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**THE SOCIO-SEMANTICS OF AFO NAMES IN NASARAWA LOCAL
GOVERNMENT AREA OF NASARAWA STATE**

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Abstract

This study investigates the onomastic and semantic significance of Afo names in Nasarawa Local Government Area, Nasarawa State, with the aim of explaining how they encode cultural values, beliefs, and social experiences beyond mere identification. Anchored in onomastic and semantic theory, the research examines Afo names as non-sentential lexical forms whose meanings are realized through cultural symbolism and social interpretation rather than communicative performance. A qualitative descriptive design was adopted, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with elders, name-bearers, and community members, complemented by observations in three Afo-speaking communities: Apawu, Kana, and Udege. Qualitative analysis of ten selected names reveals distinct semantic domains and cultural motivations reflecting nature, environment, emotion, spirituality, ritual life, family narratives, and social status. Names such as Uperemi (“vulture”) and O’guzeh (“road”) encode environmental experience and endurance, while Ukpo (“God”) and Ogba (“born during deity festival”) reflect spiritual belief and ritual affiliation. Onye (“happiness”) and Ukpomo (“death”) preserve emotional and existential meanings, and Osu (“king”) encodes leadership and social hierarchy. These names function as semantic repositories of cultural knowledge that reinforce identity, collective memory, and social cohesion. The study concludes that Afo names are enduring linguistic artifacts that sustain cultural heritage and worldview amid pressures of language endangerment.

Key Keywords: Socio-Semantics, Afo, Names, Nasarawa Local Government Area, Nasarawa State

1. INTRODUCTION

Names in indigenous societies function as vital cultural and linguistic markers through which communities encode history, belief systems, social values, and worldviews. Among the Afo people of Nasarawa Local Government Area, Nigeria, personal names extend beyond mere identification to reflect birth circumstances, spiritual beliefs, environmental realities, ritual events, and social roles. Unlike naming systems such as Yoruba, where many personal names are realized as full sentential or predicative constructions, Afo personal names are predominantly lexical and nominal forms rather than complete utterances. Consequently, their meanings are not derived from communicative or performative speech functions but from semantic content and culturally shared interpretation.

This study therefore undertakes an onomastic and semantic analysis of Afo personal names, examining how meaning is embedded in names as cultural symbols rather than as speech acts. Onomastics, as the scholarly study of names, provides an appropriate framework for understanding how names function as repositories of collective memory, identity, and worldview within a speech community. Through this approach, the study explores how Afo names encode social experiences, cosmological beliefs, emotional states, and communal values as stable identity markers, without functioning as communicative acts in interaction.

The Afo language, also known as Eloyi, is spoken mainly in Nasarawa and Benue States in north-central Nigeria, with an estimated population of about 105,000 to 110,000 speakers. Classified within the Niger-Congo language family, Afo is currently endangered due to the increasing dominance of Hausa and English, driven by urbanization, formal education, and intermarriage. Traditional naming practices, drawing from nature, deities, festivals, masquerades, and life events, constitute a significant aspect of Afo cultural heritage. Documenting and analyzing these names from an onomastic and semantic perspective is therefore crucial for cultural preservation and for expanding African naming studies, particularly in relation to under-documented minority languages.

Despite the cultural richness of Afo personal names, scholarly attention to their semantic and onomastic significance remains limited. Existing studies on the Afo

people and language have largely focused on historical origins, sociolinguistic endangerment, or dialectal variation, with little emphasis on how names function as culturally motivated symbols of meaning. In addition, some earlier approaches have applied pragmatic or speech-act frameworks to indigenous naming systems without sufficient consideration of structural differences across languages.

In the case of Afo, most personal names are not constructed as sentences and therefore do not perform communicative or illocutionary functions in the strict linguistic sense. Applying speech-act or communicative models to such names risks theoretical mismatch and analytical distortion. This gap necessitates a shift toward an onomastic and semantic approach that accounts for how meaning is culturally assigned, interpreted, and preserved in personal names. Furthermore, the gradual decline of the Afo language threatens the continued transmission of these names and their meanings, making systematic documentation and scholarly analysis both urgent and necessary. The objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify and document personal names used among Afo speakers in Nasarawa Local Government Area.
2. Examine the semantic meanings and cultural motivations underlying Afo personal names as reflections of social experience and worldview.

This study focuses on the onomastic and semantic analysis of Afo personal names in the Apawu, Kana, and Udege communities within Nasarawa Local Government Area, where traditional naming practices remain active. Data are drawn from qualitative interviews and participant observation, and names are categorized according to thematic domains such as nature, spirituality, ritual life, birth circumstances, emotions, family narratives, and social roles.

The scope of the study is limited to the meaning, symbolism, and cultural interpretation of Afo personal names. It does not examine communicative or speech-act functions, nor does it address phonological or morphological structures of names. In addition, the study is restricted to contemporary Afo naming practices within Nasarawa Local Government Area and does not extend to historical linguistics, comparative onomastics, or Afo communities outside the study area.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

Language

Language is a complex system of communication that enables humans to express thoughts, emotions, and intentions through structured sounds, symbols, or gestures. Saussure (65) defines language as a system of arbitrary signs, where meaning arises from social conventions rather than inherent connections between words and their referents. Chomsky (21) views language as an innate cognitive faculty, governed by Universal Grammar, suggesting a biological basis for linguistic structures across cultures. Sapir (134) emphasizes language as a cultural tool, shaping thought and reflecting a community's worldview, while Whorf (92) extends this idea through the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, arguing that language influences cognitive patterns and perception.

Critics of Saussure's view argue that the arbitrariness of signs overlooks the role of iconicity, where some linguistic forms mimic their referents, as seen in onomatopoeia (Perniss et al. 12). Chomsky's Universal Grammar has faced criticism for underestimating cultural and environmental influences on language development, with scholars like Tomasello (45) advocating for usage-based theories that prioritize social learning. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, particularly its strong form, is contested for overstating linguistic determinism, as empirical studies show cognition can operate independently of language in certain contexts (Pinker 67).

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of how context shapes meaning in language use, focusing on implied meanings, speaker intentions, and social conventions beyond literal content. Levinson (56) defines pragmatics as the analysis of meaning derived from contextual cues, such as deixis, where terms like "here" or "I" depend on the communicative situation. Grice (45) describes pragmatics through conversational implicature, where meaning is inferred via cooperative principles like relevance and quantity. Austin (88) and Searle (34) define pragmatics through speech acts, where utterances perform actions like requesting or promising, determined by context.

Critics note that Levinson's focus on deixis may oversimplify the complexity of contextual factors, as non-linguistic cues like gestures also shape meaning (Kendon 23). Grice's cooperative principles are criticized for assuming universal adherence, ignoring cultural variations where indirectness or non-cooperation is normative (Wierzbicka 89). Speech act theory faces challenges in categorizing ambiguous utterances, as cultural differences can blur distinctions between act types, complicating universal application (Hymes 56).

Context

Context refers to the circumstances surrounding communication that influence meaning interpretation. Halliday (29) defines context as the situational and cultural framework shaping linguistic choices, encompassing physical settings and social norms. Hymes (56) views context as a composite of elements like participants, setting, and norms, structuring speech events. Mey (76) emphasizes context as essential for pragmatic interpretation, enabling inferences beyond literal meaning.

Critics argue that Halliday's framework may be too broad, lacking specificity for analyzing micro-level interactions (Goffman 44). Hymes' model is critiqued for its static view of context, as dynamic shifts in conversation can alter interpretive cues rapidly (Goodwin 31). Mey's emphasis on context is challenged for potentially overcomplicating analysis, as not all utterances rely heavily on contextual inference, particularly in highly conventionalized settings (Sperber and Wilson 15).

2.2 Empirical Reviews

Adebayo (2015) examined "The Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Implications of Naming Practices in Yoruba Society" using a sociolinguistic framework and ethnographic methods. Data were collected through interviews with elders and analysis of naming ceremonies in Yoruba communities. The study found that Yoruba names encode social values, historical events, and familial expectations, functioning as communicative tools that convey implicit meanings in interactions. Adebayo (78) concluded that names serve pragmatic roles, such as expressing aspirations or warnings, but noted a gap in exploring cross-cultural pragmatic variations.

Johnson (2020) investigated “Pragmatic Functions of Personal Names in Igbo Discourse” employing Speech Act Theory and Conversational Implicature. Through qualitative interviews and discourse analysis in Igbo-speaking areas, the research revealed that names perform illocutionary acts like requesting respect or invoking blessings. Findings showed names imply social hierarchies and emotions in everyday communication. Johnson (145) recommended integrating pragmatics in indigenous language studies, though the study was limited to formal contexts.

Ochieng (2018) explored “Personal Naming and Identity Construction among the Luo of Kenya: A Sociolinguistic Perspective” using ethnographic interviews and participant observation. The study identified names as markers of identity that convey pragmatic meanings related to birth circumstances and social roles. Results indicated names facilitate indirect communication, such as expressing kinship or status. Ochieng (89) highlighted the role of names in cultural preservation but critiqued the lack of focus on pragmatic implicatures in digital interactions.

Mensah and Uche (2021) analyzed “Naming as a Socio-Pragmatic Phenomenon: A Comparative Study of Efik and Ibibio Naming Systems” applying Pragmatic Theory and Sociolinguistics. Data from interviews and naming rituals showed names encode implicatures tied to emotions and social norms. The study concluded that names function beyond identification, conveying subtle messages in discourse. Mensah and Uche (233) suggested further research on lesser-studied languages like Afo, emphasizing the communicative depth of indigenous names.

Udoh (2021) studied “The Intersection of Language, Power, and Identity in Efik Personal Naming Practices” utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis and Politeness Theory. Through interviews and interaction analysis, findings demonstrated names as tools for negotiating power and respect via indirect speech acts. Udoh (112) noted names' pragmatic functions in formal and informal settings but pointed out the need to explore everyday conversational uses in underrepresented languages.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Onomastic Theory, particularly semantic and cultural onomastics, which views personal names as meaningful linguistic and cultural symbols

that reflect a community's beliefs, history, social structure, and worldview. Unlike pragmatic theories such as Speech Act Theory, which focus on communicative actions, this framework interprets Afo names as nominal forms whose importance lies in their semantic and cultural meanings. Names such as *Osu* (king) and *Onye* (happiness) symbolize social hierarchy, emotions, cultural values, and collective experiences. Therefore, the study employs an onomastic and semantic perspective to analyse Afo personal names as expressions of identity, belief, and social reality within the broader context of African naming traditions.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate the semantic meanings and cultural motivations underlying Afo personal names in their natural sociocultural context. The study was conducted among native Afo speakers in Apawu, Kana, and Udege communities of Nasarawa Local Government Area, Nasarawa State. Purposive sampling was used to select 24 participants, comprising elders, parents, name-bearers, and cultural custodians who possessed adequate knowledge of traditional Afo naming practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation during naming ceremonies, festivals, and other cultural events. Interviews focused on the meanings, origins, and cultural significance of Afo names, while observations provided contextual information on naming practices. Data analysis involved transcribing and coding responses, after which names were grouped into thematic categories such as nature, spirituality, festivals, masquerades, birth circumstances, emotions, family narratives, and social status. The analysis focused on the semantic meanings, cultural motivations, and symbolic significance of each name within the Afo worldview. To ensure reliability and validity, the study employed data triangulation through interviews and observations, member checking with selected participants, and cross-community verification of interpretations across the three communities. These procedures enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings and ensured that the interpretations accurately reflected indigenous Afo perspectives on naming practices.

4. DATA PRESENTATION AND TABLE ANALYSIS

This section presents data collected from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2025 among the Afo-speaking communities of Apawu, Kana, and Udege in Nasarawa Local Government Area, Nigeria. The data consist of selected personal names obtained through interviews and participant observation. The analysis is guided by Onomastic Theory, with emphasis on semantic meaning, cultural motivation, symbolic reference, and social significance of names within the Afo society.

Table 1: Data on Selected Afo Names and Onomastic Features

S/N	Data	Sex	Literal Meaning	Semantic Domain	Cultural Motivation	Symbolic/Social Significance
1	Uperemi	Unisex	Vulture	Nature/Animals	Environmental symbolism	Represents resilience, survival, and vigilance
2	O'guzeh	Female	Road	Environment / Space	Birth circumstance	Symbolizes journey, movement, and endurance
3	Onye	Unisex	Happiness	Emotion	Emotional state at birth	Reflects joy, fulfillment, and positive expectation
4	Ukpomo	Male	Death	Existential /Life cycle	Philosophical reflection	Acknowledges mortality and continuity of life
5	Ukpo	Male	God	Spiritual/ Religious	Religious belief	Expresses divine presence and dependence
6	Ekpo	Male	Born during masquerade ceremony	Cultural event	Ritual timing	Links identity to communal tradition
7	Ogba	Female	Born during masquerade ceremony	Cultural event	Festival association	Reinforces collective memory and heritage
8	Ebo	Female	Born during Ogba deity festival	Spiritual/ Ritual	Deity worship	Symbolizes sacred timing and blessing
9	Kufe	Unisex	She came/ arrival	Birth narrative	Family experience	Expresses hope, arrival, or long-awaited birth
10	Osu	Male	Child conceived by luck	Social belief	Perception of fortune	Represents destiny, favor, and social value

Source: Field Work, 2025

4.1 Data Analysis

Uperemi (Vulture, Male)

Uperemi functions as a nature-based onomastic symbol, encoding the cultural association of the vulture with strength, vigilance, and endurance in the Afo worldview. Ethnographic observations from Apawu storytelling sessions reveal that the name is interpreted as reflecting the bearer's resilience and keen observation, qualities symbolically derived from the vulture's ability to survive in harsh environments. Within Afo cultural thought, animals are not randomly selected for naming but serve as metaphoric references to admired human traits. The semantic value of Uperemi therefore aligns with broader Afo environmental philosophy, where elements of nature are used to conceptualize human character and destiny. Through shared cultural knowledge, the name reinforces communal ideals and social expectations, enabling it to function as a subtle marker of identity and value without the need for explicit explanation.

O'guzeh (Road, Unisex)

O'guzeh operates as an environmentally motivated onomastic expression, deriving its meaning from spatial experience and movement. The name is semantically linked to birth circumstances associated with travel, transition, or displacement, often symbolizing endurance and adaptability. In Udege community narratives and family histories, O'guzeh is interpreted as reflecting life's journey and the challenges encountered along it, resonating with the cultural significance of migration and mobility in Afo society. The symbolic reference of "road" captures both physical movement and metaphorical progression through life. By encoding personal history within a broader collective experience, the name bridges individual biography and communal memory, reinforcing shared understandings of struggle and perseverance in a socio-cultural environment shaped by constant movement and change.

Onye (Happiness, Female)

Onye functions as an emotion-based onomastic marker, semantically encoding joy, fulfillment, and positive emotional states associated with birth or family circumstances. In Kana family gatherings and everyday social interactions, the name is interpreted as a reflection of collective happiness, gratitude, or relief surrounding the child's arrival.

Within Afo cultural values, happiness is not merely an individual feeling but a communal aspiration tied to harmony and social balance. The semantic weight of Onye therefore reinforces positive emotional orientation within the family and the wider community. By embedding emotional meaning into a personal name, the Afo naming system preserves affective experiences as lasting identity markers, contributing to emotional cohesion and continuity within the community.

Ukpomo (Death, Unisex)

Ukpomo represents an existentially motivated onomastic category, drawing its meaning from the Afo philosophical understanding of life and death. Rather than functioning as a morbid label, the name reflects a culturally grounded acknowledgment of mortality and the cyclical nature of existence. In Apawu condolence practices and reflective discourse, Ukpomo is interpreted as symbolizing acceptance, continuity, and the inevitability of life's transitions. The name encodes collective wisdom regarding human fragility and the balance between life and death. By assigning such a name, the community transforms a profound existential concept into a stable identity marker, allowing sensitive themes to be remembered and respected within culturally appropriate boundaries, thereby reinforcing social cohesion and shared worldview.

Ukpo (God, Male)

Ukpo functions as a spiritually motivated onomastic symbol, directly referencing divine authority and religious belief within Afo cosmology. The semantic content of the name reflects dependence on a supreme being and acknowledgment of divine influence over human affairs. In Udege ritual contexts and moral discourse, Ukpo is interpreted as embodying spiritual protection, accountability, and ethical orientation. The name encodes religious consciousness into personal identity, serving as a constant reminder of moral values and spiritual order. Through its symbolic association with divinity, Ukpo reinforces collective belief systems and strengthens the integration of religion into everyday life, making spirituality a permanent component of social identity rather than a situational practice.

Ekpo (Born during Masquerade Ceremony, Male)

Ekpo operates as a ritual-based onomastic marker, deriving its meaning from the timing of birth during a masquerade ceremony. Within Afo culture, masquerades are central institutions representing ancestral presence, discipline, and communal authority. The name Ekpo therefore encodes participation in a significant cultural moment, linking the individual's identity to communal ritual life. In Kana ceremonial narratives, the name evokes memories of festivity, performance, and cultural continuity. By preserving ritual context within a personal name, Ekpo functions as a vehicle for transmitting cultural heritage, reinforcing group identity, and sustaining traditional institutions across generations.

Ogba (Born during Ogba Deity Festival, Male)

Ogba functions as a festival-based onomastic expression, semantically anchored in the Ogba deity festival, a spiritually significant event in Afo society. The name reflects sacred timing and communal celebration, symbolizing divine favor and collective participation in religious life. In Apawu festival-related discourse, Ogba is interpreted as embodying spiritual pride and cultural belonging. The name preserves memory of sacred events and reinforces continuity of religious tradition. Through its symbolic reference to deity worship, Ogba integrates spiritual history into personal identity, strengthening social integration and reaffirming the centrality of ritual life in Afo cultural structure.

Ebo (She Came / To Arrive, Female)

Ebo functions as a birth-narrative onomastic symbol, encoding themes of arrival, hope, and fulfillment. Semantically, the name reflects family experiences such as long ожидание, perceived reincarnation, or the restoration of lineage. In Udege family narratives, Ebo is interpreted as signifying welcome and continuity, often associated with emotional relief or spiritual reassurance. The name embeds family history and belief into identity, transforming personal experience into collective memory. Through this semantic layering, Ebo strengthens emotional bonds and preserves ancestral connections, ensuring that significant family narratives are carried forward through naming.

Kufe (Child Conceived by Luck, Unisex)

Kufe operates as a fortune-based onomastic marker, semantically grounded in cultural perceptions of luck, destiny, and divine favor. The name reflects births regarded as unexpected, miraculous, or particularly fortunate. In Kana family accounts, Kufe symbolizes gratitude and wonder, reinforcing positive interpretations of life events. Within Afo belief systems, luck is not accidental but spiritually mediated, and the name encodes this worldview into personal identity. By preserving the narrative of fortune within a name, Kufe contributes to emotional resilience and reinforces communal optimism and shared belief in destiny.

Osu (King, Male)

Osu functions as a status-based onomastic symbol, encoding social hierarchy, leadership, and authority within the Afo community. Semantically, the name reflects expectations of responsibility, respect, and governance. In Apawu formal and communal settings, Osu is interpreted as embodying leadership qualities aligned with traditional authority structures. The name reinforces cultural norms surrounding hierarchy and social order, serving as a constant reminder of communal roles and obligations. Through its symbolic association with leadership, Osu integrates political identity into personal naming, sustaining respect for traditional structures and reinforcing social stability within the community.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The onomastic and semantic analysis of ten selected Afo personal names (Uperemi, O'guzeh, Onye, Ukpomo, Ukpo, Ekpo, Ogba, Ebo, Kufe, and Osu) among the Afo-speaking communities of Apawu, Kana, and Udege in Nasarawa Local Government Area reveals the extent to which personal names function as repositories of cultural knowledge, collective memory, and social identity. The findings demonstrate that Afo names are not merely labels for identification but culturally motivated linguistic symbols that embody the experiences, beliefs, values, and worldview of the people. Rather than functioning primarily as communicative or illocutionary acts, the names derive their significance from their semantic content and the cultural meanings attached to them by members of the community.

The identification of the selected names revealed several thematic categories, including nature-based names, environment- and circumstance-related names, emotion-based names, spiritually motivated names, ritual and festival-based names, family narrative names, and status-based names. These categories reflect major aspects of Afo social and cultural life such as reverence for nature, spirituality, emotional expression, ritual participation, family continuity, destiny, and traditional authority. The findings support earlier studies by Nigerian scholars such as Adebayo (2015), who observed that indigenous names serve as cultural archives through which communities preserve values, beliefs, and historical experiences. Similarly, the findings align with Mensah and Uche (2021), who found that African naming systems embody cultural ideologies and social realities that extend beyond simple identification. However, while these studies emphasized the communicative and socio-pragmatic functions of names, the present study demonstrates that Afo personal names operate predominantly as semantic and symbolic expressions whose meanings are culturally interpreted rather than interactionally negotiated.

The analysis further revealed that each name derives its significance from a particular semantic domain and cultural motivation. For instance, Uperemi symbolizes resilience and survival through animal imagery, while O'guzeh reflects endurance and life's journey through environmental symbolism. Names such as Onye and Ukpomo encode emotional and existential experiences, whereas Ukpo, Ekpo, and Ogba preserve religious beliefs and ritual affiliations. Ebo and Kufe embody family narratives and perceptions of destiny, while Osu reflects leadership and social hierarchy. These findings correspond with Ochieng's (2018) observation that African names often preserve social experiences and cultural memory. They also reinforce the broader onomastic position that names serve as symbolic representations of communal identity and worldview. Nevertheless, unlike studies that interpret names largely through pragmatic or discourse-oriented frameworks, this study shows that the meanings of Afo names are sustained through shared cultural knowledge and collective interpretation rather than through speech performance.

The findings have important implications for cultural preservation and language revitalization. As the Afo language continues to face pressure from dominant languages such as Hausa and English, traditional names remain one of the most enduring carriers

of indigenous knowledge. The preservation and documentation of Afo names contribute to safeguarding cultural heritage, transmitting indigenous values to younger generations, and maintaining linguistic identity. Because names encode information about traditional religion, festivals, environmental knowledge, social organization, and family history, they constitute valuable cultural resources that can support broader efforts aimed at revitalizing the Afo language and preserving endangered cultural practices.

Despite these contributions, the study has certain limitations. The research was restricted to three Afo-speaking communities within Nasarawa Local Government Area and examined only ten selected personal names. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent the diversity of naming practices across all Afo-speaking communities. Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on semantic and cultural interpretations and did not investigate phonological, morphological, sociolinguistic, or historical dimensions of Afo names.

Future research should therefore examine a larger corpus of Afo names across different communities and generations. Comparative studies involving Afo and other Nigerian minority languages would also provide deeper insights into similarities and variations in African naming systems. In addition, further studies could explore the phonological structure, morphological composition, historical development, and sociolinguistic functions of Afo names in contemporary multilingual settings.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the socio-semantic significance of selected Afo personal names in Nasarawa Local Government Area and established that Afo names function as important cultural and semantic symbols that reflect the worldview, beliefs, experiences, and values of the community. The findings revealed that Afo names encode meanings associated with nature, spirituality, emotions, ritual life, family history, destiny, and social status, thereby serving as repositories of cultural memory and identity. The study supports broader African onomastic scholarship which views personal names as cultural texts that preserve communal knowledge and social experience. By documenting and analysing these names, the study contributes to the preservation of Afo cultural heritage and highlights the role of indigenous naming

practices in language maintenance and revitalization. Ultimately, Afo personal names remain enduring linguistic artifacts that strengthen cultural continuity, reinforce social cohesion, and preserve the collective worldview of the Afo people in an increasingly multilingual and globalized society.

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