

Names | A Journal of Onomastics



Name This Child: Religious Identity and Ideology in Tiv Personal Names

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ans-names.pitt.edu

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Vol. 72 No. 4, Winter 2024

DOI 10.5195/names.2024.2716



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Abstract

This article investigates the motivations and ideological foundations of religion-based personal names among a sampled population of the Tiv community who are predominantly found along the middle Benue Valley in Benue State, North-central Nigeria. The names bestowed by adherents of different religions (traditional Tiv, Christianity and Islam) reflect a personally determined system of representation based on a belief in spiritual practices and icons like witchcraft, an afterlife, the influence of ancestors, and a supreme God. This investigation demonstrates how religious names in the Tiv sample reflect a strong symbolic association between the name-givers and their faith or beliefs. The names also provide a platform whereby religious adherents can initiate a dialogue with supernatural forces. Religion-based names also permit adherents to project a healthy self-image and create psychological unity thanks to the sense of protection that they are believed to confer.¹

Keywords: personal names, religion, identity, ideology, Christianity, Islam, Tiv

Introduction

Religious identity has been defined as the identification of an individual with a religious tradition (Mol 1976, 1979). Bell (2009) describes religious identity as a way that an individual relates to a transcendent being and/or to a sociocultural group which is predominantly characterized by a transcendent object. Taken together, religious identity relates to the way individuals understand themselves in relation to their external spiritual world. For many, religious beliefs are key to understanding and maintaining a positive self-concept as a spiritual person. Suel (1999) argues that because religions rest on metaphysical and ethical beliefs drawn from shared religious traditions, they have a key influence on the way individuals see themselves and the world. Moulin (2013) postulates that religions even have a greater influence on people than other kinds of beliefs because of their transcendental nature which is communicated in both text and practice.

In this study, I argue that among some Tiv people, naming and religious identity is a deliberate conscious strategy to not only associate with one's religious icons, totems, or a supreme being, but also express one's transcendental experience. The religious identity reflected in these names is based on a unique ideology of Tiv social solidarity, psychological unity and certainty for the future. In this paper, I examine the motivations for religion-based names among respondents in this community. I also investigate their categorisation and socio-onomastic significance within the Tiv cultural context. The Tiv naming system is a neglected linguistic culture in the West African onomastic tradition. The study aims to highlight the set of values, myths, and doctrines that help to shape naming practices among the Tiv. The purpose of this research is to help deepen our understanding of religious naming; and thereby illuminate the interface between naming, identity, and spiritual connectedness. The study is based on language ideology which examines deeply held beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about language use from within social and cultural context (Woodard 1998). As will be shown here, naming among the Tiv study participants is an essential component of their linguistic culture and is not immune to linguistic ideology. It is an aspect of language use and practice that encompasses their worldviews, belief systems, indigenous knowledge, emotion, and attitudes.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected using an ethnographic linguistic approach in the Gboko and Makurdi local government areas of Benue State, North-central Nigeria. Gboko is widely reputed as the ancestral home and traditional capital of the Tiv. Makurdi is the administrative capital of Benue State where the Tiv are a dominant ethnic group. More specifically, three-months of ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in which the interactions between name-givers, name-bearers, and name-users were recorded. The researcher also interacted with opinion leaders and traditional rulers who are culturally internal members of these Tiv communities. A sample of forty respondents were consulted.

The sample comprised 25 men (62.50%) and 15 women (37.50%) whose ages ranged between 25 and 87. Their occupational, educational, and religious backgrounds varied. Fifteen (37.50%) were graduates of higher institutions, 10 (25%) were high school or secondary school graduates, 10 (25%) had attained only basic literacy skills in primary school, and five (12.50%) indicated that they had been informally schooled. Twenty respondents (50%) were civil servants; and ten (25%) were artisans or handworkers such as traders, carpenters, masons, mobile phone repairers, and farmers. Fifteen respondents (37.50%) were Christians, ten (25%) worshipped a traditional African religion, and fifteen (37.50%) were Muslims. With the help of two language assistants in each area, random sampling was used to select respondents. The assistants were native speakers of Tiv, and aside from selecting study participants, their primary role was to facilitate communication between the respondents and the researcher who does not speak or understand the Tiv language. They also assisted in the recording and transcription of the data. The major criteria for respondent selection were their willingness to participate in the study and their either having religion-based names themselves or being parents to children who bore such names.

Participant observations, personal interviews, and metalinguistic conversations were the elicitation strategies employed in the data collection process. The researcher studied the real-world experience of members of the two communities in terms of their naming practices, observed the behaviour of religion-based name-bearers, and participated in various sociocultural activities in which personal names were used (e.g. ceremonies, festivals, and story-telling). The respondents were asked series of open-ended questions concerning the choice of religion-based names and their subjective onomastic interpretations. The questions specifically explored the relationship between the names, their givers, and the respondents' religious ideologies. Parental respondents were asked to offer personal narratives on the kind of experience, situations, or beliefs which motivated their selection of religion-based names for their children. The researcher also attempted to understand the perception and attitude towards this category of names by engaging some respondents in casual conversations about the frequency and significance of religion-based names in their community.

An audio recorder and field notes were used to document the interactions. All interviews and conversations were transcribed. A corpus of 120 religion-based names was generated in the field. The names were coded based on their respective religious frames, translated and transcribed. Only names that were based upon a religious belief were selected. The descriptive method of analysis was adopted in the data analysis and interpretation. This method enabled the researcher to summarize data in a meaningful way and to see the patterns emerged. It also helped the researcher to interpret the main features of the data. As will be shown below, this analysis of the religion-based named gathered offered important insights into respondents' views, actions, or perceptions in relation to their religious ideology.

Results and Analysis

In the analysis that follows, I present the religion-based Tiv names that were identified as a part of this study. In this presentation, I identify the relevant religious sources for these names (i.e. from the traditional Tiv, Christian, or Muslim faiths). I then detail the semiotic or pragmatic interpretations and perceptions of the names.

Names Based on Traditional Tiv Religions

The belief in witchcraft was a major source of personal names among respondents. Before the advent of Christianity, some Tiv people believed in Tsav 'witchcraft' and its influence over fortune or misfortune. Still today, conservative members of the Tiv society maintain that Tsav is responsible for every action or inaction in their community. Tsav is a practice and belief in magical powers and abilities. According to one respondent, in ancient Tiv history, Tsav as a religion was not singularly negative, as it is commonly stereotyped in the post-modern era. According to another study participant, belief in Tsav is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the Tiv people. It affects every facet of their social, cultural, and spiritual lives; and is used to explain misfortune, ill-health, poor harvest, or even death. In this investigation, the following names are based on the Tiv belief in Tsav (Table 1).

Table 1: Tiv Personal Names Influenced by the Practice of Witchcraft

| Name | Transcription | Gloss |
|------------|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Tsáv | [tsav] | witchcraft |
| Mbá-tsáv | [mbatsav] | witches/wizards |
| Tsáv-hèmbá | [tsavhembá] | Witchcraft is superior. |
| Tsáv-kohol | [tsavkohol] | Witchcraft has surrounded (me). |
| Tsáv-tím | [tsavtim] | Witchcraft has destroyed (me). |
| Tsáv-yángè | [tsav-yañe] | Witchcraft has obstructed (me). |
| Tsáv-wùá | [tsavwua] | Witchcraft has killed (me). |
| Tsáv-nándè | [tsavnandè] | Witchcraft has damaged (me). |
| Tsáv-ngèè | [tsavŋɜ:] | Witchcraft is widespread. |

These names are a reflection of the continued existence of the practice of Tsav within the Tiv community. Based on my findings, name-givers often expressed spiritual attacks, in one form or another, through these names. According to Mensah et al. (2019), such Tsav-related names are not actually aimed at celebrating the practice of witchcraft. Instead, they are an acknowledgement of the existence of unresolved conflicts or tensions with witches or other spiritual forces. One respondent explained that such names are often used as an expression of the namer’s desire to subdue the pernicious effect or disruptive influence of witches. According to the study participants, these names are believed to be an invitation for healing and reconciliation. They are given to guarantee the well-being and security of both the name-giver and bearer. Another respondent argues that naming children after an experience with Tsav is a way of protecting such children from witchcraft attacks. The respondent was asked why he had chosen to name his son Mbà-tsàv ‘wizard’. gave the following reasons:

Wan wam ka ormbatsav ga. Iti na ikyagh ki tomov ki hendan a tahav mbu utsa man agee a mba imegh. Ngu a tahav mbu kighir nyi tyo^ utsa man tahav mbu shon due ken iti na. [My son is not a wizard. His name is a tool for resisting the influence of witchcraft and supporting the spiritual transformation of his personhood. He has the power to overcome every witchcraft attack; and that power is in his name].

The respondent’s reasons demonstrate how such names are utilized as shields against spiritual insecurity. These names are meant to hide the identity of name-bearers against malignant underworld forces (Obeng 1998). Additionally, these names also reinforce social solidarity with the assumed witchcraft cult.

The belief in Tsav was not the only onomastic motivation rooted in traditional Tiv religion. Reincarnation was another. Among the Tiv, many believe firmly in the existence of an afterlife, (i.e., the belief that after death an individual will start a new life in a different physical body). The belief in the cyclical nature of human life which allows a soul to return is also prevalent among other tribes in Nigeria like the Yoruba (*Ábíkú*), Igbo (*Ógbánjé*), Èfik (*Èkà-Ábàsi*) and Ibibio (*EÉsén émanà*) Among the Tiv, these names are given particularly to children whose parents, grandparents, or other ancestors are believed to have transmigrated into a newborn. Examples of such names that were identified in this study are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Tiv Personal Names Influenced by a Belief in Reincarnation

| Name | Transcription | Gloss |
|----------|---------------|-------------------------|
| Tèr-hídè | [tɜ:hide] | Father has returned. |
| Ngô-hídè | [ŋgɔhide] | Mother has returned. |
| Tèr-ndèr | [tɜ:ndɜ:] | Father has resurrected. |
| Ngô-ndèr | [ŋgɔndɜ:] | Mother has resurrected. |
| Tèr-dùè | [tɜ:due] | Father has resurrected. |
| Ngô-dùè | [ŋgɔdue] | Mother has resurrected. |
| Tèr-wám | [tɜ:wam] | Father has compensated. |
| Ngù-ùma | [ŋgu:ma] | He lives. |

The sub-category of names shown above is used as a form of ancestor veneration. In this name-giving practice, a name-bearer is seen as a formerly deceased family member who has not only returned, but is now a source of tribal wisdom, tradition, and stability (Mensah 2015). Generally speaking, in communities that believe in reincarnation, death “does not alter or end the life or the personality of an individual but only causes a change in its condition” (Anderson 2005, 1). This perspective is directly in line with the Tiv traditional belief

system. Children whose names are inspired by this idea frequently allude to the physical resemblance and other shared physical attributes between the new-born child and the ‘reincarnated’ ancestor. According to Rossi (1965), this pattern of naming may be a symbolic means of linking the parents and their children to some emotionally significant aspects of the past. Through a name-bearer, the memory of the ancestor is rejuvenated and enlivened. For McAndrew, King, and Honoroff (2002), this type of naming is a form of expressive culture that announces genetic kinship and assists in procuring future investment of resources from relatives. Generally speaking, this name giving practice helps “to establish stronger connections between name-bearers and their relatives” (Close 2002, 128). It is important to note that this ancestral cultural naming tradition is anthropocentric in nature and is conferred on dead family members who were accorded ‘proper’ burial. It is believed that only those relatives who lived decent lives and died can return as ancestors to their families. Wicked people or evil-doers cannot be used as name-sakes in the Tiv tradition.

There was another death-related theme found in the names motivated by traditional Tiv religious beliefs. These names are generally used to express the state of despair, helplessness, and hopelessness of the name-giver. Examples of this sub-category of names can be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Tiv Personal Names Related to Death

| Name | Transcription | Gloss |
|----------|---------------|---------------------------|
| Á-wár-kù | [awa:ku] | Let him escape death. |
| m-wár | [mwa:] | I have survived. |
| Kù-bèè | [kubɜ:] | Death is over. |
| Kù-bùndè | [kubundə] | Death has been cancelled. |
| K-kíghír | [kuki:] | Death has stopped. |
| Kù-vísa | [kuvisa] | Death surrounds. |

Death-related names, according to Doyle (2008), reflect parents’ attitude toward infant mortality. They may reflect the way Africans generally perceive infant death in the past. Name-givers in this study usually used these names to commemorate their experiences surrounding the death of their children. Mensah (2015) maintains that such names are used to recognize the existence of a superior power that holds the key to life and death; and to question the uncertainty and temporality of life. Among the respondents in this investigation, this group of names provided some psychological relief and represented the name-givers’ attempts to guarantee the survival of the name bearer. As one respondent reported this sub-category of names is usually given by parents who have suffered the misfortune of infant mortality many times. These names are, therefore, are given as forms of assurance that this family affliction will come to an end.

Finally, I also found that ritual objects serve as an inspiration for personal names among some of the Tiv respondents who adhered to traditional religious beliefs. Such objects are mainly used in religious worships and ceremonies. They are utilized to sustain ritual communication between the sacred and the living (Mensah 2017). Examples of such names identified in this research are shown in table 4.

Table 4: Tiv Personal Names Based on Ritual Objects

| Name | Transcription | Gloss |
|------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| Mkù | [mku] | ancestors’ food |
| Áwámbe | [awambe] | blood |
| Í-nyùr | [iŋgyu:] | feathers |
| Í-kyèhègh | [ikyəhə] | alligator pepper |
| Mtwùwèn | [mtuhəm] | ashes |
| Í-jòndòugh | [ijondu:] | calabash |
| Koròugh | [korou] | ritual horn |
| Gbátsèngè | [gbatsəñə] | potsherd |
| Ányí-shòhò | [anyíʃohò] | cowrie shells |
| Í-shor | [iʃɔ:] | divination |
| Wùhè | [wuhə] | a spell from evil spirits |
| Wùhè | [ifian] | curse |
| Jíjínjí | [jijinjí] | spirit |
| Ákombo | [akombo] | mystical forces |
| Swèm | [swəm] | oathtaking |

The religious objects that inspire such names are often used during ritual ceremonies in which adherents seek healing, fertility, protection from evil, and blessing from spiritual forces. One of the respondents interviewed maintained that some of such name-inspiring objects may have been instrumental in the safe delivery of the name-bearer. For instance, ancestors may be ceremonially given a particular food by a person requesting the help of forbearers to conceive. An infant who is born after this ceremony may be given the name of that sacrificial food object, irrespective of the child’s gender. The religious objects used for these naming practices embody the beliefs, myths, and legends attached to the rituals (Mbiti 1991) as shown in the following respondent’s explanation for naming his son *Á-wámbe* ‘blood’:

M yer un me awambe sha ci u a ka mtsaase u uma. Awambe tile sha ityough ki aeren a ityo^o^ man mcivir u or-il man aeren a ve; a ka gbenda u zuan a kwaghyan, a ka a zua se a mbayiase, man a kange icombor man ityo^ kwagh mo^m. M vo^su kwase kuma anyom pue-kar-ataan, a wan shio. M nav iniav sha zende-nya cii man ngo^ na amase jiren iyol a mar un ye. [I call him *Á-wámbe* because blood is the sanctity of life. Blood has deep representations in African culture and religion: it is a source of food; it connects us with our ancestors; and it binds families and communities together. I was married for fifteen years without being able to have a child. I carried out many animal sacrifices with his mother before he could be conceived and born].

This explanation details how blood is a ritualized object in the Tiv cultural tradition, and how name-giving is an onomastic symbol of an ancestral blood sacrifice. In this socio-cultural onomastic tradition, the name-bearer is generally believed to have emerged from the afterlife (Gottlieb, Graham, and Gottlieb-Graham 1998).

Among the traditional Tiv worshipers, the following naming practice was found regardless of the name sub-category. Either the eldest member of the extended family or the compound head names the child immediately after birth (Bohannon and Bohannon 1953). This traditional name is usually followed by other names given by each of the child’s parents. This practice explains why some Tiv children have several personal names.

Names Based on the Tiv Belief in Christianity

I discovered many names based on a belief in a Supreme Being named *‘Áondo’*. According to Atel (2004), *Aondo* is believed to be transcendental and eternal. He lives beyond the skies, and is said to be involved in the activities of the earth. It is the recognition of the supremacy and transcendental nature of *Aondo* that Tiv Christians seek to glorify, esteem, and exalt this Supreme Being via naming. Tiv names in this sub-category are furnished in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: Tiv Personal Names Based on Christianity

| Name | Transcription | Gloss |
|------------|---------------|------------|
| Áondo | [aɔndo] | God |
| Jígh-jígh | [dʒi:dʒi:] | faith |
| Mgèm-shímá | [mgemʃíma] | repentance |
| Tár-tor | [ta:tɔ] | heaven |
| Myom | [myəum] | salvation |
| Í-vyándè | [iviandə] | miracle |

Table 6: Tiv Personal Names That Express a Christian Exhortation

| Name | Transcription | Gloss |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Áôndo-ngù | [andɔŋgu] | God exists. |
| Aôndo-ngù-shà | [aɔndɔŋguʃa] | God is above. |
| Á-gbá-tar | [agbata:] | He created the world. |
| Aôndo-vèr | [aɔndovɜ:] | God has blessed. |
| Áôndo-ná | [aɔndona] | God has given. |
| Áôndo-wásè | [aɔndowasə] | God has helped. |
| Áôndo-sùr | [aɔndosu:] | God has comforted. |
| Tílè-néngè | [tilənəŋgə] | Stand and see. |
| Dé-néngè | [dənəŋgə] | Wait and see. |
| Tèr-èsè-m-mlíam | [tɜ:səsəm'liam] | God has wiped my tears. |
| Tèr-kímbí | [tɜ: kimbi] | The Lord has paid back. |
| Civir-ter | [tʃivi:tɜ:] | Worship the Lord. |

The names in Tables 5 and 6 were used only by respondents who are Christians. It is interesting to note that these names were accepted in addition to the Biblical names for baptism ceremonies in most of the orthodox churches of the Tiv community studied. The exception was the Catholic Church which only allowed saints names to be given during baptism or confirmation. The names in Table 5 depict values and key doctrinal concepts in Christianity. Respondents in this study indicated that bestowing such names compelled the name-bearers to live in accordance with the doctrine of the faith. For example, one respondent reported that his child's name was *Tílè-néngè* 'Stop and see'. According to the participant, this name is an abridged form of the sentence 'Stop and see what the Lord will do in my life'. A similar narrative was given by another study participant to explain the name *Dé-néngè* 'Wait and see'. This name is a clipped form of "Wait and see what the Lord will do in my life". These and other names in this sub-category were given to children during Baptism to symbolise the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. The names are a sign of sanctification and signify the cleansing rite and a new covenant. Moreover, the name-givers interviewed explained that among the Tiv community such names are to speak directly to God, fulfil sacred promises to God, and speak indirectly the future hope and expectations. This is shown in the following explanation given by a respondent about the choice of her daughter's name *Í-vyándè* 'miracle':

Se (mbamaren) to^o iti na hingir se kwagh u wuese iveren i Ao^ondo ken uuma asew man shi u kaven kwagh u myer u mlu na. Uiviande kpishi ve er hen tsonbor sha m-mar na; mba ve to^o ter na tom la hide a na ke tom er a ya ican anyom kar er pue nahan, man angbian wam u tswen ke mba nomso hime iyongo a kwase na ve pav kera yo, kper nan u a mar wan wam u kwase la. [We (the parents) use her name to express our appreciation for the blessings of God in our lives and to understand the mystery of His being. Many 'miraculous events' happened in the family prior to her birth: her father was recalled by his former employers after ten years, and my only brother reconciled with his estranged wife the same day she was born].

This respondent's explanation suggests that there are multifunctional uses of Christianity-based names among the Tiv community. In addition to signaling a strong affiliation with the Christian faith, these names were used by the respondents to document significant socio-historical events and circumstances at the time of the name-bearer's birth. The investigation into Tiv naming practices supports the claim that in African cultural traditions, whether secular or religious, naming choices are neither decided arbitrarily nor are they lacking in meaning (Mensah and Mekamgoum 2017).

As one study respondent revealed, during the baptismal sacrament, the pastor traditionally issued the following declaration to the parents: "Name this child!" Tiv parents then reportedly respond with the name of their choice. This description is in agreement with Bulliet's (1978) claim that one of the opportunities for the exercise of free will by most parents are the bestowal of names upon their children. Bourdieu (1991) agrees with this claim as the ability to bestow names is part of one's cultural capacity to act with agency.

The data in Table 6 represents the Christian-based names that declare God's existence and express compassion towards needy name-givers who were either afflicted or oppressed. These names present God as a

moral judge, a liberator, and the last hope for justice, fairness, and equity. Some of the respondents interviewed indicated that they knew of name-givers who had encountered tragedy prior to the birth of name-bearers. These difficulties included still birth, miscarriage, and other reproductive health challenges that the name-givers felt warranted God’s mercy and compassion.

Another sub-category of Christian-based names within the Tiv community is translated names of Biblical figures. These names were adapted phonologically to align with the sound system of Tiv. Based on field observations, these names are bestowed with the hope that the name-bearers’ life experience will be characterized by the positive values and heroic deeds these Biblical figures represented. Examples of these names are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Phonologically Adapted Tiv Personal Names Inspired by Biblical Figures

| Name | Transcription | Gloss |
|---------|---------------|----------|
| Pétéru | [pitəru] | Peter |
| Paúlú | [pɔlu] | Paul |
| Saúlú | [sɔlu] | Saul |
| Andèria | [ændiria] | Andrew |
| Móse | [mouzi] | Moses |
| Yákób | [yɛəkɔb] | Jacob |
| Yésù | [yɛəsɪ] | Jesus |
| Sefánu | [seifanu] | Stephen |
| Yehémía | [yehimaiə] | Jeremiah |
| Isáka | [isaka] | Isaac |
| Yohàne | [yohæne] | John |
| Yóbù | [youbu] | Job |

According to one respondent, names like those listed above were important inspirational characters as they all died in faith. Parents, therefore, embrace them as role models. Children are named after these figures with the belief that the peculiar values they represent will be central to the name-bearer’s self-development and will guide their interaction with the wider world. It is important to note that the Christian worshippers in the Tiv community studied name their children seven days after birth as instructed in their teachings. The name which is given by either of the parents is then re-emphasized during the child’s baptism or confirmation.

Names Based on the Tiv Belief in Islam

The last category of names involves those bestowed by the Muslim population within the Tiv community to reinforce and sustain their Islamic identity. Based on my research, indigenous Muslim presence in Tivland only began a few decades ago. The Tiv were never conquered and converted en mass to Islam like other indigenous ethnic groups in Nigeria. However, trade, migration, establishment of Qur’anic schools, and interethnic marriage have facilitated the spread of Islam in Tivland (Abdulkadir 2011). The present population of Muslims in the Benue State is estimated to be six percent of the total population. This percentage amounts to approximately 5 million people according to Nigerian demographic census data from 2006 (Ibrahim 2012). One respondent in this investigation stated that Tiv who practice Islam is usually maligned and stigmatized by the dominant Christian population. This apparent discrimination may have the effect of encouraging this minority to bond more with their Islamic than their ethnic identity. One way of accomplishing this connection is through naming. Examples of Islam-based names that were identified in this research are furnished in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8: Tiv Personal names Inspired by Islamic Figures

| Name | Transcription | Gloss |
|---------|---------------|---------|
| Ádámú | [ædamu] | Adam |
| Músá | [mása] | Moses |
| Yúsúf | [yusuf] | Joseph |
| Máriám | [mæriam] | Mary |
| Ísiáká | [isaku] | Isaac |
| Yákúbú | [yakubu] | Jacob |
| Ísáh | [isa] | Jesus |
| Íbrahím | [Ibrahim] | Abraham |
| Ísmailà | [ismaila] | Ishmael |
| Yàhàya | [yahaya] | John |
| Júbríl | [dʒubril] | Gabriel |

Table 9: Tiv Personal Names Based on Islamic Traditions and Virtues

| Name | Transcription | Gloss |
|----------|---------------|---------------------------|
| Dánjúmà | [dændʒume] | born on Friday |
| Asábar | [asæba] | born on Saturday |
| Tálátù | [talatu] | born on Tuesday |
| Násirù | [nasiru] | victory |
| Áminá | [amina] | Trustworthy |
| Úmàr | [uma:] | Life |
| Súleimàn | [sulæmæn] | man of peace |
| Gíwá | [giwa] | gift of Allah |
| Mústáphà | [mustafa] | the chosen one |
| Fátímà | [fætima] | one who weans or abstains |
| Sháibù | [ʃai:bu] | Allah's gift |

As shown above, some Islam-based personal names found during this research are taken from the names of notable figures and prophets in the Koran. Islamic values and norms are also represented. According to one respondent, giving Muslim-based names to his children was of great importance to him. He stated that finding Islam-based names that fit his children essence and future aspirations was key. Another respondent indicated that it is conventional for all Muslims to give their children Islamic names before they can later earn other additional names. Although he admitted that some adherents of Islam are breaking away from this practice, he believed that the names he had given to his children would affect their future positively and make them more fulfilled individuals. A respondent who named his son, *Mustapha* 'the chosen one' maintained that:

Iti ne ngi a tahav mbu gba-ao^ndo man a tile sha ityough ki ityesen man mbamhen mba gber-ichur-inya. I bugh ian i nam mtilé do^o^ng sha mlu mo^m u uma wam man tsombor wam vea ityesen man ieren i mlu u gberen-ichur-nya. [The name has a divine essence and is based on Islamic teaching and philosophy. It provides a window into a strong family life and reflects my family's socio-historical affiliation with Islam].

This respondent further explained that this name has its roots in Arabic, and reflects the character and attributes of Allah. In this study and has been found elsewhere (Askuri and Kuipers 2018), the bestowal of Arabic names is used as an expression of Islamic faith, and is used to reinforce Islamic identity.

Further names in this category are those that are based on Islamic traditions and virtues. Also included in this grouping were names that reflected parents' prayers for the name-bearers, for example, the wish that the name-bearer be victorious, trustworthy, and live a peaceful life. One respondent claimed that bearers of such names are naturally motivated to live in accordance with the dictates of their religion. Another respondent who named his son Umar 'life' gave the reasons for naming his son:

Sha ityesen i gber-ichur-nya yo^, m ngu a ikyo i wan sha ati a nan mbayev av. Ati nga ve a za-iyol i mbya er ichan i u ange, ikyo^r-(iyol) ibo man mbamzeiyol wuee sha mlu u Or. Uma yo^ ka u nan iyol hen Ao^ndo sha u a ko^o^m m lu u wan wam-u- nomso. [Going by my Islamic teachings, I am careful about the names I bestow upon my children. There are names that bring calamities such

as poor health, bad luck, attacks and social suffering. Umar 'life' represents absolute obedience to Allah and expresses my prayer that Allah will direct the course of my son's life].

This respondent's explanation reveals that this choice of name is informed by a deep-rooted Islamic identity and belief that Allah is the guide for all wise decisions. Among the respondents, such names were believed to constitute a vital aspect of the bearers' well-being, and serve as a motivation to behave according to the tenets communicated by the name.

According to my research, Muslims in the Tiv community studied named their children immediately after birth as a 'divine injunction', just in case the child suffers an early death. According to one study respondent, this practice is followed because, according to their faith, on the day of resurrection, everyone will be called by his or her name. If a child dies without a name, it is the parent who will be held responsible for the oversight. On the seventh day, an elaborate ceremony which involves the killing of a ram is celebrated with relatives, friends, and neighbors. This feast is called "Agiqah". Afterwards, the child's chosen name is re-confirmed and his or her hair is shaved to mark the end of the naming rite and the beginning of the name-bearer's life as a bona fide member of his or her family and community.

An interesting aspect of religious-based naming practices among the sampled Tiv population in this study is that sometimes Muslim parents bestowed their children names that were considered to be Christian and conversely Christian parents sometimes bestowed names considered to be Islamic. This naming practice might be explained by the sustained history of cultural contact between the two religious groups. Among the Muslim members of the community, this practice could also be followed to gain a greater acceptance by the dominant Christian population. For the Christian members, this practice might reflect a desire to show community solidarity. As Kuiper and Askuri (2017) succinctly observe, giving Christian children Islamic names is not so much a personal endorsement of Islamism as it is a resourceful mechanism for positioning and functioning in a complex modern world. Such a naming trend can facilitate the promotion of unity, inter-religious co-operation, and socio-cultural understanding within the Tiv community.

Summary and Conclusion

In this study, I have shown how naming is a productive site for the performance of religious identity among a sample of Tiv people living in North-central Nigeria. Personal names are used as fixed boundaries and vehicles for situating religious beliefs and orientations. The Tiv society comprises of a multiplicity of cultural values, religious beliefs and social lifestyles. As demonstrated in this ethnographic research, personal names can become powerful identifying resources of this multicultural diversity.

In this article, I have also demonstrated how personal names are used by the respondents to construct, perform, and reinforce their religious identities. To these respondents, religious identity is a social capital which simultaneously reinforces community solidarity and cohesion, at the same time that it distinguishes one religious group from another. Amongst the research participants studied for this work, religious identification via personal names was driven by the name-givers' transcendental experiences or spiritual desire to connect the name-bearer to a supernatural being. The name-givers consulted explained that, for them, there is an inescapable relationship that exists between personal names, religion, and well-being. Among the participants in this community, the name-bearers believe that their names act like protective shields that guard them against the malicious wishes of enemies and hatemongers. For this community, religion-based names are, therefore, an effective means of coping with life's personal challenges. They provide a vehicle for self-representation and consolidation of communal beliefs and worldviews. Religion-related names for the Tiv represented in this work provide an ideological linguistic tool to (re)connect adherents to their faiths, (re)direct their spiritual paths, and to communicate with supernatural forces and/or ancestors.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers and the Editor for their constructive feedback and insights which greatly improved the quality of this article. I wish to thank Dr. Jighjigh Ishima and Prof. Terver Udu (Benue State University) for their translation and transcription assistance, as well as all the respondents who participated in this study. In particular, I would like to thank Terhile Alagh and Sunda Judith for sharing their in-depth knowledge and perspectives on Tiv names and culture. I also thank Dr. Kirsty Rowan (SOAS, University of London) for critiquing an earlier draft of this article. The remaining errors are mine.

Notes

¹ To see the original version of this article which was released online 12 March 2020, see: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00277738.2020.1731239>

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Notes on Contributor

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