

## WHAT IS IN A NAME?

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Personal names serve as identity markers for the individuals who bear them. It is a way of distinguishing one individual from the other. Most personal names serve a referential function. The name "John", for instance, identifies its bearer and distinguishes him from one who bears the name "Peter". If you ask any "Peter" what his name means, he might tell you "rock" because we are told in the Bible that Jesus told Peter:

Your name shall be Peter, for you are the rock upon which I shall build my church" (Matthew 16: 18).

Apart from the meaning "rock", all you can say about the name Peter is probably that he was the chief disciple of Jesus and that he was the son of so and so. But to the African in general, and to the Ewe in particular, personal names mean more than that. They are the embodiment of Ewe philosophical thought and the reflections of various circumstances surrounding the birth of a person.

What distinguish African personal names from others are:

1. their elaborate linguistic structure;
2. the complexity of their semantic content; and
3. their relationship to African value systems.

Akinnaso (1980) described two extreme types of personal names with a series of intermediate stages according to the degree of linguistic complexity and semantico-cultural significance of the names. He cites Balinese as one extreme, in which personal names are arbitrarily coined nonsense syllables and of marginal importance because the names do not refer to Balinese conceptual or social reality, nor do they express any concrete characteristics of the individuals to whom they are applied. Balinese personal names, according to Akinnaso (*ibid*), have no literal meaning of any sort, and are not drawn from any established pool of lexicon. At the other extreme are African names with their elaborate linguistic structure and socio-cultural significance.

A word, conventionally, is an image of the thing it represents. According to Adler (1978), a word is so closely identified with the thing itself that not to have a name is not to exist. It is believed in certain cultures that to know a person's name is to have power over him; so personal names are not easily disclosed to strangers in some cultures even today, because it is feared they might be used in a magical manner (cf. Young, 1931:112, quoted in Adler 1978). This shows how some people treasure personal names, and the Ewe are no exception.

#### 1.1. Principles Underlying naming among the Ewes

Two major principles are found to underly the naming of people among the Ewe. I shall call these :

1. The Home Context Principle (following Akinnaso, 1980)

2. The Philosophical Principle

The Home Context Principle (HCP) specifies the salient social or circumstantial context for personal names, while the Philosophical Principle (PP) specifies contexts which pertain to philosophical thought, belief systems and general world view of the Ewes, which are reflected in the personal names.

1.2. Home Context Principle

There are several types of Home Context (HC). The most basic of them all involves the day of the week on which the person is born. Each of the seven days of the week has corresponding names for male and female. This is shown in the table below.

Table 1: Ewe names corresponding to the days of the week.

<u>Day of Week</u>	<u>Ewe Equivalent</u>	<u>Corresponding Ewe Name</u>
Sunday	Kɔsida	Kɔsi/Kɔsiwa*
Monday	Dzoda	Kɔdzo/Adzo
Tuesday	Blada	Kɔbla/Abla
Wednesday	Kuda	Kɔku/Aku
Thursday	Yawoda	Yao/Yawo
Friday	Fida	Kofi/Afi
Saturday	Memlida	Kɔmi/Ama (Ami)

\* The names in this column correspond to male and female respectively.

Any person called "Kofi", for example, is a male child born on a Friday. This is normally the first name one gets at birth, except there is a special circumstance surrounding the birth which warrants a special name to commemorate the event. Some of these circumstances or events are the following:

- a) If the child comes out of the womb with the face down, it is called *Lumɔ* if it is male, and *Lumɔsi* if it is female.
- b) A woman may labor and give birth on a way to the farm or market. That child is normally named *Mɔta* for male and *Lifosi* for female.
- c) If the child is born in the market it is called *Asigbi* for male and *Asinu* for female.
- d) Twins are given names depending on the combination of the sexes. Two males are named *Atsu* and *Tse*, the former given to the one who comes out second, while the first to come out takes the latter name. The one who comes out last is said to be the elder. The philosophy behind this is that when an elderly person is going out with a younger one the latter is always put in front to protect him or her from any enemy who might attack from behind. Two females are named *Eyi* and *Yit-sa*. Male and female are named *Atsu* and *Atsufi* respectively.

These few examples demonstrate how certain events and circumstances surrounding a person's birth are reflected in his or her personal name. As noted earlier, the name reflecting the day of the week of birth is the most basic, but the special circumstance or event factor can have precedence over it, depending on how salient the event is to the family. In some cases, the person uses both the basic and the special name.

### 1.3. The Philosophical Principle

This pertains to names that reflect the philosophical thought of the Ewes: their belief systems and their general view about life and the world. It is said that the Africans worship stones, trees etc. It is true that Africans have their traditional religion in which many deities function. But the fact also remains that the African believes in a supreme or omnipotent God, who they believe should be worshipped through intermediary gods. So when the fetish priest or priestess prays s/he first calls on the Almighty, who is referred to by the Ewes as *Mawuga* "Supreme God". This thought of the supremacy of the Almighty is reflected in such names as *Mawunyega*, *Mawuko* or *Mawusi*.

Worshippers of other deities give names to their children in praise of those deities. The name *Afayome*, for instance, is given to a female child of an adherent of the divination cult which is known in Ewe as *Afa*, the first part of the name. The other part *-yome* means "following". So the name *Afayome* means "I shall always follow *Afa* (the cult)". It is the belief that children are the gift of the gods, so they sing praises to the gods through the names. Some "barren" women are able to have children after consulting a shrine, so the child who is born ostensibly through the help of a deity is normally given a name in praise of the deity. For example, the name *Sonyo* means "So (a deity) is good".

The Ewes also value life and abhor death. They believe that while there is life there is a way. So they have such names as :

1.
  - a) *Agbenyega* ( life is most important).
  - b) *Agbemafle* (life cannot be bought).
  - c) *Agbeko* (only life is required).
  - d) *Kugblenu* (death destroys things)

The Ewes also consider human beings to be more valuable than all the riches of life. To them, when you have children you are rich. People are proud to have as many children and grandchildren as possible (as much as God can give them). That is why some people turn deaf ears to family planning slogans and campaigns. Names such as :

2.
  - a) *Amewuga* (a person is worth more than money) and
  - b) *Amenyo*(a person is good)

are an indication of how the Ewes value human beings.

Some families suffer constant death of their children. It is believed that in order to turn away "the evil eyes of death" from the family, the next child or children should be given names that would not be appealing to death. In that way he (death) will leave the child alone. One, therefore finds such names as:

3.

- a) *Adukpo* (incinerator)
- b) *Kpɔxa* (human faeces)
- c) *Akaga* (vulture)
- d) *Kokloku* (a dead fowl).

Christianity has also got its fair share of Ewe personal names. With its advent people began to take names that are foreign. Some people, however, do not see the need for such foreign names when they can make up beautiful names from local resources. The result is the emergence of such Ewe Christian names as :

4.

- a) *Dela* (savior)
- b) *Yayra* (blessing)
- c) *Xɔlali* (the savior lives)
- d) *Makafui* ( I will praise him).
- e) *Mawufemɔ* (God's way)

## 2. GRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS OF EWE PERSONAL NAMES

The linguistic complexity of Ewe personal names is a direct consequence of the variety and richness of the semantic load and socio-cultural information that the names are made to carry.

Depending on the amount of information being encoded, Ewe personal names can be derived from nominals or from full sentences of varying degrees and complexity.

### 2.1. Names derived from nominals

These names can be said to be derived from the rule

Nominal -----> Name

These nominals can have different grammatical structures. We have names that are derived from simple nouns, compound nouns and complex noun phrases.

#### 2.1.1. Simple Personal Names

These are short and simple nouns that can be said to be arbitrary identifiers of the people that bear them. They are made up of single morphemes and have unique meanings corresponding to the special circumstances for which they stand. Examples of this category are the personal names corresponding to the days of the week mentioned earlier.

#### 2.1.2. Complex Personal Names

This category of personal names are those that lend themselves to morphological analysis. They are the result of various morphological and syntactic processes of the Ewe language. The following structural types can be identified.

- 5.
- A)
    - N + N ----- > Name
    - i. agbe + dɔ ----- > *Agbedɔ*
    - life + work ----- > 'life's work/service'
    - ii. ame + tefe ----- > *Ametefe*
    - person + place ----- > 'in place of a person'
  - B)
    - N + Adj. ----- > Name.
    - i). gbe + eve ----- > *Gbeve*
    - voice + two ----- > 'two voices'
    - ii). gbe + mumu ----- > *Gbemu*
    - grass + green ----- > 'green grass'
  - C)
    - N + LOC. + N ----- > Name.
    - xɔ + me + ku ----- > *Xɔmeku*
    - room + LOC + word ----- > 'death from one's own house'
  - D)
    - N + NEG + HAB + V ----- > Name.
    - agbe + me + a + fle ----- > *Agbemafle*
    - life not can buy ----- > 'life, which cannot be bought'
  - E)
    - N + POSS. + N + LOC. ----- > Name
    - ame (fe) ta me ----- > *Ametame*
    - person head in ----- > 'a person's thoughts'

In the last example, the possessive is covertly marked; that is, it is not found in the surface form. These types of possessive constructions are referred to as inalienable possessive constructions.

Some of the personal names are derived from complex noun phrases involving relative clauses. The underlying relative clauses are clipped to obtain the surface form of the personal name. Consider the following.

- 6.
- a) vi + gbe + dɔ ----- > *Vigbedɔ*
  - child refuse work ----- > 'a child who refuses errands'
  - b) dze + fle + ga ----- > *Dzeflega*
  - salt buy money ----- > 'money that can buy salt'
  - c) agbo + da + ze ----- > *Agbodaze*
  - ram + cook + pot ----- > 'pot that a ram can be cooked in'

The above names are derived from the following relative clauses respectively:

- 7.
- a) vi si gbe dɔ
  - child REL. refuse work ----- > 'a child who refuses errands'
  - b) ze si da agbo
  - pot REL cook ram ----- > 'a pot that a ram can be cooked in'
  - c) ga si fle dze
  - money REL buys salt ----- > 'money that salt can be bought with'

The example 6a above is derived from 7a by deletion of the relative pronoun *si*. When the same process is applied to 7b and 7c the result is quite different from the surface forms of the corre-

sponding names. We have *zedagbo* and *gafledze* instead of *agbodaze* and *dzeflega* respectively. To account for these surface forms, the notion of instrumentality is invoked. The subjects of the relative clauses 7b and 7c, *ze* (pot) and *ga* (money) are semantic instruments. They are also inanimate, and, therefore, not capable of playing agentive roles. So in the derivation, those instrumental constituents are placed last and the "patients" foregrounded. Instead of *ze-da-agbo* and *ga-fle-dze*, we have *agbo-da-ze* and *dze-fle-ga*. In 7a, however, the subject of the relative clause is the agent (not the "instrument") and it is "animate". Therefore, there is no change in word order in the derivation; the only process is the deletion of the relative pronoun. This seems to be the case when we compare the following nominalizations from underlying relative clauses.

8.

- a). ame si wɔ-a afe ----- > amewɔafe  
 person REL. make-HAB. filth ----- > 'a filthy person'
- b). ame si wɔ-a dɔ ----- > amewɔdɔ  
 person REL. do-HAB. work ----- > 'a person who works'
- c). ati si wo tɔɔ da-na akple ----- > akpledati.  
 stick REL. 3pl.take cook-HAB. corn-meal --- > 'a stick used in cooking corn-meal'
- d). ze si wotsɔ de-a tɔme ----- > tɔmedeze.  
 pot REL. 3pl.take go-HAB. river ----- > 'pot used for fetching water'

In examples 8a and 8b, we have relative clauses involving animate agents "person". So in the nominalization, the relative pronoun is deleted and the agent noun, the verb and the patient are put together in that order to form a noun. But in 8c and 8d, the relative clause involves patients and instruments. So in the nominalization process, the patient is foregrounded, the verb retains its position and the instrument comes last. In other words, the instrument and the patient NP positions are permuted.

### 2.1.3. Sentence-type personal names.

Apart from personal names derived from NPs of all sorts, Ewe personal names are also derived from sentences. This can be stated by the rule:

Sentence -----> Name

Most of these types are derived from simple sentences. For example,

9.

- a). ku + gble + nu ----- > *Kugblenu*  
 death spoil thing ----- > 'death is a destroyer'
- b). dzi + wɔ + nu ----- > *Dziwɔnu*  
 heart do thing ----- > 'a strong heart does anything'
- c). Mawu + nye + ga ----- > *Mawunyega*  
 God be great ----- > 'God is great'
- d). ame + ade + tɔ + wu ----- > *Amedetɔwu*  
 person INDEF. owner exceeds ----- > 'Someone's is worse'

Some of the personal names are of the type "if the cap fits, wear it". They may show resentment of someone against a particular class class of people or neighbors. For example, the name

"*Ezunukpenawo*" ('they are ashamed'), may be given to a child by a family to show resentment against a neighbor who probably did something for which they later regretted. Names of this category are very common among the Ewes.

10.

- a) *Lonyelawoli* --'I also have people who love me'
- b) *Dafeamekpɔ*--'go to the house and see'
- c) *Senyuidzɔwo*--'they have been born by good fate'

The above names are all derived from simple sentences.

There is a category of personal names which is quite interesting in its own right. Names belonging to this category are often referred to as "praise appellations" (a label I find inappropriate). These names are normally taken by a person himself in adulthood. But sometimes parents give such names to children in memory of a deceased family member who bore that name, especially when the child is believed to be a reincarnated family person or when the child is born soon after the death of a family member with that name. There is a special name given to a child born soon after a family member dies (*Ametefe*- 'in place of a person'), but the family has the prerogative to give to that child the name of the deceased member of the family in memory of him. The names in this category are referred to as

11.

aha + no nkɔ + wo -----> ahanonkɔwo  
drink(n) drink(v) name PL.--->'drinking names'

Probably they are labelled "praise appellations" because they praise a person or draw attention of other people to him. These names are usually invoked when men meet in drinking bars, hence the label "drinking names". It was originally taken by only men, but women are also taking such names now.

The peculiar characteristic of the category of personal names is that they represent whole discourses, reflecting people's experiences in life, people's reactions to other people's behavior or a reflection of their thoughts about what life should be. For example, the name

Gbe + eve -----> GBEVE  
voice/language two --->'two voices/languages'

is a message which literally translates as:

*Two voices/languages do not raise a child; you will spoil the child for its owner.*

The bearer of this name simply wants to put across the message that a child who is subjected to two different kinds of instruction at home will grow into a spoiled child. That is, both parents have to agree on what is good for the child. While the bearer of the above name wants to air his views about child raising, another comments on love life. He takes the name

ahia + eve -----> AHIAVE  
concubine + two ----> 'two concubines'

whose full citation form is

*Someone who takes two concubines does not become a bachelor; if one rejects him the other will remain.*

This name also has a figurative or proverbial meaning which is almost equivalent to the English proverb "Don't put all your eggs in one basket". Some of these names are also of the "if the cap fits wear it" type. An example is the name

fe + vlo -----> FEVLO.  
nail useless-----> 'useless claws'

whose full citation form is

*They have useless claws. The claws that should be given to the eagle to prey are given to the vulture to be used only on the refuse dump.*

One other characteristic of this category of names called "praise appellations" is that the full citation forms are seldom used. Instead, a clipped form comprising the salient constituent or the "theme" of the discourse is adopted. But on certain occasions, especially when friends meet at a bar or at funerals, the full citation forms are vocalized. It is ritualized in the following way. When A meets B at a bar or any appropriate place, A calls B by uttering part of the citation form and B completes the discourse.

12.

A to B : GBE-VE me-nyi-a vi o.  
voice-two NEG.-raise-HAB. child NEG.  
"two voices do not raise a child"  
B : a-va gble vi na vi tɔ  
FUT.-come spoil child give child owner  
you will spoil the child for the owner.

The discourse mostly consists of two or three clauses or sentences. In the citation, the first person utters the first clause, not only the clipped name. The clipped forms of these names are used to refer to the bearer on most ordinary occasions. On special occasions, however, (e.g. funerals, social gatherings or festive occasions), the full citation form is evoked. These occasions serve as fertile grounds for the dissemination of the information embedded in their names, and which they wish to put across.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have tried to show that Ewe personal names, like most African names, transcend the vocative function. Because they, inter alia, code Ewe cultural and philosophical thought, they must be viewed as denotatively and connotatively relevant. Like diaries, Ewe personal names provide a system through which information is symbolically stored and retrieved. These diaries are partially open in that the names are public, being the primary mode of address. They are partially



closed because the nature and range of information stored in a given name may not be known to every member of the community. There are, however, names like those corresponding to the days of the week which the whole community knows about. Most of the names that relate to special circumstances (e.g twins, someone born in a farm or market) are also easily discernible. In other words, names associated with the Home Context Principle do not pose much problem pragmatically. I have also shown that most Ewe personal names are derived from simple as well as complex, and productive syntactic processes of the Ewe language. Most of the Ewe personal names are not drawn from a stock of stereotyped forms, but rather, naming is a productive process. The study of these names, therefore, can be said to be a study of the language itself.

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