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Christianity and the Gendering of Personal Names among the Bette in Southeastern Nigeria

Romanus Aboh | ORCID: 0000-0002-4804-9968
Department of English & Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria
romanusaboh@unical.edu.ng

Eyo Mensah | ORCID: 0000-0001-5838-0462
Department of Linguistics, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria
Merian Institute for Advanced Studies in Africa (MIASA), University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana
Corresponding author
eyomensah2004@yahoo.com

Idom Inyabri | ORCID: 0000-0002-4875-195X
Department of English & Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria
idom@unical.edu.ng

Lucy Ushuple | ORCID: 0000-0001-8733-8140
Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria
mishinalucy@unical.edu.ng

Abstract

Contributing to extant debates on the juncture of naming and gender(ing), this study interrogates naming practices among Bette-Christians of northern Cross River, Southeastern Nigeria, and how they enhance understanding of the relation between naming and the enunciation of religious identity as well as how gender is enacted. With analytical insights from socio-onomastic theory, which explores the relationship between names, culture, and society, we interrogate naming practices as essential cultural currency for identification, categorization, and connectedness. Data were obtained from 40 participants through semistructured interviews and participant

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observations. We focus on the intersection of naming and spiritual sentiments to argue that the contemporary reality of naming among Bette-Christians illuminates a practice that negates traditional Bette cosmology and cosmogony. We illustrate how the emergence of Christianity has altered the naming patterns and practices of the people, and how these names embody multidimensional connotations that range from religious identity to stereotyped gender ideologies.

Keywords

personal names – Bette-Christians – religious identity – gender – onomasticon – Nigeria

1 Introduction

Scholars who are concerned with onomastics have argued that naming is a system with multilayered significations. In the African anthroponomic system a personal name exists and gains traction within a specific context of performance. It is this performative context that gives names 'birth and fire them with life and ontological existence' (Tsaaior 2013, 7). However, this theorization of naming as a performative act, even when it is central to the naming intricacies of some African communities, has been largely neglected by African scholars who do onomastic research. A name is a cultural text; consequently, in its explication, contextual textualities need to be accounted for because personal names function as means of self-representation as well as a platform for the performance of identities and ideologies. Except in the context of renaming, the self that is expressed or performed in the name is that of the name-giver, not the named. Shepherd (2016) offers an overview of performance as a theory that works in variance to the essentialist thought of the fixed, stable, and unified structure of texts with significations resident in the pregiven matrices of the text. As an analytical method, the notion of performance upholds the social constructionist's ideals that texts are defined by radically unstable, decentered, and unfixed codes that exist outside the text – its context (Burr 2003; Tsaaior 2013; Aboh and Igwenyi 2021). Proponents of performance theory believe that meaning is not monolithic; rather, it is performed and in a state of perpetual flux. This shifting nature of meaning exemplifies itself in the Bette naming repertoire. From the early '90s, the Bette naming regime, especially with the emergence of Pentecostal Christianity, illuminates how the words are Bette but the identity that the name signifies usually embodies the Christian ideology of the

name-giver. The expression 'Bette-Christian' is used in this study to depict this systematic blend.

Naming is a performative act, an activity that people engage in at specific instances of their existence. This suggests that 'names are more than labels of identification; they provide us with historical and spiritual/religious … accounts' (Aboh 2018, 26). To think in this way is to conceive naming as an implicitly social concept that is performed at certain instances of people's interaction with or reflection of contextual realities. How the Bette people give and take names is deeply influenced by sociocultural realities in conjunction with the circumstances of the birth or the appearance of the child. The treatment of names as having many nuances offers an account of naming within the Bette sociocultural, psychological, and spiritual realities, and how these belief systems are performed in the people's linguistic choices. Naming in Bette is context specific and socially constructed. Since naming is a performative act, it accounts for a name-giver's response to prevailing circumstances and moments of historical significance. Implied in this thinking is the idea that Bette names, as with many African names, are means of self-expression, memory, and sociality.

Religion is one of the prominent changes that Africa has experienced that has altered its people's belief system in remarkable ways. For many religion is a central aspect of identity. For the Bette people, who are predominantly Christians, their contact with colonialism and Christian missionaries, as far back as 1906 when 'a small military expedition visited Obudu' (Undiyaundeye 2011, 299), not only significantly changed the people's way of life but also their naming system. The influence of Christianity on Bette naming practices has not been engaged in the literature on naming. This study therefore aims to pay specific attention to how the people's adherence to Christianity and its practices have influenced their naming system, as well as the semantic content of the personal names they give or take. Personal names are important symbols of communication and signification. Mandende, Cekiso, and Rwodzi argue that 'personal names function beyond identity construction as they are used as communicative tools to transmit the people's beliefs, historical antecedents, values, intentions, experiences and other cultural practice from one generation to another' (2019, 336). Following this position, it can be argued that naming is among the most outstanding cultural sites for the performance of identities, and in their categorization of individuals as male and female (Alford 1988).

Faraclas (1989) argues that Bette is an understudied language. The few studies on Bette cover the linguistics of naming, how Bette names have functioned as death prevention labels (Nzuanke and Akpagu 2019), and how the Bette naming system provides a platform for the oppression of the girl-child (Betiang

2019). This source has been published as Mensah (2022) has examined how the naming of female children in Bette has entrenched inequality and legitimized name bearers' passive roles in the concerns of their society. The study demonstrates how naming is used as a tool to enact conformism to heterosexuality and resistance to polygamy or forced marriage. Bette anthroponyms that illustrate the link between naming and the religious identity that tended to supplant the Bette traditional/cultural identity before the advent of Christianity remain unexamined. This study thus attempts to establish a conjunction between naming, Christian identity construction, and gender ideologies as observed among the Bette people, explaining how the names Bette-Christians give or take foreground the Christian identity/ideology they profess.

More specifically, we focus on exploring the relation between personal names, gender, and Christian religious identity by illuminating how the religious identity and gender enactment of the Bette people incarnate itself in their personal names. By drawing attention to the connection between naming, identity, gender, and spiritual consciousness from the account of socio-onomastic theory, which examines naming protocol from a wide variety of cultural, social, interactive, and cognitive contexts (Ainiala and Ostman 2017), we foreground the fact that names are iconic representations of a name-giver's beliefs, values, and expectations that have the capacity to shape the name bearer's social world, including their spiritual and sociopsychological orientation. It may be instructive that naming in this context has the potential for the name-giver to performatively affect the people's worldview, especially within the circumstance of the powerful influence of Christianity among the Bette people.

2 The Bette People

Obudu is both the name of the capital of the Obudu local government area and a designation of the geographical territory of the Bette people. Obudu is among the five local government areas that constitute the Northern Senatorial District of Cross River State. Other local government areas are Obanliku, Bekwarra, Yala, and Ogoja. Obudu is located at the foot of the Cameroon Mountains. It is bordered by Bekwarra and Ogoja local government areas to the west and Obanliku on the east. To the north of Obudu are Adikpo and Tsar, both in Benue State, and to the south of Obudu is the Boki local government area. As of the 2006 National Population Census, Obudu had 85,000 inhabitants (Ashipu 2015; Nzuanke and Akpagu 2019; NBS, 2006).

Obudu is a multilingual community, the result of trade activities, especially between the Igbo and the Hausa long before Nigeria's independence, and an

influx of the Hausa group shortly after the Nigerian Civil War in 1970 (Ellah 2016). Consequently, apart from the natives and students and staff of the Federal College of Education, the small town is inhabited mostly by Igbo and Hausa traders who have integrated with the indigenes through marriage and commerce.

Bette is the language of the Obudu people. Although Bette is among the largely understudied Nigerian languages, the missionaries produced a complete Bible translation in the Bette language. Although Bette is spoken and understood generally in Obudu, it is spoken in some parts of the Obanliku and Boki local government areas. It is the language spoken in the five Bette-speaking wards of Obudu Urban 1, Obudu Urban 2, Begiading, Angiaba/Begiaka, and Ipong. The natives of the above-mentioned wards are known as the Bette people. Alege/Ubang, Ukpe, Utugwang South, Utugwang Central, and Utugwang North are the five non-Bette-speaking wards of Obudu.

Bette belongs to the Bendi cluster of Cross River languages of the Benue-Congo, and a member of the Niger-Congo phylum (Nzuanke and Akpagu 2019; Ushie 2011; Ashipu 2015). Bette has a dialect, Bendi, which is found in the Obanliku local government area. It designates a people and the geographical territory of the Bendi people. Although Ushie argues that 'it is yet uncertain which of these [Bette and Bendi] are dialects of each other' (2011, 57), it appears that Bendi is a dialect of Bette because Bette has the largest number of speakers, and the language functions as the lingua franca of the Obudu and Obanliku local government areas. Its speakers span Obudu, and parts of the Obanliku and Boki local government areas of Cross River State (Nzuanke and Akpagu 2019). Bette and Bendi share many features, and are often studied as one ethnolinguistic group (Aboh 2014). This study focuses on Bette because of the slight variation in the spelling systems of the two dialects. It is interesting to note that the difference in spelling does not bring about changes in meaning. For example, *Akomaye* (Bette, let me be quiet for the time being) and *Akomale* (Bendi) have the same meaning.

The Bette people's religious beliefs and ideologies are actualized in their naming system and language use in general. This echoes Ushie's (2011) claim that nearly every aspect of the Bette people's lives rests on religion and justice. Before the advent of Christianity the people believed in the existence of *Unimahusilifuntabe* (God who is in the sky/God of the sky) and other smaller gods. Adie also writes that:

> The people worshipped several gods and deities, prominent among them were Unim-Unwulikong (god of the entrance of the compound), Unim-Utemkung (god of the backyard), Unim-UkwelUfung (god of the

> white hill), Kude, Alapla, Kutswan, Ideem, etc. In addition to these gods was a legion of secret societies like Kunde, Keetung, Ikwong, Ikwomishor, Atimabel, etc. (2015, 421)

The people had a strong sense of attachment to their ancestors whom they worshipped. The smaller gods served as links between the people and the Almighty God. They also believed in the existence of spirits who functioned as mediators between Almighty God and his lieutenants, the smaller gods. Consequently, it did not come as something entirely new when Catholicism came to the people and advanced the Holy Trinity in their sermons. Because it was the Roman Catholic Mission that first took the gospel to the people in 1922 (Adie 2015), the Bette people are predominantly Catholics. In contemporary times, however, the younger generation are members of the new generation Pentecostal churches, especially those who dwell in urban areas or in the diaspora, as this study shows. Christianity brought impacts, one of which is exemplified in the naming practice that is reflective of their newfound faith.

3 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts socio-onomastic theory as the framework to drive the analysis of data. This study was first conceptualized by Leslie and Skipper (1990), but was taken up and expanded by Lombard (2015) and Ainiala and Ostman (2017), among other scholars. According to Ainiala and Ostman (2017), socio-onomastic theory takes into account the social, cultural, and situational domains in which names are given and used. This also takes into cognizance the influence of religion on names, why names change, and the effect of gender stereotypes on naming practices. The theory emphasizes a multidisciplinary engagement of names and naming systems such as in psychology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, history, cultural studies, and literary studies, and in rendering analysis and interpretation based on their specific disciplinary peculiarities and impulses. In this regard, 'names intersect with many aspects of human existence, the field of onomastics frequently intersects with work in various disciplines and thus requires multiple approaches in explanation and analysis' (Lombard 2015, 48). This interdisciplinarity demonstrates the influence of different spheres of human endeavors in various spaces on names and naming practices.

Of greater concern to socio-onomastic theory is the role of names in the construction of social identity, sustenance of lineage structure, and the ethnopsychological conception of the self. Zandi and Ahmadi (2017) argue that

socio-onomastic theory perceives names as part of the cognitive construction of individuals in societies with sufficient social and linguistic variation. In other words, socio-onomastics is not merely concerned with names as vital elements in the study of language and identity, but also accounts for both cognitive and social aspects of naming. The domain of socio-onomastics also covers beliefs about and attitudes toward names and name use. Hadiati (2021) corroborates this position, positing that names are at the center of socio-onomastics since it analyses the use and variation of names. Significantly, socio-onomastic theory can also spotlight the role of names in accentuating the cultural values of a people and historical background of name bearers. According to Hadiati (2021), the goals of socio-onomastic theory are twofold: first, to explicate the origin and use of different variants of proper names within various situations and contexts, and second, to define the relationship between the name-giver, name bearer, and name user. Lombard (2015) recognizes naming as an important social phenomenon on the basis of understanding the social and cultural contexts in which names are given and used. The social basis of the approach accounts for the sociocultural contexts within which names function, and which provide the basis of analyzing the contextual and pragmatic meanings of names. Put more broadly, Lombard (2015) believes that the socio-onomastic theory facilitates accurate and socially realistic interpretations of the locally constitutive meanings of names that form essential component of lived experiences of people in the course of everyday life.

The present study gains perspectives from socio-onomastic theory to interrogate the role of religion and gender in the emerging onomastic tradition of the Bette people, and to establish how the new sets of Bette names derive meaning from the Bette sociocultural context. Significantly, we aim to uncover the reflexive relationship between naming, religion, and gender, and probe to what extent the Bette social naming process mirrors various modes of identities, positioning, and belonging.

4 Methodology

This study is qualitative in its approach and techniques with respect to data collection and analysis. Data gathering started in 2018 when one of the authors was involved in an informal conversation with some Bette-Christians after the christening of a friend's child in a church in Calabar. Informal interactions are vital sources of information gathering in that they add authenticity and naturalness to and situate data within a specific sociocultural context. The outcome of the interaction, which partly centered on naming patterns, was

shared with the coauthors, who continued to examine the naming nuances of the Bette people. After the lockdown in 2020, two of the authors traveled to Obudu where semistructured interviews and participant observations were conducted. A digital audio recorder and field notes were used in eliciting data from the participants. Names of participants have been anonymized for the sake of confidentiality, even when they were told that their responses would be used for academic purposes only.

Forty participants were sampled for this study. Twenty were purposively selected from Obudu town and 20 were recruited from Calabar because it is the capital city of Cross River State and many Obudu-Bette people are residents there. They were recruited based on their deep knowledge of Bette cultural tradition with particular reference to their Bette onomastic competence, coupled with their willingness to participate in the research. Sociolinguistic variables of age, education, gender, occupation, and religion were taken into consideration during the sampling procedure. The age range of the participants was between 30 and 60 years. The group was comprised of two divorcees, two widowers, and three widows; one participant was separated and others were still married. Sixty percent of the participants were holders of higher degree certificates from universities, colleges of education, and the College of Health Technology. Three participants, two females and one male, taught at the Federal College of Education, Obudu; four participants, two males and two females, were professors at the University of Calabar. Fifty percent of the participants were civil servants who worked in the state civil service. Three, all males, were political appointees in the state government. Two of the participants were self-employed in poultry farming and fashion designing respectively. The participants consisted of 20 Catholics, ten in Assemblies of God, and ten in new generation Pentecostal churches. The high number of Catholics is a result of the fact that Catholic missionaries were the first to have contact with the people. All participants gave informed consent in writing for all interviews, observations, conversations, and recordings. The consent statements were interpreted for participants who could not read or write.

Semistructured interviews allowed researchers to pose predetermined and open-ended questions to participants based on their cultural knowledge and experience of naming in the Bette tradition. Questions were asked regarding the influence of Christianity on the naming system, the changing patterns of naming, and the social factors responsible for this change. We further probed the historical and contemporary perspective on this regime of naming. Questions were also asked on the relationship between gender and naming, and the effect of conflict, power dynamics, and heteronormative ideology in the naming of children. This interview approach allowed free-flowing conversations between participants and the researchers that facilitated casual, natural, and honest

responses. This approach is also a flexible and powerful tool for capturing the voices and ways participants make meaning of their experience of names and naming (Rabionet 2011). Participant observations enabled the researchers to immerse themselves in the study area that presented the participants' cultural context in which personal names are significant and symbolic cultural resources. We engaged with the participants' familiar life world (Laurier 2010), which allowed us to participate and observe traditional ceremonies such as child naming, libation rituals, and funeral orations, all of which involved the prominent use of personal names. We also observed the role of patriarchy and heterosexuality in the family structure and intimate lives of men and women, and how this division affected the naming of children.

A corpus of fifty names was collected during the fieldwork exercise. All data were coded and thematized based on the identified social categories. They were subsequently transcribed, translated, and checked for accuracy through the examination of the lead researcher. An audio recorder was used to document all interviews. Field notes were used to record interview transcripts and metadata of participants, dates/time of interviews, and the type of data sourced. The descriptive method of analysis was adopted to drive the analysis of data. This approach interprets the main features of the data and offers in-depth explanations and perspectives based on the views and opinions of the participants.

5 The Bette Traditional Naming System

As in other cultures of the world, in the Bette culture the personal name or given name of a person describes their individuality as well as other subjectivities such as their religious identity or spirituality. Ushie notes that Bette names 'represent the thoughts of a man at a time, his joy, his sorrow, his life situation, his history, his sense of religion and his philosophy' (2011, 253). As a religion-conscious people, the Bette people view naming as an integral aspect of their spirituality. Therefore a personal name functions as a medium through which religious and other belief systems are transmitted from one generation to another.

Bette personal names provide three basic semantic significations: first, personal names, even ego boasting names, signify the general circumstances under which a child was born; second, personal names communicate the child's parents'/people's feelings or future aspirations for the child; and third, personal names describe the child's appearance. The name *Akomaye* (let me be quiet for the time being), for example, is a name that conveys a father's feeling at the birth of a male child. The socio-onomastic signification of this

name can be traced to the age-long preference for male children. Based on our findings, parents engage in all kinds of rituals and visit oracles in their tortuous desperation for male children, who are viewed as sustainers of the family lineage. This inherently familial tradition among the Bette people is rooted in patriarchy and inequality. It reinforces stereotypes and the domestication of the girl-child, and renders her role as passive and inconsequential in the sanctity of the family or community structure. *Unimnauke* (it is God who gives) can come under the category of names that overlap with a father's feeling at the birth of a child. Based on the interview transcripts, we found that this name is anchored in the belief that God is the giver of all good things. A child is the most prized asset in every Bette marriage, and childless marriages are often stigmatized. This name-giver believed that the gift of a child is a manifestation of the goodness of God on the parents because of God's gracious character of a giver.

Core traditional Bette anthroponomic practice makes a distinction between male and female names. That is, male children must not be given the same names as those borne by female children and female children must not be given names that belong to the male (Ushie 2011). Although female and male names may have similar meaning, they are mutually exclusive of each other in terms of pronunciation and spelling. For example, the name *Akamka* is given to a female child. It translates to 'I have tried in vain or have failed to bring order or put things in their right place'. Its male variant, *Akpika*, means the same thing. Despite the sameness in meaning, it is odd for a male child to be called *Akamka* and a female child *Akpika*. The socio-onomastic import of this name highlights the name-giver's failure to act in a certain way in the past in order to avoid certain tensions or crisis within the family or the enlarged community. This name is thus not only an act of self-recrimination but a means of perpetuating the memory of this regret in the selfhood of the name-bearer. Other examples of male and female names and their meanings are summarized in Table 1.

These names are archives in their own right because they preserve the worldview as well as represent the sociocultural reality of the name-giver. Moreover, the naming pattern speaks to the sensitivity of Bette names in terms of gender. Also entrenched in this naming modality is the assignment of death-related names to male children because, as the study discovered, the rate of infant mortality was higher among male than female children. Names like *Líwhùlíhwòbé* (death overcame them), *Ákpékwùlìwhú* (he keeps it for death), and *Úkpèkwú* (he keeps it for them) were bestowed on male children as death-prevention labels to deceive their underworld parents that such children were worthless and were not desired by their earthly parents. Mensah

TABLE 1 Bette names, gender and meaning

Male names	Gloss	Female name	Gloss
Lìwhúlìhwóbe	Death overcame them	Ùtìãnbéshé	Allow them to deal with me
Ákpékwùulìwhú	He keeps it for death	Úfédèùkíébma	She detects for her husband
Úkpékwú	He keeps it for them	Ùngyéáwhúkyémá	The wife dominates her husband
Ágãbá	Lion/Strong	Útáùshú	One whose face glitters
Ágíãnpúyè	He does not miss all	Ányìn	The one that sweetens me
Ákwãgìóbé	I listen to them	Úkwúdí	Daughter of my wealth
Úkèlíná	Trouble seeker	Beéèn	Favourite female friend/daughter
Béshèl	They are afraid	Ándòúkyé	Wiper of tears/cry

(2015) and Akung and Abang (2019) argue that such names turned out to be the needed antidotes with which such children's lives were spared. The other category of male names in Table 1 depicts an ideology of fearlessness, toughness, and heroism, which are often celebrated as traits of masculinity. These names are detailed traditional conception of masculinity and familial conflict which are essential aspects of gendered power relations in the Bette society. The thematic threads in female names include tension/succor, dominance/value of a wife, physical beauty, and wealth. The patterned way of naming is embedded with gender disparity wherein women are constructed as weaklings who are mostly concerned with beauty, fertility, body image standards, and their roles in traditional overtures of marriage, among others. In the people's cultural imagination, the man's bravery is very celebrated but his handsomeness is immaterial.

Beyond the symbolic relation that holds between a name and its spiritual resonance, a deeper reading of Bette-Christian male names shows how some are subtly imbued with masculinities. Names such as *Ikèbúnìm* (strength/power of God) and *Unìmùyìútsú* (God is king) are reserved for men. While *Kùkéúnìm* (little gift from God) is for the girl-child, male names arrogate power and control to the boy-child while the girl-child's name makes her subject to the

powerful control of the male child. Mentally, the girl who bears the name is 'made' to see herself as only a fragment from God, just an afterthought. We arrived at this interpretation by contextualizing the socio-symbolical meanings entrenched in the name, knowing that the linguistic repertoire alone does not have the capacity to allow access to the semiotic resources and onomastic capital that easily point to the interface of language and identity construction.

A glimpse into the marriage system of the Bette people offers intriguing insights into the distinction between female and male names. *Úngìé* is a Bette form for 'wife'. It functions basically as a prefix. No one takes or is given *Úngìé* as a name; it is rather used as a modifier of a personal name. Upon marriage a woman is given a new name. The newly married woman takes on the name of either the husband's close friend or a blood relative. This is why in the traditional Obudu-Bette setting a married woman can be called *Úngìé-Ágbá* – *Ágbá*'s wife, if the name of either the husband's close friend or blood relative is *Agba* – not the name of the man she is married to. It is taboo for a wife to be named after her husband. Ideologically, this naming system incarnates the communal lifestyle of the Obudu people. As it obtains in the Bette moral philosophy, the saying that a woman is married to the husband only at night illuminates how the community-oriented lifestyle expresses itself in the people's naming imagination. The woman is socially identified as one who is married to everyone in her husband's community. It is within this thinking that 'a community's naming practices can therefore reveal important information about deeply held identity constructs' (Shanmuganathan, et al. 2021, 2). This renaming-marriage nexus, apart from being consistent with the in-group identity maintenance goal, depicts naming as a significant aspect of the Bette people's social universe. However, for Betiang (2019) the naming practice in which a woman loses her name upon marriage and takes a new name is hugely wrapped in hegemonic patriarchy. The Bette marriage system is such that once a woman is married it is expected that she loses her space in her family because, apart from visiting, she is not expected to return home. For example, a girl-child is trained to endure a man so that when she gets married in the future she will be able to accommodate the excesses of her husband. This idea derives from the Bette philosophy in which divorce is totally discouraged. Within this traditional framework a woman becomes a member of the family she marries into, and is also the responsibility of every member of her new community. Even at the demise of her husband she remains the wife of the community. In this regard she can remarry any member of her community if she pleases. Apart from naming wives, parents, especially fathers, use *Úngìé* as part of their children's name to perform certain communicative acts. Some examples are presented on Table 2.

TABLE 2 *Ungie* and some of its variants

Name	Gloss
Úngìényòngúkìémá	She values her husband
Úngìéáwhúkìémá	The wife dominates her husband
Úngìéúbúã	The troublesome wife
Úngìéúgíòkìémá	She listens to her husband
Úngìékèn	The one/only wife
Úngìéákpéùshú	She has taken over the husband's home

These names, though given to girl-children, are reflective of the wife's character trait. Because the people 'believe that positive character traits command more dignity and stability in marriage' (Betiang 2019, 368), names such as *Úngìényòngúkìémá* (she values her husband) and *Úngìékèn* (the one/only wife) are given to female children as a husband's response to his wife's positive character. *Úngìékèn*, for example, is a name a man gives his daughter to register his indebtedness to his wife. Within this cultural context in which names are derived and negotiated, it means that the husband is so happy with his wife that it would be unthoughtful to marry another woman. Similarly, when the wife displays negative character traits names such as *Úngìéákpéùshú* (she has taken over the husband's home) and *Ungieubua* are heard in a home. *Úngìéúbùá* can be read as 'a woman who spits fire'. A wife can also use such names to express her dissatisfaction with her husband's negative behavior. However, the name is only used by the woman and is neither recognized within the community nor is it used as an official name. Names, then, are avenues through which various acts of gendered identities are performed and as means of engaging social contradictions. Based on the socio-onomastic framework, female children are given this regime of names as a form of cultural socialization toward heterosexuality as the only sexual path or orientation to follow in future life. Mensah (2022) argues that the names are also used to reinforce traditional gender roles of female homemaker versus male breadwinner. In this way, such names are expected to sustain gender-linked behavior.

Another dichotomy between female and male names is exemplified in the axiom of core names, ego-boosting names, and fun/nicknames (Ushie 2011; Aboh 2018; Nzuanke and Akpagu 2019; Betiang 2019). Regarding core names, the child is named by its father shortly after birth. However, the advent of Christianity has almost obliterated this naming practice (Aboh 2018). Some Christian families name their children seven days after the child's birth; if a

mother is unmarried her father or an uncle may name the child. This suggests that giving a child a core name is entirely a man's affair. The naming practice that mandates the man to name the child allows 'most families [to] perpetuate these naming traditions because of their desire to keep alive the memory of some dead forebears or relatives'. This naming process is done 'most times with little or no consideration for the intrinsic meaning of the name' (Betiang 2019, 365). In addition, it underprivileges the woman and places her on the fringes of existence since she does not have the right to name her own child. Even when the woman names a child it remains a 'house name', meaning that it is a name she alone uses.

An uncle or any close blood relative or a friend can assign ego-boosting names to a child. Such names often align with the traits the child 'portrays as well as the personality [social identity] of the child's parents' (Aboh 2018, 34). In this regard, Ushie (2011) notes that parents who call their daughters either *Úkwùdí* (money) or *Ùbáshá* (wealth) – currencies and symbolism of wealth – are expressing the idea that the child's bride-price (dowry) can bring wealth home. Such female names are prominent sites for the performance of masculinity and in enacting conformism to patriarchy and heterosexuality. If a man calls his son *Úhùbkìmbíddáng* (the one who uproots the cotton tree) it is clearly a statement that either directly refers to his own toughness or that he anticipates his son will have. This name reflects power, status, and social hierarchy, and defines the role of the boy-child as a social agent and carrier of the family bloodline. *Úkìmbíddáng* describes the thorny cotton tree that no one can climb. In some cases, names that were meant to boost a child's ego become permanent and serve as core names. There is a subtle gender ideology inherent in these examples based on the socio-onomastic reading. Male names are recreated as expressions of power that align with existing patriarchal norms, while female names only reflect concerns of marriage and brides' wealth that illuminate a history of inequality and prejudice against girl-children. In this way, we acknowledge the spectrum of ideologies of gender and sexuality embedded in Bette personal names.

5.1 *Female Bette-Christian Names*

An outstanding feature of Bette-Christian names is the use of the form *Únìm* (God), as either a prefix or suffix, as an indicator of piety. In addition to the foregoing, male children, not females, can be called *Únim*. Despite the people's immersion in Christianity their naming pattern still shows a distinction between males and females. The names *Kùkéúnìm* (little gift from God) and *Ámókèúnìmyé* (God's gift cannot be rejected) are examples of names that

come under the category of female names. One man narrated why he named his two daughters, who are the second to the last and the last, *Kùkéúnìm* and *Ámókéúnìmyé* respectively:

> I have five children, all of them females. When we had our first three female children, we [the man and his wife] became very worried. We needed a male child and we started praying to God to give us a male child. My wife got pregnant and we kept hoping it would be a male. When she came back from the scan and told me it was a girl, the name 'Kùkéúnìm' came to my mind. In our search for a male child my wife got pregnant the fifth time, and it was a female child again. My wife was the one who named her Ámókéúnìmyé.

The above quotation shows how onomasticon can reflect a people's beliefs about marriage and children. It is important to be married; it is a symbol of respect and acceptance. The social identity of the married couple becomes more worthy when the marriage is blessed with children. However, it becomes a problem both for the couple and their relatives if the marriage does not produce male children. The names in the narratives above therefore convey the parents' resignation to the will of God in being unable to have a male child. The choice of names is informed by the circumstances surrounding the children's births. Although these parents longed for male children, they expressed their submission to the will of God in the two daughters' names. These names served as consolation through the belief that every child comes from God as a gift, and it would be untoward to reject what comes from God. It is also noted that a girl-child is *Kùkéúnìm* (a little gift from God), which appears to place less value on her compared to the male equivalent, Únìmké (God's gift) (see Table 5), which is not qualified in terms of size. This category of names is also a critical reflection of power and hierarchy in the Bette religious context. Some examples of female names that resonate both with the Christian ideology and the circumstances that preceded the child's birth are demonstrated in Table 3.

The data in Table 3 shows that names are linguistic windows into people's state of mind as well as their perceptions of their maker. The name *Béyìnúnìm* (God's love) describes the name-giver's acknowledgment of God's unfailing love. In this way the child is seen as God's expression of his love to the family. The shortened form, *Bényìn* (love), recognizes the child as the apple of God's eye, and also conveys the message that everything about God is love. Similarly, the name *Únìmúyámì*, which translates to 'God is with/dwells with me', is a

TABLE 3 Female Bette-Christian names

Female names	Gloss
Béshíúnìm	God's mercy
Kùkéúnìm	Little gift from/of God
Ándórúnìmyé	God is unpredictable
Ámókèúnìmyé	God's gift can't be rejected
Bèyínúnìm	The love of God
Únìmúyámì	God is with me
ígórúnìm	I hear from God
Inùnúnìm	God's beauty
Kìndéúnìm	Light/countenance of God

declarative act that embodies the name-giver's appreciation of God's constant presence with him. A 45-year-old participant who named his daughter *Únìmúyámì* told the researchers:

> I had her (she is my third daughter) after a lot of things went wrong in my life. I was involved in many mishaps. My business was going down. It was difficult, really difficult. But you know, before she was born, things started to change. And one contract and things got back for good. It is only God that can turn things around for you. I just knew God is with me and will never let me down. That is why I named her so to acknowledge God.

In this context *Únìmúyámì* conveys the father's gratitude to God. The interviewee sees God as his fortress. These names are frameworks that enable the name-giver to enact a dialogue with the Supreme Being they venerate. *Béshìúnìm*, which is often shortened to *Béshì*, means 'God's mercy'. It is another example of how a name can function as a channel of communication between people and the transcendental being they serve or revere. Many Bette people use the name *Béshì* as a way of foregrounding God's abundant mercy, and they as a people whose survival is tied to God's mercy. Ninety-five percent of the participants held the view that God is especially merciful, and that all they have – money, houses, children, and material possessions – are given to them by God out of his ample mercy. *Béshì* is thus a name-giver's acknowledgment of God's clemency. One of the participants explained:

> I wouldn't have named this girl any other name than Béshì. You know, God is just super kind. After the kind of life I lived? And God gave me a

> child? Isn't he a merciful God? God hears everyone's prayers, the good, the bad, the ugly. God is not man.

The participant became emotional and started to sob. We later learned that she was a divorcee, and before she married she had been a 'runs girl' (a slang for one who was engaged in transactional sex) who had had a series of abortions. After ten years of marriage without a child, her husband left her for another woman. One year after her husband left, she got into a relationship and later had two children. The first was *Béshì* (mercy) and the second she called *Únìmúyíútsú* (God is king). Apart from the fact that these names are circumstantial, this way of naming a child suggests that 'religious identity relates to the way individuals understand themselves in relation to their external spiritual world' (Mensah 2020, 1). These female names illuminate how a name can become a site for the performance of religious identities.

As Mensah puts it, 'personal names are used as fixed boundaries and vehicles for situating religious beliefs and orientations' (2020, 14). The names detail a correlation between the way the Bette people construct social identities for the girl-child, revealing some striking resemblances in the way the girl-child is conceived in the Hebrew culture. Biblical references such as Proverbs 31:10–31, wherein a wife is said to be of 'noble character' only if she attends to the needs of her husband and children, and her dutifulness makes other people respect her husband, and Colossians 3: 18, in which the Apostle Paul encourages wives to be 'submissive' to their husbands are instances of that spiritual connection between Bette ideas and those of Christian ideology in terms of the way the woman is constructed spiritually and socially.

Christianity has become a determinative factor in the Bette onomasticon. Betiang is not unaware of the influence of Christianity and how its ideology contradicts itself in the naming modality of the people. He writes, 'Another trend in the cotemporary naming system in Bette is the mutation/revision of the original baptismal model towards the re-rendering of both Christian and native names, or altering the original meaning of the names to acquire a new religious significance' (2019, 365). As gleaned from our interviews, many Bette-Christians have been persuaded to abandon their core Bette names for Christian ones. The renaming of one's self, a kind of new consciousness that is given fervency by Christian ideology, is summarized in Table 4.

These names have been relexicalized to align with the bearers' new identity. Renaming one's self cuts across both genders, signaling some disconnectedness with the traditional Bette naming episteme we have highlighted above. These names are thought to be regressive, demonic, and unfashionable, and thus have to be reconfigured to resonate with the bearer's new identity. Christian adherents, especially the Pentecostal group, are encouraged 'to drop their African

TABLE 4 Renaming in Bette

Original name	Gloss	New name	Gloss
Ágíánpéh	deprived/denied/ bereft of praise/ thanks	*Ágíânpéh*	she sings praises
Áwhòbíwòm	Wealth	*Bíwòmúnìm*	Things of God
Ányìn	Sweetens the husband	*Ányìnújésú*	She sweetens Jesus
Áshìbébónyé	They don't appreciate her deeds	*Bébónyéúnìm*	They believe in God
Ákâmká	I have tried in vain or have failed to bring order	*Ákâmè*	I can bring/put things in order
Ápòbéndé	We (scatter) detest one another	*Ápèbéndé*	They praise one another
Úndìúgbéúndéyé	No one should progress than the other	*Lìgbébéndé*	We should make progress

names and adopt new names which must be located in the Bible' (Adie 2015, 431). Just as Adie recounts the transitional period that brought about the loss of core Bette names, Betiang (2019) also laments the abandonment of African names and how it causes a dislocation between local names and local identities. Adie argues that the first generation of Obudu Christians discarded Obudu names and adopted Christian or English ones such as 'Michael, Joseph, John, Polycarp, Justin, Godwin, Eugene, Patricia, David, Regina … instead of Obudu names like *Akwagiobe* (let me be quiet and hear what they will say), *Asheta* (it is another day/Each day comes with its trouble), *Akawu* (secretary/he who writes), *Udodor*, *Adie*, *Agaba* (Lion/Strength), etc. which [sic] meanings we all know' (2015, 432). As society continues to mutate, specifically from the 1990s to date, a new trend has manifested: there is a significant drop in the use of the above listed Christian names that Adie (2015) lists. Apart from the fact that Bette-Christians consider these names to be old-fashioned or outdated, the people feel that Bette names are rich enough to express their religious sentiments, and that they can still use Bette words to define their relationship with their maker. It is also a form of deconstruction. One of the participants mentioned that if God understands all languages it is pointless to continue to give their children foreign names, especially those whose meaning they do not know. Meaning and essence are the crux of this naming pattern among the

people. A new system of codifying religious identity among Bette-Christians illustrates a naming practice in which the names are Bette words but the names align strongly with Christian ideologies.

5.2 *Bette-Christian Male Names*

In Bette-Christian anthroponyms there are still names that are designated for males. As with their female counterparts, these names shed light on the people's religious cognition. For example, *Únim* means 'God' and *ke* translates to 'give'. *Únìmké* then translates roughly as 'God's gift'. It symbolizes the name-giver's recognition of children as gifts from God. *Únìmké* is slightly different in meaning from *Únìmnâúké* (it is God who gives). While *Unimke* is used specifically to acknowledge the child as a gift from God, *Únìmnâúké* is a name that pronounces the appearance of a child. *Únìmnâúké* can thus come as a mark of appreciation to God for an elevation in rank or status, or for some material wealth or possession. It suggests that the name frequently points to a historical moment in the people's social narratives, and extends beyond the name-giver's thought to incorporate the community's sense or notion of success. *Únìmnâúké* enables the name-giver to negotiate shared knowledge with members of his community. These onomastic procedures and their sociopragmatic significations are core to the Christian ideology. Some of these names are presented in Table 5.

The preceding sections of this study emphasized the circumstantial motivation of Bette-Christian names. *Únìmndébèshí* (God, have mercy) is an appeal to God to shower his mercy on the name-giver. *Únìmndébèshí* is an example of

TABLE 5 Bette-Christian male names

Male names	**Gloss**
Únìmké	God's gift
Únìmndébèshí	God, have mercy
Únìmúyí	God exists
Únìmùyìútsú	God is king/reigns over all
Ikèbúnìm	Power/strength of God
Únìmná	God's judgement
Kíwhâúnìmyé	It cannot be difficult for God
Únìmáshídòritìáng	God did it to set a precedence
Únìmnâúké	God is the one who gives
Lípéhúnìm	We praise God

a circumstantial name that creates a communication link between God and the name-giver. Two instances in which *Unìmnédebèshí* is given to a child are hereby explained. One participant recounted that he had been married for a long time, and when the marriage produced no children he repented. He started attending church and praying, and God answered and gave him a male child. When asked why he did not name the male child *Bèshí*, a female variant of *Únìmndébèshí*, he clarified that *Bèshí* is a female name, signifying that some Bette-Christians still believe in the dichotomy between male and female names. Another participant reported that he named his son *Únìmndébèshí* because it is an appeal to God to have mercy on him since he had lost three children. This kind of naming pattern acutely articulates the powerlessness of the name-giver and his dependence on a superior power for life and survival. *Únìmndébèshí* is therefore the participant's empathetic appeal to God to allow the child to stay. This evidence reveals that certain names are made to function as survival strategies and they are meant to guarantee their bearers' survival from infant mortality.

These names detail the relation between emotion and the circumstances surrounding a child's birth. One of the participants narrated that she named her son *Únìmáshídórtíâng* (God did it to set a precedent) because God gave her victory over her estranged husband. Her husband had accused her of barrenness and it led to their separation. After the separation she married another man and had a male child, proving that she was not barren. God gave her a child, a symbol of victory over her former husband's accusation. This shows that despite Bette-Christians' newfound faith and Christian ideals, the majority still place a high premium on children. This thinking resonates with the traditional Bette ideology 'that children are synonymous to joy, comfort, wealth and power' (Lamidi and Aboh 2011, 41). These names are layered with contextual significations. If we focus on the spirituality of the names alone, the other semantic values that the names exemplify would be neglected.

5.3 *Gender-Neutral Bette-Christian Names*

The desire to express one's religious identity in a name has brought about a shift in the way some Bette-Christians name their children, a system in which male and female children share the same name. This practice is entirely different from the core traditional Bette naming ideology in which female names are different from male ones. Examples of such names include *Ipéhúnìm* (God's praise/God be praised) and *Únìmáshí* (God has done well). This naming pattern, as our sample depicts, is prevalent among Pentecostal Christians. Both male and female children take up or are given these names. Other names that are shared by both males and females are summarized in Table 6.

TABLE 6 Gender-neutral names

Gender-neutral names	Gloss
Únìmáshí	God has done good
Únìmágìó	God has heard/answered my petition
Únìmágbéb	God is good/kind
Ipéhúnìm	Praise God/God's Praise
Líyíòúnìm	We are in God
Únìmúyílèbí	God owns everything
Áyánbíúnìm	None resembles/is like God
ìwhúúnìmyé	Nothing is beyond/difficult for God to do
Únìmnâúshìé	God does all things
Únìmúshámé	God is able/can do things

One of the participants made the case that since both male and female children are equal before God, children should be given names based on what the name signifies to the name-giver rather than allowing the biological sex of the child to determine its name. One lady in her midthirties explained why she named her child *Únìmágìó*:

> Six years of marriage, no child. No child! I was very worried because my childlessness became a constant source of trouble between my husband's people and me. My husband was not bothered but his people almost drove me out of their son's house. I started praying, my mother, siblings, and friends joined me in praying. God answered our prayer and gave me this child, and we named her so.

Únìmágìó (God heard) is therefore the name-giver's gratitude to *Únìm* (God) for answering her prayer. This name reverberates with the Christian ideology that God listens whenever he is called on. As is the case with many African cultures, in the Bette culture childlessness in a marriage is often blamed on the woman. This participant told us that she came under severe vituperation and psychological torture from her in-laws. She confessed that because of the pressure to have a child, she almost went 'out to test' if she could get pregnant, meaning that she almost engaged in extramarital sex in order to ascertain whether the childlessness was her fault or her husband's. This choice of euphemism exemplifies how the woman is sexually silenced by the dominant Bette patriarchal system where infertility is always blamed on the woman. From the account

of socio-onomastic theory, it is evident that a name like *Únìmágìó* is not only an acknowledgement of God's answer to the prayers of the name-giver but a way to record history and perpetuate the memory of her experience with her in-laws. This state of affairs justifies Rymes's claim (1996) that every name has a story behind it.

If names are the conveyors of people's religious sentiments that continuously reinforce community solidarity and cohesion, the Bette people's naming system confirms this. The Christian ideology in which everyone is God's creation and as such is equal before God is articulated in the names Bette-Christians give to their children. *Ipèhúnìm* (praise God/God's praise) is a popular name among Bette-Christians and is shared by both males and females. Intriguingly, its variant, *Lípéhúnìm* (we praise God) is reserved for male children. This naming pattern supports the social constructionist's ideology that upholds the unstable and consistently shifting nature of meaning and its stylization in Bette naming discourse. These names serve as emblems through which the people inscribe their new religious identity. Moreover, the fact that we have a corpus of gender-neutral names given by Bette-Christians is indicative of another significant way in which Christian-influenced anthroponyms are affecting the Bette worldview. The testimony of the participant who told us that she named her baby (girl) *Únìmágìó* because male and female children are equal before God demonstrates a Western/Christian ideology of equality that runs counter to Bette indigenous belief on the hierarchy of children that prioritizes male children. This is the reason why some names are males' exclusive reserve and by their names the Bette ethos is codified and projected. By neutralizing the gender specificity of names the Bette-Christian naming system is shifting that traditional worldview and projecting an alternative, if not a counter, cosmology. In this regard, socio-onomastic theory has provided sufficient insights into how personal names are used to sustain religious ideals. In the process, cultural practices such as sexist ideology and dominant power relations are brought to the fore. This position shows that names do not merely index solidarity, construct identity, or enact belonging; they reflect the social history of their bearers and givers.

6 Conclusion

One interesting finding from this study is that both traditional Bette names and Bette-Christian names are gender sensitive in that there is a distinction between female and male names. However, an intriguing finding is the non-differentiation between male and female names. This marks a shift from the

core Bette traditional naming pattern. Another noticeable shift is the context in which women name their children, as opposed to the typical, traditional naming system in which naming is the exclusive reserve of the man. As with the traditional Bette names, these Bette-Christian names make statements about specific events and circumstances. We adopted socio-onomastic theory to explain the changes Bette names have undergone due to the influence of Christianity, and the shift in the naming system that has symbolically resulted in changes in the social identity model and reconfigured social relations (Inyabri, Aboh and Mensah 2021). The act of giving Bette names to children is not a rejection of Christianity; rather, it is motivated by the meaning inherent in the names. These names thus function as a communicative channel between the name-giver and their maker. These names incarnate the people's religious ideology and serve as sources of memory retention of events that took place in the life of the name-giver and the community. This archival role is manifested in both core Bette traditional names and Christian-inclined ones. Although new Bette-Christians no longer take Christian names, a form of cultural revival is occurring: the names they give or take are Bette words, but the meanings express the ideology of their newfound faith. The analysis also illustrates that there are still traces of the cultural schemas of the Bette naming ideals in the new patterns of names that people give or take.

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