process and system differs across cultures. Naming practice is generally a valued culture among African people (Mohome, 1992; Yusuf, Olatunji, & Issah, 2014), thus, given names are so relevant that some of their socio-cultural characteristics cannot be well understood except one peeps into the dynamic nature of their naming. The dynamic nature of naming in Africa is bore out in the fact that a name given to a child or an adult (for example nickname) is often determined by different factors ranging from beliefs: belief in individual spirit, belief in reincarnation, environment, social class, lineage system, ethnic affiliation, gender, day of the week, day of the month, time of the year, conditions of parents at birth, conditions of child at birth, circumstances surrounding the birth, historical events, family occupation; family deity, family name, economic situation and etc.

In other words, naming in African society is to a great extent determined by socio-cultural, environmental, circumstantial and ethno-pragmatic contexts (Agyekum, 2006). For example, among the *Basotho* of South Africa, a child is commonly named after a relative. Naming practices among the *Basotho* people of South Africa also serves as religious, political and social functions (Monnig, 1967). Hence, names are used to immortalize the ancestors; it is also believed that naming children after ancestors would ensure the inheritance of the social virtues of their grandparents. Also, the *Basotho* believed that a child is a gift of *badimo* (ancestors) and thus, a child should be named after a known ancestor as a form of appreciation for a life well spent by the ancestor (Setiloane, 1975).

More practically, if couples suffered long period of childlessness after marriage, the child born under this condition is believed to have given by their benevolent ancestors, and he or she is named *Mpho* (gift from the ancestors) or *Keneiloe* (I have been given) or *Kelebogile* (I am grateful to the ancestors). Furthermore, among the *Basotho*, children are named after critical events or occurrences that affected the child, family or the society at large. Such names include: *Kotsi* (danger or accident) or *Tsietsi* (accident), *Tsie* (invasion of locust that destroyed planted crops); *Sehlolo* (disaster). This practice could be because naming a child after a historic event may serve psychological and social functions for those who are affected by an event. In other words, these names are socio-psychological and historically symbolic since they serve as reminder of past historical events that befell a child, family or the society at large.

Among the *Akan* of Ghana, naming is a unique socio-cultural practice; they sometimes name their infant based on the day of the week the child was born. This system of naming based on the belief that the day that a child is born is the day that the spirit re-incarnates, and thus, a child should be named after that day. The names of the days were mostly derived from the names of deities and the particular day they are honored. It could be said that this practice is what was transferred into becoming African-British culture whereby a child is named based on the days of the week that he or she was born; hence, we have names such as Saturday, Sunday and Monday with each day having its own peculiar features attributed to it.

Hence, people born on particular days are expected to display the features attributed with the day. For example, ‘a child born on Monday is believed to be peaceful and tranquil, while a child born on Friday are expected to be a wanderer or an adventurer and a child born on Saturday would be creative and ingenious’ (Obeng, 2001:16). Table 1 presents one of the social dynamics that determine the type of name given to a person among the *Akan* of Ghana.

Table 1: Naming Dynamics among the *Akan* of Ghana

Name of Days in English	Name of Days Akan	Male Name	Female Name
Sunday	<i>Kwasiada</i>	<i>Kwasi</i>	<i>Akosua</i>
Monday	<i>Edwoada</i>	<i>Kwadwo</i>	<i>Adwoa</i>
Tuesday	<i>Ebenada</i>	<i>Kwabena</i>	<i>Abenaa</i>
Wednesday	<i>Wukuada</i>	<i>Kwaku</i>	<i>Akua</i>
Thursday	<i>Yawoada</i>	<i>Yao</i>	<i>Yaa</i>
Friday	<i>Efiada</i>	<i>Kofi</i>	<i>Afua</i>
Saturday	<i>Memeneda</i>	<i>Kwame</i>	<i>Ama</i>

Source: Agyekum (2006:214).

Also, infants are sometimes given names that reflect the deities of their family. The *Akan* have twelve patrilineal divisions; each family starts with *Bosom*, which literally means deity (each family has its own deity). Names that are given to infants are peculiar to their family deities and this serve a symbolic purpose for social identification. The *Akan* also believe that naming infants based on family deities serves religious, socio-cultural and psychological functions. Table 2 shows family names and their associated names among the *Akan* people of Ghana:

Table 2: Patrilineal and Associated Names among the *Akan* of Ghana

Patrilineal identity	Examples of Family Names
<i>Bosomafram</i>	<i>Afram, Peasa, Dame, Amponsa, Awua, Afrane, Anokye</i>
<i>Bosom-Akom</i>	<i>Asuman, Adu, Ak[ ]maa, Oben, Anim, Ado, Ankomahene</i>
<i>Bosom-Dwerebe</i>	<i>Akuamoa, S[ ]kyere, Otiaku, Sakyi, Amponsa, Aboagye</i>
<i>Bosomnketa/Bosompo</i>	<i>Ayim, Dakwa, Boadu, Antwi, Poakwa, Bonsu, Osei,</i>
<i>Bosomptra</i>	<i>Agyeman, Amoako, Asare, Boateng, Kwakye, Owusu, Oti</i>
<i>Bosomtwe</i>	<i>Ofosu, Boafo, Gyadu, Kwatia, Boate, Atakora Osafo</i>

Source: Agyekum (2006:217)

Among the *Zulu* of South Africa, the word for name is *Igama*, which means your symbol (Audrey, 2014). Infants are named before they are born in *Zulu* culture. Among the *Zulu*, there is nothing called naming ceremony as it is obtainable in some other Africa societies. Instead of having naming ceremony, the *Zulu* performs ritual practices called *Imbeleko*. The ritual is performed to introduce the infant to the ancestors and to thank them and ask them to protect the infant. For *Imbeleko*, a goat must be slaughtered as a sacrifice to the ancestors and the family elder responsible for talking to the ancestors will call the infants by its name when presenting it to the ancestors at the same time the goat is being slaughtered (Audrey, 2014). Among the *Edo* of Nigeria, during the naming ceremony it is customary to invoke the ancestral spirits for blessings.

Among the *Yoruba* of Nigeria, the naming of new babies is mostly determined by three major cultural factors: the circumstance of birth, the profession of the family into which a child is born into, and the religious totem (*Orisa*) of the family (Ajanaku, 1969). Based on these cultural factors, *Yoruba* names are categorized into three major types, thus: *Oruko Amutorunwa* (natural names), *Oruko Abiso* (ascribed names or given names), and *Oriki* (pet names) (Nze, 1984). According to Adeoye (1969) and Yusuf, Olatunji, and Issah (2014), *Yoruba* naming practices are culturally rooted, and they are reflections of their traditional cultural practices. In the traditional *Yoruba* culture, the process of giving a name to a baby starts as soon as a woman desires to have a baby. She approaches the diviner (*Babalawo*)- the *Babalawo*, a spiritualist and a psychotherapist who diagnoses the fate of the baby in the womb.

The first *Odu Ifa* (*Yoruba* divination codes) that emerges when the *Babalawo* first divines for a woman will determine the name of the child. Some of the *Odu Ifa* speaks about a specific *Orisa*; for example, *Odu* is then said to belong to that *Orisa* (Adeoye, 1969). Second is the *Orisa* divined to be her patron which automatically becomes the patron saint of the yet-to-be-born child. If it turns out that the *Orisa* belongs to a particular god or goddess like *Osun*, the woman would have to use water from the river *Osun* to facilitate her pregnancy and to sustain it to maturity. The child from such a pregnancy becomes a child of *Osun* and the prefix *Osun* will be affixed to the name of the child, thus the child would bear a name such as *Osundeyi*, (River *Osun* turns this), or *Osunbumi* (Gift from River *Osun*), etc.

Adeoye (1969) classified *Yoruba* names into four categories: *Amutorunwa* (natural names); *Abiku* (stillborn); *Alaje* (nicknames); and *Orile* or *oriki* (genealogy). In his classification, Adewoyin (1996) grouped *Yoruba* names based on different socio-cultural dynamics into five categories: *Amutorunwa* (brought from heaven); *Abiso* (given name); *Esin* (Religion-related); *Ise* (occupational related); and, *Oriki* (praise names). In the analysis of Olajubu (2003), names given to children in *Yoruba* culture could be influenced by certain factors which are: circumstances surrounding the birth of the child, the condition of the child at birth, the state of the parents or family characteristics; and the life of the child in the first week of its existence. *Oruko Amutorunwa* (names brought from heaven) are determined by circumstantial factors and clinical information of the child at birth; *Oruko Abiso* (ascribed name) is like the normal name given to a child irrespective of the birth condition of the child.

They are names that are not natural with the child at birth, but given on the child's naming ceremony (Ajanaku, 1969). In most *Yoruba* naming culture, ascribed names are given in accordance with significant cultural events at the time of birth, or with reference to the family's traditions. Such a name is often determined by various socio-cultural factors like the occupational type of the family, in this situation, a prefix is presented, thus: *Ode* (for those that choose hunting as their occupation) *Ayan* (for those that choose drumming as their major occupation), '*Ade*' (for those from royal family) *Ola* (for those born into a wealthy family) *Ifa* (for those born into a family where divination is their occupation) (etc.) are often attached to the beginning of the name. Examples of the names include: *Ayanwale*, *Ifawole*, *Adewale*, *Olatunji*, *Adeyanju*. Also pet names are complementary names given to the child as a result the lineage; hence, a name is given by the child grandparents or other elderly person in the child's family. And generally, important factors which often determine the name to be given to a child in African societies can be summarized as: belief in destiny, belief in reincarnation, religious belief, circumstantial names, names reflective of the supremacy of leaders and the right of governance, and cyclical birth. Hence, we will explore this phenomenon next.

## **Belief in Destiny**

One of the major features of African traditional religion is the belief in destiny and this cultural belief is one of the major factors that influence the naming system of many African societies. For instance, among the *Edo* of Nigeria, the belief in destiny determines the choice of certain names. According to Bradbury (1973) cited in Edonaze (2011) "*Omwan* (the living person) and *Ehi* (the spirit of the living person) are the two halves of a single being ...before birth". Each individual is believed to pre-destiny by making a statement before *Osanobua*, (the creator setting out a life programme) and asking for all will be needed to execute it out successfully". The people of *Edo* name their infants to reflect their beliefs, hence: "*Ehiosu* (the guardian spirit that guides); *Aizehinomo* (A child's destiny is not chosen by the parents); *Ehinnwenma* (My guardian spirit is good); *Aisagbonbuomwem* (one's destiny is not determined in the world)" (Edonaze, 2011). Also, among the *Ewe* of Togo, certain names are given to reflect the belief in destiny, hence, *Senanu* (It is the destiny that gives).

## **Belief in Re-incarnation**

Another major feature of African traditional religion is the belief in reincarnation. African people strongly believe in re-incarnation and this also reflects in African naming dynamics. Among the *Edo* of Nigeria, there are certain names which reflect the people's belief in re-incarnation. Some of the names include: *Iye* (mother); *Iyorre* (I have gone and come). This is a reflection of the doctrine of transmogrification. Also, among the *Basotho* of South Africa, there are names which strongly manifest the people's belief in transmogrification. This can be seen in certain names like: *Oboile mo tseleng* or *Tebello* (he has returned from the road or expectation). Also in *Yoruba* society, there are names that reflect the people's belief in re-incarnation. Some of these names are: *Babatunde* (Father has come back), *Iyabode* (Mother has come back), and *Iye-wande* (My mother comes back for me).

## Religious Belief

In general, African people believe in deities; and this is manifested in African naming practices. According to Sharon (2001), one of the teachings of African spirituality is that when one bestows a name upon a child, that person is not simply naming the flesh of the infant; but rather, the name is for the person's soul. Among the Northern *Sotho*, the Southern *Sotho* and the *Botswana* of South Africa, an individual's name has immense spiritual implications for the child and the people around him/her. Among the *Edo* of Nigeria, most of their names are reflected in their strong belief in deities or spirit. These can be reflected in the following names: "*Erinmwingbovo* (the spirit beings are not envious of humans); *Osarodin* (god is the eldest); *Osaro* (god exists); *Okungbowa* (water god ensures wealth); *Ogunbo* (Ogun-god of Iron-is favourable); *Igbinosun* (I seek the protection of Osun-god of healling)" (Edonaze, 2011).

Among the *Igbo* of Nigeria a name has spiritual affiliation as reflected in a popular maxim '*agoa onye afa cia analo*' (when a person is given a name his gods or spirits accepts it). This conception informed the giving of such names as: *Aniwela* (Spirit of the land or family symbol brought it); *Odeakosa* (he is in the hands of *Olisa*-Spirit of Plenty); *Nwachukwu* (Son of god); and *Anizoba* (Let the spirit continues to defend). Among the *Akan* of Ghana: *Nyame Kye* (God's gift). Among the *Zulu*: *Sibusisiwe* (we are blessed); *Sibusiso* (Blessing from God); *Simphiwe* (we have her as a gift); *Siyabonga* (We are grateful for male); *Sibongile* (we are grateful for female); *Ndumiso* (Praise); *Malibongwe* (Let it be praised); *Sphiwe* (We have gotten or received a gift), and among the *Yoruba* of Nigeria: *Ore-ofe* (Free gift from god), *Osunbunmi* (Free gift from Osun deity), *Orisabunmi* (Deity gives me as gift), *Osunseyi* (Deity does this); *Oluwamuiyiwa* (God brought this); *Oluwaseyi* (God does this); *Ifagbamila* (The Oracle saves and Blesses me); *Ifawole* (Oracle has come home again), *Osundeyi* (deity turns this), *Oyawole* (deity has entered home), and *Ojelabi* (deity is born) is common. And in addition, Sofola (1970) outlines that the following names reflect traditional *Yoruba* religion): *Sangoyemi* (I'm delivered by god of thunder), *Fabiyi* (A baby delivered by Ifa), *Oyalana* (The goddess of Niger has opened the way), *Osundina* (Osun goddess has blocked the way), *Osabunmi* (A gift from Orisa), and *Abegunde* (A child born during Egungun festival).

## Circumstantial Names

Sometimes, the conditions or circumstances of birth determine the name of an infant. This is a common criterion for giving a name in many African societies. Commenting on circumstantial names, Blum (1997:364) asserts thus: "*these names are viewed as governing the child's fate in some ways; they are harmonized with the time and often place of the child's birth*". For an example, among the *Zulu* of South Africa, a child born when it is raining is called *Nomvula* (Mother of rain); the one born during an intense sun is named *Nomalanga* (Mother of sun). Hence, Table 3 shows a naming system based on the circumstances surrounding the birth of child among the *Yoruba* of south-western Nigeria.

**Table 3: List of Names given to a child as a result of circumstance at birth, the Yoruba of Nigeria (Oruko Amutorunwa)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<i>Ojo</i>	A male child that has his umbilical cord tied around his neck at birth
<i>Ajayi</i>	A child born with face turned downwards
<i>Talabi</i>	A child born with the head and body covered with caul like a masquerade
<i>Oni</i>	A baby whose incessant cry at birth suggest that she is in distress
<i>Ige</i>	A baby that came out of the womb with feet first
<i>Aina</i>	A female child that has his umbilical cord tied around his neck at birth
<i>Dada</i>	Children with knotted hair or dreads
<i>Ilori</i>	A child conceived after a previous birth, before resumption of menstruation
<i>Oke</i>	A child rapped in a thin membrane at birth
<i>Taiwo</i>	The first to arrive of a twin
<i>Kehinde</i>	The last to arrive of a twin
<i>Idowu</i>	A child born after a set of twins
<i>Alaba</i>	A child born after idowu
<i>Erinle</i>	A child born with an umbilical cord around his wrist

Sources: Ajanaku (1969), Adeoye (1969), Afolabi (1986) and Olajubu (2003)

## **Names that Reflect the Supremacy of Leaders and the Right to Governance**

There are certain names among African people which reflect the people's belief in the supremacy of the land and its governance. Among the *Edo* of Nigeria, examples of such names include: *Osagiobarre* (the king is ordained by god); *Obasogie* (the king is greater than the ruler of fiefdom); *Aiguobasimwinoto* (One does not dispute the ownership of land with the king); *Obayanto* (the king is the owner of all land) (Edonaze, 2011). Among the Zulu of South Africa, *Nobantu* (Mother of people); *Nozizwe* (Mother of nations); *Zwelakhe* (His country/land); *Zwelethu* (Our land/ country); *Zwelibanzi* (Huge or wide country); *Londisizwe* (Protect/take care of the nation); *Bhekizizwe* (Watch the nation), etc (Audrey, 2014).

## **Cyclical Birth**

Cyclical birth is a belief among African people which reflects that sometimes, the dead infant sometimes recycles themselves by repeatedly being conceived by the same couples. Therefore, couples who experienced cyclical birth tend to name their infant names so that the name will serve as an anchor that will make the child stay alive with the family once and for all, instead of reincarnating. It is important to note that particular names are peculiar which children who die as an infant is quite different from an adult re-incantation belief system mentioned above.

This belief is common in many African societies that possess cultural practices which reflect the existence of cyclical birth as a social reality. For example, among the *Edo* people of Nigeria, names as *Gumwendia* (remain with me); *Onaiwu* (This one will not die); *Sonarae* (leave this one behind) and names as *Leena* (Staying or remaining behind or get immortalized) among the *Zulu* of South Africa is a reflection of this naming practice (Obeng 1998, 2001:90). Also, among the *Yoruba* of Nigeria: such infants are called *Ikunmafayi* (Death do not take this), *Kokumo* (He will not die again), *Biobaku* (It is right not to die again), *Arikuyeri* (A person who escaped death), *Jenriogbe* (Stay so that I can carry you), *Durojaiye* (Do not die so that you can enjoy life), *Malomo* (Do not go again), and *Durosimi* (Wait so that you can bury when I die).

Also among the *Akan* of Ghana, if a mother suffers constant child mortality, an infant who is born will be given a weird or unattractive name. Hence,

*“It is a common belief among the Akan people that the reason for child mortality is that child’s mother in the underworld does not want the child to stay in the living world. It is believed that if the name is unattractive, the other mother in the underworld will not like to accept the child over there and this would make the child stay in this world. Such names include Sumina (garbage); Donko (Slave); Kaya (Carrier of loads); Abirekyie (Goat); Dsaaseasa (the land is finished)”* (Opoku 1973; Kofi 2006 cited Agyekun, 2006: 221).

It is important to note that, the reason why these names are common in traditional African societies is because it is a general belief infant mortality is caused by spiritual factors, not medical factors. Thus, high infant mortality rate could be adduced as the reason these names are prevalent in many traditional African societies, but with the development of modern maternity sciences, there has been a considerable drop in infant mortality rates in Africa, and as a result, such names are gradually going into extinction.

## **Preservation of Ethical and Social Values**

Other important circumstances that determine the dynamics of name-bearing in Africa is for preservation of ethics and social values. African people conceived it that given name performs important function such as the preservation of ethics and social values. In other words, names serve as instrument of regulating the general conduct of members of a particular group in that unruly behaviour is not expected of a responsible individual in the society. Individuals who engage in deviant or criminal acts are deemed to irresponsible, cowards and callous, in some instances, an individual is disowned by their family or barred from the land. Some of the names that reflect African ethical and socio-cultural values are: among the *Edo* of Nigeria: *Ekpen* (Bravery); *Egbenayalobele* (Hardwork-the path to success is rough); *Aghaleladia* (Good behaviour-one’s behaviour is conditioned by his or her peers); *Akugberetin* (communality-unity is strength). Among the *Igbo* of Nigeria: *Ikemefona* (Let my strength not be lost); *Ikeebunam* (Let strength not kill me); *Edekobi* (Do not hang your heart); *Emenike* (Do not with force); *Ejike* (We do not use power in doing-things-of the world).

Among the *Ewe* of Togo: *Agbenyega* (Life is great); *Gameli* (There is time for everything). Audrey (2014) asserts that among the *Zulu* of South Africa: *Zenzile* (You are responsible for what you have become); *Bhekisisa* (Be real, careful and cautious); *Nomzamo* (Mother of attempts/efforts); *Mnqobi/Mangoba* (the one who conquers in hopeless situations); *Mlungisi* (The one who brings order); *Thandanani* (*You all love one another*); *Mandlakhe* (His efforts); Lunga (Be good or kind). Among the *Yoruba* of Nigeria: Akinwunmi (I love bravery), Akinlolu (Bravery is great), Akinyemi (Bravery befits me), Akintola (Bravery is worth rejoicing over) Omoluwabi (The Virtuous one).

## Occupations and Economic Situations

There are some names which reflect people's occupations and economic situations. For instance, among the *Edo* of Nigeria: *Idemudia* (I am financially stabilized); *Abieyuwa* (Born into wealth); *Adesuwa* (Born in the midst of wealth). Among the *Igbo* of Nigeria: *Akubueze* (Wealth is the king); *Udeafo* (Noise of the market); *Nwaobuako* (Child who carries wealth). Among the *Akan* of Ghana: *Afriyie* (has appeared well); *Abayie* (has come well); Sika (wealth). Among the *Zulu* of South Africa: Mcebisi (The one who brings wealth). Among the *Yoruba* of Nigeria: *Owodunni* (It is good to have wealth), *Owoyemi* (wealth befits me), *Owolabi* (Wealth is born), *Olowolagba* (The wealthy people are the eldest), *Olowokere* (The wealthy people are not small), *Olowoniyi* (The wealthy is honourable), *Olowoleni* (wealth is admirable), *Ajewole* (Wealth has entered our house), *Ajenipa* (Wealth has positive effects), *Ajeigbe* (Wealth will never go unrecognized), *Ajgunle* (Wealth has come or landed).

## Conclusion

The forgoing discussion has brought to bear the importance of names as social necessity common to virtually all human societies. The relevance of a name as an important necessity of everyday living could be reflected upon the fact that a name has been a significant factor of social life from time immemorial. Although a name is a universal socio-cultural practice; it is remarkably particularistic, and thus, the dynamic nature of cultural practices among people of the world greatly influence it. Being an important socio-cultural practice that is fundamentally used symbolically as means of social interactions among people; a personal name represents one of the basic necessity of everyday living. That is, without it, social interactions would not be possible in many ways. However, despite the socio-cultural relevance of this practice, not much sociological work has been directed towards studying it.

The focus herein is on the socio-cultural embellishment and dynamic circumstances surrounding naming culture among African people. Citing examples from various African societies, this presentation suggests that a name is not only a dynamic socio-cultural practice; not only a reflection of reality of everyday social life of people, but also a phenomenon that needs sociological attention.

As an analysis rooted in micro sociological analysis, a symbolic interactionist perspective was adapted to explain that names are not only important social symbols, but they are a viable basis for social interactions. Hence, understanding the dynamics of naming practices in many African societies is a reliable means of understanding cultural reality.

Based on the above, names should be acknowledged as an important social phenomenon which needs to be given further attention by sociological scholars since there is dearth of research on this topic of social living. Specifically, African sociologists should give more priority to names because it is a remarkable culture (i.e., the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired in the course of generations) among African people, thus, it could be used to understand the dynamics of social reality. Thus, this exercise recommends that African personal names should be well-preserved since they are a reflection of the people's cultural practices, and a valuable component of African cultural heritage.

## References

- Adeoye, C.L. (1969). *Oruko Yoruba* Ibadan: The Caxton Press Ltd.
- Adewoyin, S.T. (1996). *Simplified Yoruba Literature for J.S.S.C.E.* Lagos: Compromitt Pp.60-63
- Agyekum, K. (2006). "The Sociolinguistic of Akan Personal Names" *Nordic journal of African studies*, 15(2), 205-235.
- Ajanaku, S. (1969). *Oruko Amutorunwa* Ibadan: OUP
- Akinnaso, N.F. (1980). "The Socio linguistic basis of Yoruba personal names" *Anthropological Linguistics*, 22(7), 275-304.
- Akinnaso, N.F. (1981). "Names and naming principle in cross-cultural perspectives" *Names*, 29, 37-63
- Asante, M.K. (1995). *The book of African names* Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Bernhardt, S. (2001). *African Names – reclaim your heritage.* South Africa: Struik Publisher.
- Blum, S.D. (1997). "Naming Practices and the Power of Words in China" *Language and society* 26: 357-379.

- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bongaju, T.K. (2005). "Ideologies of women's names among the Nso of Cameroon: A contribution to the philosophy of naming, decolonization and gender". *Journal of Philosophy*, xviii, 57-82
- Bradbury, R.E. (1973). *Benin studies* International African Institute.
- Burton, R. (1998). "Names and naming in Afro-Caribbean cultures" *New West Indian guide*, 1/2, 35-58.
- Chuks-orji, O. (1972). *Names from Africa: Their origin, meaning and pronunciation*. Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902) *Human nature and social order*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- DePaulo, B.M., Kenney, D. A., Hoover, C. W., Webb, W., & Oliver, P. (1987). "Accuracy of person perception: do people know what kinds of impressions they convey?" *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 52, 303-315.
- De-Pinar- Cabral, J. (2008) "What's in a name: personal identity and linguistic identity in a cosmopolitan world' preliminary version of paper written for the *symposium on multilingualism and intercultural dialogue in globalization* New Delhi.
- Fayeye, J.O. (2006). "Memorial: what's in a name: professor J.A. Sofola's contributions to sociological tradition". *Ilorin Journal of Sociology*, 2(1):217-230.
- Fortes, M. (1973). "On the concept of the person among the Tallensi" in G. Dieterlen (ed.), *La Notion de la personne and Afrique Noire*. Paris.
- Gecas, V., & Burke, P. J. (1995). "Self and identity" In K. Cook, G. A. Fine, & J. S. House (Eds.), *Sociological perspectives on social psychology* (pp. 41-67). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gecas, V., & Schwalbe, M. L. (1983). "Beyond the looking-glass self: social structure and efficacy-based self-esteem". *Social psychology quarterly*, 46, 77-88
- Geertz, F. (1966). *Person, time and conduct in Bali: An essay in cultural analysis*. program cultural report series, 14 Yale: South-East Asian Studies.
- Guma, M. (2001). "The cultural meaning of names among Basotho of Southern Africa: A historical and linguistic analysis" *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 10(3), 265-279
- Guma, S. M. (1965). *Some aspects of circumcision in Basutoland* African Studies 24: 2-4. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.

- Guma, S.M. (1983). *Form, Content and Technique of Traditional Literature in Southern Sotho* Pretoria: Sigma Press.
- Hallowell, A. I. (1955). *The self and its behavioural environment in culture and experience* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Pp. 75-110.
- Kass, A., & Kass, L. (1995). "What's your name?" *Journal of religion, culture and people's life* <http://www.firstthings.com> Retrieved on January 18, 2006
- La Fontaine, J. (1977). "The power of rights" *Man* 12, 421-437.
- Liseli, A.F. (2012). *African names and naming practices: the impact slavery and European domination had on the African psyche, identity and protest*. A Master of Art Thesis submitted to Graduate School of the Ohio State University.
- Lupenga, M. (2006). "Naming and linguistic Africanism in African American culture" In J Mugaine (ed.), *Selected proceedings of the 35<sup>th</sup> annual conference on African linguistics* Somerville, M.A: Cascadilla proceeding project
- Mairi, R., & George, D. (2005). *Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> century dictionary* India: Allied publishers private limited.
- Mazrui, A. (1987). *The African people: A triple heritage*. United States: Little Brown & Co.
- Mazrui, A. (1993). *A general history of Africa* Volume xiii California: Heinemann.
- McCall, G. J., & Simmons, J. L. (1978). *Identities and interactions* New York: Free Press.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mohome, P. M. (1972). *Naming in Sesotho: its socio-cultural and linguistic basis* New York: University College.
- Monnig, H. D. (1967). *The Pedi*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- Mugudu, S., Muguti, T., & Mutami, N. (2014). "Deconstructing the colonial legacy through the naming process in independent Zimbabwe" *Journal of Studies in social science*, 6(1), 71-85
- Mwaniki, I.N. (2013). "Oral narratives: social cultural repository of names and naming practices of Agikuyu in Kenya". *International Journal of Education and Research*, 1(8):1-12.
- Neething, B. (2004). "Name Choice among the Xhosa of South Africa" *The language quarterly*, xxix (4), 4-6.

- Norton, B. (2008). *Identity and language learning: gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Essex: Pearson.
- Nze, C. (1984). "The art of naming among the Igbo" *Ikenga*, 6 (1-2), 47-50
- Obeng, G.S. (1997). "From morphophonology to sociolinguistics: The case of Akan hypocoristic Day- names". *Multilingua*, 16(1), 39-56.
- Obeng, G.S. (1998). "Akan death-prevention names: A pragmatic and structural analysis". *Names*, 46(3), 163-187.
- Obeng, G.S. (2001). *African anthroponymy: An ethnopragmatic and morphophonological study of names in Akan and some African societies*. Muenchen: Lincom Europa.
- Ogie, E. (1974). *Edo Culture: Modern essays*. Edo Publications.
- Oladunjoye, J.F. & Adeyemi, A. (2012). *A Sociolinguistic study of deviant orthographic representation of graduating student names in a Nigerian university*. Linguistic online 53, 3/2012.
- Opoku, A. A. (1970). *Festivals of Ghana Accra*: Ghana publishing corporation.
- Ota, O. (2002). "Edo personal names and world view" In I.P. Ohioma & O.E. Francis (eds.), *New perspectives in Edoid studies: Essays in honour of Ronald Peter Schaefer*. Centre for advanced studies of African society. Book Series No. 2.
- Rosenberg, M., Schooler, C., Schoenbach, C., & Rosenberg, F. (1995). "Global self-esteem and specific self-esteem: different concepts, different outcomes". *American sociological review*, 60, 141-156.
- Rymes, B. (1996). "Naming as social practice: The case of little creeper from Diamond Street" *Language in society* 25: 237-260.
- Setiloane, G. (1976). *The image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*. Netherlands, A.A: Balkema.
- Shrauger, J. S., & Schoeneman, T. J. (1979). "Symbolic interactionist view of self-concept: through the looking glass darkly". *Psychological bulletin*, 86, 549-573.
- Sofola, J.A. (1970). "What's in a name: the sociological uses of names and naming among the Yorubas and Igbo ethnic groups in Nigeria" *A journal published at University of Ibadan*. Volume 12 (1):115-132.

Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural version* Menlo Park: Benjamin Cummings.

Suzman, S.M. (1994). "Names as pointers: Zulu personal naming practices". *Language in society* 23:253-72.

Wieschhoff, H.A. (1941). "The social significance of names among the Ibo of Nigeria" *American Anthropologists*, 43, 212-223.

Yusuf, N., Olatunji, A., & Issah, M. (2014). "Yoruba names as reflection of people's cultural heritage". In S. A. Ahmad et.al (ed.), *Bringing our cultures homes: Festschrift for Bade Ajayi at 70* (pp. 186-196). Ilorin: Chridamel Publishing House.

Zawawi, S.M. (1993). "What's in a Name" *Unaitwaje? A Swahili book of Names*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc.

Zawawi, S.M. (1998). *African Muslim names: images and identities*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.