

AN ETHNO-LINGUISTIC STUDY OF DEATH PREVENTION NAMES OF SELECTED LANGUAGES OF NASARAWA STATE

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Abstract

This work studied death prevention personal names of selected languages in Nasarawa State from the ethno-linguistic perspective. Naming practice, though universal or cross-cultural among human societies, it is remarkably idiosyncratic in style, custom etc. among cultures and ethnic groups. The paper argued that naming practices are not arbitrary labels, but sociocultural tags that show socio-cultural functions, roles and meanings. The study investigated the peculiarities and commonalities in death prevention names in selected languages in the state. Data for the study were obtained through interviews, personal observation and analyzed using the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Findings from the research showed that these names undergo different derivational processes and there is a strong interface between a people's language and their cultural practices, i.e. it mirrors how a language is used as a cultural practice and how it serves as a window to understanding the worldview and philosophy of a given people.

Keywords: Anthropology, anthrotoponymy, Àgàtú, Basà, Èlóiethno-pragmatics, naming practice, personal

Introduction

Linguistic onomastics is a sub field of onomastics that studies proper names, especially, personal names, also called anthroponyms, place names referred to as toponyms and animal names technically called zoonyms. Naming practice, though universal or cross-cultural among human societies, is remarkably idiosyncratic in style, custom, etc. This work focuses on death prevention names as attested in selected languages in Nasarawa State namely, Basà, Agatu, Eloyi and Gbagyi. Death prevention names are bestowed on children who suffer cycles of child mortality and rebirth in the family. To forestall this unacceptable happening, the people have strategized how to overcome it by bestowing weird or strange names on children that are portrayed as very unusual. These names are believed to protect the named children from the spirit of death and other underworld forces to forestall further death which are believed to control the spirit of the affected infants and their right to live. This subtle strategy is a sociocultural method of daring or appealing to the spiritual or underworld forces to free the affected children from the cycle of death and reincarnation and allow them live. Though this approach is quite common among Africans, it portrays an idiosyncratic strategy among ethnic groups and their sociocultural practices in combating child mortality.

Research Questions

This research attempts to answer the following questions:

- i. Why are weird names bestowed on some new born babies among certain sociocultures or ethnic groups?
- ii. What are the implications of these names on the bearers?

Literature Review

Names exist as part of the socio-cultural setting of every society. Being part of the society that gives them, they act as a window through which the world is understood and appreciated (Mutunda, 2011). They are used as conduits of information, especially, on society's attitudes or observation towards the named (Mapara et al, 2009, p.9). Musonda, Ngalande & Simwinga (2019) state that it is important that one has a good knowledge of the imagery and metaphor of the language under consideration to appreciate their names.

Studies on personal names have been carried out in the onomastic literature in different disciplines such as linguistics, such as Akinasa (1980), Ubahakwe (1981), Uduoyoye (1982), Essien (1986), Aceto (2002), Agyekum (2006), Agbo (2014) Mensah (2013), (2015), and (2017) Mensah & Ishima (2020), Okon (2017); Psychology, Steele (1988), Steele & Smith (1989); Anthropology Bean 1990, Obeng (1998), Ukpong (2007), Author (2015) & (2017); Sociology Ngade (2011), Suzman (1994), Author (2016), etc. Study on personal names is very pivot to the socio-cultural fibre of every society as there is no known society in the world which does not give names to every new born child. The foregoing fact justifies the academic interest cultivated by researchers to study personal names as they are not just indices of identification rather, underlain by different forms of communication.

Anderson (2004, p.435) presents a syntactic and morphological comparison of French, English and Greek names where he proposes the universality of names belonging to the category of determinatives such as pronouns and determiners but are inherently neither definite nor indefinite whose functions differ from regular argument of the predicator. Conclusively, he argues that each language varies. His argument reveals that the grammatical structure of personal names usually synchronizes with the grammar of the language. Mensah and Ishima (2020) argue otherwise that this may not always be true for all languages. They prove this with contemporary German names where Plank (2011, p.269) shows that family names in this language have "subtle but comprehensively severed ties with their ancestral word classes in their morphology upon attaining name status in spite of their origin in nouns and adjectives and in spite of retaining the phonology and syntax of their origin". He (Plank) further argues that this manifests in inflection and derivation and thus, renders the traditional word class categorization of family names as a type of noun in languages, especially languages like German which can affect both the lexicon and grammar. In virtually all African naming systems, names have meaning based on their semantic and pragmatic contents. This assertion is contrary to researchers like Searle (1958), Dixon and Lyons (1977) whose opinion is that personal names do not have sense or meaning but what they only represent is unique and individuating.

Hussein (1997, p.25) submits that personal names are ambiguous properties of every linguistic community given that names are words (with expression character) that exist in a

language which are an essential part of the linguistic repertoire of their bearers, users and givers and are valuable carriers of identity that reflect the dominant attitude and socio-cultural value of a community. Names are founded on people's cultural heritage, and therefore reflect major currents in their history and worldview. For this reason, they show deep attachment to indigenous traditions and embed significant psychological and pragmatic attributes. It is also believed that names in Africa have deep spiritual context and cosmology (Obeng, 1988; Mensah, 2015). Mapara, 2013, p.15 opine that personal naming in Shona culture practice is seen as a rite of passage marking the transition from the womb into the community. This opinion is supported by Mensah and Ishima's claim that personal naming practices, especially in Africa, "act as narrative discourses where stories that provide insights to live experience are told" (2020, p.4). To Haviland et al, they define it "as a social transition from a state of nature to a state of culture" (2013, p.130).

In Basà naming tradition, personal names are given based on certain social and cultural parameters which require reflecting the situation or circumstances surrounding the conception and birth of the child, the situation surrounding the parents, family, community and so on. Imoh (2019) studies the structure of Basà personal names where he outlines the various structure of Basà personal names, namely; words, phrases, sentences etc. Imoh, and Dansabo (2020a) studied the ethno-pragmatics of Basà personal names where they did a general investigation into the language and socio-culture of Basà naming practices; Imoh and Dansabo (2020b) examined Basà sentential names, focusing on those names that are composed in sentences and undergo complex morphological and morphosyntactic operations to derive their surface forms; Imoh (2020) surveys onomastics and names as indirect communication in Basà, where he studied anthroponyms, toponyms and zoonyms as a strategy of indirect communication in Basà language

Umaru, Yusuf & Abraham (2017) studied 'the syntax of Agatu personal names', Umaru (2023) studied 'compounding in Agatu personal names. Dalhatu (2020) investigated 'Language shift: The case of Gbagyianthroponomy; Dalhatu's (2021) surveyed a 'Linguistic appraisal of Gbagyianthoponoyms'. This work differs from the previous ones in that it seeks to dwell mainly on the ethno-pragmatics and narration of death prevention names in Basà, ÀgàtùÈlòyì, and Gbágyílanguages in Nasarawa State.

In the onomastic literature of African naming practices, especially the aspect of grammatical description, there are a number of related studies in linguistic onomastics such as Mensah & Ishima (2020) who investigated sentential names in Tiv and categorized Tiv names into several categories of sentences, examining the semantic, pragmatic, social and spiritual meanings. Their investigation shows a reflection of grammatical structure of Tiv language. Mande (2009) discovered that in Tshivenda, names have referential and cultural meaning composed from nouns, verbs, adjectives and larger units like phrases, compounds and relativization. He claims that in this language, naming forms an indispensable part of grammar. Linguistically, Mapara argues that names are part of language and constitute phrasal, clausal and sentential categories. He further argues that they may be semantically characterized in complete statements, questions, or commands which are appropriately situated in the realm of language study. Kamu, Jauro & Wappa (2013) undertook a structural study where they categorized names into their morpho-semantic attributes namely, word, classes and studied their semantic and pragmatic meanings.

Concerning meaning of names, Oluwale (2005, p.9) argues that "in Africa, there is so much meaning in a name. If you are given the right name, you start off with certain indefinable but very

real advantages”. This supports the assertion of Mbiti (1975, p.213) that naming in Africa is a big social event being that, it is characterized by numerous roles.

Bantu, according to Moyo (1996), especially the Ngoni-Thumbuka ethnic group in Malawi, prefers names with historical undertone such as *Mopara* (wilderness, named after several deaths of infants) and *Tafwachi* (what is wrong with us). They are based on the family or society’s antecedents.

Koopman (1990) undertook a study on the Zulu society, reached a conclusion that name givers and bearers are aware of the names, that the ability to read between the lines depends on the cultural continuity in which language is embedded which is not applicable or known to all. It is argued therefore that pragmatics comes into play complimented by semantics.

Epstein and Kole (1998, p.26) maintain: “every utterance occurs in a cultural determined context of situation”. Hence, the meaning of a name can only be understood by the knowledge of the context in which naming is based. It is, therefore, important as the meanings of names are based on “complex social negotiations, learned and interpreted through socialization.” Thus, this implies that only those who are members of the society and participate fully in its activities can construe the deep meaning embedded in the names and such communicative interactions (Battie, 1957, p.37).

Finegan (1976, p.173), considering names whose meanings are not deciphered from their surface suggests that “the colourful, often figurative quality of many of these names should be brought out. There are, of course, many names which are relatively straightforward with little overt meaning. Others, however, are richly allusive” in deciphering their meaning adequately.

Musonda, Ngalande and Simwinga (2019) maintain that one should have adequate knowledge of the language’s imagery and metaphor to fully appreciate the aspect of naming. Matunda (2011) asserts that a name is like a document where one can read the history, culture and heritage of the individual or of the family in time and space. This view is related to the current investigation as it is used to unveil the bearer’s cultural identity. He further says that in addition to psychological role in establishing a person’s identity, names convey to those who know their origin and meaning the social and cultural experiences of the people who created them. These names, in addition, show how members of the community regard themselves because they reflect values, tradition and events. Similarly, Mashiri et al (2013) assert that naming in African societies always reflects sociocultural and ideological realities of the societies that give or bear them. This, according to Musonda, Ngalande & Simwinga (2019), shows how sociocultural factors play a major role in the selection and bestowal of names.

Research Methodology

Data Generation and Research Participants

The study was conducted using the qualitative research approach and employed a descriptive linguistics framework/survey. The primary source of data elicitation included oral interview, partial integration, observation, metalinguistic interaction and focus group discussion with the sample population. The data elicited were verified by the researchers, given their native intuitions of languages investigated. All the recordings were done during the interviews and were jotted down in note books for easy identification; in some instances, the data were gathered through

discussions and these discussions aided the researchers to verify the authenticity of the data gathered. These procedures were also supplemented by introspection, based on the fact that the researchers are native speakers. The field work was carried out in Basà, Agatu, Eloyi and Gbagyi speaking areas of Nasarawa state, North-Central Nigeria. The data were analyzed in three or four tiers, namely, the raw data presentation followed by interlinear glossing i.e. morpheme-by-morpheme glossing (Leipzig Glossing Rules), the semantic meaning and finally, the pragmatic meaning where applicable.

Selection of informants was done randomly considering the fact that the consultants are native speakers with native intuitions, who were between twenty (20) to seventy-five (75) years of age and their willingness to participate in the investigation. These randomly selected informants were both literate and non-literate native speakers of the languages. The selection was also based on their experience, good knowledge of naming conventions and also vast knowledge of culture, both as name givers and bearers/users.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Basà, Àgàtù, Gbagyi and Èlòyì are tone languages characterized by three register tone levels. Tones in these languages are phonemic, that is, tone variations cause meaning change in the languages and they are also grammatical. Thus, the high tone is marked with an acute tone, the low tone with grave tone and the mid tone unmarked.

Death prevention names can be studied from the morphological, morphosyntactic, syntactic and ethno-pragmatic perspectives, but the focus of this present study is on the ethno-pragmatic aspect. This section presents Basà, Àgàtù, Gbagyi and Èlòyì death-prevention anthroponyms as were elicited during the field work. Each set of the data presented is followed by word-for-word glossing, the denotative/semantic (surface meaning) and finally, the connotative pragmatic (underlying meaning). These levels are important as they are helpful not only in deciphering the literal meaning, but also in the underlying or implied meaning. This approach is partially propelled by the ideology of many African onomasticians encountered in this study, that in Africa context, naming practices usually have an underlying meaning beyond their surface entailment. In what follows, the data gathered during the field work are presented and analyzed.

Basà DPN

1. a Cẹ̀njẹ
ground
'grave'
- b Fwóshí
rotten.PST
'rotten'
- c Gbàjẹ
heap
'grave'
- d Tù'wó

- 'death'
- e Dáje
'instrument for sighting the location of a grave'
- f Wara
'bush/giant grass'

The names in (1) are death-prevention names which are bestowed on female children who are believed to have suffered the cycle of death and reincarnation in the family. *Cẹnje* 'ground' implies that the named female child who is believed to have suffered death and rebirthed will die again.

Fwóshí 'rotten' is a name given to a female child who is also believed to have suffered death and rebirthed in the family. It implies that the named child will die like in a fore time and get rotten in the grave. *Gbàje* 'heap' simply typifies grave i.e., the named male child will die and be buried in a grave (heap). *Tù'wó* 'death' is bestowed on a female infant who is believed will also soon die, hence, the name *Tù'wó* which implies that the named baby is a corpse who will soon be taken away by the forces of the underworld. *Dáje* is an instrument used in the Basà Tìrìbì shrine i.e. the shrine in charge of burial of adults who are traditional worshipers. The instrument is kept with a member of the shrine who is second in command in the order of rank in the shrine. When an adult die, a request for the instrument is made to *Dáje*, the custodian to bring it to the venue of their sitting in order to sight the location of the grave. This officer is also called by the name of his office or portfolio. It implies that this instrument (*Dáje*) typifies or connotes death. Thus, a family that has suffered infant death mortality, when a male child is born, it could be called *Dáje* which means, the birth of the baby will invite death or the named male child will soon die and require the digging of a grave.

Wara is a kind of bush made up of thick giant grass. It is believed by the people that when an individual die, their spirit goes to the bush for repose. Thus, it is believed that in a family that suffers infant mortality, when a child is born, it shall die and return to the woods, hence, it is named *Wara*; if it happens to be female because it is believed that in due time, she shall also die. The data in (1) are mainly simple words.

There is also a category of names that undergoes some morphological processes. Less emphasis will be laid on the structure because the focus of this investigation is on the ethno-pragmatic or sociocultural perspective. Examples:

- 2. a Nyígátàngà→Ànyìngàtò
'console' 'consolation'
- b àgàzama→Gázama
'PL.bush'
- c nwóma→Tònwòmá
'fail' 'misfortune/sorrow'

In (2), *Nyígátàngà* 'console' is a verb and its nominal form is *Ànyìngàtò* 'consolation'. The meaning of this is quite obvious and it is bestowed on a female child who is believed to be a

consolation from God or a replacement for a deceased member of the family, and a passionate prayer to God to spare the life of the named child. *Àgàzama* is a plural form of *ùgàzama* which is a herbaceous plant believed to be a place of repose for the spirit of the dead. The name is bestowed on a female child believed to have suffered the cycle of death and rebirth based on whose fact conclusion is made that the named child shall die again and repose in the herbaceous plant cluster. *Tònwòmáís* is a nominal derived from the verb *nwóma* 'be sorrow'. It is a death prevention name but could be used to imply other non-death related implications. The giver of the name bestows the name on the male child coming after series of deaths or evil occurrences.

This category of names is composed in larger and complex structures larger than words. Examples:

3. a Ndá zhaga → Ndàzhaga
 do go
 'hurry and go'
- b Tò 'wó → Tò'wo
 NEG die
 'Don't die'
- c Tàmàhóngá → Tàhóngá
 NEG.2PSG laugh
 'Don't mock me'
- d Ñ ndámó 'wo → Ñdámó'wo
 ISG leave 1PSG die
 'leave me let me die'
- e Tàínà → Tà'ínà
 NEG lost
 'Don't get lost'
- f Gó ì shiloba → Shílóba
 3SG AGR.S lay there
 'Let it remain there'

Ndàzhaga comprises two verbs of equal syntactic value i.e. verb serialization with covert head which is characteristic of an imperative sentence. It makes a command instructing the named male child to hurriedly maximize the available time and do what he can within the little time available and depart to the underworld like its predecessors. In common parlance, it means 'act fast and go' or 'act fast and die'. *Tò 'wo* is derived from *tò 'wo* 'don't die'. This death prevention name is more semantic in meaning. The name is used as an appellation to appeal to the interpellated (the underworld spirit) to spare the name bearer from death. It is a demonstration of fear of death stemming from their antecedent experience.

Tà(mà)hóngá 'Don't taunt/mock me' is a negative command used as an allusive message to the interpellated, using the name as his/her interpellation. The interpellator addresses his/her

mockers not to mock/taunt him/her as s/he is hopeful of a better future. By this name, s/he also appeals to divinity or deities to wipe their tears and make the named female child survive.

Ìdámó'wo 'Live me! Let me die!' is a name coined in a remark expressing the desperation of the parents over incessant deaths and rebirths of infants, challenging and daring the underworld spirit by the name that they are no longer threatened by death.

Tà'inà 'Don't get lost' is a negative command asking the named female child not to get lost (die) like her antecedents. The command which is also an appeal is denotative in meaning, i.e., it is a desperate appeal to make the named child survive.

Shílóba is derived by clipping the head (subject-NP) and subject agreement marker to derive the surface form which means 'Let it remain there'. The pragmatic or implied meaning underlying the name is, 'Let us watch and see what becomes of this baby boy'. The child is named thus based on their antecedent experience of infant mortality. It implies that the name givers are watching and are hopeful that the name bearer will survive.

The next category of names is also composed of a larger linguistic unit but differ from (3) above. This set of names is statements or sentences. Examples:

- 4 a Bòzhẹ nà ambẹ → Zhánàambẹ
3SG go.FUT to bush/wood
'Go to the bush/woods'
- b Bọ mâ nyisa → Mânyísá
3SG ISG.OBJ entice/deceive
'S/he is enticing/deceiving me'
- c Í ta haànsà → Tàsà
ISG PROG ponder
'I am thinking'
- d Í tà 'nwanẹ → Tà'nwanẹ
ISG PROG carry
'I am still carrying'
- e Bọ zhananẹ → Zhananẹ
3SG go-HAB
'S/he is going again'

Zhánámẹ in (4a) is derived from clipping the subject-NP *bọ* and merging the verb *zhẹ* 'go', the preposition *nà* and the object (*ambẹ* 'bush'). It implies that the named infant (female) is expected to die like others and her soul escape into the woods.

Mânyísá in (4b) is derived by clipping the sentence subject and combining the sentence object and the verb, and it implies that the named male child who came after several cycles of

or optimism. Those that sound weird or funny like *Ñdámówo* ‘Leave me, let me die’, *Tú’wo* ‘death’ *Dájè* ‘grave sighting instrument’, etc. actually have pragmatic meanings which make invocations or petitions to the spirit of death to forestall further infant mortality in the family.

It is believed that death, though scary should not be mentioned anyhow, but can be defeated when it is dared by trivializing it. It is also an indirect way of intersession to the spirit of the underworld through children’s names. This practice is believed to mitigate the forceful power of death in the life of the bearer and subsequent children. Death daring or prevention naming practice is an index of Basà socio-cultural experience and supernatural universe. It indexicalizes their cultural patterns or belief system, language and spiritual strategy in combating incessant infant mortality. In what follows, we present the Àgàtú death prevention names which bears strong affinity with those in Basà.

Àgàtú DPN

Àgàtú also called Idoma North is a dialect of Idoma genetically classified as belonging to Idomoid language family, a branch of Benue-Congo subgroup predominantly spoken in Benue, Nasara state of North-Central Nigeria. In Àgàtú ethno cultural practice, death prevention names which are disgraceful names are bestowed on children that portray them to the underworld as being worthless and unwanted by the biological parents or name givers. Death prevention names in Àgàtú are categorized below:

A. Social Emotional Names

In this category, we have names that stir up emotions as a result of the pains inflicted on the family by death of loved ones. These names are given from psychological and situational contexts.

6 i. Ikwú we ọchè → Ikwúochè
death BE king
‘Death is king’

ii. Ikwú yùn jà → Ikwúnjà
death 1SG.OBJ surround-HAB
‘Death surrounds me’

iii. Ikwú bía èlà → Ikwúbíèlà
death spoil.HAB thing.PL
‘Death spoils things’

iv. Ikwú yùm → Ikwúyùm
death do.PST.1SG.OBJ
‘death did to me’

The names in (6) are given to children from psychological and situational contexts aimed at inflicting the pains and trauma associated with death. Death is an ‘inevitable call’ that every living soul has to answer. *Ikwúochè* depicts the supremacy of death over all mortals. Everyone including the weak, the mighty, royals and non-royals all die. This name, because of the power death exerts on all mortals, is portrayed as being king for its power and influence over all. In the name also, there is an elision of the verb *we* in the surface form. *Ikwúnjà* speaks of the manipulative power of

death to strike when one least expects. From the name, the name givers experience frustration of a dashed hope as a result of the death encountered in either the family or community. The name also has phonological elision of *yu* that features in the deep structure as the words are combined in the surface structure. *Ikwúbìèlà* speaks also of the dashed hope, especially when a benefactor dies. In the formation process of the name, there is an elision of low back vowel of the verb (*a*) to derive the surface form. *Ikwúyùm* expresses the devastating impact of death over the life of a parent(s) or name givers.

B) Animal Names

7. i. Ùpù
 ‘vulture’
- ii. Ègáwá
 ‘snake’
- iii. Èkéké
 ‘monkey’
- iv. ọ̀bàgwù
 ‘baboon’

Names of animals are given as death prevention names in Àgàtú to disgrace the spirit of the children that undergo the cycle of birth and rebirth within the same family. In this category of names, the disdain and fury over the birth of this kind of children is reflected in their names. The names are given from derogatory perspective. The vulture in Àgàtú tradition is seen as a very dirty bird that scavenges on dead or rotten food and unlike other birds; nobody eats vultures. By giving the name *ùpù* ‘vulture’ to a child, the spirit of the child is hurt and most times when this happens the death and rebirth cycle is stopped. *Egáwá* is another Àgàtú death prevention name. Sometimes, there are particular looks the children come with and that makes the parents to name it *Ègáwá*. *Ekà* ‘monkey’ and *ọ̀bàgwù* ‘baboon’ are seen also as very ugly animals that are despised by people. They are not seen by many as animals killed for meat as hunters do not take pride in killing them. By giving these names to children in Àgàtú culture, it is believed that the spirits of the children are hurt and despised, thereby preventing the birth and death cycle.

C). Names as Misfortune

These are death prevention names meant to spite the spirit of the underworld that keep tormenting parents by the cycles of birth and death of children.

8. i. íyé ọ̀nọ̀ → Íyónọ̀
 name pain
 ‘bad luck’
- ii. í mà tówè → Ímàtówè
 3SG born suffer.FUT
 ‘Born to suffer’
- iii. ọ̀fyè
 ‘slave’

- iv. òtó wẹ→ Otówẹ
 on road
 ‘wanderer’
- v. òmà bónú→ ómàbónú
 born waste
 ‘wasted birth’
- v. òmà tá chí→ ómátáchí
 born AGR bush
 ‘born into the bush’

This category of names is meant to curse the spirits of the children. *Íyónò* ‘bad luck’ is given to a child suspected to be tormenting the parents by dyeing and coming back in cycles. Most good parents wish that their children will grow well and succeed in life but because of the circumstance they find themselves with the birth of these kind of children, they wish them evil as the children too are believed to be intentional in tormenting the parents. *Ìmàtówẹ* wishes the child pains and suffering, *Otówẹ* ‘wanderer’ referring to the child who wanders about without trying to settle down with a family. *Ófẹ* means ‘slave’ and this also means the child is wished to play a second class fiddle or inferior life. *ómàbónú* ‘wasted birth’ and *ómátáchí* ‘Born into the bush’ have concluded on the destinies of the children as being inconsequential and worthless. These names are given to embarrass the spirit of these children to change their mind to live or not return to torment the parents again, even if they return to the spirit world.

D. Concept Names/ Reincarnation

Àgàtú concept names are death prevention names that expose the concept of the re-incarnation of children who die at will and their spirits will still come back in as a different child to same parents thereby causing agony and pains to the parents. The names are meant to either appease or hurt the spirit world to prevent death and rebirth cycles.

9. i. òbí tíyé → Òbítíyé
 care body
 ‘to nurture for a while’
- ii. òwò ya ìhẹ→ Òwòyáihẹ
 rain fall end
 ‘Wasted birth’
- iii. àjùm úbí → Àjùmbí
 give.1SG.OBJ keep
 ‘Given to me as a care taker’
- iv. áda íkwu → Ádaikwu
 father death
 ‘father of death’

(11vi), *Lúkwúkwúleèyi* ‘death has forgotten’ and (vii) *Òtówúmò* ‘we have forgotten this’, both the killer spirit and humanity have forgotten the child.

C. Metaphoric or Flora and Fauna Names as DPN

12. i. *Ìshóshí*
‘animal’
- ii. *kúwéyí*
‘firewood’

Metaphoric or flora and fauna type of names are given to a child to prevent the death of the child. They are animate and inanimate names; animate ones do not refer to human beings, but other species of animal. The names are also derogatory to the name bearer and as such will not be happy to bear such names. In *Àfò*, the names *Ìshóshí* ‘animal’ *Kúwéyí* ‘firewood’ are names of animals which are given as death prevention names in *Àfò* to disgrace the spirit of the children that undergo the cycle of birth and rebirth within the same family. In this category of names, the disdain and fury over the birth of this kind of children is reflected in their names. The names are given from derogatory perspective.

D. Defiance as DPN

Death prevention names are sometimes given to a child in order to resist death. They are strong worded names that depict resistance. In *Àfò* world view, such names can ward off any incidence of further death of the child. These names are expressed in the following data (12i-v).

13. i. *kókí*
‘stone’
- ii. *Éwà lí lúkwú* → *Éwàlìkwú*
fight AGR death
‘Fightdeath’
- iii. *Lúkwú*
‘death’
- iv. *òkò lúkwù* → *Òkòlúkwú*
wife death
‘death’s wife’
- v. *òtà húmà* → *Òtàhúmà*
(2SG).stay here
‘you, remain’

Names such as *Kókí* ‘stone’ are bestowed on a child to resist death. In data (13ii), *Éwàlìkwú* ‘fight with death’ is defiance as both the giver and bearer are ready to fight with death and death should be prepared for such a battle. *Lúkwú* ‘death’, is a death prevention name that signifies that the

name bearer is as strong as death itself, which makes the killer spirit to be aware of devastating effect that their collision would cause. In (13iv) the bearer of *Òkòlúkwú* ‘wife of death’, is described as the wife to death. In Àfò worldview, women or wives could be more troublesome than men. Therefore, being a wife to death, she could harm death. Lastly, *Òtáhúmà* ‘you, remain’ is a command, stating that the name giver has commanded the bearer to stay with them and never to die as its predecessors.

E. Sudden or Unprepared

In Àfò, death prevention names are given to depict unexpected situation or a state of unpreparedness. The following example shows that the family of the named child is not prepared for the calamity that has befallen them.

14. i. Kúfà
unexpected’

Gbagyi DPN

Gbagyi is a Nupoid language of Benue-Congo family which is spoken in north central Nigeria, particularly in Nasarawa, Kaduna, Niger, Kogi states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Gbagyi is made up of Gbagyi and Gbari varieties but this study is based on data from the Gbagyi variety. As will be seen, Gbagyi is a tonal language which largely exhibits a mixture of inflexional and agglutinating features. It is instructive to note here that data are presented in conformity with the Gbagyi tone marking convention where four contrastive level tones and one contour tone are attested. The level tones are marked thus: Super High tone [˥], High tone [˨˨], Low tone [˩] and Mid tone is left unmarked, while the Falling tone is marked [˨˨˩].

In Gbagyi culture, many personal names are believed to have the power to repel or prevent death occurrence. This category of naming is generally referred to as death prevention names which are commonly practiced amongst Nigerian languages and particularly, languages in Nasarawa state, including Gbagyi. The following names were elicited from data on Gbagyi personal names as they illustrate this phenomenon.

For adequate presentation and interpretation of the death prevention names in Gbagyi, we classify them in various categories as follows:

A. Lexical forms:

15. gbegbè [gbegbè]
thick grass
‘wilderness’

The name in (15) is a lexical item which is assigned to a child to portray worthlessness. This is because, in the Gbagyi community, it is believed that value and worth is attractive to the killer spirit. In other words, the spirit of death is considered to be interested in people of high value and great worth and as such, the people believe that one way to make a person uninterested and unattractive to the spirit of death is to name such a person as worthless or useless. Therefore, the Gbagyi name giver portrays the worthlessness of a child by naming it *gbegbè* ‘grass’ in order to repel the killer being from it.

16. fnìdànkulú [fnìdàŋkulú]
'garbage dump'

The name in (16) is given to a baby to repel the killer spirit from it. This name presupposes the Gbagyi name giver's belief that nothing of good use and value can be found on rubbish heap as only materials of worthless value are kept there. The ethno-pragmatic perspective of the name in (16) is therefore, that there is nothing good about the so-named child to interest the death's spirit.

17. gbmanyí [gbmaŋí] 'one'

The name in (17) is given to a baby who is perceived as the only surviving child of the family. However, in Sakoma's (2023) opinion, the name is an address to the killer spirit by which the name giver appeals to the killer spirit to be kind enough to spare one child in the family.

B. Phrasal names:

18. Nítná òdatnáda → [tnáda]
with- NEG father

'Without a father'

The above name is given to a child to portray that the child is an orphan. This is based on two traditional beliefs of the Gbagyi. The first being that the spirit of death only takes away someone who has a father to mourn their demise. In other words, a giver of the above name believes that a child who bears such a name as "fatherless" is least attracted, if at all, to the spirit of death. The second pragmatic implication of assigning the above name to a child is that the killer spirit reserves some sympathy for anyone who has no parent, particularly, a father. Therefore, the Gbagyi parents give the name *tnáda* to the child in order to attract sympathy from the spirit of death.

C. Sentential names

Declarative sentences:

19. Ceḅózmizhnicézmizhni [fḗzomizni]
3NPPST PFV ISG happen

'It has happened to me before (and shouldn't happen again)'

Observe that the above name results from a desententialization process that involves the phonological process of deletion whereby the tense marker becomes deleted and its tone docks on the subject of the sentence which is the third person neuter pronoun *ce* 'it'. In Gbagyi culture, the name in (19) is used to indicate that death had previously occurred in a particular family. The name symbolizes a defence and/or an appeal that death should not reoccur in the particular family. Therefore, the name giver believes that the family which has suffered loss in the past should be exempted in the subsequent events of death occurrence.

20. Wòtáḅwaóyé -ntáḅwayen [táḅwajén]

3SG NEG get name-NEG

'(S/he) cannot be named'

Again, the name in (20) is a reduced sentence involving the deletion of the subject *wò* and thereby surfaces as [tábwajén]. The name is an ethno-pragmatic symbol that expresses the belief by the Gbagyi that the killer spirit only visits one who is identified by name. Therefore, it is believed that a nameless child is invisible and immune to death.

21. Álamaḡàòknimagaḡni [magàḡni]

INDF PFVborn PREP earth

‘A person has given birth for the earth’

In (21), the name *magàḡni* is a resultant form of a sentence reduction process by which both *á* and *la* are deleted. The name symbolizes the hopelessness and helplessness and consequently, the surrender of a child by the name giver to the spirit of death. This is the case of a parent who hitherto has experienced recurrent deaths of children in the family. Consequently, the child is named *magàḡni* because the parent expects that the child could die like the previous ones. Yet, at the same time, the parent is hopeful the spirit of death would spare the child when its power is acknowledged and the child is surrendered to it.

22. Ófyílaòmibwifílabwi [fílabwi]

death PFV1SG stir

‘Death has disturbed me/death has troubled me’

The name in (22) is a desententialized form of an underlying sentence which is used by a name giver who must have been troubled by numerous losses of loved ones in the past. As a result, the name giver gives the child the name *fílabwi* as a way of making a case against the spirit of death or making an appeal to the killer spirit to look elsewhere subsequently to guarantee the child’s survival.

23. Ófyínoḡkpíyí fínkpíyí [fínkpíyí]

death BE wicked/evil

‘Death is wicked/evil’

The choice of the above name is informed by the giver’s assumption that death should want to prove wrong whoever sees it in a bad light. Consider the analogy of one who steals and does not want to be called a thief. If you save some valuable with him/her, they will ensure that nothing happens to it just for the purpose of proving everyone wrong about them being thief. This is the idea behind the name *fínkpíyí*. Personal communication with Dr. Sakoma, a 67 years old Gbagyi native speaker in 2023 reveals that the name giver hopes that the spirit of death would play innocence whenever it is confronted.

24. Àfáḡní mí → fáḡní mí [fáḡní mí]

INDF. NP leave 1SG

‘Leave for me’

Observe that the name *Fáḡní mí* is derived from the sentence in (24) through the deletion of *à*. Using this name, the Gbagyi cultural belief that the spirit of death can be begged not to strike. Therefore,

the name giver uses the name to request plead with the spirit of death to not take the child from them. This of course usually follows series of deaths previously suffered in the family, which makes the parents apprehensive.

25. Shèkwóyílá fágnímíshèkwó~~l~~á fágnímí [ʃèk^wolá fágnímí]

God PFV leave 1SG

‘God has speared (him/her) for me’

The name *shèkwó~~l~~á fágnímí* is derived from a declarative sentence above through the deletion of *yi* which the name giver uses to prophetically declare or make hopeful statement over a child’s life pertaining to its survival. Like the case in (24), this name relates to parents who must have suffered series of child loss in the past, which makes them to declare in hope that God will preserve the given baby.

26. Shí wó → filoshífilo [ʃífilo]
hold 3SG in case

‘Nurse hopefully/ nurture without expectation of survival’

The name *Shífilo* is derived from the above sentence through the deletion of *wó* and it is given to a child whose parents have lost hope on having any surviving children, due to the recurrent death of children previously experienced in the family. In which case, the parents nurture the child without expecting the child’s survival. However, this name may be perceived as a way of expressing hope by the parents that the child does not die like the previous ones.

27. À-bmì-yítámì-nàbmìyítámìn [àbmìyítámìn]

PL-hate-A NEG.FUT DO-NEG

‘Haters (of the child) will not succeed (in harming the child)’

The name in (27) is given to a child when the parents want to exercise confidence against their suspected haters. This way, the parents of the child make trivial the powers of those who hate the child believing that the child will survive all their attempt to kill it. The pragmatic implication of this name is that the name giver believes that a potential hater of the child will feel called-out or confronted and hence get discouraged to strike, thereby leaving the child out of their prey which increases the child’s chances to survival.

28. Nyáhotázhni-nnyáhotázhni -[n~~h~~hotázhni]
something NEG.FUT happen-NEG

‘Nothing will happen (to child)’

By the name in (28), the care/name givers express strong confidence that in spite of how bad situations may seem to be around the child’s existence, or how ill the child may be, s/he will not

die but survive and live long. This expression of confidence and belief is usually made based on strong faith in God whom the Gbagyi serve and believe in.

29. Nyáòwoòsànyáwósâ [nʷáwósâ]
chase.IMP 3SG time

‘(The child) to live until his/her due time’

The sentential name in (29) literally means ‘to follow one’s full lifetime’. The surface form is derived through the deletion of /o/ in *òwoandòsà* which surfaces as *nyáwósâ*. By this name, the parents or name givers instruct that the child should live and only die when he must have fulfilled his days. This name reflects the parents’ belief that the child has the power to determine how long he lives or how soon he dies. This is particularly for some children who are described in Gbagyi culture as evil, who reincarnate after the death of an ancestor only to die again shortly after. This name is therefore, an order or instruction given the child which he/she is expected to go by.

30. Nyaànyìòsànyanyìsà [nʷanìsà]
chase.IMP life time

‘Last a whole/full life time’

The name in (30) is similar to that in (29) both in context and in meaning with the only difference being that while the child in (30) is directly commanded, the command in (29) is not directly addressed to the child. The command instructs the child in both of the above examples to live by the length of the world’s timing. i.e., to live a number of years that the world considers long enough. Observe that the derivation of the name involves the deletion of /a/ in *ànyì* ‘life’ and /ə/ in *òsà* ‘time’.

31. Shèkwòbágwushèkwágwu—[ʃèkwág^wu]
God FUT guard

‘God will guard/protect’

The name *shèkwágwu* is a prayer of hope or faith that God will protect a child from harm’s way. This again, demonstrates the parents’ belief in God’s potency in preserving the child’s life and it also reflects the fact that though death is fearful and powerful, God’s power surpasses it. The interesting phonological processes of deletion and glide formation are observed to interplay in the process of the (31) sentence reduction where the bilabial implosive, /b/ gets deleted, resulting in a prohibited VV sequence of /oa/. To resolve this prohibition, the vowel /o/ becomes [w] and the thereby surfacing as [ʃèkwág^wu].

32. Shèkwôyídnámíwyélóshèkwódnámíwyéló—[ʃèkw^wódnámíwíéló]
God put 1SG eye PROG

‘God is looking after me’

33. Shèkwonún̄ceyishèkwonún̄ceyi —[ʃèkw^wonún̄tʃeji]

God FOC it

‘Is it God who owns it (the child)’

Similar to the name in (31), *shèkwódnǎmíwýé̃lò* is used by the child’s parents to acknowledge the all-seeing God, believing also that He deliberately looks over and after the child and as such, no evil can befall it. The name in (33) is given based on the belief that whatever or whoever is owned by God cannot be killed. Hence, the name serves as a hedge of protection or a mark of exemption over the child’s life against the spirit of death.

34. Shèkwóshíá-wyé̃lòshèkwósháwýé̃lò [ʃɛkʷóʃjájwé̃lò]
God look PL-eye PROG

‘God is watching’

We observe the interplay of glide formation process in the derivation of the name *shèkwósháwýé̃lò* from the above sentence, where the vowel /i/ becomes [j] to truncate the prohibited VV sequence. In Gbagyi tradition, the name is used as a warning to the killer spirit or those who cause a child’s death. The Gbagyi are of the belief that when the spirit of death is informed about God’s watch over a child, it stays away from taking the child in order to avoid the wrath of God.

Summary

This work unfolds the locally constitutive meanings of death prevention names among the Basà, Àgàtú Èlòyì, and Gbágyí of Nasarawa State, North Central, Nigeria in order to unveil and make accessible the practices to both cultural insiders and outsiders. The narrations were done on the keywords embedded in the cultural scripts which show the ethnolinguistic norms and values in names and naming practices among the ethnic groups under investigation. The work focuses on keywords which comprise names that are targeted to prevent death, dare death, appeal to the Supremacy of God, the spirit of death, deities, etc. with the same objective of making infants survive infant mortality and live. The work analysed death prevention names as culture encoding, ethnopragmatic and sociocultural information where some are idiosyncratic and others are shared commonalities. From the narrative perspective, it is demonstrated that while Basà, ÀgàtúÈlòyì, and Gbágyí are culturally distinct ethnic groups, they share so much commonalities with respect to their naming traditions as it concerns death related and death prevention naming. The study also explored different ways meaning is enacted in the naming systems and x-rayed nuances behind them from the lived experiences of the bearers and givers of these names. In an attempt to unveil the tapestry of these naming practices and traditions, we uncovered the hidden concepts in the names and the cultural values that are construed within them. For those that are co-construed, we selected those meanings that are bias and suitable to our objectives. Names in these traditions represent local meanings and values known only to cultural insiders. The work has highlighted the peculiarities and commonalities of Basà, ÀgàtúÈlòyì, and Gbágyí meaning as they concern names and naming. The study has uncovered culture-specific meanings, their commonalities underlying different anthroponomic stems. Thus, we have established that meaning in the languages investigated have strong social and cultural rootedness and performs unique symbolic and communicative roles. On a broader scale, naming practice is a reservoir of cultural ideology, belief

systems, philosophy, religion and worldview. We hereby recommend similar investigations done on other ethnic groups in Nigeria and Africa.

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