

ONOMASTIC STUDIES: THE SEMANTICS OF NAMING BY THE URHOB0 PEOPLE OF NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA REGION

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Abstract

This study explores the semantics of naming practices emanating from the social, traditional, and cultural contexts surrounding the birth of children among the Urhobo people of Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Drawing from the field of onomastics, the study of names and naming, the research examines how the Urhobo use naming as a means of expressing joy, commemorating memorable events, processing trauma, asserting identity, and preserving collective memory. Urhobo culture and traditions transcend mere semantic representation by embedding profound meanings that reflect the community's history, values, beliefs, and social structures. The Urhobo naming system vividly encapsulates how names convey messages about identity, lineage, birth circumstances, gender, and shared experiences. The study analyses selected names given to children in response to specific socio-cultural experiences, highlighting the emotional, cultural, and political meanings embedded in them. Through qualitative data gathered from interviews, oral histories, and linguistic analysis, the research demonstrates how these names function as tools of social commentary and as markers of socio-political and cultural preservation. Ultimately, the paper contributes to broader discussions on gendered onomastics, colonial and postcolonial identity, and the role of linguistic practices in the Niger Delta, a resource-rich yet historically marginalized region of Nigeria.

Keywords: Onomastic Studies, Gender, Urhobo People, Niger Delta, Colonial/Postcolonial Cultural Identity, Semantics, Identity, Collective Memory.

Introduction

Names are not merely arbitrary labels; they are powerful linguistic, cultural, and social symbols that carry profound meanings within human societies. Across the world, naming practices are deeply rooted in cultural traditions, spiritual beliefs, historical experiences, and social dynamics. The systematic study of names and naming practices is known as onomastics, a field that intersects with linguistics, anthropology, sociology, history, and cultural studies. According to Agyekum (2006), names are “linguistic resources that embody the worldview of a people,” serving as vehicles through which communities express their identities, values, and collective memory.

In African societies, names often go beyond simple identification to reflect events surrounding a child's birth, parental aspirations, communal expectations, and even socio-political realities. Scholars such as Alford (1988) and Herbert (1999) emphasise that in many African cultures, naming is a communicative act that can celebrate joy, document trauma, resist oppression, or encode spiritual and ancestral connections. Within this broader African context, the Urhobo people of Nigeria's Niger Delta region provide a particularly rich case study. The Urhobo, one of the largest ethnic groups in Delta State, possess a highly developed and symbolic naming system that encapsulates their complex history, cosmology, and socio-political experiences.

The Niger Delta region, known for its abundance of natural resources, particularly crude oil and natural gas, has long been a site of both wealth and marginalization. The Urhobo people have experienced cultural disruption due to colonialism, missionary activities, postcolonial governance challenges, and environmental degradation caused by extractive industries. These historical forces have shaped their linguistic expressions, including naming practices. As a result, Urhobo names are not only personal identifiers but also textual markers of resilience, resistance, and communal memory. For instance, names may reference the struggles of childbirth, gender expectations, family dynamics, spiritual beliefs, or socio-economic hardships.

This paper explores the semantics of Urhobo naming practices, focusing on how names encode happiness, memorable events, trauma, and social commentary. The paper also examines the intersection of gender, tradition, and identity within Urhobo names, revealing how these linguistic forms function as cultural texts that preserve the community's heritage. Through qualitative data gathered from oral histories, interviews, and textual analysis, the study highlights how the Urhobo use naming as a narrative device to process life experiences and to negotiate their position within a resource-rich yet politically marginalised region.

By situating Urhobo naming practices within the broader discourse of onomastic studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how language operates as a tool of cultural preservation and identity construction. It also underscores the importance of documenting indigenous naming traditions in the face of globalisation, cultural erosion, and the homogenising effects of modernity. Ultimately,

the study demonstrates that names, far from being simple words, are repositories of history and powerful symbols of collective consciousness.

The Urhobo People and the Niger Delta Region

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, endowed with vast reserves of crude oil and natural gas, has long been a focal point of both national and international attention. The region's wealth of energy resources has attracted multinational oil corporations, positioning the region as a crucial driver of Nigeria's economy. However, alongside the promises of economic development and globalisation, the influx of oil exploration and expatriate workers has brought significant social disruptions. These include environmental degradation, economic displacement, and socio-cultural transformations that have altered the traditional way of life of the indigenous peoples (Okaba, 2005). Oil spills, gas flaring, and deforestation have degraded farmlands and fishing waters, threatening the ecological balance on which many communities, including the Urhobo, depend for subsistence.

The Urhobo people are one of the largest indigenous ethnic groups in southern Nigeria; they constitute the most populous single ethnic group in Delta State. They speak Urhobo, a language classified within the Niger-Congo language family, which serves as a core marker of their cultural identity. According to Urhobo oral traditions, their origins can be traced to migrations from the ancient Benin Kingdom and other surrounding areas. These migrations eventually led to their settlement in the western section of the Niger Delta, where they established a network of autonomous but culturally interconnected kingdoms and clans.

Geographically, the Urhobo occupy a low-lying area interwoven with a dense network of rivers, creeks, and wetlands, including the Ethiope, Warri, Forcados, and Escravos rivers. The major urban and semi-urban centres of the Urhobo include: Ughelli, Sapele, Effurun, Oghara, Orerokpe, and Abraka. These towns have historically served as centers of commerce, political administration, and cultural expression.

Culturally, the Urhobo maintain a clan-based social structure in which kinship ties are central to governance, inheritance, and communal life. Spirituality occupies a vital place in Urhobo culture. They traditionally worship Oghene, the supreme deity, regarded as the creator and sustainer of life. Alongside Oghene, the Urhobo venerate a pantheon of lesser divinities and ancestral spirits, who are believed to serve as intermediaries between the divine and the living community. Ancestral reverence is particularly significant, as the dead are thought to remain active participants in the lives of their descendants (Otite, 2003 and Ekeh, 2007).

Despite these socio-economic and ecological challenges, the Urhobo people, along with other ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, continue to exhibit remarkable resilience. They have preserved their languages, customs, and cultural identities, using oral traditions, festivals, and naming practices to pass down their heritage to future generations. At the same time, the Urhobo have engaged in political activism and cultural revival movements to assert their rightful place in the Nigerian federation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Onomastic Theory, which examines the origin, meanings, and socio-cultural significance of names and naming

practices. The theory provides a framework for understanding names not merely as personal identifiers but as linguistic and cultural symbols that encode collective memory, social values, and emotional experiences. In the Urhobo context, naming reflects the people's worldview, spirituality, and socio-political realities.

Using this framework, the study explores how semantics and pragmatics interact in shaping names that communicate meanings beyond identity. Urhobo names often function as expressions of memory and resistance, conveying narratives of historical experiences, ancestral ties, and communal struggles. Some names may reflect grief, trauma, or appeals for divine justice and protection, shaped by the realities of Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

Naming is therefore viewed as a form of social commentary and cultural preservation through which communities express resilience and transmit shared experiences across generations. Insights from trauma and memory studies further explain naming as a site of collective memory where historical experiences and emotional realities are preserved and communicated.

Significance of Names

In Urhobo culture, names are far more than personal identifiers; they are deeply symbolic expressions of identity, heritage, and values. They play a vital role in connecting individuals to their ancestral roots, serving as a bridge between past and present while preserving the community's traditions and collective memory. Names also influence social relationships, reflecting family ties, clan membership, and status within the community. They foster unity and belonging while guiding interactions and communal recognition.

Beyond their social function, Urhobo names carry rich meanings and symbolism, often expressing gratitude, historical events, parental aspirations, or divine intervention. Each name tells a story, acting as a linguistic record of personal and communal experiences. Through their naming practices, the Urhobo people preserve their cultural identity, strengthen social cohesion, and pass down their values and history to future generations.

Literature Review

The field of onomastics, the study of names and naming practices, has long provided valuable insight into how individuals and communities use naming as a linguistic and cultural tool to construct meaning, express identity, and navigate complex socio-cultural realities. In regions marked by systemic trauma and exploitation, such as Nigeria's oil-rich but environmentally and socially devastated Niger Delta, naming practices often transcend their basic referential function. Names become acts of resistance, remembrance, and socio-political commentary, reflecting both personal and collective experiences of struggle and survival. This review examines scholarship relevant to the semantics of naming among the Urhobo people within this context.

Ajiboye (2014) offers a foundational contribution which focuses on the Urhobo-speaking area of Avwraaka. Her study highlights that naming is deeply embedded in cultural logic, emotional expression, and social commentary. Rather than being mere identifiers, names operate as vessels of family history, communal values, and personal sentiment. Ajiboye's findings underscore the pedagogical importance of teaching the semantic richness of naming traditions within language education. Although her study does not address naming related to sexual violence or

trauma, it provides a critical framework for understanding how names encode lived experiences and social realities.

Broader African onomastic literature further supports this perspective. Agyekum (2006) and Ameka (2001) demonstrate that naming practices in African societies often encapsulate profound emotional and social meanings. Names may reflect sorrow, anger, resilience, defiance, or joy, depending on the circumstances of a child's birth or family history. In contexts of trauma or social upheaval, naming may act as catharsis or protest, preserving collective memory and expressing condemnation of injustice. Such naming practices serve as linguistic testimonies, encapsulating the psychological and socio-political weight of historical experiences.

Postcolonial and feminist perspectives provide additional interpretive lenses for analyzing the socio-political dimensions of naming. Oyěwùmí (1997) and Mama (2001) interrogate how gender, power, and colonial legacies intersect to shape cultural practices, including naming. Within the Niger Delta, where multinational oil corporations operate amid stark economic inequalities, women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Though these scholars do not focus directly on onomastics, their work helps explain the power asymmetries that underlie naming practices linked to sexual violence, promiscuity, and social stigma. These perspectives highlight the gendered dynamics that influence both the form and meaning of certain names.

Contemporary African onomastic scholarship emphasises that personal names are semantic and pragmatic resources that encode worldviews, social relations, and historical experiences (Agyekum,

2006). Recent socio-onomastic studies across West Africa integrate semantic analysis, ethnographic observation, and pragmatic frameworks to examine names as sites of memory and identity construction. These approaches are particularly relevant for analysing Urhobo naming traditions in the Niger Delta.

Several recent studies focus specifically on the Urhobo. Morphosemantic analyses show that Urhobo personal names often invoke divinity, ancestry, birth circumstances, and socio-economic conditions (Imu et al., 2023; Akpojisheri & Dumbi, 2024; Uwasomba & Okiemute, 2024). These works document the linguistic composition of names and interpret their semantic fields as repositories of religious, philosophical, and historical knowledge. Other scholars situate Urhobo naming practices within the broader Niger Delta socio-political context, emphasising how colonial encounters, missionary activity, and the rise of the oil economy have shaped contemporary naming patterns. Environmental degradation, forced migration, and encounters with expatriate workers have indirectly influenced modern name choices, resulting in a complex interplay between traditional forms and hybrid innovations.

Gender and power in naming have become prominent themes in recent scholarship. Comparative studies across Nigerian communities reveal how onomastic practices can either reinforce or challenge patriarchal structures. Female names, for example, often encode societal expectations, resistance to gender roles, or memories of suffering. These insights are now emerging in Niger Delta onomastic research, providing new perspectives on the role of gender in naming traditions.

Methodologically, contemporary onomastic research increasingly combines qualitative interviews, participant observation at naming ceremonies, corpus-based morphosemantic analysis, and discourse-pragmatic frameworks. Foundational resources such as Urhobo lexicons, oral histories, and ethnographic records are frequently used to contextualize the semantic layers of naming within lived cultural practices (Atubi, 2025).

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. Few longitudinal studies track how oil-related socio-political changes have influenced naming patterns across generations among the Urhobo. Quantitative analyses of naming frequency, class-based variations, and gender dynamics are also limited. Furthermore, there is a lack of research explicitly connecting environmental trauma, resource conflict, and gendered violence to naming practices. The current study addresses these gaps by integrating discourse-pragmatic analysis with community-based interviews focused on oil-related trauma and cross-cultural encounters. It also seeks to develop a small annotated corpus of contemporary Urhobo names, including glosses and contextual narratives, to serve as a foundation for future comparative studies.

Finally, perspectives from trauma and memory studies provide valuable insights into understanding naming as a powerful medium through which collective memory is constructed, preserved, and transmitted across generations. A name given to a child born under traumatic circumstances, such as sexual violence or systemic exploitation, functions not merely as a label but as a living testimony. These names embody the ongoing struggle for justice and remembrance, ensuring that the traumatic events they reference are not erased from communal consciousness.

Data Analysis

Data 1: Names for Self Signifying Personal M

Name	Meaning	Gende
1. Aghogho	Happiness	Unisex
2. Onome	My own	Unisex
3. Akpesiri	Good life	Unisex
4. Erhuvwu	Good news	Unisex
5. Edesiri	Good day	Unisex
6. Ese	Gift	Unisex
7. Efe	Wealth	Unisex
8. Obruche	Peacemaker	Male
9. Akpevwe	Let’s praise him/	Unisex
10.Odede	Titled individual	Male

The names Aghogho, Onome, Akpesiri, Erhuvwu, Edesiri, Ese, Efe, Akpevwe, Obruche, and Odede reflect deeply embedded personal and social meanings within Urhobo culture. Except for Obruche and Odede, which are traditionally reserved for male children, most of these names are unisex, indicating their broad cultural resonance and inclusivity. These names mentioned above, collectively signify ecstasy, happiness, prosperity, and well-being. They serve as linguistic tools of affirmation, offering psychological reinforcement to individuals and families. In contexts where people may experience pain, anger, regret, or frustration. Such names act as psychological boosts, encouraging resilience and optimism. For instance, Aghogho (happiness) and Erhuvwu (good news) are explicitly uplifting, while Efe (wealth) and Ese (gift) reflect aspirations for abundance and blessings. Beyond their personal emotional value, some of the names also carry communal and

social connotations, symbolising liberty, peace, and collective harmony. A name like Obruché (peacemaker), though gendered male, transcends individual identity by promoting societal ideals of conflict resolution and unity. Similarly, Akpevwé (let's praise him/her) implies communal thanksgiving and shared joy.

From an onomastic perspective, these names fall under the category of personal names, given primarily to celebrate positive life circumstances and convey blissful renditions of identity. Their semantic weight demonstrates how the Urhobo use naming not only to mark the birth of a child but also to encode collective hopes, values, and psychological resilience within their linguistic and cultural system.

Data 2: Names Depicting Loyalty to the Supreme Bei

Name	Meaning	Gender
1. Oghenerume	God has done well for	Unisex
2. Agoghene	Let's serve God	Unisex
3. Oghenerode	The great God	Unisex
4. Jesutekevwe	Jesus is enough for me	Unisex
5. Oghenero	There is God	Male
6. Osivwin	Saviour	Male
7. Iruoghene	The works of God	Unisex
8. Oghenerherure	God has done it again	Unisex
9. Oghenefure	God is purity	Male
10. Oghenebrorhien	God is the supreme judge	Male

This dataset highlights Urhobo spiritual consciousness and the community's strong connection to the Supreme Being through naming practices. The names reflect reverence for God's sovereignty, ascribing to him divine authority and supernatural supremacy over human affairs. Most of the names, such as Oghenerume (God has done well for me), Jesutekevwe (Jesus is enough for me), and Iruoghene (the works of God), are unisex, demonstrating their universal spiritual appeal across gender lines. However, names like Agoghene (let's serve God), Oghenerode (the great God), and Oghenebrorhien (God is the supreme judge) are unisex indicating traditional gender dynamics in which male and female children are often positioned as custodians of family spirituality and leadership.

These names function as linguistic affirmations of faith within a post-colonial, Christianised Niger Delta context. They illustrate how the Urhobo people negotiate spiritual identity amidst historical and socio-political change, especially in a region shaped by missionary influence, colonial encounters, and contemporary religious movements. The emphasis on divine purity, salvation, and judgment reflects a cultural aspiration toward moral sanctity and radical self-purification. From a semantic perspective, these names form a repertoire of spiritual expressions, symbolising gratitude, devotion, and reliance on divine providence. For instance, Oghenererure (God has done it again) signifies ongoing divine intervention in human affairs, while Oghenefure (God is purity) encapsulates ideals of holiness and spiritual integrity.

Collectively, these names embody the Urhobo worldview, where personal identity is intertwined with religious consciousness. They serve not only as personal identifiers but also as theological statements, reinforcing communal values of faith, reverence, and spiritual

accountability. In this way, naming operates as a sociolinguistic tool for transmitting religious traditions and sustaining spiritual resilience in the face of modern challenges.

Data 3: Names with Connotations of Anger

Name	Meaning	Gender
1. Akpohwofadaye	Picking pitfalls in people's lives	Male
2. Avwayebayerin	Let's manage them	Unisex
3. Ayaba re	End of my sojourn	Unisex
4. Eghwrudjakpo	Live endlessly or lost in life's sojourn	Unisex
5. Ejaita	Let them be the judge / Say what suits them	Unisex
6. Wejaigunvwe	Let them gossip me	Male
7. Ophurode	Great anger	Male
8. Mechakaye	I am coming all out for them	Male
9. Orhuerayehphana	They are mad / On the verge of madness	Male
10. Eruvwetere	They have done enough to me	Unisex

The third dataset presents a collection of Urhobo names that are deeply rooted in emotions of anger, pain, and resentment, often reflecting personal or communal struggles. These names, given to both male and female children, though more commonly male are powerful linguistic expressions of grief, frustration, and psychological turmoil. They emerge in contexts where individuals or families have experienced betrayal, marginalisation, exploitation, or intense social conflict.

Names such as *Ophurode* (great anger) and *Mechakaye* (I am coming all out for them) explicitly convey rage and a readiness for confrontation. Others, like *Wejaigunvwe* (let them gossip me) and *Ejaita* (let them be the judge or say what suits them), demonstrate a defensive yet

resilient attitude, reflecting an effort to rise above societal criticism or injustice. Similarly, *Eruvwetere* (they have done enough to me) expresses exhaustion and emotional weariness after enduring prolonged suffering. These names are often bestowed as coping mechanisms, allowing parents to symbolically channel their anger and grief into their child's identity, thus externalizing pain while preserving their dignity within the community. Culturally, these names in Data 3 function as silent protests against perceived wrongdoers or oppressive circumstances. For instance, *Orhuerayehephana* (they are mad or on the verge of madness) ridicules and condemns antagonists indirectly, while *Avwayebayerin* (let's incorporate and live with them) reflects a resigned yet pragmatic approach to coexisting with difficult individuals or situations. In this way, naming becomes a form of social commentary, enabling families to voice discontent and critique societal issues without direct confrontation. Unlike celebratory or spiritually grounded names, which emphasise joy, gratitude, or devotion, anger-laden names highlight negative emotional states. They capture the psychological reality of living in a region like the Niger Delta, where environmental degradation, socio-political injustice, and economic exploitation have deeply scarred communities. These names preserve the collective memory of suffering, ensuring that experiences of trauma are not forgotten but instead transformed into enduring cultural symbols.

Thus, names with connotations of anger go beyond individual identity. They serve as linguistic records of communal resilience and resistance, illustrating how the Urhobo people use naming not only to express personal emotions but also to engage with broader social and political realities. Through these names, pain is given voice, and silence is replaced with a subtle but powerful form of protest.

Data 4: Urhobo names that are constructed as parables

Name	Meaning	Gender
1 Ovwemejephān	I am on my own	Unisex
2 Etarākpobuno	Too many hearsays	Usually male children
3 Ejimivwionana	Let me give birth to this one	Unisex
4 Ejomafuvwe	Let me have peace	Unisex
5 Ejuvwevwo	Let them leave me alone	Unisex
6 Erāphienghen	Those deceived are usually foolish	Unisex
7 Ejukonemu	Let trouble be far from (my) things	Male children
8 Eremafo	The most holy ones	Unisex
9 Akpokiriboro	Life is like football	Usually male children
10 Ejaiguedjoromaraye	Let them gossip about themselves first	Unisex

This fourth dataset presents Urhobo names that are constructed as parables, often expressed in long, phrasal forms that capture deep moral lessons, social observations, or philosophical reflections. These names function as proverbs in miniature, encapsulating wisdom, social critique, and personal experiences in a single linguistic unit. For convenience, and to ensure ease of pronunciation in everyday interactions, such names are often abbreviated or shortened while retaining their core meaning. Names like *Ovwemejephān* (I am on my own) and *Ejuvwevwo* (let them leave me alone) express feelings of isolation, independence, and self-reliance, revealing the speaker's decision to detach emotionally from conflict or societal pressure. Similarly, *Etarākpobuno* (too many hearsays) and *Ejaiguedjoromaraye* (gossip about yourself first) are indirect social commentaries, reflecting the communal nature of Urhobo society where reputation and rumor play significant roles. These names allow individuals to respond to criticism or tension in subtle, culturally acceptable ways, using language as a shield rather than direct confrontation. Some names, such as *Ejimivwionana* (let me give birth to

this one) and *Ejomafuvwe* (let me have peace), express personal aspirations for peace, continuity, and relief, particularly in contexts of hardship or conflict. Others, like *Eraphienghen* (those deceived are usually foolish) and *Akpokiriboro* (life is like football), are metaphorical and philosophical, providing timeless reflections on human nature, fate, and the unpredictability of life. Through such expressions, the Urhobo people embed moral guidance and social values directly into the act of naming.

These parable-based names are also therapeutic and restorative, offering a way for individuals and families to release emotional burdens. By framing pain, disappointment, or societal criticism through metaphor, parents can transform personal struggles into collective lessons, fostering healing and reintegration into the community. For instance, names like *Ejukonemu* (let trouble be far from my things) and *Eremafo* (the most holy ones) reflect desires for divine protection and a return to moral purity.

Overall, these names demonstrate how Urhobo naming traditions function as ethic-based linguistic practices, merging storytelling, philosophy, and identity. They not only encode personal narratives but also preserve cultural values, acting as portable parables that connect individuals to their heritage while guiding them toward psychological and spiritual balance. Through this category of names, the Urhobo people reveal the profound role of language in navigating life's challenges and in reaffirming one's place within the broader social fabric.

Data 5: Names depicting sexual immorality

Nam	Meani	Gend
1 K o n o v w	W h o o w n s	U n i s
2 M e y a b	T h e e n d o f m y	U n i s
3 O m o k e	C h i l d i s	U n i s
4 O m o v	S l a v e c l	U n i s

5 Omuhi	Promiscuous sojour	Unisex
6 Ofarhie	Prostitut Usually	Female child
7 Ayevwor	A promiscuous public l	Usually female child
8 Oduey	A promiscuous m	Usually male child
9 Igber	Sex diseas	Unisex
10 Eghwareruvv	I am a victim of s	Unisex

This dataset comprises Urhobo names that convey social censure regarding sexual immorality, promiscuity, or the consequences of illicit relationships. These names often function satirically, expressing both disapproval and caution while highlighting the moral and social expectations within the community. Some names, such as *Konovworo* (who owns him) and *Meyabare* (the end of my sojourn), are unisex, while others, particularly those referring to promiscuous behaviour, are gender-specific, mostly assigned to female children (*Ugberadja*, *Ayevworo*) or male children (*Odueya*).

The semantic load of these names is substantial. They evoke feelings of shame, regret, and social scrutiny, often reflecting gossip or communal judgment concerning children born from extramarital or socially frowned-upon relationships. Names like *Ewhareruvwe* (I am a victim of sex) or *Igbere* (sex disease) highlight experiences of victimization, moral caution, or social stigma, while others, like *Omokoro* (child is gold), balance critique with recognition of the cultural value placed on children, regardless of the circumstances of their birth.

Functionally, this category of names serve multiple roles. They act as verbal reproach, warning children especially girls against immoral behaviour. They also provide a psycho-social adjustment mechanism for parents and families, helping them manage the shame or social backlash

associated with sexual misconduct within the community. The names operate as moral lessons, preserving family honour while simultaneously embedding cultural norms and ethical boundaries. Overall, the Urhobo naming system in this context transforms moral admonition social critique, and collective values into linguistic artifacts, enabling parents and communities to both transmit cultural lessons and navigate complex social realities.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of Urhobo naming practices reveals a deeply semantic and culturally embedded system, where names function as more than mere identifiers. They serve as vehicles of identity, memory, morality, spirituality, and social commentary, reflecting the lived experiences, values, and worldviews of the Urhobo people. Names expressing personal meaning, such as *Aghogho* (happiness) and *Onome* (my own), capture joy, optimism, and communal aspirations. These names provide emotional reassurance, reinforcing ideals of peace, prosperity, and social harmony. Similarly, spiritually inclined names, like *Oghenerume* (God has done well for me) and *Jesutekevwe* (Jesus is enough for me), illustrate the Urhobo's deep religious consciousness, where naming embodies devotion, moral guidance, and alignment with a post-colonial Christianised worldview. Male-specific spiritual names often reflect traditional roles as custodians of family and community religiosity, while unisex names emphasise the universality of divine connection.

Names conveying anger, including *Ophurode* (great anger) and *Mechakaye* (I am coming all out for them), reveal that naming functions as a mechanism for expressing grievance, frustration, or social protest. These names allow parents to externalise emotional pain, critique perceived wrongdoers, and maintain dignity within the community. Parable-based names, such as *Ovwemejephon* (I am on my own) and

Akpokiriboro (life is like football), function as miniature proverbs, offering moral lessons, philosophical reflections, and guidance for navigating social and personal challenges. They demonstrate how the Urhobo integrate ethics, storytelling, and cultural wisdom into onomastic practices.

Names reflecting sexual immorality, such as *Ugberadja* (prostitute) and *Odueya* (a promiscuous man), perform a regulatory and cautionary function. They communicate disapproval, preserve family honour, and serve as warnings to younger generations. Some unisex names in this category, like *Ewhareruvwe* (I am a victim of sex), also operate as psychological coping mechanisms, helping families process shame, regret, and social scrutiny. Across all categories, Urhobo names demonstrate semantic richness and multifunctionality. They encode emotional states, social norms, spiritual beliefs, and historical memory, while reflecting gendered roles, moral expectations, and communal values. Naming is thus a sociolinguistic tool for transmitting cultural knowledge, reinforcing moral codes, and preserving communal identity, especially in the context of the Niger Delta, a region shaped by environmental challenges, social disruption, and historical inequalities.

In summary, Urhobo naming practices illustrate the interplay between language, culture, and lived experience. Names are not simply labels; they are active participants in the construction of identity, the mediation of social relationships, and the communication of collective memory, offering both psychological support and cultural continuity within a complex and often challenging socio-political environment.

Conclusion

The study of Urhobo naming practices in Nigeria's Niger Delta region reveals that names are deeply embedded in the social, cultural, and spiritual fabric of the community. Far beyond serving as mere identifiers, Urhobo names encode personal emotions, communal values, moral instruction, spiritual devotion, and social commentary. They function as

vehicles for identity formation, memory preservation, and moral education, reflecting both individual experiences and collective cultural consciousness.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Urhobo naming practices are semantically rich, culturally meaningful, and socially functional. They serve as linguistic repositories of collective memory, ethical frameworks, and community values, illustrating how language mediates identity, culture, and social relations in the Niger Delta. In a region marked by environmental, economic, and social challenges, these names also provide psychological resilience, moral orientation, and cultural continuity, ensuring that the lived experiences of individuals and communities are preserved, interpreted, and transmitted to future generations.

Ultimately, the semantics of Urhobo naming practices highlight the interconnectedness of language, culture, and lived experience, affirming that names are powerful instruments of identity, memory, moral reflection, and socio-cultural preservation within Niger Delta communities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, there is a need for proper documentation and preservation of Urhobo names, their meanings, and cultural significance to ensure their continuity for future generations. Onomastic studies should also be integrated into educational and cultural programmes to promote awareness of the values and identities embedded in naming practices.

Future research should examine the effects of modernisation and external influences on Urhobo naming traditions. Additionally, digital platforms and online archives should be used to preserve and promote

Urhobo names as important tools of cultural identity, collective memory, and social cohesion.

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