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**A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF NAMES AND THE UNEARTHING
OF NAMING PRACTICES IN THREE ETHNIC GROUPS IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This study on personal names and naming practices examined the significance, typology and naming patterns in selected ethnic-groups in Nigeria. Also, it adopted a mix of approaches from anthropology and linguistic research to give a clearer illumination on the approach to name-study. The approach is predicated on the realities of the numerous studies conducted by myriads of disciplines with little meeting points. The study which employed the semi-structured and key informant interviews had a sample size of 450 respondents through simple random and a blend of purposive sampling. It debunked the perceived notion of arbitrariness of names which is not shared by anthropologists and ethno-semantics. The research, however, revealed that names are still significant and considered a vital social activity of the ethnic groups studied and as such picking a name for a child demands a careful inward-looking. It further revealed that personal names are still used effectively not only as veritable tools for communication but also for the storage, retrieval and perpetuation of cultural knowledge. The study, however, recommended that proper understanding of the collective roles of names as a symbolic system in a culture demands knowing the past, classificatory notes, methods of obtaining information from sources, present manifestations of names and consequences on man's activities and his psyche.

1. INTRODUCTION

All over the world, scholars have carried out studies and have engaged extensively in the discourse on names generally and its practices. On the other hand, concerted efforts by language philosophers have directed their attention on the lexical-semantic character of names and inadvertently turned blind eyes on the lexical-syntactic attributes of names. The broad investigation into names is anthropological onomastics which encompasses all types of names but most consequentially, names of places and people; giving birth to toponymy and anthroponymyas subfields(Heiko, 2020; Okal, 2018; Evgeny, 2014; Bramwell, 2011; Kerfoot, 2007; McClure, 2005). In Nigeria, the name given to a person has meanings attached to it and among Edo, Urhobo and Yoruba, the study area.

It is believed that a person lives up to the meaning of the name that he or she bears. As rightly noted by Aruegodore(2005); Edevbie (2005); Ogwezzy (2008), if a thief is the name of a child, that individual might grow up to be a rogue. Similarly, a person with a name that suggests wealth or poverty might end up being a rich person or poverty-stricken in life. Parents from these communities are often very careful of the names ascribed to their children. Prior researchers(Ogwezzy, 2008; and Edevbie,2005) noted that "birth registry" is a recent development in the study area because traditionally, parents are not expected to count the number of their children and names are not just mere labels as practised in many ethnic groups around the world but have very profound meanings with many implications for the bearer.

Nevertheless, names and naming among many ethnic groups in Nigeria have undergone drastic changes over the years. Bamgbose (1990) writing on the Yoruba of Nigeria noted that these changes are provoked by cultural, religious educational, immigration and socio-political factors. He observed that what we call Yoruba today is no longer what it was one hundred years ago. The views of Bamgbose(1990) are germane to the communities being studied. Studies on slavery and its footprints have also considered what happened to the names that enslaved Africans had before their sojourn to foreign lands and consequences of obliteration of such names on the personality of these unfortunate African folks.

Remarkably, empirical studies on onomastics are not widespread in the literature, particularly in Nigeria notwithstanding the extensive discourse on names and naming practices. Most studies on onomastics abound in developed countries (see Heiko, 2020, 2019; Mackenzie, 2018; Okal, 2018; Glasgow University Butler, Christopher, Joanna & Ian, 2017; Evgeny, 2014; Selfa). Given the above, this study was carried out with the view to assessing the significance, typology and naming patterns in three selected ethnic-groups(Edo, Urhobo and Yoruba) to fill the literature gap in the Nigerian context. The remaining part of this paper is sectioned as follows: Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussions, Conclusion and Recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Theoretical Literature on Names and Naming Practices*

Edo, Yoruba and Urhobo naming practices like other parts of Africa and Asia, are both a cultural and linguistic phenomenon. Edevbie (2005) contended that apart from serving the functions of individual identification in society, names as an aspect of language construction could also be a source of understanding the myriads of social-cultural forces that rule the existence of people in their communities. This relationship between culture and language calls for investigation of the use of language within the context of the cultural milieu in which it is spoken (Hymes, 1986; Dorothy, 2018). Over the years, it has been observed that this line of thought has generated a new strand of research termed "ethnography of communication" which does not advocate the separation of language from culture but stressed that any such research must be done within the ambits of the culture of the language group and the individuals so investigated.

Sociological researches into personal naming are scanty. It involves an analysis of children's names given in Bulgaria before and after the fall of

communism (Kalkanova, 1999) to changes in names of Jewish and Italian immigrants to the USA (Watkins & London, 1994) to naming in middle-class families in the USA (Rossi, 1965) and to nicknaming in British schoolchildren (Morgan, Neil & Harre, 1979). Much of what has been done in sociological research into names and society has been traced to Lieberson who has done extensive writing on names and society (Lieberson, 1984; Lieberson & Mikelan, 1995; and Lieberson, 2000). However, current naming practices that are very reliable, the kinship terms employed within societies are known to have been gathered in the course of anthropological investigations into cultures.

Amazingly, notes taken on naming practices during observations of certain communities that are in anthropological publications have been sources of succour and the many cases not made public to society and researchers. Anthropological drive for the recording of names in societies has been of immense help in ethnographic approach to data collection much as an integral part of society. This has negative consequences on onomastics because of their poor background of the study, as they are qualified as researchers to document particularly their perception of the naming system but with very little interest in bringing into their studies, wider knowledge on personal naming (Stokhof, 1983). Sociological research is more of quantitative methods unlike the qualitative anthropological names- studies approach.

Heiko (2019); Dorothy (2018); Butler, *et al*, (2017); averred that the names of people are very significant and vary among cultures; as these names connote different meanings and things to different people and also seen as one of the human universals. As Mackenzie (2018); Akpabio (2003) observed, names function as a vehicle for identification and however stated that beyond personal identification, names communicate and give necessary information about the bearers; the status of the owner of the name in the family, the events around the birth, family/parental condition, aspirations, hopes, desires, financial station, links with deceased family members and the cult of ancestors and above all as a way of keeping and retrieving information.

Furthermore, the names of people could also be a veritable source for tracing the origin of a person. Besides these, a name could reveal the day a person was born. For example, market days which could be likened to such English names that people are associated within Africa (Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday) and even with months (January, February, May, June and so on) to reflect in English, the day or month the child came to this world. Names also show whether the child was born during harvest time, planting season or during times of war (Gowon was given to a male child born during the Nigerian civil war) while others reflect birth pattern and order of pregnancy and birth for a family and the trade or occupation of family members.

Olanike (2006) noted that names are beginning with the name of the deity the people worshipped. The name of a child given birth to in a family of oracle-diviners starts with the divination deity while a child given birth to in a royal family begins with the crown, and with the hunter, the family starts with hunting or hunter. Some names are divinely ordained (from heaven). Children give birth in strange or unusual conditions of birth are named as such. Twins, firstborn, last to survive, triplets, children with six fingers or toes, children

born with an umbilical cord tied around their waist or wrist and children that spent more than 9 months in the womb, are given special names. Olanike (2006) further identified names given to children as a reflection of the wishes and aspirations of their parents.

Similarly, a child born to die; crib-death is identified with infancy death in a repeated cycle of birth and transition via the same parents. The belief among these communities is that this phenomenon is linked with roaming spirits that dictate the span of lives of these children. Aruegodore (2005) noted that names in most communities in Nigeria particularly among Urhobo invoke spiritual or religious significance. Names could connote a contest to self or others while some names are given as a mark of celebration and appreciation while yet other names reflect honour and achievements. Roger (1995) also observed story-telling name types in Asia and Africa, which were at a time prevalent among the English during the 17th-century Puritan period but ceased to be popular or gone through a transition. He further alluded to the fact that most personal names were chosen from known words irrespective of culture. Over the years, however, naming practices, on the whole, seem to have evolved to include other considerations such as historical, religious association, notable observations and characteristics that underlie the pattern of life of the people giving the names.

Anthropologists, historians, folklorists, ethnologists, linguists and other scholars have noted that there is a nexus between naming patterns of a people and its migratory history; and a lot can be deduced about names from the knowledge of boundaries of ancient cities and countries. Similarly, because personal names constitute a large part of the lexicon of a language, it can therefore be a reliable source of data for the reconstruction of the migratory history of a people (Edevbie, 2005). In his research of place names in Pakistan, Siddiqi and Bastian (1981) pointed out that analysis of names does not only reflect the effects of several millennia of cultural succession in that area but also reveal regional settlement patterns of conquering kings and ethnic groups.

Nicolaisen (1975) identified a multi-layered sequence of names in an environment that could have emerged from periods of bilingualism and coded in cultural contact over time. This process he conjectured, could account for the occurrences of certain names. Akinnaso (1983); Mohame (1972); and Kolatch (1957) have provided names among the Yoruba, Basotho and Jewish peoples respectively. These include names derived from the life experiences of parents, names of animals and types of vegetation, theophoric names, names given to express a general opinion, emphasize conditions or experience of mankind, philosophical/proverbial statements, event names, toponymic, names given to child reincarnates, occupational names, patronymics, nicknames and what have you.

2.2 *Ethnography of the Study Area*

In this paper, three ethnic groups in Nigeria were chosen - Yoruba, Edo and Urhobo. The groups studied were diverse with which to generalize on social groupings in Nigeria. Edo and the Urhobo can also be categorized as immigrant communities judging from archival materials. Dioka (1997) classified the factors that promoted inter-group relations among various

Nigerian groups as trade, trade routes/markets, marriage, religion, war, diplomacy among others.

The Yoruba people lived in South-Western states of Nigeria numbering over 20 million people. Similarly, Smith (1976) noted that the Yoruba inhabited Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, Lagos and parts of Kwara and Delta states of Nigeria. They are also found in some parts of the Republics of Benin and Togo. The origin of Yoruba has been subjecting controversy among writers on Yoruba history, tradition and culture. However, Talbot an anthropologist, suggested that the Yoruba migrated from the North-East notably Egypt (Talbot, 1926).

Lucas a renowned Egyptologist identified several similarities between the Egyptian and Yoruba ways of life and asserted that the Yoruba migrated from Egypt through Sudan to their present abode (Lucas, 1948). Subaru Biobaku pointed at Meroe in Eastern Sudan while Johnson(1973) Arabiabecause of religious disputes. The Yoruba have two versions of their origin; the first is the tradition of autochthony which related that the Yoruba originated from Ile-Ife; that they did not migrate from anywhere. While the second version stated that Obatala was first sent by Olodumare to create the solid earth, where the people are found today; amongst other versions on migration relating to their origin.

The term Edo-speaking people can be as ambiguous as describing the same group of people as Benin people. While Benin serves as a territorial label (for example, Benin City, Benin kingdom, Benin Empire or Benin Division) both Benin and Edo serve as linguistic and ethnic labels for the inhabitants of the Benin territory (Andah, 1988). In this direction, it is used to describe a group of historically related languages and dialects spoken by various communities within and around Benin such as the Esan, Etsako, Bini, Owan and Akoko-Edo, Urhobo, Isoko and their related dialects. Omoregie (1988) noted that it can also refer exclusively to the language spoken by the Bini, who historically are the Edo people as distinct from others named earlier. Like several traditions of origin of various Nigerian peoples, the origin of Edo people is not certain. Edo history is a blend of oral tradition accounts, ethnography and archaeology (Andah, 1988).

The Urhobo are found mainly in the Delta state of Nigeria where they constitute the largest ethnic group (Otite, 2003). There is a paucity of information on the population of the Urhobos. Otite (2003) however noted that thousands of Urhobos are permanent or semi-permanent settlers outside their homeland while most of the settlements are largely nucleated towns and villages strung along motor roads. The historical narratives of the people have been hampered by the absence of archaeological and palynological activities, based on the excavation of their old socio-political and socio-economic sites that are replete in oral traditions (Otite, 1993). Besides various traditions of migration, there are four theories relating to their origin.

Firstly, the Urhobopeople are autochthonous in their present ecological niche (they came from nowhere); secondly, there is the theory of Urhobo origin from a common territory of the Edo-speaking peoples- a linguistic classification devised by Northcote Thomas (1910) to describe distantly similar peoples, who have improved the heterogeneous social and cultural organisation over

centuries of migration, fusion and adjustment to the environment in which they found themselves; thirdly is the tradition of origin from Ife territory.

Finally, is the narrative of origin which traced the Yoruba, Edo speaking peoples to Sudan and Egypt (Otite, 1993). Interestingly, the three studied ethnic groups (Yoruba, Edo and Urhobo) have comparable historical pathways such that history portends that the Edo people migrated from Yoruba while Urhobo people from Edo. The correspondence in origin and perhaps the culture of the ethnic groups is one of the reasons for the choice of the ethnography of the study area.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is rooted in socio-onomastics; a new area of study that borrows knowledge from different disciplines. Specifically, the study permitted some air of freedom in its method as cross-sectional exploratory research, which adopted comparative and historical strands and critically investigated the importance of names and naming practices in three (3) ethnic-groups in Nigeria (Yoruba, Edo and Urhobo). The cross-sectional exploratory design enabled the researcher to understand participants' perceptions and perspectives on significance, typology and naming practices in selected ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Nevertheless, some fundamental claims to support the choice of design are that it allows the researcher to obtain an inner understanding of participants views (Corbin & Strauss, 2008); engenders reality and event that maybe refuting in nature (Shaw, Dyson & Peel, 2008); and allows a wide range of data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A sample size of four hundred and fifty (450) interviewees were selected via simple random sampling with a purposive blend to ensure adequate representation of the population of the study.

The major instrument of data collection employed was the structured interview method alongside key informant interview for elderly, middleaged male and female, immigrants, indigenous individuals, traditional rulers, married women and divorcees, Christian and Muslim clergies. The key informant interview comprised of a list of specific questions which permitted the interviewees freedom to provide answers and in patterning the course of the interview.

The analysis of qualitative data begins with the editing and transcribing of the raw data obtained in the course of the interview. The transcripts from the key informant interview were coded appropriately; however, illustrative quotes, statements and ideas were formed and organized under different themes which provides a starting point for further interpretation of the results. Based on this, each theme was discussed and relevant explanatory quotes obtained to substantiate existing literature on names and naming practices. Data obtained were analysed using simple percentages and graphical illustrations.

4. RESULTS

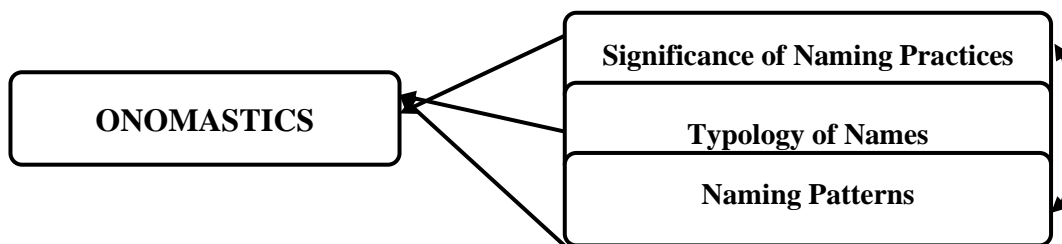


Fig.1: Understanding participants' perception of the significance of naming practices, typology of names and naming patterns

Majority of the participants shared their perception of Onomastics, particularly in areas of the significance of naming practices, typology of names and naming patterns among three ethnic-groups (Yoruba, Edo and Urhobo) in Nigeria. First, the study showed that naming practice is a common feature among the ethnic groups/communities studied. Also, great significance is attached to names as indicated by 69% of the respondents as well as 72% of the key informants. Furthermore, participants were asked about the typology of names in their ethnic-groups; the results are presented below:

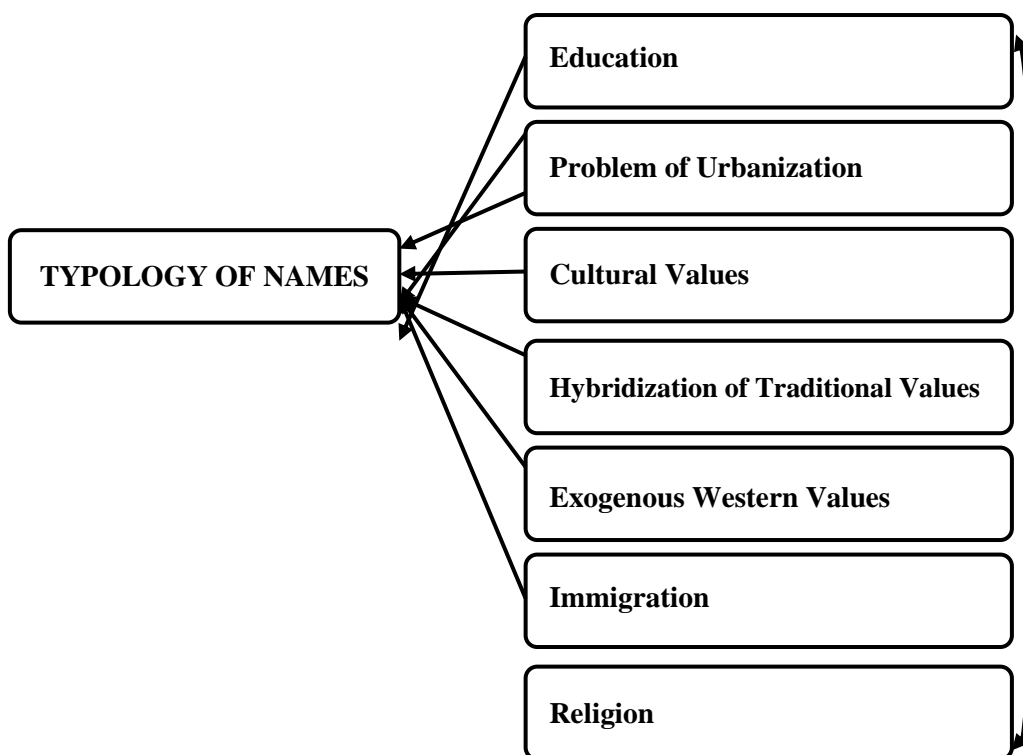


Fig.2: Understanding participants' perception of the typology of names and Dynamics that Shapes It

Second, the results showed that there are some dynamics which shapes the typology of names in the studied ethnic groups (see fig. 2); this was indicated by 75.2% of individual respondents and 63.2% by key informants while 22.4% and 17% respectively identified education and a mixture of traditional and western values as major dynamics for observed changes in the typology of names. Besides, 54.2% of the respondents reported that names are veritable modes for communication while 22.4% showed that people no longer want to be identified with traditional names but preferably with English names.

Furthermore, participants were asked about the naming patterns in their ethnic-groups; the results are presented as follows:

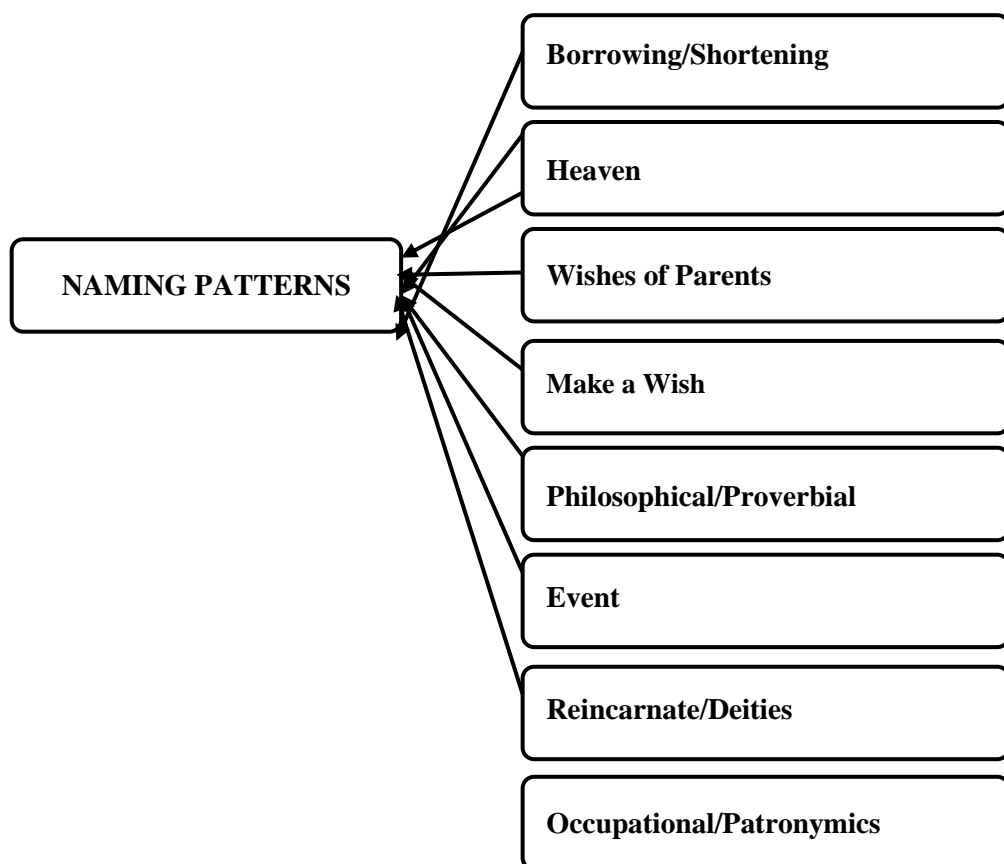


Fig.3: Understanding participants' perception of Naming Patterns

Third, the affirmation to name borrowing and innovations in name shortening as well as nicknames was by 12.4% and 10% respectively; 38.2% affirmation for 'names from heaven' and names reflecting the wishes of parents while 31% affirmed names designed to make a wish and other statements of hope. 15.4% reported philosophical/proverbial names as well as 8% for event names while 12.4% of respondents within the age brackets of the elderly and middle-aged, also reported names given to child reincarnate and deities. More so, occupational/patronymics names 15% of respondents, while 8.4% was from key informants; however, 8% of respondents and 5.4% of the key informants did not see any significance in names given to individuals, citing arbitrariness and superstition in such practices.

5. DISCUSSIONS

The study agrees with extant literature that personal names are a human universal with variance across cultures around the world, particularly in the study area. Edevbie (2005) noted that the structures of personal names are the products of common words, sentences and phrases with a diverse degree of linguistic complications. Considered as an interdependent system, language and culture in various parts of Africa and Asia are merely cultural and linguistic phenomena. Hence, apart from serving the purpose of individual identification in society, these names can also be tools for understanding the social-cultural forces that rule the existence of people in their communities. The observed variance cross-culturally notwithstanding, several names

investigated have been able to reveal the existence of some systematic cultural principles whose application can be predictable.

Prior researchers (Doob, 1966; Olurode&Olusanya, 1994 Akpabio, 2003; Aruegodore, 2005; Ogwezy, 2008; and Amadi, 2017) stressed that more than identification names communicate and give reliable information about their owners. Olurodeand Olusanya(1994) further stressed that names serve as links with the departed members of the family and a system of record-keeping. Similarly, Doob (1966) observed that names narrate the conditions surrounding a child's birth or appearance, expression of hope and parent`s disappointments. Oduyoye (1972) averred that choice of a name is a solemn perception of parents that an individual's name could portend psychological consequences on the person's behaviour and as such, care must be taken in identifying a person with a name. Apart from giving names based on religion, profession or status of a child's family, Oduyoye (1972) observed that names may also reflect the aspirations of parents for their children.

Oyelaran (1976) also identified attributive names that may express what the child is, as dictated by the child's 'fortune'. A child that emerges singularly that must be pampered, because the newborn is believed to possess some supernatural powers or believed to be perfect in all ramifications. Johnson (1969) also wrote extensively on attributive names and noted that unlike personal names, attributive names do not show the features of the family and therefore makes it impossible to get information on the family's status, profession and religion. Oyelaran (1976); Edevbie (2005) also identified the phenomenon of nicknames. Odebode (2014) stressed that names serve as means of expression and it is believed that names transcend their surface meanings as a noun- that which we call a place, an animal or a thing. Ogunwale (2012) pointed out that Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria believed that a good name is better than riches and names for them are message-laden. He further argued that bearers of names can manifest the traits inherent in their names. This point is arguably not true always, because respondents have identified names laden with wealth or affluence yet in real life, bearers of such names are very poor and living in penury.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the linguistic and cultural significance of names in the study area, names have meanings, display semantic content and a reflection of the life knowledge of the people. Besides being a source of identification, personal names serve collectively as a symbolic system for providing information with regards to individuals and their communities. Names from the study area according to the findings, are value-laden due to the stories they tell, describe events, objects, ideas and places in time and space about how the peoples of Yoruba, Edo and Urhobo conducted their lives in the past and presently. The perceived notion of arbitrariness of names is not shared by anthropologists and ethno-semanticists who related that naming of plants and certain categories of animals are governed by certain principles.

In the study area, names have served over the years as an effective means of communication. From the African traditional religion, names given to children are predicated on their cultural beliefs and association with specific cult groups or deities worshipped by the family. Such names, therefore, are tokens of

appreciation and dedication. The onerous tasks of giving names to the newborn are often, reserved for grandparents or close older relatives. Picking of a name is a major social function for every Urhobo family but not with much fanfare or festive ceremonies in other ethnic groups such as Edo and Yoruba in Southern Nigeria. Nevertheless, naming is an emotional, mental, linguistic affair which is occasioned by a lot of souls searching.

Findings of the study revealed that names are still significant and considered a vital social activity of the ethnic groups studied and as such picking a name for a child demands a careful inward-looking. Given the findings, the study recommended that proper understanding of the collective roles of names as a symbolic system in a culture demands knowing the past, classificatory notes, methods of obtaining information from sources, present manifestations of names and consequences on man's activities and his psyche.

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