

Dangme death-prevention names: A socio-onomastic study

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Abstract

Personal names reflect the culture, cognition and worldview of a people. The Dangme, like many African ethnic groups use names as antidote to prevent infant mortality. Dangme death-prevention personal names have not attracted much attention in Dangme ethnolinguistics scholarship. Thus, this article seeks to fill this gap. The work investigates the categories of Dangme death-prevention names. It examines the relationship between culture and the environment in the context of Dangme naming practice, as well as the psychological incentive for the bestowal of death-prevention names. It also investigates the place of death prevention names in the contemporary Dangme society from socio-onomastic and ethnopragmatic theoretical standpoints, which offer an analytical tool for fleshing out the social, cultural and situational interpretations of death-prevention names in the Dangme naming context. Data were collected through interviews from the Manya Klo, Yilo Klo and Shai Osudoku traditional areas in South-eastern Ghana. Findings show that the Dangme people use loaned names to hide the ethnic identity of children to guarantee their survival. This strategy reveals that death-prevention names shield children from infant mortality. The article concludes that the conferral of Dangme death-prevention names is on the decline in contemporary times.

Keywords: *Cognition; Dangme; Ethnolinguistics; Ethnopragmatics; Socio-onomastics; Identity*

Abstract in Dangme: Biɛ tsɔɔ mabi a kusumi, a susumi kɛ a nɔ he he tomi. Dangmeli kaa Africa ma a, tsuɔ biɛ he ni kɛ tsɔɔ bimwɔwi a gbenɔ nya. Gboba biɛhi hine Dangme je biɛ nɛ Dangme kusumi kɛ gbi tsɔɔli flɛ nge si gbɛmi mi. Si gbɛmi nɛ ɔ ya nɔ kɛ tsi si gbɛmi muɔ nɛ a flɛ ɔ. Si gbɛmi ɔ yi mi tomi ji e tsɔɔ Dangme je gboba biɛ slɔto ɔmɛ. E je tsakpa nɛ nge kusumi kɛ nihi nɛ a ɔle wɔ ɔmɛ a kpeti kpo nge Dangme biɛ womi kusumi nya kɛ nɔ he je nɛ fɔli wɔ gboba biɛhi. E kpale tsɔɔ gboba biɛhi a dahe nge mwɔnɛmwɔnɛ ɔ Dangme biɛ womi blɔ nɔ tomi nya kɛ gu sosio-onomastiki kɛ etinopragmatisi si gbɛmi dade

nɛ ɔmɛ a nɔ kɛ kpa bo nɛ gboba biɛ ɔmɛ a sisi numi kɛ a kusumi ni tsumi he. Si gbɛlɔ ɔ bua nihi a nya kɛ gu nya mi tami nɔ nɛ Manya Klo, Yilɔ Klo kɛ Osudoku nɛ South-eastern Ghana. Si gbɛmi ɔ je kpo kaa Dangmeli tsuɔ biɛ babɛɛhi a he ni kɛ laa bimwɔwi a heso nɔ kɛ heɔ a yi wami. Si gbɛmi ɔ yɔse kaa gboba biɛ womi nɛ si sɛɛ nɛ Dangmeli a kpeti amlɔ nɛ ɔ.

Introduction

Names and naming practices remain cultural universal phenomenon. However, the processes and patterns of naming are remarkably particularistic to different societies. Olatunji et al. (2015, p. 78) contend that naming in Africa is motivated by factors such as “spirituality, belief in reincarnation, environment, lineage system, ethnic affiliation, gender, day, season, conditions of parents at birth.” Other determinants include the child’s condition at birth, events predating the child’s birth, occupation of the family, physical appearance of the child, as well as political and economic situations. Names emanate from the society in which they are given and used. The fact remains that there is no society that does not use names to identify or individuate its members. Every Society uses names to organize its environment, facilitate communication and categorize people in social groups such as clan, members of the nuclear family, gender and occupation (Ainiala et al., 2016). Mensah & Offong (2013) show that personal names in African are channels for the transmission of African cultural heritage, media for cultural retention, and identity construction. Personal names, to (Kohlheim, 1998), connect to the extralinguistic environment of their givers and bearers.

Aside the primary function of names which is the construction of identity, the socio-onomastic and the ethnopragmatic meanings of names are language and culture specific phenomena. Mensah et al. (2024) remark that names are products of culture and a reflection of cultural ideologies. A name in the African context is an outlet for communicating the belief, emotions, hopes, ideology, expectations, religion, worldview, philosophies, values, norms and experiences of the name-giver and the society (Agyekum, 2006; Mensah et al., 2024; Mensah, 2023; Ramaeba, 2019; Yakub, 2024). Research findings indicate that personal names resonate with their bearers’ pattern of rectitude; they influence the bearers’ socio-cognitive development as well as guide and direct the name bearers’ purpose in life (Mensah et al., 2024; Mensah et al., 2021).

De Klerk & Bosch (1996) posit that names in the Western world are primarily meant for referential purposes. This suggests that Western names may not have strong meaning-sense relation because they do not offer any reasonable connection between the name and its

reference or signification. Contrary to the findings of De Klerk & Bosch (1996) about names and their meanings in the Western world, many African onomastic researchers argue that names in most African cultures are symbolic, lexically transparent and meaningful (Agyekum, 2006; Neethling, 2005; Sekyi-Baidoo, 2019; Mensah et al. 2024; Yakub, 2024). Names are not like national identification tags but carry informative messages to reflect the past, present, future, circumstances surrounding one's birth, wealth of the child's parents, name-users and values of the naming community. The bestowal of names is influenced by cultural, social, spatial, temporal, psychological and historical factors. Names in the cultures of African societies are therefore linguistic resources. Accordingly, name formation processes in African cultures adheres to the phonological, morphological and syntactic rules governing the structure of words in the language of the people whose culture contains the name. This is because names are words that exist in a language. Some of the names are derived from already existing names that have denotative, connotative and associative meanings. Crane (1982) avers that names are valuable possession of people such that a name survives the name-bearer after death. Personal names are vibrant channels for expressing emotions and feelings.

Death is a ubiquitous phenomenon of both social and spiritual significance in most cultural contexts. Africans believe in the emergence of a new incarnation in another jurisdiction after a good person dies (Mensah 2015; Mensah & Offong 2013; Obeng 1998). African names have strong connection with spirituality. This is reflective in the bestowal of death-prevention names. Though death-prevention names are common in most African cultures, the sense and meaning portrayed by the names reflect the idiosyncratic sociocultural practices and the beliefs of the society. Yakub (2024) postulates that death-prevention names are conduits that connect the named to his or her lineage and the spirit world such that death-prevention names are used to swindle the malevolent spirits to guarantee the survival of the child.

Onomastic research, particularly in the African context, has gained currency in recent times. Scholars like Agyekum (2006), Batoma (2009), Bisilki (2018), Mensah et al. (2024), Obeng (1998), Sekyi-Baidoo (2019) and Yakub (2023, 2024) have examined several categories of personal names from different perspectives. One category of personal names that some African cultures use as ethno-medical cure for infant mortality is death-prevention names. Akung & Abang (2019), Abubakari et al. (2023), Kamalu et al. (2024), Mamvura (2021), Obeng (1998) and Yakub (2024) have investigated the concept of death-prevention names in some Africa cultural traditions demonstrating their belief, cultural-cognition, and motivations behind death-prevention names. However, death-prevention

names in Dangme has not attracted any scholarly attention, hence, the gap in Dangme ethnolinguistics literature, and this paper seeks to fill this gap. The study aims at broadening our understanding of the socio-onomastic and the cultural-pragmatic insights into Dangme death-prevention names in the context of the worldview and the cultural conceptualization of the Dangme people. The study demonstrates how the Dangme people use death-prevention names to perpetuate their cultural ideologies, shaping and guiding life trajectories of name-bearers. The study offers a significant contribution to the teaching and learning of Dangme culture and language in the face of the threat of extinction of indigenous Dangme death-prevention names. This is mainly due to the penetration of Christian religious practices into almost every facet of the Dangme society particularly their names and naming tradition. Again, the study augments the existing literature on names, specifically death-prevention names by offering a socio-onomastic and ethno-pragmatic insights into the phenomenon from an African cultural perspective.

The Dangme people and their naming system

The Dangme ethnolinguistic group is made up of eight mutually intelligible linguistic groups. The Dangme are found in the Greater Accra, Eastern and Volta regions of Ghana (Angmor & Dautey, 2024; Huber, 1993). They are noted for farming, bead making, fishing, palm-wine tapping, weaving and salt mining due to their geographical distribution. The Dangme people attach high premium on children. In view of this, several childbirth related rituals are performed to ensure the survival of children. Huber (1993) avers that naming in the Dangme society is done on the 8th day after birth. Child naming in the Dangme society marks the transmogrification of an infant to personhood. Naming marks an important event in the life of a new-born child. The ceremony is performed in the morning, mostly at the wee hours of the day in the compound of the family house (Dautey 2023). In rural settings, the entire community is invited together with family members invited from all walks of life. The naming ceremony is performed amidst singing and dancing of *Klama*, a folk music of the Dangme. However, in recent times, the ceremonial event involves immediate family members, close friends and church members. Dangme parents who are Christians climax the naming ceremony in the chapel by dedicating the child to God.

In a situation where naming may be extended beyond the conventional one week, the child is given a waiting name. The Dangme refer to this type of name as '*Siko bie*.' To Christian parents, this name can be a baptismal or religious name. Such names can be given based on the physical attributes of the child; size, beauty, complexion or circumstances of birth or experiences and emotions of parents (Caesar, 2019; Leyew, 2003, Yakub, 2023). The

child's father in consultation with the grandfather of the child gives names, in the Dangme tradition. Considering the family lineage, the child's grandfather carefully draws a name from the Dangme established onomastic inventory. At the point of naming, the child is given a clan explicit gendered name that portrays the named as a descendent of a particular ancestral lineage except twins, triplets and quadruplets who have fixed names in the Dangme cultures.

The Dangme concept of cyclical birth

The Dangme, like many African ethnic groups believe that the dead infant recycles to life. According to Olatunji et al. (2015), it is a common belief among Africans that the dead infant sometimes recycles through being conceived by the same couple. A special name is therefore, given to such infants by parents who experience cyclical birth. These names help to secure the life of the child. Recycled name is referred to as *gboba bie* in the Dangme culture and naming tradition. *Gboba* is a compound comprising *gbo*, meaning dead, *ba* 'returned' and *bie*, 'name.' Thus, the infant has died and returned. According to the belief, *Gboba*, is only meant for babies who shuttle between the spirit world and the physical world. Such children are given facial marks on the cheeks at both corners of the mouth. In some cultures facial marks are used for beautification and clan identification, but the Dangme use facial marks as a treatment of some deadly ailments and an antidote to ward-off evil spirit. The Dangme used facial marks as protective therapy to prevent infant mortality (Ebeheakey et al., 2016).

Aside the bestowal of death-prevention names on a new-born baby and performance of other rituals to prevent the incessant appetite of death on infants, the Dangme believe that the corpse of a baby, known as *mɔmɔ tso bi*, 'tender flower' must be treated with disdain. This is to communicate to the malevolent forces and the infant that it does not deserve a befitting burial if it continues to shuttle between the physical and the spiritual worlds. In this regard, nobody sheds tears for the death of such an infant. The burial is done with a handful of people. The body is wrapped with *kumelo* leaves, a plant with broad leaves that grows on the refuse dump together with a white cloth. The corpse is not buried at the graveyard, instead, it is buried around the refuse dump within the home environs. No pre-burial or post-burial ceremonies is observed. All the unbefitting burial processes are measures put in place to ensure that the next child survives.

Previous studies

Yakub's (2024) study on Nzema death-prevention names is rooted in cognitive onomastic and cultural metaphors. The study notes that names of filthy places, insects and birds within

the environment are conferred on infants to present them as ‘unpleasant to the ancestral spirit to stop snatching them. From the cultural conception and belief of the Nzema ethnolinguistic group, names of domestic objects such as basket, ladle, mat and sack, though indispensable in their socio-economic lives, are regarded worthless. However, the local names of the objects are bestowed on children who transit between the physical and the spirit world to ensure their survival. This assertion by Yakub (2024) is in tandem with the claim of Abubakari et al. (2023) that names have protective power such that they are used as weapons against death. They argue that infant mortality is curbed using death-prevention names. Yakub (2024) reveals that Nzema death-prevention names hide the identity of the named. The name is meant to deceive the supernatural forces that the child is valueless. He concludes that Nzema personal names, particularly death-prevention names reflect the worldview and belief system of the Nzema people and their interaction with the environment.

Caesar (2019) corroborates Kadenge et al. (2014) claim that allusive names are understood within the socio-cultural context as they serve as “silent dialogues” between the name-giver, the named and the hearer. Examining Nzema allusive names from an ethnopragmatic lens, Yakub (2023) validates assertions made by Caesar (2019), Kadenge et al. (2014) and Ramaeba (2020) that in addition to their referential significance, allusive names are symbolic and communicative in nature. Mensah (2015) examines the ethno-pragmatics of death-prevention names among the Ibibio ethnolinguistic group in South-eastern Nigeria from an ethnographic perspective. The study investigates the culturally fashioned meanings of death-prevention names. It observes that aside the semantic meaning of these names, the choice of death-prevention names is motivated by the locally constitutive significations embedded in the names. This suggests that context and the belief systems of the Ibibio people are highly considered in conferring names on people.

Mamvura (2021, p. 1) makes a similar observation in his investigation into the ethno-pragmatics of death-prevention names among the Karanga of Zimbabwe. The paper contends that, “the bestowal of death-prevention names is an emotional reaction to infant mortality.” Mamvura (2021, p. 7) evinces that death “triggers feelings of despair, helplessness and hopelessness, driving name-givers to make entreaties to spiritual forces to spare the lives of the named children.” He avers that these names are understood within cultural contexts. His findings suggest that name-givers use death-prevention names as the only license to defy the spirit of death and an opportunity to speak to supernatural spirits.

A related study by Mensah & Offong (2013) observes that death-prevention names among the Ibibio in South-eastern are morpho-syntactically rich linguistic resource useful for syntactic analysis of the Ibibio language. The authors opine that death-prevention names present a window to the varied sentence structures and functions in the language. To them, the names serve as a conduit that link the named to the ancestors, the past and spirituality. Mensah (2015) concurs with the view of Mensah & Offong (2013) that the bearers of death prevention names are children who experience the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. The studies suggest that death-prevention names are constructed in recognition of the rules of phonology, morphology, syntax and the semantics of a language.

Obeng (1998) remarks that Akan death-prevention names differ in structure from other Akan names. Akan death-prevention names are generally unisex in nature. According to Obeng (1998), children, who through death, transit between their spiritual parents (the spirit world) and their biological parents (the physical world) with the intention of frustrating the latter are given “funny” or “dirty” names to shame them from the former. This, therefore, suggests that the Akan of Ghana, like the Ibibio of Nigeria, believe in the existence of both spiritual and biological parenthood of children. He contends that death-prevention names enable parents within the Akan society to express their emotions, feelings, desires and needs to other members of the Akan society, including the child’s spiritual parents to allow the child to live. Obeng (1998) concludes that Akan death-prevention names reflect loss, emotional torture, agony and the ordeal parents who suffer child mortality go through.

Theoretical framework

The study adopts combined frameworks of socio-onomastic theory and ethnopragmatic model to unearth the sociocultural, sociolinguistic and ethnopragmatic interpretation of Dangme death-prevention-names. Socio-onomastics is the interface of sociolinguistics and onomastics that looks at names from a broader perspective of sociocultural variables such as religion, gender, worldview and social status (Michael & Mensah, 2025). Socio-onomastic theory was introduced by Walther (1971) and has since been used as an explanatory tool for onomastic research. Many scholarly studies of names in Africa (Ramaeba, 2019; Mensah et al., 2024; Yakub, 2024) and in Europe Burns, 2015; Bramwell, 2011) have been conducted through the lens of the socio-onomastic theory. The theory has proven that names are bestowed and used in different domains and their meaning is shaped by the cultural environment. According to Michael & Mensah (2025), socio-onomastics accounts for the functional significance of names in daily discourses. Names have strong connection to language, culture and tradition which provide the sociocultural dimensions

of their use. The meaning of names emanates from the lived experience of the name-giver on the one hand, and attitude and stance of the naming society on the other hand. This is often achieved through social interaction and the people's relationship with the environment. The socio-onomastic theory explicates the social, cultural and contextual factors that underpin the bestowal of names. The meaning of words is context driven just as names in the African culture are context-dependent. Therefore, it is critical to link a study of names to a theory that lends itself to cultural linguistics and worldview of a people. According to Ramaeba (2019), the socio-onomastic theory offers special possibilities in interpreting and exploring the relationships between names and their bearers, name-givers and the society more broadly.

The socio-onomastic framework is complemented by the ethnopragmatic theory that refers to an approach to explaining language in use where culture plays a major explanatory role and at the same time shows the interlocking relationship between language and other cultural phenomena (Goddard 2006). According to Goddard (2006) and Goddard & Ye (2015, p. 66) the ethnopragmatic theory is based on three pillars comprising objective, methodological tools and linguistic evidence. The objective component provides cultural-insider perspectives, 'how', and 'why' of speech practices of speech communities. It describes and explains the ways of speaking by a people that makes sense to the members of a speech community with respect to their indigenous values, beliefs, emotions, social categories and attitudes. The methodological tools concerns the interpretation and capturing of cultural norms of meaning shared among speakers of a language. The interactional routine is concerned with language specific lexicogrammatical construction, routine ways of thinking and appropriate analysis of cultural-insiders. These account for the linguistic evidence of the ethnopragmatic theory. The two theories underscore the point that names are linguistic structures that are culturally constructed based on the beliefs, values, emotions, experiences and the worldview of a people. Therefore, names are products of language, culture and thought system of a group of people. The socio-onomastic and the ethno pragmatic theories are considered adequate frameworks to unravel the dynamic sociocultural perspectives, and locally constitutive interpretations of Dangme death-prevention names. Dangme death-prevention names epitomise the belief and features of the culture cognition processes involving reasoning and reminiscence, and the psycholinguistic competence of the Dangme people. A culture-insider and cultural specific perspective is the best approach to understanding death-prevention names; hence, the current study is grounded in the frameworks of socio-onomastic and ethno-pragmatics.

Methodology

Data for this ethnographic study was collected during a ten (10) months ethnographic fieldwork exercise carried out in the Manya and Yilo Krobo traditional areas (provide the relevant context for these areas). Death-prevention names are ascribed to Dangme children who suffers from incessant neonatal death. Data were sourced through two ethnographic methods; participant observation at naming ceremonies and in-depth interviews. In all, thirty (N=30) participants who were native speakers of Dangme were interviewed. Participants comprised ten (10) bearers of death-prevention names of equal gender ratio, twenty (20) name-givers and users consisting of ten (10) males and 10 females. The equal number of participants based on their gender was motivated by the role of women in child-naming among the Dangme. However, men have the greater privilege in naming children in the Dangme cultural tradition. Participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the research as name-bearers, givers and users. Participants' knowledge in the culture, tradition and onomastic practices also informed their selection. Participants were purposively sampled, and interviewed at their convenient places and time. The semi-structured interview guide was used. This allowed the researcher to interrogate the socio-cultural contexts that warranted the bestowal of death-prevention names. It also enabled the researcher to ascertain the ethno-pragmatic interpretations and implications of the names within the anthroponymic system of the Dangme people. The interview questions were mainly open-ended. Participants were asked questions about the circumstances that motivate death-prevention names, their categories interpretations and implications. Informed consents and approval were obtained from all participants who were involved in the study. All procedures and approval for the research were granted by the University of Education, Winneba's Ethical Clearance Committee. Participants' demographic characteristics such as education, occupation and religion were recorded. The religious background of participants shows that 19 were found to be Christians, 8 were believers of the African Traditional Religion while 3 do not belong to any organised religious group. Participants' educational background were categorised as follows; Teacher Training College level, 12, Secondary education, 8, Basic education, 7, and informal education, 3. Christian religion and formal education have implications on the bestowal of death-prevention names. This has resulted in the gradual shift from the traditional death-prevention names to theophoric names. The occupational background of participants shows that 12 were civil servants in active service while 5 were retirees. Seven (7) were farmers and six (6) were artisans. The data were coded, transcribed and categorized under thematic headings. This was done in order to account for all the traditional and contemporary

Dangme death-prevention names as well as to offer a broader explanation and understanding of their socio-onomastic and ethnopragmatic interpretations.

Data presentation and discussion

The ethnographic data on Dangme death-prevention names is presented and discussed from socio-onomastic and ethnopragmatic perspectives under six (6) thematic areas.

Names that represent worthless and filthy entities

This category of death-prevention names represents some worthless entities and places in the Dangme traditional setting. Table 1 below illustrates worthless things and filthy places within the Dangme cultural context that are bestowed as personal names.

Table 1. Names of worthless entities used as death-prevention names.

Name	Gloss
Dɔ	run-off water
Dɔtɔ	heap of debris
Kuku	refuse dump
Puseɛ	plantain fibre

In Table 1, the names echo how children born after several infant mortalities are portrayed as worthless in the Dangme culture. The Dangme bestow the name of filthy entities and places on infants based on their metaphorical conceptualization and belief system. The name, *Dɔ* ‘run-off water’, is the form of water that contains a lot of impurities by virtue of where it runs through. In the estimation of the Dangme, a child born after several failed attempts to survive is as unstable, unclean, worthless as *dɔ* ‘run-off water’. The Dangme belief that in as much as *dɔ* ‘run-off-water’ is not accepted for any domestic or agricultural purposes, so is the child portrayed as worthless in the sight of the underworld spirit. *Dɔ*, ‘run-off water’ causes destruction and havoc to the environment and property. It knows no boundary. The devastating and destructive nature of *dɔ*, ‘run-off-water’ makes it an enemy to life and the environment more broadly. This conception of the Dangme people is similar to Obeng’s (1998) observation of the Akan naming tradition. He notes that names of “destructive or dangerous animals” such as *Akrɔma* ‘hawk’ and, *Ɔwɔ*, ‘snake’ are given to show the pain and grief that the death of children can cause their biological parents.

The traditional Dangme belief that the underworld spirits are so decent that they would not settle for anything filthy and destructive as run-off water. The infant is therefore, given a name to make it unattractive and worthless. *Dɔtɔ*, ‘heap of debris’ simply means the residues a farmer gathers and heaps after burning the shrubs on the farm in order to tidy up the farm. This heaped debris is burnt to make the farm tidy and ready for planting. The Dangme name-giver who suffers cyclical birth, death and rebirth bestows the name *Dɔtɔ*, ‘heap of debris’ depicting the child as worthless and a nuisance as those residues that deserve to be burnt. Connotatively, the name-giver is informing the child’s parents in the spirit world that the infant has no place in their home.

The name *Kuku* ‘refuse dump’ is a place where every filthy and unclean materials are disposed. This despicable name is given to a new-born child to convey a message to the ethereal forces that the biological parents have subtly rejected the named. *Kuku* ‘refuse dump’ is metaphorically referred to as *Kuɛtɛ*, meaning ‘strong neck’ based on Dangme culture and worldview. Ethnopragmatically, the *kuɛtɛ* is conceived as carrier of filth, curses and diseases. From a socio-cultural perspective, it means the entity with the capacity to accommodate every form of waste, filth and rejected materials. Participants indicate that *Kuku* or *Kuɛtɛ* ‘refuse dump’ serves some functions in the life of the traditional Dangme even though it is a filthy and devalued place within the home environ. *Kuku*, ‘refuse dump’ is where every solid waste material generated in a home is dumped. Among the Dangme, *Kuku* is not kept close to a source of water. It is a place where rituals aimed at warding off evil spirits and curses as well as deadly diseases are performed. Mensah & Offong (2013) draw attention to the fact that spirituality forms an important part of the worldview and existence of the African people such that Africans are spiritually bonded together as a people. This observation fits into the context of Dangme naming since death-prevention names are sociocultural and spiritual manifestations. The Dangme name-giver bestows this derogatory name on the child to ascribe to it the attributes of the refuse dump. Strikingly, Obeng (1998, p. 167) explains that *Sumina* ‘incinerator’ is an example of a name of a filthy place bestowed as Akan death-prevention name. It presupposes that there is no place in the home to accommodate the child who journeys between worlds of its biological parents and those of the spirits, hence the filthy places as death-prevention names are bestowed to indicate that the child is regarded as a trash or unclean.

Another worthless and valueless entity within the Dangme traditional environment that is bestowed as a name is *Puseɛ*, ‘dry plantain fibre.’ Among the Dangme, particularly rural dwellers, *Puseɛ*, ‘dry plantain fibre’ is used to dress/clean the anus of both adult and children after visiting the toilet. *Puseɛ*, is common and undervalued in agrarian

communities. Participants reveal that after the *Puseɛ*, is used to clean the anus of children it is disposed onto the refuse dump. Parents out of love for their new-borns adopt the names of these worthless and filthy entities, *Dɔɔ*, *Kuku* and *Puseɛ* to portray the name-bearer as a rejected person in order to protect and divert the attention of the hounding spirits that kills the child. Participants named, *Dɔɔ*, *Kuku* and *Puseɛ* disclosed during the interview that the name, though ugly saved their lives because their predecessor siblings could not survive. They therefore suggest that their names serve as cultural expellant of death.

The use of filthy entity as a name in protecting the life of the child is not peculiar to the Dangme. It emerges from Yakub's (2024) study that the Nzema people use names of filthy entities like vulture, housefly, chamber pot, broom and rag to portray name-bearers as undervalued by their biological parents to divert the focus of the malefic forces to guarantee the survival of the child. Yakub (2024) argues that in the cultural context of the Nzema these creatures and objects are regarded as filthy in that the vulture and the housefly feed on carcasses, stinking materials and are always found in unkempt places. Similarly, the chamber pot accommodates human excreta, urine and vomit whereas broom and rag are materials for cleaning filth in the environment. Sagna & Bassène (2016) establish that death prevention names broaden understanding of the naming tradition including the conceptualization of ethereal forces that threaten the survival of infants and those that expel the spirit of death. Death-prevention names signify how inevitable death is as well as demonstrate the socio-cultural significance of supposedly unimportant objects, materials and filthy places within our physical environment (see Kamalu et al., 2024; Mensah & Offong, 2013; Obeng, 1998; Ogunwale, 2012; Yakub 2024).

Sarpong (1974, pp. 89-90) remarks that death-prevention names are “funny names.” He argues that recycled children have both “biological and spiritual parents.” In his view, the “spiritual parents” determine the child's right to survive on earth. Sarpong maintains that despicable names are bestowed on such infants by their biological parents to delink them from their spiritual parents. Sarpong further observes that the “funnier the name, the better the (chances of the child's) survival” of the child. However, modernization and religion are threatening the practice of bestowing death-prevention names in Dangme.

Names that reflect low-level paid jobs

Dangme death-prevention names related to slavery and low-level job based on the socio-cultural and socio-onomastic belief and practice of the people is another class names worth noting. Consider Table 2 below.

Table 2. Slavery-related names

Name	Gloss
Kaya	carrier of load
Odoko	slave
Odokoyo	maid

The Dangme society is traditionally agrarian. There are certain jobs, though important to the economic development of the society that are often underrated. People who engage in such jobs are also undermined. One such job is the carrying of load at the market square popularly referred to as *kaya*. The name *Kaya*, a Hausa word, meaning load (see Obeng, 1998; Yakub, 2024) is bestowed on a child to devalue him or her to make them unattractive to the malevolent spirits. Women who engage in the carrying of load or luggage at marketplaces and bus stations are referred to *Kayayo* ‘Kaya girl’. Some participants disclosed that individuals who engage in carting load in the cities, particularly at the market square are seen as low-level persons with poor remuneration and are treated with contempt. The people who engage in the *kaya* business have either no formal education or are less educated. This, therefore, suggests that these individuals occupy the lowest rung on the economic ladder and low social status in the society. As a result, biological parents sarcastically use the name to inform the spiritual parents of the name-bearer lower social status in society. The name portrays a sense of devaluation before the malevolent spirits that would not take such a person for anything.

New-born children who traverse between the physical and the spiritual worlds are given slavery names as an indirect communication to their spiritual parents to spare their lives. In the Dangme culture, slaves are referred to as *Odoko* and *Odokoyo* for male and female respectively. Slaves, according to the Dangme cosmology, have no better place in the society, notwithstanding their contributions towards the development of the society. Slaves have no voices; they work under the instruction and supervision of their masters; they occupy the margins of life. In view of these, the Dangme see slaves as cheap labour force who undertake herculean task that attracts less remuneration. In the Dangme tradition, slaves are given facial marks to distinguish them from the freeborn. This corroborates the findings of Ebeheakey et al. (2016) that children who transit between the physical and the spiritual world are given facial marks. Mensah (2015, p. 120) argues that “body parts are mutilated as protective rituals to prevent their return to particular families in the Ibibio

culture. However, the children manifest the same mark, inscription or mutilated body part with the same physical mother in her next delivery.”

The Dangme’s belief in facial mark as a measure to prevent neonatal death is similar to the belief of the speakers of some Maba languages like Dagbani, Kusaal, Likpakpaanl and Sisaali as noted by (Abubakari et al. 2023). The study reports that special death-prevention marks are incised on both jaws of a child who survived after several neonatal deaths not only for identification but also to guarantee his survival. An ethnographic account from participants added that such children are branded slaves in the sense that slaves are not envied by their host because they are not considered as permanent members of the family.

Death-prevention names make parents to recover from fear, frustration, and anguish and restore their hope. Such names facilitate the survival of the child. Participants submit that the Dangme people hold the belief that the spirit causing infant mortality is not interested in a slave. This belief corroborates the views of Yakub (2024) and Obeng (1998) that parents metaphorically likened the new-born child to a slave or a carrier of load to suggest to the malevolent spirit that the child is not respected and regarded as a migrant labourer to warrant his survival.

Names that express negative emotions

Frustrations and emotions of Dangme parents who suffer repeated neonatal deaths are communicated through names. The death-prevention name that express disdainful treatment, frustration and emotions of the name-giver are illustrated in Table 3. The name-giver expresses his negative emotion through painful experiences, frustration, and a show of life dissatisfaction. From an Ethnopragmatic lens, the name-giver’s bitterness, depression and grief are expressed through this category of names. This class of names are the reactions of the name-giver and a demonstration of his cultural and onomastic behaviour. The positive emotion inspires hope and assurance with the belief that the child will survive. The name-giver and bearer are consoled and motivated with respect to the child’s possibility of survival. Consider the names in Table 3.

Table 3. Contemptuous death prevention names

Name	Gender	Gloss
Ahɛɛlegu	Female	Handle it with contempt
Alimo	Male	You are not known
Jaapama	Unisex	Same is coming again
Odumta	Male	No wood for coffin
Zuta	Male	No earth for burial

The names in Table 3 are bestowed to express frustration and grief that is occasioned by infant mortality caused by malefic forces to the family. The name *Ahɛɛlegu*, ‘Handle it with contempt’ is an expression of emotional suffering of a parent who is fed-up with the incessant agony caused by child mortality. The frustration is expressed in a contemptuous manner as requested by the name-giver. This demonstrates how an infant is regarded metaphorically as worthless. Dangme name-givers who experienced repeated infant mortality believed that denying knowledge of the child by giving the name *Alimo*, ‘You are not known’ is enough humiliation to deter the spirit from recognising him or her. From a socio-onomastic perspective, the name, *Alimo*, ‘You are not known’ evokes a sense of disdainful treatment and social disconnection from community members. *Jaapama* ‘Same is coming again’ symbolises the lamentation of the name-giver to the underworld forces to spare the child’s life. The name, *Jaapama*, demonstrates the fear and panic that parents live with cyclical birth. The ethnopragmatic implication of the name, *Jaapama* ‘Same is coming again’ can influence a contemptuous attitude of parents, family members and the society towards the named. This is meant to create the impression that the child is hated or not desired.

The names *Odumta*, ‘No wood for coffin’, *Zuta*, ‘No earth/ground for burial’ are occasioned by the agony caused by the spirit of death. *Odum* is a very precious wood for furniture. It is mostly used for making coffin for prominent people in the Dangme society. The ethnopragmatic implications of the names *Odumta* and *Zuta* are that parents are pointing out to the new-born that there are no resources like wood and land to bury him or her if they returned to the underworld or spirit-parents.

Borrowed names used as death-prevention labels

The primary reason why the Dangme name-giver resorts to names from neighbouring cultures is to disguise the cultural, linguistic and ethnic identity of the name-bearer (see Abubakari et al., 2023; Obeng, 1998). Table 4 displays loaned names from other cultures, including Akan, Ewe and Yoruba.

Table 3. Borrowed names used for death-prevention

Name	Source Language	Gender	meaning
Ababio	Akan	Male	It has come again
Asaase	Akan	Male	Land/Earth
Ahusano	Hausa	Male	A Hausa person
Apaana	Gurene	Male	Stranger
Baba	Hausa	Male	Father
Madugu	Kasem	Male	It is him
Joko	Yoruba	Female	Sit down
Dedzi	Ewe	Female	Surplus

The Dangme refer to people from other ethnic extractions as *Majeli*, meaning non-natives. They perceive non-native people as unclean especially females. This is because they have not undergone the cleansing *Dipo* puberty rites. Some non-native labourers were employed as farm hands by their Dangme hosts to boost agricultural production. Some participants revealed that some non-native people were bought as slaves during the colonial era. The Dangme perceive such people as lacking knowledge of the Dangme culture and do not act or behave like Dangme indigenes. *Majeli*, ‘non-natives’ cannot hold prestigious positions in the Dangme society because they are socially excluded and stigmatised. The names in Table 4 above are alien to the Dangme society and their bearers are equally despised as foreigners. In Akan, Obeng (1998) reports that the bestowal of “migrants” or non-Akan names as death-prevention names is for the biological parents to make the child invisible from the spiritual parents.

From socio-onomastic and ethnopragmatic points of view, the child is perceived as a foreigner who is not a legitimate member of the family. Given the naming system and

tradition of the Dangme, the socio-onomastic implications of this class of names suggest that the child is denigrated, discriminated against and deemed as inferior to his/her kinsmen. The names are decoys to conceal the real identity of the infants from the perceived malevolent spirits that might take them away. These names suggest that the Dangme society disowned the child as not belonging to them. Consequently, death, as the Dangme's belief is not interested in what the living disowned and denigrated. This findings are consistent with the findings of Mensah (2015) that death-prevention names are employed to frustrate malevolent spirits as well as hide the identity of such children. It is worthy of mention that Dangme people believe that by giving the children alien names, they conceal their real identities from their underworld parents who would not consider them attractive. In a study of anthroponyms of some Mabia languages, Abubakari et al. (2023) indicate that as part of the rituals to ensure the survival of a child who comes after several neonatal deaths, a non-native is made to supposedly buy the new-born baby. The buyer then bestows on the child a name from his culture name stock in order to conceal the ethnic identity of the child to warrant his or her survival.

Baba, 'father' though a honorific term in the source language, the Dangme, through their anthroponomastic system, however, employ the polite address term *Baba* to conceal the ethnic identity of the child to save his or her life from the claws of the underworld spirits. The Dangme naming tradition allows the name-giver to deploy the borrowed words from other cultures to disguise the identity of the Dangme new-born baby by either commanding the child to survive, branding him or her as a stranger, express anger for the cyclical birth and to indicate that the same child has recycled. This group of names is meant to communicate to the underworld forces that the new-born child is a foreigner and has no family lineage within the Dangme society.

Death defiance death-prevention names

Another social category of Dangme death-prevention names involves those that defy the authority of malefic forces. The cultural conceptualization embedded in this regime of names is the mounting of resistance to the tormenting forces of death as demonstrated in Table 5 below:

Table 4. Names that act as protective shields

Names	Sex	Meaning
Adũ	Male	It is planted
Bawa	Male	As you have come, grow
Amami	Female	It is replaced/replanted

Kamalu et al. (2024, p. 12) contend that death-prevention names that defy the oppressive power of death ‘represent a positive affirmation and attitude regarding survival and living in the face of a very difficult and agonizing situation’. In the estimation of the Dangme, participants disclosed that the bestowal of these names on children by parents is based on the approximation that the positive pronouncements inherent in the names will inhibit the death of the name-bearer. The name-giver bestows the name, *Adũ* ‘It is planted’ with the hope and expectation that the child would be able to withstand external forces and shock to survive. The fortification rituals that are performed in addition to the bestowal of the name motivate, and increase the optimism and expectation of the name-giver. Just as a newly planted seedling is nurtured so does the name intensifies the biological parent’s surveillance, protection and the tendering processes involved in ensuring the survival of the infant. *Amami*, ‘It has been replaced’ and *Bawa* ‘As you have come, survive!’ are the name-givers open confrontation to the powers of the ethereal spirit. These findings are in consonance with Kamalu et al. (2024) observation that the Igbo use death-oriented names as a means of challenging the power of death; thus, the authors revealed that parents that confer death-defiance names on their wards have experienced several infant mortalities. The Dangme people, like the Igbo believe that bestowing death-daring names would compel death to reserve the life of the named or delay his or her death. However, the Igbo portray death in some of the death-oriented names as wicked, powerful, and insensitive to the social status of people in society. The paper explains that Igbo death-oriented names enable parents to express their cultural and psychosocial experiences. The Dangme name-giver expresses optimism and affirmation of the survival of the child. The Dangme, like the Igbo confers death-daring names as a means of defiance, and opposition to the power of death to spare the life of the child (Kamalu et al. 2024).

The last category of Dangme death-prevention names is the new trend of names revealed by the ethnographic data. The domination of Pentecostalism and Charismatic faiths have influenced the new wave of death-prevention names in the Dangme society. According to Akung & Abang (2019), some Mbube Christians give personal names that express their

religious affiliation and to protect their children from infant mortality. They argue that there is a developing global trend among some African Christian believers for using God-referent names as death-prevention labels. This claim is evident among contemporary Dangme Christian parents. Based on emerging ethnographic and linguistic data, participants suggested that the Christian faith is gradually dominating Dangme societies. The contemporary Dangme parents affirm their belief in God as the provider and protector of children. This affirmation of faith in the Supreme Being is reflected in names like *Kemawusuɔ* 'If God permits.' This is the clipped form of the longer sentence *Ke Mawu suɔ ɔ, e maa da sisi*. Meaning 'If God permits, the child will survive.' Others include *Mawutsuɔeni* "God performs his miracles, *Mawulede* 'God said it', *Mawulehaanɔ* 'God is the provider. Some Christian participants revealed that the name of God is the panacea for preventing infant mortality. It became known during the interview that Dangme Christian parents who suffered continued neonatal death believed that given the indigenous death-prevention names to their children would betray their faith in God. A Christian participant disclosed that her Pastor would not bless a child who bears any of the traditional death-prevention names.

The traditional infant mortality resistant names and the naming practice of the Dangme are endangered by the gradual shift to what can be referred to as theophoric names. Some elderly participants expressed their frustration about the excessive penetration of modernization and Pentecostalism into the Dangme culture and naming tradition. Dangme personal names still survive despite the onslaught of Christianity and Western culture domination. Participants were of the view that personal names are incentives for shaping the name-bearer's feeling and reflection on his culture. Indigenous personal names make the named feel more attached to his heritage, culture and language. We discovered during one of the interview sessions that names determine how the name-bearer is treated. Individuals who are familiar with the cultural conceptualisation and ethnolinguistic import of the Dangme may appreciate and understand the psychological impact of death-preventions names parents. The cultural cognition of name users can evoke some sense of empathy, compassion and affection towards the name-bearer and givers.

Conclusion

The socio-onomastic theory and ethnopragmatic analytical tool present a better sociocultural and ideological outlook of Dangme death-prevention names. This article outlined the categories of death-prevention names in accordance with the naming tradition and the belief system of the Dangme. The study demonstrates that death-prevention names

are products of cultural conceptualisations: belief system, tradition and the worldview of the Dangme society. The data mirror the interconnectedness between language, culture, thought and the environment in the context of the Dangme society. It is evident from the discussion that entities and objects that are regarded as worthless in the environment play significant role in protecting and saving infants lives.

The study demonstrates that the Dangme, like some cultures in Africa confer weird names on children to make them unattractive and unpleasant to the malevolent spirit that haunt the life of a child. The belief and worldview of the Dangme occasioned the use of the names of filthy entities to guarantee the life of an infant. It is evident from the analysis that names of inferior jobs that are not respected within the economic value chain is given to a Dangme child to portray such a child as worthless. Although such inferior jobs are significant in the daily lives of the people, the Dangme regard such jobs as degrading and non-dignifying. Additionally, slavery, from an ethnographic account of participants is a preserve for non-native Dangme. Slavery in Dangme tradition is a position that one should not be proud of it. In most cases, slaves are mistreated such that their rights and privileges are trampled upon. In view of the marginalization of slaves, names attributed to slavery are given to a child by parents who suffer continues neonatal death to ensure their survival. It is clear that parents ventilate the psychological trauma, frustration and disappointment suffered from the hands of the malefic spirit for the death of several new-borns through the bestowal of contemptuous names.

Other death-prevention names mentioned in the discussion are those borrowed from other cultures and languages to conceal the ethnic identity of the Dangme child as a decoy to protect and ensure the survival of the child. From an ethnopragmatic perspective, the bestowal of such borrowed names delegitimizes the child as a member of any Dangme family and a native of the Dangme ethnic group in general. Death prevention names do not only fight and curb infant mortality but also elucidate how the Dangme society solve challenging problems relative to life and death that confront their existence. The study demonstrates the sociocultural relevance of names of filthy places, worthless entities and inferior jobs to the survival of the Dangme child and in addition restoring the joy of parents who repeatedly experience infant mortality. The findings of this article concur with Mensah's (2024) observation that death-prevention names are symbolic cultural resources that express emotional reactions of parents who suffered from frequent neonatal mortalities. Death-prevention names are laden with spiritual and cultural beliefs and serve sociocultural significance.

The study focused on the socio-onomastic and ethnopragmatic interpretations of Dangme death-prevention names. Regarding the implications of the study, it is significant to the teaching and learning of cultural studies of Dangme at all the levels of education particularly, the Senior High Schools, the Colleges of Education and the Universities. The study largely contributes to developing Dangme cultural linguistics and the understanding of Dangme anthroponyms. Significantly, the study contributes to the field of onomastic scholarship. The Dangme's cultural cognition, philosophy, ecology, thought, belief, language and worldview are reflected in their death-prevention names. We recommend that future researchers should investigate the effects of Dangme death-prevention names on name-bearers.

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