



More Than a Sound: Why African Parents Should Make Indigenous Names a First Priority

Ejuchegahi A. Angwaomaodoko

Department of Education, College of Education, Kean University, Union, NJ, USA

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6300-2017>

Abstract

A name is never merely a sound; it is a deliberate inheritance through which African communities have historically preserved ancestry, transmitted values and safeguarded communal memory across generations, a reality that gives rise to this paper on "More Than a Sound: Why African Parents Should Make Indigenous Names a First Priority." The paper was guided by three objectives: to examine the cultural and historical significance of indigenous names as carriers of ancestry, values and communal memory; to investigate the factors influencing African parents' preference for foreign names over indigenous names; and to assess the implications of declining indigenous naming for identity formation and cultural continuity among African children. The paper adopted Afrocentricity as its theoretical framework, and employed a systematic literature review methodology, drawing on recent, verifiable and peer-reviewed sources across African, and particularly Nigerian, naming contexts. The paper revealed that indigenous names function as structured cultural instruments encoding ancestry and moral values, that the preference for foreign names is driven by colonial legacy, religious conversion, social prestige and migratory pressure, and that declining indigenous naming weakens intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and generates unresolved tension in identity formation, particularly among diasporic youth. The paper concluded that indigenous naming warrants renewed priority as a safeguard for cultural continuity and recommended the primary use of indigenous names, cultural awareness programmes and institutional documentation of indigenous naming meanings.

Keywords:

Indigenous Names, African Identity, Cultural Continuity, Afrocentricity, Naming Practices.

Introduction

Naming constitutes one of the earliest and most consequential acts performed for a child anywhere in the world, serving as a marker of belonging, a repository of family history and a statement of aspiration for the individual who bears it. Across societies, a name is rarely a neutral label; it is bound up with kinship, religion, historical circumstance and communal memory. Within African societies specifically, this understanding is deepened, as indigenous names are traditionally composed as full statements or proverbs that narrate the circumstances of birth, honour ancestry, invoke divine protection or record a family's hopes and struggles. The name given to a child at birth was, in pre-colonial African communities, an act of documentation as much as of celebration, preserving oral history in a manner that written records could not always achieve.

Colonial contact altered this practice considerably. Christian missionary education, coupled with the administrative apparatus of colonial governance, introduced European names as a condition for baptism, schooling and, later, employment, gradually positioning indigenous names as markers of backwardness rather than heritage. Njagi et al. (2023), examining the Amuthambi people of Tharaka Nithi County in Kenya between 1920 and 1963, demonstrate how colonial administration actively reshaped indigenous naming systems, replacing ancestral names with foreign ones as part of a broader project of cultural reorientation. This pattern was not confined to East Africa; it recurred across the continent wherever colonial rule and missionary Christianity took hold, embedding a hierarchy in which European names were associated with civility and progress, while indigenous names were relegated to the domestic or unofficial sphere.

In the Nigerian context, this historical inheritance persists in altered form. For instance, Mensah et al. (2021), studying naming practices among youth in Calabar, Cross River State, found that many young Nigerians continue to reject indigenous first names in favour of Western alternatives, motivated by perceptions of prestige, ease of pronunciation and social mobility, even in the absence of the colonial compulsion that originally introduced the practice. Similarly, Ukaegbu and Okon (2024), working among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, report a decline in traditional naming patterns attributable to increased media exposure, global communication and the growing influence of Christianity, with parents increasingly favouring names that signal modernity and religious affiliation over those that transmit ancestral meaning.

Among the Yoruba, Fakuade et al. (2019) observe that although the tradition of full indigenous naming persists formally, the meanings embedded in such names are frequently unknown to both the parents who bestow them and the children who bear them, reducing a once-deliberate cultural practice to an inherited formality. Michael and Mensah (2025), in their study of the Nsirimo people of Abia State, similarly emphasise that indigenous names continue to confer identity, individuate their bearers and mark social belonging, underscoring what stands to be lost where such practices are abandoned. Together, these findings indicate that the erosion of indigenous naming is neither accidental nor confined to a single region; it reflects a sustained pattern across Nigerian ethnic groups, shaped by religious change, urbanisation, and the enduring prestige attached to Western identity markers.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the documented cultural, linguistic and psychological value of indigenous names, a considerable number of African parents, and Nigerian parents in particular, continue to prioritise English, Arabic or other foreign names over names drawn from their own languages and traditions. This preference is frequently justified on grounds of convenience, religious conformity or perceived social advantage, yet it carries consequences that are seldom interrogated with the seriousness they deserve. Where indigenous names decline in usage, the languages and belief systems encoded within them face a corresponding risk of erosion, since names often serve as compact vessels of proverbial wisdom, historical memory and ancestral reference that are not easily transmitted through other means.

The problem is compounded by generational disconnection. Fakuade et al. (2019) note that even where indigenous names are retained, their meanings are increasingly unknown to those who bear them, suggesting that formal continuity does not guarantee cultural transmission. Ukaegbu and Okon (2024) similarly caution that abridged and hybridised naming forms, though

popular, dilute the semantic and cultural content that indigenous names were designed to carry. This raises a pressing concern for identity formation among African children, particularly those raised within diasporic or urbanised settings where indigenous languages are already under pressure, since a name devoid of known meaning cannot perform its traditional function of anchoring the child to family history, community values or ancestral obligation.

Existing scholarly work has documented the historical causes of this shift and traced its manifestation among specific ethnic groups, yet comparatively little attention has been directed towards articulating why the deliberate prioritisation of indigenous names ought to be treated as an urgent parental responsibility rather than an optional cultural preference. It remains unclear, within current literature, how the loss of indigenous naming practices intersects with broader concerns of cultural continuity, self-perception and belonging among African children growing up in increasingly globalised environments. This gap justifies an examination of the reasons African parents should reconsider the ordering of priorities in the naming of their children, situating indigenous names not as mere sound but as instruments of identity, memory and inheritance.

Aim of the paper

This paper aimed to examine why African parents, particularly within the Nigerian context, should prioritise the giving of indigenous names to their children over foreign alternatives, with attention to the cultural, linguistic and identity-related significance that indigenous names carry beyond their function as mere sounds.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine the cultural and historical significance of indigenous names among African societies as carriers of ancestry, values and communal memory.
2. To investigate the factors influencing African parents' preference for foreign names over indigenous names in the naming of their children.
3. To assess the implications of the declining use of indigenous names for identity formation and cultural continuity among African children.

Literature Review

The review of literature for this paper was done in tandem with the aim and objectives and under conceptual review, empirical review and theoretical framework as follows:

Conceptual Review

The major concepts in this paper are reviewed as follows:

Indigenous Names

Scholars within onomastics have approached the concept of indigenous names from differing but overlapping standpoints, generally converging on the understanding that such names are linguistically and culturally embedded units of meaning rather than arbitrary labels. Oluyemi (2023), writing on the Yoruba social construction of names, presents indigenous names as socially constructed artefacts that encode circumstances of birth, familial expectation and

communal values, arguing that a name functions as a condensed narrative rather than a mere identifier. Ukaegbu and Okon (2024) extend this position by describing indigenous names among the Igbo as linguistic forms shaped by causal and cultural context, in which the meaning attached to a name is inseparable from the specific ancestral, religious or historical event that occasioned its bestowal.

Motupa et al. (2024), approaching the concept from a decolonial standpoint, characterise indigenous names as Afrocentric onomastic constructs whose value lies precisely in their capacity to resist the epistemic displacement imposed by Eurocentric naming conventions. Where these positions diverge is in emphasis: Oluyemi (2023) foregrounds the social and familial function of naming, Ukaegbu and Okon (2024) stress its causal and linguistic grounding, while Motupa et al. (2024) privilege its political and decolonial significance, suggesting that no single account fully captures the layered nature of the concept.

For the purpose of this paper, indigenous names are adopted as personal names originating from African languages and cultural systems, deliberately composed to encode ancestral heritage, religious belief, familial circumstance or communal values, and transmitted across generations as instruments of cultural continuity and identity formation. This definition synthesises the linguistic, social and cultural dimensions raised across the reviewed sources while situating indigenous names specifically within their function as carriers of meaning that foreign or Westernised names do not ordinarily replicate.

The Cultural and Historical Significance of Indigenous Names among African Societies as Carriers of Ancestry, Values and Communal Memory

Empirical studies across African linguistic communities consistently demonstrate that indigenous names function as structured repositories of ancestry, moral instruction and collective experience rather than as arbitrary sound combinations. Among the Akan of Ghana, Agyekum (2006) documents a naming system in which children receive day names tied to the deity presiding over their day of birth, alongside family names drawn from one of twelve patrilineal clans, circumstantial names reflecting the conditions of birth, and theophorous names invoking divine attributes. This typology illustrates that a single Akan individual may carry several categories of names simultaneously, each performing a distinct commemorative or protective function; unattractive names such as Kaya (carrier of loads) are deliberately given to children believed to be at spiritual risk, intended to discourage malevolent forces from reclaiming the child, thereby demonstrating how naming operated as a practical mechanism of communal protection rather than mere labelling.

In south-eastern Nigeria, Michael and Mensah (2025) examined naming among the Nsirimo people of Umuahia South, Abia State, establishing that personal names are bestowed in strict accordance with custom to confer unique personhood, mark social standing and communicate the circumstances surrounding a child's arrival into the family. Their study of names associated with outcast status shows that naming practices among the Nsirimo extend beyond celebration to encode social positioning within the community, including markers of lineage disruption and reconciliation. This finding corroborates Fakuade et al. (2019), who studied Yoruba personal naming traditions and observed that a Yoruba child may bear three or more indigenous names reflecting lineage, religious circumstance and parental aspiration, with the full set of names written out in official contexts even where an abridged form is used informally, preserving the semantic record embedded in the original naming act.

Among the Igala people of Kogi State, Nigeria, Egbunu (2016) establishes that indigenous names are bestowed in direct accordance with the spiritual and historico-social circumstances surrounding a child's birth, together with the emotional state of the parents at the time, such that a name frequently comes to embody the destiny anticipated for the individual who bears it. The study further shows that naming ceremonies among the Igala constitute a formal rite of incorporation, through which a child is admitted into full membership of the community and granted recognised personhood, a process that positions naming as inseparable from the social structures that define belonging within Igala society.

Egbunu (2016) further argues on this basis that indigenous names among the Igala, as among African peoples more broadly, constitute an inalienable aspect of culture warranting deliberate preservation rather than incidental retention. This account corroborates the pattern previously documented among the Akan, Yoruba, and Nsirimo peoples while extending the evidence to the Igala people of Kogi State, thereby providing a context directly relevant to the present paper. Taken together, these cases suggest that, despite variations in cultural traditions and naming conventions, indigenous naming practices across African societies consistently function as mechanisms for preserving ancestral continuity, transmitting communal values, and positioning individuals within established social structures. This consistency underscores the enduring sociocultural significance of personal names across diverse African contexts.

Historical evidence further situates indigenous naming as a system disrupted rather than naturally abandoned. Njagi et al. (2023), examining the Amuthambi people of Tharaka Nithi County in Kenya between 1920 and 1963, trace how colonial administration systematically replaced indigenous names with foreign ones as part of a wider programme of cultural reorientation, confirming that the communal memory embedded in indigenous names was targeted precisely because of its power to sustain ancestral continuity independent of colonial authority. This historical account is significant because it establishes that indigenous names were not incidental to community identity but central enough to warrant deliberate colonial intervention.

Contemporary efforts to reclaim this heritage further affirm its enduring significance. Motupa et al. (2024), studying the renaming of South African geographical features, argue that the continued dominance of Eurocentric names over Afrocentric ones in public spaces represents an unresolved onomastic injustice, recommending the involvement of indigenous knowledge specialists in future naming decisions. Their findings, though focused on place names rather than personal names, reflect the same underlying principle documented in personal naming studies: that indigenous names encode historical claims, ancestral memory and cultural legitimacy that foreign names do not carry. Collectively, these studies, spanning Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, establish indigenous names as structured cultural instruments through which African communities have historically preserved ancestry, transmitted moral and spiritual values, and maintained communal memory across generations, a function that continues to be documented and defended in current academic literature.

Factors Influencing African Parents' Preference for Foreign Names over Indigenous Names in the Naming of their Children

Several recent empirical investigations identify converging factors behind the growing preference for foreign names among African, and particularly Nigerian, parents. Mensah et al. (2021), studying name-changing practices among youth in Calabar, Cross River State, found

that participants who had rejected indigenous first names in favour of European alternatives cited ease of pronunciation, perceived social prestige and the desire to project a modern, cosmopolitan identity as primary motivations, with the change frequently occurring during adolescence or early adulthood as a deliberate act of self-redefinition rather than parental imposition. This suggests that the preference for foreign names is sustained not only by parents at the point of naming but reinforced by the bearers themselves in later life, indicating a self-perpetuating cultural pattern.

Religious influence emerges as another significant factor. Ukaegbu and Okon (2024), working among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, report a measurable decline in traditional naming patterns linked to increased media access, global communication and, most notably, the expanding presence of Christianity, which favours names perceived as biblically appropriate or spiritually potent within charismatic worship contexts over names rooted in indigenous cosmology. Their qualitative data, drawn from one hundred participants comprising name-givers, bearers and users, indicated that the new naming trend was associated with a deliberate alignment towards Western religious and cultural prestige, with such names functioning as markers of modernity and social distinction.

The dynamics of migration and transnational identity negotiation constitute a further documented factor. Ekechi and Okorie (2025), examining Nigerian students in the diaspora, found that many participants anglicised their personal names to navigate the demands of belonging in host societies, describing this practice as a symbolic strategy for managing the tension between homeland attachment and the pressures of transcultural assimilation. Their study demonstrates that the preference for foreign names is not confined to the point of birth but continues to be actively renegotiated throughout an individual's life course in response to social and institutional pressure abroad, including difficulties of pronunciation encountered in academic and professional settings.

Additionally, Nwosu and Inyima (2025), investigating the englishisation of indigenous Igbo names, observe that some parents deliberately modify indigenous names into English-sounding variants to render them fashionable and easier to integrate into global social contexts, describing this as a sociolinguistic strategy that retains a nominal connection to indigenous identity while conforming outwardly to English phonological patterns. This hybrid practice indicates that the rejection of indigenous names is not always total but frequently partial, reflecting a negotiated compromise between cultural attachment and perceived social convenience. Taken together, these recent case studies point to a convergence of factors, comprising social prestige, religious conversion, migration pressure and linguistic convenience, that collectively account for the sustained preference for foreign names among sections of the Nigerian and broader African parent population.

The Implications of the Declining Use of Indigenous Names for Identity Formation and Cultural Continuity among African Children

The decline of indigenous naming carries measurable consequences for how African children construct and negotiate personal identity. Ekechi and Okorie (2025) found that Nigerian students who anglicised their names while abroad frequently reported an accompanying sense of internal division, describing the practice as a continuous negotiation between an authentic self-linked to home and an adapted self-presented to the host society, indicating that the loss of one's indigenous name can generate an unresolved tension in self-perception rather than a clean

resolution of belonging. This finding provides direct evidence that naming practices are not incidental to identity but actively implicated in how individuals experience continuity or fragmentation of selfhood.

A further practical implication concerns the transmission of cultural and linguistic knowledge across generations. Ukaegbu and Okon (2024) note that the decline of traditional Igbo naming patterns is accompanied by a corresponding decline in the semantic literacy required to interpret indigenous names, meaning that children given hybrid or foreign names grow up without access to the proverbial, historical and religious knowledge that such names would ordinarily transmit. Where a name no longer communicates lineage, circumstance or ancestral reference, the child is deprived of a culturally encoded record of belonging that previous generations relied upon for self-location within family and community structures, as documented among the Nsirimo by Michael and Mensah (2025), whose informants demonstrated that names actively confer social positioning and personhood within the community.

The erosion of indigenous naming also has implications for intergenerational communication and cultural authority. Mensah et al. (2021) observed that name-changing among Nigerian youth in Calabar was frequently a source of tension with older relatives, who regarded the practice as a rejection of family heritage, indicating that the decline of indigenous names can generate friction within family units and weaken the transmission of cultural values from elders to younger generations. This practical consequence extends beyond the individual bearer to affect the broader mechanism by which African communities have historically sustained continuity, since names have served, as demonstrated in the Ghanaian and Nigerian case studies reviewed above, as vehicles for passing ancestral knowledge from one generation to the next. Where this vehicle is abandoned, the responsibility for cultural transmission shifts to other, often less consistent, means, placing indigenous languages and belief systems at heightened risk of gradual discontinuation among African children raised in increasingly globalised and religiously altered environments.

Empirical Review

Michael and Mensah (2025) carried out a study on the cultural context of naming among the Nsirimo people of Umuahia South, Abia State, in south-eastern Nigeria, with particular attention to names associated with outcast status and social positioning within the community. The study area, Nsirimo, is an Igbo-speaking community where naming remains closely tied to custom and communal regulation of identity. The theoretical framework adopted was socio-onomastics theory, which examines personal names in relation to the socio-cultural conditions under which they are given and used. The research employed a qualitative design, drawing on ethnographic engagement with community members, including elders, name-givers and bearers of names linked to lineage disruption, selected through purposive sampling to ensure that participants possessed direct knowledge of the naming customs under investigation.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentary review of naming records within the community. The major findings revealed that personal names among the Nsirimo confer unique personhood, mark social standing and communicate the specific circumstances surrounding a child's birth, with certain names historically used to indicate compromised lineage status or reconciliation within the family unit. The study concluded that naming among the Nsirimo continues to function as an active instrument of social regulation and communal memory rather than as a fixed historical relic. This review is instructive in demonstrating that

indigenous names carry functions beyond individual identification, extending into the regulation of social belonging within the community.

A gap identified is that the study focused narrowly on outcast-related naming within a single Igbo sub-group and did not examine how such naming values are being sustained or eroded among children born to parents who increasingly favour foreign names, a gap the current paper addressed by situating indigenous naming within the wider context of parental choice.

Ukaegbu and Okon (2024) examined the shift in personal naming patterns among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria, focusing on the motivations, semantic implications and general perception of new naming trends. The study was situated within Igbo-speaking communities in south-eastern Nigeria and was underpinned by the causal theory of names, which links the meaning of a name to the specific circumstance or intention behind its bestowal. A qualitative research design was adopted, and data were elicited from one hundred participants comprising name-givers, name-bearers and users, selected to reflect diverse perspectives on naming practice within the community. Data collection methods included interviews and elicitation sessions designed to capture participants' understanding of both traditional and emerging naming trends.

The major findings indicated a decline in the observance of traditional Igbo naming patterns, attributable to greater media access, global communication and the rising influence of Christianity, with new names increasingly favoured for their association with prestige, modernity and religious conformity rather than ancestral meaning. The study concluded that Igbo naming practice is undergoing active transformation rather than complete abandonment, with hybrid and abridged forms emerging alongside declining traditional patterns. This review is useful in identifying religious and technological change as central drivers of parental preference for foreign or hybridised names. A gap identified is that the study did not extend its analysis to the effect of this naming shift on children's later identity formation or their capacity to connect with indigenous cultural knowledge, a gap the current study addressed.

Ekechi and Okorie (2025) investigated identity renegotiation through the anglicisation of personal names among Nigerian students in the diaspora, examining how such students navigate belonging within transcultural spaces. The study area extended beyond Nigeria to diasporic settings where Nigerian students reside and study abroad. The research was framed within an identity negotiation and acculturation perspective, drawing attention to the tension between homeland attachment and adaptation to host-society expectations.

A qualitative design was employed, with data gathered through interviews with a purposively selected sample of Nigerian students who had anglicised their personal names while studying abroad. The major findings showed that many participants adopted anglicised versions of their indigenous names as a symbolic strategy for easing social integration, while simultaneously expressing an underlying sense of internal division between their adapted diasporic identity and their attachment to home. The study concluded that the anglicisation of names among diasporic Nigerian students represents an ongoing and unresolved negotiation of identity rather than a settled resolution of belonging.

This review is significant in demonstrating the psychological and social implications that accompany the departure from indigenous naming beyond the immediate context of birth. A gap identified is that the study concentrated on students already in the diaspora and did not

examine the earlier parental decision-making processes that determine whether a child receives an indigenous or foreign name in the first instance, a gap the current study addressed by focusing on parental naming priorities themselves.

Theoretical Framework: Afrocentricity Theory

The theory considered most appropriate for this paper is Afrocentricity, propounded by Molefi Kete Asante in 1980 through his work “Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change”, and further developed in his subsequent writings. Afrocentricity emerged as a response to the long-standing dominance of Eurocentric frameworks in the interpretation of African life, thought and cultural practice, proposing instead that African peoples and their experiences should be understood from a standpoint that places African values, history and agency at the centre of analysis rather than at the periphery of Western reference points. The theory holds that centuries of colonial and missionary influence displaced African peoples from their own cultural centre, compelling them to interpret their identity, behaviour and institutions through borrowed Western categories, and that meaningful cultural restoration requires a deliberate reorientation towards indigenous African knowledge systems, languages and practices.

The major assumptions of Afrocentricity rest on the position that African culture possesses its own internally coherent logic and value system capable of explaining African social phenomena without recourse to Western frameworks, that African identity has been historically disrupted by colonial domination and requires conscious effort to restore, and that cultural practices such as language, religion, communal organisation and naming serve as active sites through which this restoration can occur. The theory further assumes that agency lies with African people themselves to reclaim and revalidate indigenous practices that colonial and postcolonial pressures previously devalued, positioning cultural self-assertion as both a psychological and political undertaking.

Afrocentricity carries notable strength in its capacity to account for the deliberate revaluation of indigenous practices, including naming, dress, religion and language, as expressions of cultural agency rather than mere nostalgia, providing a coherent explanatory basis for why communities and individuals consciously return to ancestral practices after periods of decline. The theory also allows for the interrogation of Western dominance as a historical and structural force rather than a neutral cultural preference, which is particularly useful in explaining the asymmetry between indigenous and foreign naming choices among African parents.

However, the theory has been criticised for occasionally presenting African culture as a uniform and undifferentiated whole, understating the considerable linguistic, religious and regional diversity that exists across the continent, and for placing heavy emphasis on cultural restoration in ways that risk romanticising indigenous practices without sufficiently engaging with the practical realities, such as religious conviction or migration pressure, that also shape contemporary parental choices.

Applied to the present paper, Afrocentricity provides the appropriate interpretive foundation for understanding why African parents’ ought to prioritise indigenous names over foreign alternatives, situating this choice not as a matter of aesthetic preference but as an act of cultural self-location and resistance to the residual effects of colonial displacement documented in the naming literature reviewed. The theory accounts for the historical process by which indigenous names were devalued under colonial and missionary influence, as evidenced in the

transformation of naming systems among communities such as the Amuthambi of Kenya, and equally accounts for the contemporary responsibility placed on African parents to consciously reverse this displacement by restoring indigenous names as instruments of ancestry, communal memory and identity, in direct alignment with the objectives guiding this paper.

Methodology

This paper adopted a systematic literature review design, guided by an adapted application of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol, to examine existing scholarly evidence on indigenous naming practices among African societies and the factors influencing their decline. The selection of sources followed a defined set of inclusion criteria: only peer-reviewed journal articles published within the last five years, with limited exception made for foundational studies of established relevance, were considered; sources were required to focus specifically on personal naming practices, naming identity or naming change within African, and particularly Nigerian, cultural contexts; and only studies with verifiable and traceable authorship, publication outlet and digital object identifier were included.

Materials excluded from the review comprised newspaper reports, blog entries, institutional websites, unpublished theses without institutional verification, and any source whose authorship or publication details could not be independently confirmed. Search terms combined variations of indigenous names, African naming practices, onomastics, cultural identity and naming decline, applied across academic databases and journal repositories, with retrieved sources screened first by title and abstract relevance and subsequently by full-text assessment against the study's three objectives.

The adoption of a systematic literature review design is justified on the grounds that the objectives guiding this paper are conceptual and comparative in nature, requiring the synthesis of existing empirical findings across multiple African linguistic communities rather than the generation of new primary data. Given that naming practices have already been documented through empirical fieldwork among the Akan, Igbo, Igala Yoruba and other African groups, a systematic review allows for the identification of recurring patterns, points of convergence and points of divergence across these existing studies, producing an evidence-based account of why indigenous naming warrants renewed parental priority without duplicating fieldwork already conducted by other researchers. This design is further justified by its capacity to draw on a wide geographical and cultural spread within a single study, an outcome that would be difficult to achieve through a single empirical fieldwork exercise conducted within the time and resource constraints typically available to an individual researcher.

Notwithstanding its appropriateness, the systematic literature review design carries identifiable limitations. The findings of this study are necessarily bound by the scope, quality and geographical focus of the primary studies reviewed, meaning that ethnic groups or regions that remain under-researched in the existing literature are correspondingly underrepresented in this review, despite the likelihood that similar naming dynamics exist within them. The review is also limited by its reliance on secondary interpretation of findings originally generated for other research purposes, which may not align precisely with the specific objectives of the present study, requiring careful contextual adaptation during synthesis.

Furthermore, because the review restricts itself to recent, traceable and peer-reviewed sources, certain relevant but older foundational studies, or grey literature containing valuable field-level detail, may have been excluded, potentially narrowing the range of perspectives available for analysis. These limitations notwithstanding, the systematic review design remains the most suitable approach for addressing the comparative and interpretive objectives set out in this study.

Discussion

The findings assembled in this study, drawn from the cultural, causative and identity-related dimensions of indigenous naming, converge to support the central argument that African parents, and Nigerian parents in particular, have compelling grounds to prioritise indigenous names in the naming of their children. Addressing the first objective, which concerned the cultural and historical significance of indigenous names as carriers of ancestry, values and communal memory, the evidence reviewed demonstrates a consistent pattern across otherwise distinct African societies. Agyekum (2006) shows that among the Akan, a name is rarely a single unit of meaning but part of an elaborate typology encompassing day names, clan names, circumstantial names and protective names, each performing a distinct communal function. Michael and Mensah (2025) extend this pattern to the Nsirimo of Abia State, where names actively regulate social positioning and mark lineage status within the community.

Egbunu (2016) offers a comparable account among the Igala of Kogi State, showing that indigenous names are bestowed in direct response to the spiritual and historico-social circumstances of birth, with naming ceremonies functioning as a formal rite through which a child is admitted into recognised membership of the community. This finding is particularly instructive when interrogated alongside Agyekum's and Michael and Mensah's accounts, since it demonstrates that the association between naming and communal incorporation is not peculiar to any single Nigerian ethnic group but recurs, in locally specific form, among the Igala as it does among the Akan and the Nsirimo. Where Egbunu's account adds further weight to the discussion is in its explicit framing of Igala names as embodying anticipated destiny, a dimension that resonates with the protective and cosmological functions Agyekum documents among the Akan, suggesting that the belief in a name's capacity to shape the life course of its bearer is a recurring, rather than isolated, feature of African naming philosophy. Together, these accounts interrogate the notion, sometimes implicit in casual parental decision-making, that a name is a neutral or interchangeable label.

Both studies instead present naming as a structured cultural technology, one that performs identification, moral instruction and communal regulation simultaneously. Where the three accounts differ is in orientation: Agyekum emphasises the cosmological and protective functions bound up in Akan naming, Michael and Mensah foreground the social-regulatory function evident among the Nsirimo, and Egbunu foregrounds the incorporative and destiny-bearing function evident among the Igala. This divergence does not weaken the overall pattern; rather, it strengthens it, since it shows that the carrying of ancestry, values and communal memory through names is not confined to a single explanatory mechanism but recurs across different cultural logics within African, and specifically Nigerian, societies, including one situated directly within Kogi State.

The second objective, concerning the factors influencing parental preference for foreign names, is addressed through findings that similarly correspond across independent studies while

revealing important differences in emphasis. Mensah et al. (2021) attribute the rejection of indigenous names among Calabar youth primarily to considerations of prestige and ease of pronunciation, framing the phenomenon as a matter of individual social positioning. Ukaegbu and Okon (2024), by contrast, locate the same broad phenomenon within religious transformation, arguing that the expansion of Christianity among the Igbo has reoriented naming preference towards names perceived as spiritually appropriate within charismatic worship.

When these positions are interrogated together, a more complete picture emerges than either study offers alone: the decline of indigenous naming is not reducible to a single cause such as prestige-seeking or religious conversion, but reflects the accumulation of social, religious and technological pressures acting simultaneously on parental decision-making. Ekechi and Okorie (2025) add a further dimension by demonstrating that this preference is not confined to parents at the point of birth but is actively renegotiated later in life, as Nigerian students abroad anglicise their names to manage the demands of transcultural belonging. This finding is significant because it challenges any assumption that the naming decision is settled once made in childhood; instead, it shows the pressure towards foreign names as a persistent and recurring feature across the life course, reinforced by structural conditions in both homeland and diaspora settings.

Addressing the third objective, concerning implications for identity formation and cultural continuity, the findings from Ekechi and Okorie (2025) offer the most direct empirical evidence, revealing that participants who anglicised their names abroad reported an accompanying sense of internal division between an adapted diasporic self and an authentic self-rooted in home. This finding, when considered alongside Ukaegbu and Okon's (2024) observation that declining traditional naming corresponds with declining semantic literacy regarding indigenous meaning, indicates that the loss of indigenous names carries consequences beyond nomenclature, extending into the psychological experience of belonging and the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge.

Mensah et al. (2021) further corroborate this by showing that name-changing frequently generates friction with older relatives, illustrating a practical breakdown in the mechanism through which cultural values have historically passed from elders to younger generations. Taken together, these findings interrogate the assumption, common in popular parental reasoning, that a foreign name carries no meaningful cost; the evidence instead suggests that such a choice carries measurable implications for identity coherence and cultural transmission, even where the immediate social or religious motivations for the choice appear reasonable.

The Afrocentricity framework adopted in this study, propounded by Asante (1980), provides a coherent basis for interpreting these findings as a unified pattern rather than as isolated cultural observations. Afrocentricity assumes that African identity was historically displaced from its own cultural centre through colonial and missionary influence, and that restoration of that centre requires the conscious revaluation of indigenous practices, including naming. This assumption directly accounts for the historical evidence presented under the first objective, where colonial administration is shown to have deliberately dismantled indigenous naming systems, as documented among the Amuthambi of Kenya, confirming that indigenous naming was targeted precisely because of its centrality to communal identity rather than being incidental to it.

The theory equally illuminates the findings under the second objective, since the preference for foreign names documented by Mensah et al. (2021) and Ukaegbu and Okon (2024) can be understood, from an Afrocentric standpoint, as a continuation of the same displacement that colonial administration initiated, now sustained through religious institutions, media exposure and global social pressure rather than through direct colonial compulsion.

Finally, Afrocentricity's emphasis on agency, the assumption that African people retain the capacity to consciously reclaim displaced cultural practices, provides the theoretical justification for the study's central argument under the third objective: that the psychological and cultural costs identified by Ekechi and Okorie (2025) are not inevitable but can be actively addressed through the deliberate prioritisation of indigenous names by parents. In this sense, the theory does not merely describe the pattern observed across the reviewed studies but supplies the normative basis upon which this study's recommendation, that indigenous naming be treated as a first priority rather than a secondary consideration, is grounded.

Conclusion

This paper examined why African parents, and Nigerian parents in particular, should prioritise indigenous names over foreign alternatives in the naming of their children, guided by three objectives concerned with the cultural and historical significance of indigenous names, the factors influencing parental preference for foreign names, and the implications of declining indigenous naming for identity formation and cultural continuity. The findings demonstrate that indigenous names function as structured cultural instruments through which African societies have historically encoded ancestry, transmitted moral and spiritual values, and preserved communal memory, as evidenced across the Akan, Igbo, Igala, Yoruba and Nsirimo naming systems reviewed.

The evidence further revealed that the growing preference for foreign names among African parents is not a spontaneous or isolated development but the outcome of accumulated historical, religious, social and migratory pressures, tracing back to colonial disruption of indigenous naming systems and sustained in the present through religious conversion, social prestige and the demands of transcultural belonging. Most significantly, the study establishes that this shift away from indigenous naming carries measurable consequences, including a diminished capacity among children to access the ancestral and linguistic knowledge embedded in their names, weakened intergenerational transmission of cultural values, and, in diasporic contexts, an unresolved tension in personal identity experienced by those who depart from their indigenous names in later life.

Interpreted through the perspective of Afrocentricity, these findings converge to support the position that a name is never merely a sound. It is a deliberate cultural artefact whose loss represents a continuation of the historical displacement that colonial and missionary influence first initiated upon African communities, and whose deliberate restoration constitutes a legitimate and available act of cultural self-location. The paper therefore concluded that indigenous naming warrants renewed recognition as a matter of first priority in African parenting, not as an exercise in cultural nostalgia, but as a practical safeguard for the continuity of ancestry, values and communal memory across generations.

Recommendations

- i. African parents should be encouraged, through community and religious institutions, to give indigenous names as the primary or first name of their children, reserving foreign or religious names, where desired, as secondary names, so that the child retains an accessible link to ancestral meaning while accommodating other personal or religious considerations.
- ii. Educational and religious authorities, including schools and churches, should incorporate awareness programmes that explain the cultural and linguistic significance of indigenous names to parents and young people, addressing the misconception that such names are less prestigious, less pronounceable or less compatible with modern religious identity than their foreign counterparts.
- iii. Cultural and linguistic institutions, including universities, language boards and community associations, should undertake the documentation and publication of indigenous naming meanings in accessible formats, ensuring that even where families have adopted hybridised or abridged forms of indigenous names, the semantic and ancestral content of those names remains recoverable for future generations.

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