African anthroponyms: Sociolinguistic currents and anthropological reflections

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1 Introduction

Names and naming traditions are ubiquitous cultural practices that herald the beginning of bearers as social beings. In the African socio-historical context, anthroponymic systems provide prominent sites for the interaction between language, culture and society. African names have age-long ideological rootedness in culture and institutions; they are contextualized as social action and practices only within the culture in which they are embedded (Mensah, 2017). This position corroborates the claim by Haviland, Prins and McBride (2013), who state that personal names mark the social transition of a child from a state of nature to a state of culture. Gertz (1973:363) captures it more aptly when he argues that naming is an act of converting ‘anybodies into somebodies’. This position reveals that naming is one of the important symbolic resources in which an African society can express its culture, and it is through name bestowal that history can begin to gather around the name-bearer (Bodenhorn and vom Bruck, 2006). Names in this context confer ideologies of individualism, enact social personality and negotiate cultural identity. African names are, therefore, crucial cultural capital that reveal essential information which transmits relevant African
ontological and epistemological values. Personal names can be described as a ‘cultural universal’ (Alford, 1988:2) which project beliefs, norms, attitudes, emotions and mores that can facilitate a broader understanding of Africa and its people. With names, personal identity and collective belonging are discursively constructed from varied ideological bents. These names and naming practices interface with every facet of African life – environment, occupation, geography, spirituality, economy, politics, family and conflict – in the quest for identity and authenticity and in the preservation of linguistic and social heritage.

In the Western tradition, proper nouns or personal names are believed to not have sense or meaning (Searle, 1958; Dixon, 1964; Lyons, 1977; Ryan, 1981; Suzman, 1994) given that what they represent is unique and individuating. Personal names usually only identify or recognize the name-bearer; thus, they refer to one and only one object. In other words, Western names are existential elements with no definite description and signification. However, in the African cultural context, personal names do not fit into this stereotyped semantic categorization because they have both sense and referents. Carlson (2004) maintains that such names are expressive and refer directly to their referents, and there is no mediating sense or meaning which is employed to necessarily determine reference. The interpretation of African names is not extremely literal or semantic in content but embodies a wide range of peculiarities that need to be broadly contextualized and understood from social, religious, cultural and pragmatic perspectives (Mensah, 2015). In this way, the import of African names is that they reflect and capture cultural variables such as kinship, gender relations, class, cosmology, personal tastes and preferences, along with indexing relationships that define socio-cultural functions and meaning. African personal names, therefore, are cultural symbols that represent experiences, conflicts or situations with deep historical resonances. These names are a body of knowledge that reflect the depth and breadth of African culture; language, history, philosophy, spirituality and worldview. African names also mirror the patterns of a society’s cultural and social organization and are pointers to a range of people and circumstances that are relevant at the time of the child’s birth (Suzman, 1994). In Africa, personal names are communicative devices that tell stories about historic events, familial conflicts and the struggle with supernatural powers which are central to the notions of personhood and self-definition. African names are symbolic resources for communicating name-givers’ experiences, expectations and perceptions. They have expressive communicative content which can also be a reflection of social tension and struggle. Their use in social interaction represents cultural customs and family traditions.
Importantly, African personal names have been identified as prominent sites to reflect on and interpret emotions, where a name can stand for its bearer and synecdochally epitomizes the essence of his or her being. African names appear to inform how their bearers act, think and feel, and how others react and respond towards them. In this way, African personal names are also significant entry points into African cosmology and cosmogony. African names can also function as a medium of spiritual communication, particularly with ancestors and underworld forces (Obeng, 1998; Doyle, 2008; Mensah, 2015; Sagna and Bassène, 2016). This is captured by Handler and Jacoby’s (1996:686) claim that ‘ritually significant information’ is coded in personal names. In this way, names provide a renewed sense of security to its bearers and sustain transition and mobility that connects the living with the dead, who are the source of tribal tradition and stability.

Research into African anthroponyms over the years has offered intriguing insights into contemporary issues in names’ scholarship from broad interdisciplinary perspectives, and investigated the relevant themes and resonances in naming ‘to see how differently societies conceptualize personal identity’ (Alford, 1988:51). However, sociolinguistic and anthropological investigations of African names are sparse in the onomastic literature. This Special Issue aims to fill this conceptual gap and extend the frontiers of knowledge by renewing sociolinguistic and anthropological interest in African names’ research, particularly within the increasing contemporary globalized culture where there is an apparent decline in cultural identity among Africans. The papers included in this Special Issue examine African names from sociolinguistic and anthropological trajectories, linking the discussions on convergent paths from different methodological, conceptual and theoretical backgrounds. We are pleased to present this Special Issue which engages exciting new dimensions of African names’ research with innovative insights and approaches.

2 African names and naming practices: A transhistoric trajectory

Certain events and activities in the course of history have tended to erase or subjugate African names and identities. Of particular interest is the effect of the slave trade, colonization and the advent of new religions in the African naming enterprise. Asante (1995:71) records that there was a forceful attempt to eradicate any trace of African culture during the transatlantic slave trade era, and among the initial forms of this eradication programme were African names. African naming procedures were torn from the social and ritual context that existed in Africa (Handler and Jacoby, 1996:689). The immediacy of this eradication can be seen
in that African (slaves) names were changed before they disembarked from the slave ships, and they were punished severely if caught speaking their own languages. Assigning new names to African slaves, or even leaving them nameless, was an attempt by the colonisers to obliterate African collective memories and identities; one of many ways in which Africans were subjugated and forced into perpetual servitude (Fitzpatrick, 2012). In this way, renaming and name defilement became tools for oppression and suppression. Mphande (2006) illustrates how African-Americans have retained and modified their names and even adapted them to their slavery experience. He maintains that they invoke a culture of resistance which involves a process of renaming themselves, constantly reverting back to their African roots, cultural forms and spirituality, thus reasserting and reaffirming their humanity in a hostile world. This naming pattern is propelled by the pain of the slavery experience. In the same vein, Ngubane and Thabethe (2013) show how Africans attempt to reclaim their names in the post-apartheid dispensation in South Africa, as a way of redefining and affirming their identity and to promote their African heritage and history. The dominant hegemonic political structure in South Africa under apartheid regimes had compelled many Africans to change their names so as to be relevant or acceptable in the prevailing socio-political system. With the abolition of apartheid, Africans found a compelling need to reassert their African cultural roots. This demonstrates the power of naming as subject to alteration and adaptation in response to political power, control and annihilation which has now conferred contested identities on Africans.

The experience of colonialism has had its concomitant negative impact on the African naming enterprise. Johnson (1921) aptly documents how the colonial British government in Sierra Leone abolished native names wholesale, considering them heathenish, and substituted European names. This was one of the outputs of the forced assimilation policy of the British Colonial Government (Bailey and Lie, 2013). Similarly, Mensah (2009) reveals how the British administrators in Old Calabar, Nigeria refused to accept and recognize indigenous Efik names in official government circles. Rather, they resorted to anglicizing and imposing English versions on the bearers of the indigenous names. For instance, names like Okon, Orok and Abasi were changed to Hogan, Duke and Bassey respectively. These names were, however, reclaimed in the course of time. The adoption of Christianity and Islam in Africa has also contributed to the suppression of African names and identities. Most African names have been condemned as fetishist, heathen or diabolical (Betiang, this volume), hence the need for name change as a condition of accepting a new faith becomes compelling in order to define a new spiritual path that fits the essential self (Mensah,
forthcoming). According to Rahman (2015:36), ‘conversion to a religion generally entails a change of name’, and therefore this widespread practice is accountable for the loss of African indigenous names in most parts of the continent that have undergone early evangelization. Commonly, religious authorities compel their adherents or converts to change their names as a contemporary response to new religious references, in addition to being used as a tool for reclaiming faith. Names are used to index social and spiritual transformations of the individual. This state of affairs reflects the socio-religious influence in the naming system of a people, and a transformation of custom which endangers traditional anthroponymic praxis.

3 African anthroponyms in contemporary sociolinguistic and anthropological literature

Investigations and documentation of African anthroponymic practices have provided excellent and multiple insights into a broader understanding of the African people. Lynch (2016) avers that names and naming provide the structures and nuances of the way we imagine and understand the world, and are essential practical rituals of everyday life (Althusser, 1971). Contemporary sociolinguistic and anthropological research on African names has provided acuity into and defined how anthroponyms are an interface between the social and cultural aspects of African life. The relevance of personal names in language planning, language shift, language ideology, language change and the development of new Englishes has been highlighted in the literature (Yanga, 1978; Makoni, Makoni and Mashiri, 2007). Names are conventional signs, hence; they help to preserve cultural identity and indigenous linguistic heritage. African names are highly important for preserving and maintaining indigenous languages whereby the discontinuity of these names could forewarn the imminence of their languages’ endangerment or ultimate extinction. Continued cultural transmission of names from one generation to another could be a key intervention strategy towards revitalization and conservation of threatened languages, given that languages die alongside the sociological and cultural information that is also embedded in the naming practices of their speakers. Names also have deep historical significance. The naming pattern of any society, according to Ansa and Okon (2014), generally reflects the linguistic behaviour of people, and names are not just arbitrary labels of identification; they are imbued with the socio-cultural and geo-political histories of the bearers or the bearing community. They therefore act as historical records or landmarks which are passed on from one generation to another. Among the Efut people of Southern Cross River State, South-eastern Nigeria, whose
language and culture has been consumed by the dominate neighbouring language, Efik, personal names and street names are the only resources left to which the community can reclaim or associate with their community’s identity.

African names also have communicative attributes (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 2000; Mensah and Mekamgoum, 2017) which aid in the composition of dirge, drum language, and praise poetry, and tell stories about past events, experiences and circumstances of birth. Pilcher (2016) argues that names serve to mark unique individuality as well as family rootedness. Beyond these, they offer information on significant historical events which are indicative of family or communal festivals, tensions, struggles or crises. In this way, names function as essential memory cues to perpetuate the continuity of such activities. Naming is also used to facilitate intercultural communication. For example, there is greater cross-cultural affinity with speakers of Yoruba in Nigeria, Benin Republic and Togo who also bear similar Yoruba names. In other cases, people may choose alternative or surrogate names based on the naming practice of a prevailing culture (Oyetade, 1995). This can help to promote intercultural communication, friendship and intimacy. In this way, names become resources for bi/multilingualism and biculturalism (Li, 1997).

The role of names in attributing gender identity (Pilcher, 2017) is a unique feature of African anthroponyms as found in Akan, Igbo, Ibibio and Efik cultures among others. Certain categories of names, such as birthday names, order of birth names and market day names are usually grammaticalized in terms of gender (Essien, 2000). These names are bestowed automatically depending on how the bearer fits into the existing stereotyped norm. Aygekum (2006:213) maintains that among the Akan, it is believed that the particular day a child is born may affect his or her behaviour, fate and future. Essien (2001:124) similarly argues that such names can influence the future, well-being, personality and character of the bearer, thus naming generally can be quite an exacting mental or emotional exercise. This category of names also assists in the socialization process of children. Male and female children become aware of their stereotype roles in the family and society by virtue of their gender. This usually results in the fusion of names, bodies and identities, or what Pilcher (2016:764) calls ‘embodied named identity’. Another common feature of African naming patterns is degenderization, that is, where male and female members of the society share the same first names. Such names cannot be distinguished on the basis of gender. In certain cultures, however, affixation processes are used to signal the gender category of name-bearers.

It is common knowledge that traditional name-giving practices in Africa have decreased (Suzman, 1994) and continue to do so. The transformation of naming practices is directly caused by the impact of religion, politics, modernization and
globalization. The challenge, therefore, becomes compelling for name scholars, parents, custodians of culture and community members to strive to reclaim their cultural citizenship and navigate their sense of belonging through using established naming practices. This collection, therefore, explores some of the vast cultural knowledge which is embedded in African names and offers a range of sociolinguistic and anthropological understandings of African anthroponyms that will be a useful resource for future research.

4 A synopsis of this volume

Focusing on East Africa, Luke Fleming, Alice Mitchell and Isabelle Ribot (‘In the name of the father-in-law: Pastoralism, patriarchy and the sociolinguistic prehistory of eastern and southern Africa’) reveal the name-avoidance strategies of the daughter-in-law register of Datooga, a Southern Nilotic, Nilo-Saharan language community of Tanzania. The discussion of the sociocultural significance of patrilineal descent of the Datooga allows us to understand the motivation behind this specific name-avoidance register. This discussion demonstrates that this register involves avoidance of not only the names of in-laws, but also the lexical roots and near-homophones of these names. Contextualizing this practice within the broader discussion of in-law avoidance in Africa, the authors show us how these are commonly gendered and generationally stratified. In considering the genesis of these specific avoidance registers in eastern and southern African languages, the authors investigate the registers’ historical roots and trace their origin to East Africa. With further considerations of archaeological, ethnological, sociolinguistic and genetic lines of evidence, the authors suggest that the spread of pastoralism can be correlated with the diffusion of these specific anthroponymic registers, leading to the explanation for their manifestation in these particular regions of Africa. A socio-pragmatic approach to naming practices amongst the Kabye of Northern Togo, West Africa is the focus of Atoma Batoma’s paper (‘Onomastic strategies: A pragmatic approach to the use of personal names among the Kabye of Northern Togo’). As in many other African languages, Kabye names have meaning beyond their referential function, and the social context which motivates the bestowal and use of names in a community may be obscured to strangers in their speech community. This paper approaches Kabye naming practices from a behaviour-motivated perspective, whereby Batoma proposes that there are three strategies by which interpellators (name-givers or name-users) attempt to influence the behaviour of a name-bearer: the choice of anthroponym; the amplification of the meaning of the anthroponym; and the intonation of the anthroponym which is used as a signal of
the interpellator’s state of mind. This paper shows us how these strategies assist with reinforcing the efficacy of the communicative use and function of Kabye anthroponyms, and how it is important to understand names as communicative verbal acts in themselves.

Taking an ethnopragmatic approach to naming practices amongst the Tiv in Nigeria, the study by Eyo Mensah, Kirsty Rowan, Akase Tiav and Jighjigh Ishima (‘Aspects of traditional Tiv naming practices: A sociocultural account’) provides a culture-internal perspective on the interpretation of Tiv anthroponyms. Tiv naming practices are ‘cultural scripts’ through which an insight can be acquired into the importance of certain cultural traditions, socio-cultural concerns and worldview of this community of speakers. For instance, the authors show how Tiv name-givers’ experiences are encoded in their choices and bestowal of names as a form of guarantee against continuity of suffering in the name-bearer, whether physical, material or spiritual, or as a form of supplication. The authors assert that Tiv names are also a form of ‘indigenous oral education’, whereby naming practices are an important device for the transmission of cultural and historical knowledge. Considering anthroponyms from the culture-internal angle allows the authors to reveal to us not only the socio-cultural environment of the Tiv community but also their lived experiences. Staying with an ethnopragmatic approach, Eniola Boluwaduro examines identity construction in Ibibio (southern Nigeria) personal names and their underlying ideologies (‘Ideology and identity construction in Ibibio personal names’). The paper foregrounds the perception of personal names from the name-bearers’ perspective. Name-bearers negotiate their individual identity through activating their subjective beliefs about their names, while also transferring these beliefs to their lived experiences. The study also uncovers that in certain cases, name-bearers are disconnected from the symbolic meaning of their names through limited knowledge or experience of the cultural background or that their names lack guidance for their lived experience as they capture the name-givers lived experience instead. For these Ibibio name-bearers, their names are subjectively redundant for symbolic significance or guidance. The author considers the fundamental notion that name-bearers are essentially under an imposed identity construction from name-givers which they have to ‘live-up’ to.

A typology of traditional Yoruba (Nigeria) naming practices is presented in Gbenga Fakuade, Joseph Friday-Otun and Hezekiah Adeosun’s study (‘Yoruba personal naming system: Traditions, patterns and practices’). The authors’ study is motivated by their observation that many of these naming practices are endangered due to various factors within the community. Eliciting information from respondents on name-givers’ choices, the authors allow us to understand the impact of changes that traditional birthing circumstances have had on the
continuity of Yoruba traditional naming practices. As many names relate to the family, home or birth of the name-bearer, disruptions to traditions in these contexts consequently affects naming practices. We are presented with evidence showing this disruption to Yoruba naming practices which are both unary and sentential in their structure.

Motivated to disprove the general notion that names are not translatable because they have no meaning beyond their referential function, the translatability of African anthroponyms is the focus of Samson Nzuanke and Zana Akpagu’s study (‘Onomastics and translation: The case of Bette-English translation of death-related names’). Presenting data from Bette (Niger-Congo, Nigeria) death-related names, the authors show that translatability can be achieved through utilizing linguistic, interpretative and semiotic approaches. Throughout the analysis and translation proposals presented in the paper, we are informed of the rich sociocultural meanings behind Bette death-related names, in particular the psycho-spiritual meaning and functions of these particular anthroponyms. Bette death-related names address the spiritual realm as implorations for an opportunity to life; they can take the form of epigrams, statements, declarations or apostrophes which, through the authors’ analyses, can convey their meaning to speakers outside of this community through their translation into other languages such as English.

The theme of death-related names is also discussed in the paper by Jonas Akung and Oshega Abang (‘I cannot baptize Satan: The communicative import of Mbube death-prevention names’). Herein we find a sociopragmatic investigation of death-prevention names of the Mbube, Nigeria. The Mbube’s belief in reincarnation is discussed as a primary factor in motivating the selection and bestowal of names. Death-prevention names are also examined as being appeals to the spirit world for the protection of the name-bearer. Through the discussion and presentation of data in this study, we are informed of the rich spiritual beliefs of the Mbube people, including how derogative names are bestowed as a mechanism to protect the name-bearer from ethereal forces by not attracting attention. Death-prevention names are not only significant communicative devices for and between the community’s members, but are also a form of communication between the physical and spiritual worlds of the Mbube.

Male praise names of the Awgba Igbo of Nigeria are presented and discussed in Patience Solomon-Etefa and Amaka Ideh’s paper (‘Naming and social identity: A case study of male praise names in Awgbu Igbo’). Praise names form one category of names amongst many that are bestowed upon a name-bearer within this community. The authors show us how these names can be explained as being of dual function: creating or maintaining social identity whilst also being
instructional. We are informed of how it is the praise name which is the most preferred name for reference and address for an Awgba Igbo member. In this community, it is the praise names which have specific social importance, as any social interaction requires the use of the praise name foremost. The authors’ focus on male praise names permits us an insight into the gendered meaning of these names, which are typically associated with strength and power, wealth and kingship. The authors show us that these specific categories of names are an interactional strategy for the discursive and ideological construction of social identity.

Itani Peter Mandende, Mzwamadoda Phillip Cekiso, and Christopher Rwodzi (‘Personal names as communicative tools in Tshivenđa: Cultural-historical perspectives’) explore how the Tshivenđa naming system is used as a communicative tool reflecting the lived experience, cultural values and beliefs of the Vhavenda of South Africa. The Vhavenda naming practice is considered, by the authors, as a form of information transmission by the name-givers to society at large, whether living or deceased, as in the case of appeals to forebears. We find that Tshivenđa names are a form of verbal documentation which transmit information of historical events within this community, and therefore act as oral record-keeping. Personal names are living archives which assist with the continuity of Vhavenda socio-cultural and historical knowledge.

Liwhu Betiang (‘Naming and the reconstruction of female identity in Bette-Obudu’) approaches naming practices bestowed upon female Bette (Nigeria) children from a critical ethnographic perspective. The author seeks to investigate the appropriateness, or not, of naming-bestowal traditions in the 21st century on the Bette girl-woman. Presenting the theoretical argument that there is a connection between the function of a Bette name and how this bestows a preordained or self-fulfilling prophecy on the Bette girl-woman, Betiang finds that there are discordances in the lived experience of name-bearers. The Bette girl-woman is in a position whereby she either deviates from the identity constructed by her name or conforms to the identity. For the author, this is a restrictive practice which hinders the formation of multiple identities needed in the postmodern 21st century by the Bette girl-woman.

The referential transformation of English titles, kinship terms and occupations (or non-names) into Akan (Ghana) is the focus of Yaw Sekyi-Baidoo’s study (‘English “non-name” address forms in the non-native sociolinguistic context: The case study of the Akan of Ghana’). While Akan has traditional names, their replacement by the use of English titles and other non-names is primarily a reflection of the colonial history of Ghana and the subjective valorization of English terms. However, within the Akan sociolinguistic context, these English non-names become subject to new meanings in their transformation as address
terms. The author’s study reveals to us the complex nature of Akan use of these borrowed forms, and he also details how the intricate interplay of social status, age, deference and politeness in Akan are involved in the correct usage of these loaned forms as dynamic address terms.

The various studies on African anthroponyms presented herein also form an important and specific collection of language documentation in Africa. At a time when many of the world’s languages are undergoing shift, particularly in Africa, these papers highlight that even within those languages which may appear ‘safe’, there exists endangerment such as in their traditional naming practices. These papers also contribute to identifying the causes of this lexical shift, which are perhaps specific to certain communities of speakers, while at the same time documenting these traditional naming practices. The importance of anthroponyms has been demonstrated by all our contributors who have shown, through multiple approaches, that African anthroponyms reveal so much to us about distinct communities of speakers’ knowledge, perception and worldview. Assuredly, anthroponyms, within an African context, can also be considered as crucial carriers of a community’s living heritage.

Notes
1. We regret the passing of Dr. Oshega Abang who sadly departed this life during the course of co-preparing his manuscript for this Special Issue.

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