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Death is the cause of my predicament: A cross-cultural study of death-related personal names in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the motivations, beliefs, and attitudes toward death-related names in some onomastic traditions in Nigeria: Ibibio, Igbo (south-east), and Owe (mid-west). The study is anchored theoretically on the ethnopragmatic framework which accounts for the locally interpretable meaning of discourse practices in terms of values and beliefs within particular cultural contexts. Drawing on ethnographic qualitative data sourced through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, I argue that death-related names are based on varied cultural scripts that communicate many nuances of meaning grounded in lived experiences of name-givers. The article concludes that death-related names have cultural semantics that are shared cross-linguistically: to acknowledge the inevitability and unpredictability of death; to admit the existence of superior forces that control the affairs of human beings and to question the temporality of life. These names, therefore, serve as consolatory sites for the expression of grief, tension, and the rebuilding of identity.

Contemporary and historical perspectives on the concept of death have approached the phenomenon from a wide range of dimensions: biological, social, and religio-philosophical. Biologically, death is irreversible cessation of organismic functioning of the human body. It entails that every life function ends at the time of death. Socially, death necessitates the loss of personhood and identity which corroborates the position that a person cannot have a legitimate claim to ownership in the future (Strawson, 2017), and from the religio-philosophical account, a human being is dead upon the separation of the soul from the physical body (Rasekh & Ayati, 2007). Death marks the transition from the physical realm to the ancestral realm. Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata (2014) maintain that such a transition signifies a spiritual connection between the visible (physical) and the invisible (spiritual) worlds. The death of a beloved one is often marked as a moment of loss and grief which is enveloped in a state of hopelessness and helplessness. The sense of grief may be overwhelming and may trigger negative emotions such as sadness, anger and shock. Every society has different responses to death in terms of established customs, rituals, or traditions (Strawson, 2017). These responses include care for the

body, funeral practices, interment as well as the afterlife.

In some cultural contexts in Africa, discourses of death are considered to be highly taboo subjects as a result of the apparent fear of death and the sacredness with which it is shrouded. This justifies why the experience of death is often talked about using varied literary and discursive devices like metaphor (e.g., embarking on a journey or sleeping), and proverbs (visiting one's ancestors). Other verbal strategies deployed to reference death include humor (e.g., he/she is resting) and poetry (Tagore, 2012). These linguistic communicators are used to convey temporary separation of the deceased with the bereaved. They make the experience of death much more tolerable to the human consciousness and enable the bereaved to come to terms with the loss, and to be able to handle the consequences of the permanent loss. In some cultural settings, the way the physical remains of the dead is interred and the accompanying rituals determine its status in the afterlife. For instance, Mensah (2015) argues that among the Ibibio in south-eastern Nigeria, death is not conceptualized as the end of life but the beginning of a fresh embodiment in another realm, and this change in condition

is expressed through ancestor veneration. Put together, dead ancestors retain a social presence in the lives of the living (Graham, 2016). Ancestors live and communicate with their families after their physical death and are believed to be sources of tribal traditions and stability. They provide the bridge and continuity between the living (present) and the dead (past) (Mensah et al., 2020). They also mediate between the living and the Supreme God, and are key components in the maintenance of jural authority, land tenure systems and segmentary social organization (McCall, 1995). Community members whose lives were deemed to have been dignified and acceptable, and who died from natural causes, and were given befitting burials were conferred the status of ancestors, as in the case of Ibibio (Mensah, 2015). This evidence reveals that death has immense social, emotional, and spiritual resonances, and their applicability and articulation depend on the subjective meaning each society ascribes to death.

Personal names are tools of communication in most traditional societies. Ansu-Kyeremeh (2000) maintains that there is no limit to the kind of information that can be embedded in personal names. Extant literature in onomastic science has demonstrated the interdisciplinary nature of the study of personal names (anthroponymy) and the kind of information that can be conveyed by names. This has considerably covered many domains of knowledge depending on each field's disciplinary impulses and peculiarities. Names are the most important anchors of personal identity that define how human beings see themselves and how others perceive them. They help bearers to make social connections, build relationships and maintain membership of a particular community of practice (Aboh et al., 2023; Mensah, 2023; Suzman, 1994). Naming processes, therefore, play important roles in authenticating one's membership of society. Haviland et al. (2013) describe such an inclusion as a transition from a state of nature to a state of culture, and Geertz (1973) captures it more aptly as a transformation from "anybodies" into "somebodies." These positions confirm the fact that names provide the launch pad to acknowledge the existence of an individual; reflect cultural norms and beliefs and offer the most noticeable social expression of oneself. In some African contexts, beyond the identity construction value of personal names, they can be sites for navigating the impact of death and dialogue with underworld forces.

There is a closely-knitted relationship between naming and cultural beliefs and traditions pertaining

to death. For instance, Mensah et al. (2020) report that among the Okoyong community in South-eastern Nigeria, children are named after living or dead ancestors as a way of renewing the spiritual energy between the living and the death; to strengthen paternity and to connect the bearers with their dead or living ancestors. The name bearer is believed to possess certain attributes of his or her namesake, and is accorded the same level of respect as the namesake. This is why children are mainly revered as ancestors in the Kiong cultural tradition. There have been few studies on death-prevention names in the African cultural contexts such as among the Akan of Ghana (Obeng, 1998), Ibibio of Nigeria (Mensah, 2015; Mensah & Offong, 2013), Mbube in South-eastern Nigeria (Akung & Abang, 2019), and Karanga in Zimbabwe (Mamvura, 2021), where it is broadly established that names are believed to counteract the power of spiritual forces who are responsible for infant mortality. In this respect, such names are said to be a reaction to negative emotions like fear and grief, and in the construction of layers of sociocultural meanings. Other extant literature on death-related names like Makondo's (2007) study of the Shona people of Zimbabwe contend that such names are loaded with evaluations and beliefs surrounding death, and reveal the transitory and impermanent nature of life. The author maintains that death-inspired names reflect experiences of name givers, and accentuate the belief that previous incidences of death were not natural. However, Doyle (2008) argues that death-related names among the Bunyoro in Western Uganda is a reflection of changing attitudes toward mortality, and Nzewi (2001) offers an alternative medical explanation for the causes of death beyond the dominant belief of supernatural forces. Nzewi (2001) maintains that death-related names in Igboland, South-eastern Nigeria were prevalent in families of children described as malevolent *Ógbánjé* who are chronically ill and engaging in repeated cycles of birth, death and reincarnation. The author proved that based on family history and child mortality, there was a relationship between cultural description of malevolent *Ógbánjé* and symptoms of sickle cell disease. In other words, symptomology and early mortality experience are related to sickle cell disease. Nzewi (2001) concludes that there is strong cultural resistance among the Igbo to this medicalized causes of child mortality.

In this study, I aim to investigate the socio-cultural motivations of death-related names from a cross-cultural perspective taking into account their socio-onomastic significance and the subjective meanings

they encode in three cultural traditions in Nigeria: Ibibio, Igbo (south-east), and Owe (Yoruba) (mid-west) to see the patterns that will emerge; the extent of their divergence and convergence as well as what these names reveal about cultural attitudes to life and death. The study intends to unpack the social, cultural and individual responses to death as are exemplified in death-related naming practices, and increase understanding of indigenous processes of constructing identity through nuanced experiences of and reaction to death.

Theoretical framework

In this study, I adopt the principles and methods of ethnopragsmatics to drive the analysis and interpretation of data. Ethnopragsmatics is an approach to the study of meaning in language. It is concerned with the role played by cultural norms, values, attitudes, and emotions in local discourse convention. Goddard (2006) maintains that ethnopragsmatics identifies a threefold alignment of objectives, methodological tools, and evidence based. The key objectives deal with culture-internal speech practices, and describe the pattern of linguistic behavior of speakers in a way that is sensible to a particular community of practice. This position firmly articulates Goddard and Ye's (2015) view of ethnopragsmatics as "an approach to language in use that sees culture as playing a central explanatory role, and at the same time opens the way for links to be drawn between language and other cultural phenomenon" (p. 66). The methodological tools is defined in terms of decomposing cultural notions and representing cultural norms in simple meaning shared by variety of languages. The methodological framework of ethnopragsmatics is an offshoot of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) developed by Wierzbicka (1996) which reduces the meaning of all lexica into a restricted set of semantic primes. The primes are universal because they encode the same translatable meaning in all languages and cannot be defined using other words. Put together, they facilitate the analysis of linguistic data which are cross-translatable, non-Anglo-centric, clear, and intelligible to people without formal linguistic training.

Significantly, ethnopragsmatic principles are based on linguistic evidence. Goddard and Ye (2015) argue that such evidence includes usage patterns elicited through corpus techniques, interactional routine, and language-specific lexicogrammatical constructions among others. They contend that language usage is an index of routine way of thinking that allows access

into insider perspective. From the nuanced analytical frame of ethnopragsmatics, it is evident that it articulates a closer relationship between language and culture, taking into perspective patterns of speaking, culture-internal practices and norms that will be accessible to both cultural insiders and outsiders. Many studies in African anthroponyms have adopted the ethnopragsmatic paradigm to frame their analysis and discussion. These include Ehineni (2019), Mamvura (2021), Benson (2006) and Mensah (2015) among others. In these studies, it was established that the meaning of some African names "do not rely on interpretations that are extremely literal or semantic in content. They embody cultural peculiarities that need to be properly understood from both ethnolinguistic and pragmatic perspectives" (Mensah, 2015, p. 119). Broadly speaking, ethnopragsmatic methods have rich explanatory and descriptive tools to unpack culture-internal meanings of names in a way that makes sense to both cultural insiders and outsiders.

Methods

Sampling

This study adopts the qualitative ethnographic approach to data collection, analysis and discussion. Data for this study were collected during eight months fieldwork exercises between June 2022 and February 2023 in Offot (Akwa Ibom State), Mbaise (Imo State) in south-east, and Kabba (Kogi State) in mid-west Nigeria that are indigenous to the Ibibio, Igbo, and Owe people respectively. The choice of these cultural areas was hinged on the prevailing culture of bestowing this unique set of (death-related) names on children in spite of the over-bearing influence of Pentecostal Christianity which tends to condemn the practice. Ten participants were recruited in each study area. Their deep knowledge of their cultures' naming practices and willingness to participate in the research were some of the inclusion criteria. The exclusion criteria were the inability to provide accurate data and failure to honor appointments for interviews. Nine potential participants were excluded from the research in the three study areas. Participants' status as name-givers, bearers and users were also considered as factors in their selection as participants. They were purposively selected by research assistants who were members of the respective communities and who acted as liaisons between the participants and the researcher. The research assistants were all university graduates who have been formally trained in ethnographic field methods. The purpose of the research

was revealed to all participants to enlist their support and cooperation. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants such as gender, age, education, occupation, and religion were documented because some of these variables have impacted on the bestowal of death-related personal names (see Table 1). Informed consent was obtained from all participants in writing for interviews, observations and recording. Consent was also given for the publication of the data generated from the participants. Ethical approval was granted by the Directorate of Research and Development, University of Calabar, Nigeria.

Procedure and data collection

Two ethnographic methods were employed in the data collection orientation: participant observations and semi-structured interviews. The motivations for the two methods were to strengthen the validity of the outcome of the research and to allow access to different layers of interpretations of the researched phenomenon. Participant observation allowed access to participants' natural environment where I adopted the position of a passive participants and an objective observer. I was also actively engaged in activities of the research participants involving the use of names. I participated in three child-naming ceremonies, and libation rituals where names of people were

mentioned and in the dedication of farmlands where many names (of ancestors) were also celebrated. This approach enabled me to integrate in the culture and environment of the participants and to have firsthand experience of how names were given and used in the study's cultural areas. It also afforded me an opportunity to study participants in greater details and to gain access to relevant information that would ordinarily not be accessible to a cultural outsider. Semi-structured interviews allowed access to open speaking aimed to gather the real world experience of participants with respect to the interpretation of meaning of the studied phenomenon (Kvale, 1983). A male researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants. The interviews took place in participants' homes, farms, market stalls and town halls sometimes with the presence of nonparticipants. This interview approach enabled participants to explain in some depth the functions of names in their cultures more broadly and the motivations for death-related names in particular. Questions were also asked about how people position themselves in relation to death through these names, and what this naming regime reveals about cultural attitudes to death. During these interview sessions, questions were asked about the sources of these names; and the social, and cultural factors that influence the choice of names. The cultural significance and ethnopragmatic import of this

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of research participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Religion
Akpan	M	56	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Farming	Christianity
Ibangha	M	64	No formal education	Carpentry	Christianity
Moses	M	70	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Blacksmithing	Christianity
Bassey	F	66	Nigerian Certificate of Education	Teaching	Christianity
Obot	M	45	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Fishing	Christianity
Usen	M	47	First School Leaving Certificate	Trading	Christianity
Mfreke	M	21	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Student	Christianity
Ukeme	F	65	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Teaching	Christianity
Mayen	F	18	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Public servant	Christianity
Samson	M	34	First School Leaving Certificate	Raffia work	African Traditional Religion
Woniseun	M	73	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Mining	Christianity
Adunni	M	68	No formal education	Farming	Christianity
Tinuola	M	49	Bachelor of Science	Architecting	No identity
Osetupe	F	54	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Hair styling	African Traditional Religion
Afere	F	66	First School Leaving Certificate	Electrician	Christianity
Ola	M	40	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Hunting	African Traditional Religion
Charles	M	67	First School Leaving Certificate	Farming	Christianity
Fasanmi	M	48	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Trading	Christianity
Lami	F	55	Higher National Diploma	Civil servant	Christianity
Ooni	M	60	Doctor of Philosophy	Lecturing	Christianity
Udoka	M	54	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Mining	Christianity
Ifeanyi	M	43	No formal education	Trading	Christianity
Chika	M	72	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Farming	No identity
Polycarp	M	48	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Hunting	Christianity
Obi	M	24	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Student	Christianity
Okoro	F	28	Master of Science	Journalist	Christianity
Nwansi	M	59	Higher National Diploma	Administrator	Christianity
Udensi	M	74	First School Leaving Certificate	Blacksmithing	African Traditional Religion
Ada	F	59	Senior Secondary School Certificate	Teaching	Christianity
Nwosu	M	38	First School Leaving Certificate	Farming	African Traditional Religion

class of names were also probed. Questions were open-ended and allowed for flexibility and free form answers.

A corpus of 322 names was collected during the fieldwork exercises. However, only 96 death-related names were sorted out from the data corpus which formed the basis of the analysis. A digital audio recorder was used in documenting all interviews and observations. There was three hours recording of interviews during the fieldwork exercises. Field notes were used in recording interview transcripts, and metadata of participants such as date, time, and place of interview. All participants' names were anonymized to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Data were coded, and categorized into relevant thematic tropes. They were checked for accuracy by the research assistants who were native speakers of the various languages involved, transcribed, and translated verbatim.

Data analysis

I adopted thematic analysis to identify patterns in the meaning of the data to find the relevant themes. My subjective experience in similar previous studies was useful in making sense of the data. The descriptive method of analysis was adopted in the interpretation and discussion of data. This approach examines the main features of data, summarize them in a meaningful way and offer nuanced analysis and interpretation. It also provided insightful information based on the opinions and perspectives of participants in their own words.

Results

In the analysis that follows, the relevant cultural scripts that are represented in death-related names such as emotional suffering, supremacy, and inevitability of death, overcoming death, consolation and unpredictability of death are analyzed. Different historical experiences, beliefs and religious traditions provided varying interpretive framework for understanding these names.

Emotional suffering

The names in this category are reactions to previous infant deaths that may have occurred in a particular family. The names are used to express anger, anxiety, hopelessness and a feeling of grief. These are some of the effects which have wrecked the name-giver, and often result in diminished health, well-being and quality of life. Examples of names in this category are

Table 2. Names that reflect emotional suffering.

Name	Meaning
Igbo	
Ọnwùdịnjọ	Death is evil
Ọnwùdiwè	Death is wicked
Ọnwùdiilú	Death is painful
Ọnwúamańsọ	Death doesn't know customs and traditions
Égwúónwu	Fear of death
Ọnwùdiwe	Death is angry
Owe	
Íkúenábàhí	Death has no honor
Íkúenákám	Death has no shame
Íkúsémóró	Death causes difficulties
Ibibio	
Mkpánám	Death is the cause of my predicament
Ánàmétèntúá	Death has done it so that I may weep
Mkpáúkút	Death has brought agony

demonstrated in the Igbo data in Table 2. Participants believed that these names represent the concept of death as cruel and unfair to the name-giver. It creates a feeling that can be frightening and upsetting, and as one participant puts it, "When death hits you (your loved one), it seems as if the pain will never go." He further justified the choice of the name *Ọnwùdịnjọ* "Death is evil" which is his family name as a memorial to perpetuate his family's experience with death. He related the post-death experience thus:

From my family history, it was recounted that many children suffered from a cycle of birth-death-rebirth causing so much agony to the extended family. It separated homes, affected people's health, engendered feeling of depression, and other difficult and unsuspected emotions. The family took time to walk through this era of the terror of death, and subsequently adopted the name *Ọnwùdịnjọ* (Death is evil) to complete its story (Nwansi Male 59).

From the account of this participant, it was evident that grieving, beyond its psychological consequences, also has physical effect which affected health and well-being as manifested in loss of appetite, lack of sleep, and physical pain. The names in this category were reactions to grieving experiences which reconstruct death as evil, wicked, painful, ignorant, fearful, and angry. The names therefore become coping strategies during grieving period to make difficult moment less intense, and to allow the healing process to gradually work through.

Names that represent the experience of emotional trauma suffered by name-givers were also found in the Owe (Yoruba) data corpus as are demonstrated in names like *Íkúenábàhí* "Death has no honor," *Íkúenákám* "Death has no shame" and *Íkúsémóró* "Death causes difficulty." These names also represent significant amplification of the challenges of grief and feeling of social isolation encountered by name-givers

after the loss of their loved ones. In this way, death as a force of nature has become a site for value conflicts. Death is believed to lack dignity, and to reinforce mental, physical and emotional adjustments. Participants argued that these names are meant to offer support in the complex form of mourning. A similar regime of death-related names that depict emotional trauma was also found among the Ibibio as reflected in names like *Mkpánám* “Death is the cause of my predicament,” and *Ánàmétèntúá* “It (death) has made me to weep” which evidence how name-givers and families were overwhelmed with experiences of death. Based on the findings, this subset of names is a dynamic and creative process that makes connection with the negative past in order to recreate positive memories of the present that counteract stress and depression. The subtle psychology and ethnoprismatic reading of these names is the desire to rebuild a fatalistic identity into a more endurable attitude toward life in general. In the Ibibio, Igbo, and Owe traditions, this class of names contains elements that tend to be shared cross-culturally. They are used to combat fear and uncertainty, and to forge a positive view of the future.

Supremacy and inevitability of death

Names are given to children to reflect the power of death as a force of nature over human beings. Names that demonstrate the supremacy and inevitability of death are shown in the Igbo data in Table 3. A name like *Ónwúbíko* “Death, I beg you” is a polite request from the name-giver to death (ethereal spirit) to secure the survival of the name-bearer. The use of the pragmatic modifier, *bíkó* “please” shows the desperate state of mind with which the name-giver made this request. In names like, *Ónwúzùrúíké* “Death, rest” and *Ónwúebúná* “Death, do not kill” though these are commands with an imperative force; they are mainly

Table 3. Names that demonstrate the inevitability of death.

Name	Meaning
Igbo	
<i>Ónwúbíko</i>	Death, I beg you
<i>Ónwúzùrúíké</i>	Death, rest
<i>Ónwuegbuna</i>	Death, do not kill
<i>Ónwúkárìrì</i>	Death is too much
<i>Ónwúdíké</i>	Death is strong
<i>Ónwúmèrè</i>	Death did it.
<i>Ónyékàónwú</i>	Who is greater than death?
<i>Ónwújiakù</i>	Death that holds wealth
<i>Ónwúamáezè</i>	Death does not know a king
<i>Ónwúásoányá</i>	Death is no respecter of any person
Owe	
<i>Ikubolaje</i>	Death destroys wealth
<i>Ikuejashi</i>	Death is not like traveling somewhere

applied here as a form of appeal to death to have compassion on the name-bearer and spare its life. In the three names above, the notion of death has been personified, strengthening the belief among the Igbo that death is a being with its own independent existence (Anigbo, 1982). This justifies why it operates on a higher realm of existence than humans, thus making it supreme. Other names in this category demonstrate the power of death over mortals and wealth. They indicate the inescapability of death. A participant attempted to justify the choice of the names in this category as follows:

The names are used to remind us of our mortality. They bring to our consciousness the futility of life; whether you are a king with all the material possessions in the world, when death knocks at your door, there is no redemption. So these names are constant reminders to us the living to come to terms with death because it will certainly happen. It will enable us to live fuller and more positive life (Polycarp, Male 48).

This account reveals the socio-culturally sensitive meanings of death-related names as not only reflections of specters of the past but also creates awareness of the emptiness of life which people must accept to forge a creative relationship with the future. The emotion that characterizes this relationship is that human beings find it difficult to process the reality of dying in order to live their lives without fear of death. Instances of names that reflect the inevitability of death were also found in the Owe (Yoruba) data. The names include: *Íkúbóláje* “Death destroys wealth” *Íkúejáshí* “Death is not like traveling somewhere.” These names depict death as a universal currency that everybody must experience irrespective of status, race or position, and it is irreversible. The bestowal of these names is a way of dealing with the inescapability of death. From an ethnoprismatic lens, these names provide emotional support and promote healthy grieving to the bereaved. The names also disclose that human beings are not in control of death as it comes on its own time.

Overcoming death

Some death-related names are used as protective shields against “the destructive power of death” as a result of our “inability to accept the limits of our mortality” (Segal, 2016, p. 6). In the struggle against anxiety toward death, children are bestowed names that tend to reduce the troubling tension between the agency of death and human physicality. Participants believed that the category of names in Table 4 was

meant to reduce the fear of death and generate popular optimism that death can be halted.

The names are used to generate some sense of security, and to alleviate human misery caused by the terror of death. On the surface, the names create the impression of conquering death from inflicting grief and deprivation. The names *Áfaméfulà* “My name will not lose,” *Nkémákolam* “My own will not pass,” *Mmáduákolam* “I shall not lack human beings” and *Kàmjímérié* “How I won death” are emotional reactions of name-givers to death and the search for spiritual tranquility. They have allegedly subdued death and cling to the illusion that it can be postponed indefinitely (Weisman, 1973). The names are self-assuring, and depict a past experience of childlessness with its attendant social consequences. A participant (Ada, Female 59) argued that parents who have suffered many cases of infant mortality usually have preference for this class of names for the surviving children. She believed that the names are subtle ways of managing difficult emotions, pain and distress of the past which have helped name-givers to discover and foster meaning in life.

Names like *Chínònyélúm* “Stay with me,” *Òzóémèrà* “May another one not happen,” *Nwàèkèrèndù* “The child is destined to live” speak to the dynamics of the name-bearers’ survival, and are sources of emotional and practical support to the name-giver. They reinforce the inability to accept the finality of death (Ebo, 2019), and give an assurance of a new beginning. The names indirectly acknowledge the tension between the underworld forces and the living (name-givers). They either speak to the name-bearers directly, offer a prayer, or make a declaration. Participants argued that the experience of death is inconsolable, and usually leaves the bereaved withdrawn into a state of nothingness. Consequently, this category of names is often used to nurture the renewal of hope and offer a new lease of life that will safeguard the survival of potential infants born into a family. However, in spite of the various rituals and rites of passage that may be performed to subdue the influence of death, its impulse still remains an overpowering force as exemplified in the name, *Ónwùémérié* “Death has won.” This evidence details the fact that human beings are mortal creatures, and death provides the limit that frames and defines life. Therefore, human beings cannot overpower death but can seek ways to understand the complex and emotional processes involving death.

Names that tend to overshadow death are also found in the Owe data corpus. They include *Íkújémíhí* “Death left me,” *Métúnnyún* “I am no longer going,” *Mébèghà* “I

Table 4. Names that overwhelm death.

Name	Meaning
Igbo	
Áfaméfulà	My name will not lose
Nkémákolam	My own (heritage) will not pass me
Mmáduákolam	I shall not lack human beings
Kàmjímérié	How I won (death)
Chínònyélúm	Stay with me
Òzóémèrà	May another one not happen.
Nwàèkèrèndù	The child is destined to live
Sòmádinà	Only me should not live
Ónwùémérié	Death has won
Owe	
Ikujemihi	Death left me
Metunyun	I am no longer going
Mebegha	I did not beg you to come
Olejutan	The thief has stopped roaming
Etuhoko	There are no more holes
Igodi	The forest is blocked

did not beg you to come,” *Óléjután* “The thief has stopped roaming,” *Étúhóko* “There are no more holes” and *Ígódí* “The forest is obstructed/blocked.” These names provide the cultural resources of renouncing death. They employ many dimensions of emotional expressions to achieve this goal, for instance, the name, *Íkújémíhí* “Death left me” is a celebration of the name-bearer’s presumed victory over death. *Métúnnyún* “I am no longer going,” the name-bearer is making a commitment not to return to the underworld. In other words, he or she has vowed not to die. Participants maintained that this commitment is a covenant between the name-bearer and the name-giver. It is often used as a constant reminder to the name-bearer in the event of illness or poor health that he/she has promised not to return. *Mébèghà* “I did not beg you to come” is a threat from the name-giver to the name-bearer who may be unwilling to stay alive, thus causing the family sadness and grief. The reverse psychology and ethnopragmatic reading here is that since the name-giver/family did not beg the name-bearer to come, it means that he/she was not desired, and this provides the motivation to stay alive. In the name, *Óléjután* “The thief has stopped roaming,” death is reconceptualized as a thief (that roams) to depict the idea that it steals people’s “properties” (lives) without using force. A participant offered an explanation of this name as follows:

The semantic import of the name has two dimensions: first, it is to create some tension between death and the name-bearer. Labelling death as a thief is injurious in the ethereal plane, and should be able to isolate the name-bearer from the influence of death. Secondly, it is believed that forces of nature exemplified by death may have slowed down their malevolent activities during the birth of the name-bearer through some ritual invocation hence, their malicious eyes were blinded from locating the name-bearer (Charles, Male 67).

Table 5. Names that depict consolation.

Name	Meaning
Igbo	
Kándíbé	My consolation
Kásiemó	Console
Daramobi	Comfort me
Ogwugwo	Clean my tears
Ibibio	
Ídòñésít	Consolation
Ibérédém	Comforter

The account by this participant shows how rhetorical devices like metaphor and indirectness are employed as modes of reducing anxiety toward death. The names *Étúhóko* “There are no more hoes” and *Ígódí* “The forest is obstructed/blocked” contained declarative forces and are strong warnings directed at the name-bearers. According to Alexander (2018), the names are given with the intention of shaming or embarrassing such children so that they can stay alive and not die again and again. The messages of the names imply that there would be no hoes to dig graves, and no site to locate graves in the event of their untimely death. This means that name-bearers would not be accorded befitting burials, and would be alienated from the physical world completely. This kind of threats is a source of empowerment which naturally provides the impulse for life continuity and the foundation for understanding the past. The names in this category have special symbolic relevance in helping name-bearers to hypothetically build valuable relationships and a sense of security that is useful for their well-being journey. The names reinforce an optimistic view of death, and cause name-givers to perceive death with a sense of contentment. This implies that such names offer greater understanding of the phenomenon of death, and strengthen people to cope when they encounter difficult situations like the death of a beloved one.

Consolation and unpredictability of death

Consolation is understood as psychological comfort given to one who has suffered severe upset or complete loss like bereavement. It is a social practice that expresses empathy and highlights hope of a positive future turn of event. In Table 5, 1 identified death-related names that were consolatory scripts, meant to play symbolic roles to ameliorate the anguish of the name-giver. Among the Igbo, names like *Kándíbé* “My consolation” and *Kásiemó* “Console me” are used to make the name-givers to feel better and make meaning of their situation after undergoing painful experiences of loss of their children. Participants

argued that giving support to a bereaved member of the society arises from the shared belief that nobody is immune to affliction. The surviving name-bearers are the sources of the name-givers’ consolations. In justifying the choice of these names among the Igbo, a participant stated thus:

... such names are used to perpetuate the memories of suffering occasioned by incessant infant mortality in the family. The name-bearer is the consoling dividend of the many years of affliction and uncertainty experienced by his/her family, so the birth of the name-bearer is to impress and provide solace to his/her family (Udoka, Male 54).

The narrative by this participant corroborates the claim that consolation endangers inner peace and ignites a moment of communion with the living. A similar name that connotes a sense of comfort is *Ídòñésít* “Consolation” among the Ibibio. It has the same cultural signification as its semantic equivalents in Igbo which mainly expresses empathy. Participants were however unable to nuance the cultural meaning of the name beyond the claim that it is usually given to a child that comes immediately after the death of a previous child in the family.

Another significant cultural script was the notion of unpredictability of death (Table 6). This can be demonstrated by Igbo names such as *Ónwúkwe* “If death permits” and *Íkéagwúonwù* “Death doesn’t rest” which are bestowed to affirm the belief that how and when death strikes may not be certain but it is inevitable. The names are contemplative reflections of the past as they create apprehension in the minds of the name-givers. A participant (Udensi, Male 74) submitted that such names often convey the feeling of shock and disbelief and describe how parents cope with difficult emotions and react to death more broadly. In other words, these names help parents and/or name-givers to understand the true purpose of life. Based on this position, it is observed that it is extensively difficult to accept the fact of mortality. Ibibio also furnishes some examples of this class of death-related names include: *Ñkpòñnyòñ* “Tomorrow, it is gone,” *Ndàràké* “I will not rejoice (until you live)” and *Ñséméké* “I will not lament (if you die).” These names equally demonstrate the futility of life based on the precarious condition of the name-bearer. Participants argued that these names are deeply influenced by the degree of uncertainty about the chances of survival of the name-bearers as a result of the history of mortality in each family. Another participant offered an explanation on why children are named with this aura of uncertainty as follows:

Table 6. Names that showcase unpredictability of death.

Name	Meaning
Igbo	
Onwúkwé	If death permits
Íkéagwónwù	Death does not rest
Ibibio	
Ndaráké	I will not rejoice (until you live)
Íséméké	I will not lament (if you die)
Íkpònyònyò	Tomorrow it is gone

At birth, it looks as if the child has been diagnosed with a terminal illness because nobody knows if it will be alive the next moment. So these names provide a slight tinge of hope that sustains the flame of their survival (Bassey, Female 66).

This opinion reveals that the birth of such children is often greeted with mixed feelings: happiness and sadness. The ambivalent disposition often haunts the name-giver and neutralizes his or her attachment to the name-bearer. He or she sees death as a substantial possibility, and it has a way of focusing the mind. The names, therefore, creates the impression that the name-giver is prepared for the worse. Based on my observation, the names in this category are meant to emphasize the temporality of life and the need to be positively attuned to face the reality of death. They help to change people's normative attitudes toward death, example, from becoming too attached and emotional about experience of death.

Discussion

Death-related names are inspired by history of previous death(s) in the same family. They have enormous cultural and spiritual significance in societies where such names are prevalent. They are laden with emotional reactions and beliefs about the phenomena of death. Children who experienced cycle of birth-death-reincarnation are generally referred to as “born to die” which defines *Ésién Èmàna* (in Ibibio), *Ógbánjé* (in Igbo) and *Ábíkù* (in Owe, Yoruba). In this study, I interrogated the functions of death-related names from a cross-cultural perspective. I have identified the relevant cultural scripts embedded in the names and explored the locally constitutive meanings each culture assigns to these names. I revealed mainly similarities in cultural norms in patterns of death-related names among the Igbo, Ibibio and Owe (Yoruba) people in Nigeria. Death is an important aspect of natural biological life, and for the cultures in this study, death is not an end of life but a transition to a new world of ancestry (Ebo, 2019). It therefore means that death is a continuum from where the relationship between the dead and the living is strongly fostered. Cultural

semantics and social scripts evaluate how people assess traumatic experience of infant mortality and how they make sense of this experience. Death is described in metaphoric terms to conceal fear and anxiety occasioned by grief, misery, and insecurity. The ethnopragmatic reading of this class of names attempts to understand their nuanced meaning from a cultural insider's perspective based on their cultural particularities, and allows a fine-grained resolution of meaning (Gladkova, 2013; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004; Goddard & Ye, 2015). The names are forms of communication or what Goddard and Wierzbicka (2004) called “interactional aspect of language” (p. 154) which pays attention to security and well-being of the living. The communication may be direct or indirect, and may be targeted at the name-giver, name-bearer, ethereal forces (underworld) or death itself.

Through the use of collectivism as an ethnographic tool, another recurrent theme that emerged from the analysis of death-related names is the inevitability of death which articulates its supremacy in the affairs of human beings. This trope also unveils an understanding of social attitudes toward death such as the futility of life. There is also the cultural myth or belief that ritual power can overcome death through some of the names. The preoccupation with death connotes the assumption that death may not be a natural event. This position corroborates the claim by Anigbo (1982) that among the Igbo, the *Aju Ochu* cleansing festival is usually performed during farming seasons to prevent (accidental) death of people. According to Anigbo (1982), “it is designed to expel death from the community and ensure good health for the villagers” (p. 517). This practice is based on cultural norms and values which index shared understanding and expectations about death. An interesting aspect of the cultural scripts embedded in death-related names is consolation which embodies a spirit of solidarity to alleviate the burden of grief. Surviving infants become sources of comfort and seek to make meaning of their present circumstances. This category of death-related names also uses “request” which is a speech act verb to appease the bereaved. The names are used to make explicit statements with immense cultural value that uses condolence routine to enable them acquire special significance.

Death-related names are words and expressions that exist in the languages under focus. In other words, they are linguistic actions. Capone (2010) refers to them as “speech acts in context” (p. 4), which are used in social interactions to provide

cultural rules for meaning construction and interpretation. They also contain social intentionality that reflects the experience and nuanced discourses of name-givers. Based on the accounts of the research participants and observations, death-related names serve significant socio-cognitive and ethnopragmatic functions. They provide a window for understanding people's perception of death, appease the name-givers and give him/her peace of mind. The names have also offered alternative modes of combating fear and uncertainty. This means that they serve as compensatory routines by offsetting some psychological difficulties. Significantly, these names are forms of social interactions with determined social norms and practices embedded in culture (Capone, 2010). These interactions may be mediated between the living and the dead transcending both physical and spiritual worlds. It therefore reflects the experience of life across time and place (Mensah et al., 2020).

The study findings should be understood within the limitations of the study. Usually, qualitative studies are conducted by more than one researcher to avoid the risk of researcher bias, especially regarding data collection and analysis. However, I am grounded in similar research endeavors over the last couple of years. I have sufficient experience in ethnographic fieldwork, and understood the demands of the research from the outset. Significantly, although I have a rich sample size, it did not cover every cultural setting in Nigeria where the bestowal of death-related names is prevalent, example among the Efik, Erei (south-east) and Tiv (north-central) Nigeria. Findings from these cultures may present different results from the present study. Significantly, I am not a native speaker of any of the three languages used by the various participants (Ibibio, Igbo and Yoruba), I was limited in being able to interact directly with them in their indigenous languages to understand certain nuances and subtleties of death-related names. I relied on native speaker research assistants to remedy this deficiency.

In conclusion, I conceptualized death-related names as symbolic cultural and linguistic resources and essential aspects of speech practices, beliefs and social history in three cultural traditions in Nigeria: Ibibio, Igbo and Owe. I identified the relevant cultural scripts that are embedded in these names such as emotional suffering, inevitability, subduing, condolence and unpredictability scripts which constitute indigenous speech practices that are essential aspects of cultural norms, values and expectations about the broad agency of death. A cross-cultural study of these names

from cultural insider's perspective reveals uniformity in the patterns and locally constitutive significations assigned to the names. The intention of the names is to communicate the desire to spare the lives of the name-bearers, and in communicating this desire, other socio-cognitive functions are activated which are mainly to understand social attitudes and perceptions toward death. Future research on death-related names may focus on the role of ethereal elements as the driving force for the cycle of birth-death-rebirth that motivates the bestowal of these names.

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