

# THE SIGNS AND SYMBOLICS OF ÒSÁ 'GOD' IN EDO PERSONAL NAMES

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## Abstract

Names are provided at birth, and these include Anthroponyms and hypocoristics. The naming act in Benin laws and customs states that any individual must have a patronym plus one or more personal names. This study was based on the naming customs and traditions of the Edo people of Benin. Ethnographic process was used to collect several names as data for the study, from the class list of Linguistics student's registration (100 level - 400 level) files in the University of Benin, and some primary and secondary school registers within Ovia Northeast, and Ugbowo axis precisely. Some were also collected from Edo textbooks as secondary data. These names were subjected to the semiotic analysis of Moris (1964). The findings revealed that most Names in Benin are linked with God 'Osa' because of the strong love the people have for God ('Osa'). *Symbols* are true of the signs in names associated with "Osa (God)" in Edo personal names because the meaning the people equate to these names are because of convention. Thus, their idea of "God" is symbolized in the names they give to their children after birth. The Benin people hold dear the name of God, OSA; and so, are inclined to link most of their children's name to God.

**Keywords:** Naming, Anthroponyms, Hypocoristics and Semiotics, Edo

## Introduction

What is in a name? A name identifies or links every one of us with a family and explains some of our inherited behaviours. Most

times people bear family-related names as identifications of their root. No wonder in the Biblical book of Luke 1:57-66, the people who came to witness the naming ceremony of John the Baptist were astonished when his father Zechariah wrote "John" which is not the customary practice of his people for a child to be bestowed with a name outside his family lineage. They wondered and questioned "what then will this child be?" but implicitly, John means the graciousness of God. This Child is not only God's graciousness to his parents, but also, the announcer of the graciousness of God Almighty to the world. This illustration points to the fact that in every culture, at times there is a little deviation in the bestowal of names. According to de Klerk and Lagonikos (2004:60), "the bestowal of names is not an arbitrary act. It often has a symbolic power." (De Klerk and Bosch, 1995; Herbert and Bogatsu, 1990; Bangeni and Coetser, 2000) cited in de klerk and Lagonikos, (2004:60). They pointed out that African names which are full of meaning are bestowed for particular reason by name givers who include members of extended family. The reasons behind bestowal of name as observed by scholars in onomastics research may include any one of the following: circumstances of the birth, social circumstances, religious factor, community affairs, family structure, politics and commemoration, and so on.

With a focus on this paper, the typical reason behind the bestowal of the name with the addition of "*Osa* (God)" is from the religious circumstances. de klerk and Lagonikos (2004: 62) opines that, names play a significant symbolic role in communicating and appeasing with the ancestors, who are seen, in many African cultures, to have considerable power from beyond the grave. (Also see Junod 1912; Koopman, 1989; Herbert and Bogatsu, 1990; de Klerk and Bosch, 1995; Sumbwa, 1997). The present study is a scholarly endeavour to examine Edo personal names from a specific symbolic perspective (names associated with God) as previous studies tended to focus more on the names from a general perspective based on either structure or

interpretation. Previous studies on Edo personal names have focused on the sociolinguistics, the socio-cultural and grammar aspects of these names; (Ogie, 2002; Omoregie, 2005; Adeniyi, 2008; Adeniyi and Yuka, 2012; Aigbedo 2018). Adeniyi and Yuka, (2012) claim that the various constraints in personal name shortening are a replication of both socio-cultural and morpho-semantic limitations in basic sentential constructions in the Edo language. Ogie (2002) investigates Edo personal names and argues that they are used to affirm certain aspects of Edo culture. The linguistic aspect of the study breaks names into its constituent morphological parts to reveal their meanings.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

Onomastics is the science of names and naming. It focuses on the study of proper names via its forms and uses. On the other hand, Anthroponomastics which is the study of personal names is a sub-part of Onomastics (see Algeo, 1992). Thus, this paper is routed in Anthroponomastic an aspect of linguistics Anthropology which shows that there is a link between peoples' language and their cultural practices. Several works on personal names have dwelt on sociolinguistic classification and the relationship between names and their morphological and syntactic structures. This paper explores the semiotic theory of signs a branch of Linguistics which focuses on symbolic meaning of names. To the best of our knowledge no detailed account of personal names have utilised this theory especially Edo names. Signs interpretation in semiotics is centered on the differentiating between "signification" and "significance" (Morris, 1964). Morris equates "signs" to "value" as recapped by Ponzio (2007). According to Saussure (1974:114), signification is the relationship between the two parts of the sign, which is the signifier and the signified. Barthes (1964:33) supports Saussure's view that signification is not the "thing" but the mental representation of the thing which is essentially the conceptualisation of the idea. A semiotic interpretation

of how significant a representation of an object/words is, therefore, becomes relevant; this is largely dependent on the culture and exposure of the people for the consideration of the object of representation to carry a meaningful idea. Eco, (1976:8) avers that signification system is an autonomous semiotic construct that has an abstract mode of existence, independent of any possible communicative act which makes it possible. In analysing the data in this paper, we agree with the views of Ponzio (2007), that signs are symbolic.

This view corroborates the views of scholars such as (Pierce, 1898; Ogden and Richards, 1986; and Morris, 1946), who state that the “symbol is a sign that replaces another sign, acting as a guide to behaviour” Their submission agrees with Saussure’s (1974:115) views that symbol is a special type of sign. According to him, symbols are not completely arbitrary and therefore can be distinguished from the verbal signs. In the study of semiotic theory, iconicity, indexicality and symbolism are often focused on, but in this paper the focus is symbolism. A symbol is a sign that stands for object by convention or agreement in specific contexts. Danesi (2004) opines that, words in general are symbols. For her, a particular signifier (object or word) can be symbolic within context or historic tradition. She cited an instance where, “rose is a symbol of love in some culture, while it might not be in another culture” (Danesi, 2004:31). It is taken that symbolism is the result of historical and social conventions. Silverstein in his views on symbols, states thus: “Symbols are the residual class of signs, where neither physical similarity nor contextual congruity hold between the sign vehicle and entity signaled” (Silverstein, 1976:27). Also. Schroder (1998:551) opines that “a symbol is a sign whose connection with its object is purely a matter of convention.” The idea of “God” is symbolised in the names they give to their children after birth. Presented below is Ogden and Richards (1986) triangular model that points out the relationship between symbol, thought and objects.

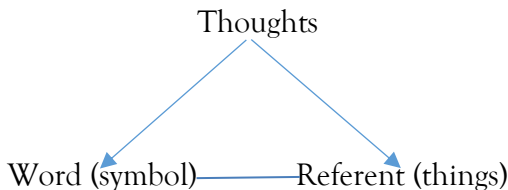


Fig.1 Source: Ogden and Richards (1986:11)

The figure 1 above shows the interrelation that exist among words, thought and things. In any communication that is represented either verbally or non-verbally, the word (symbol) is often arbitrary, and this is why the direction of the symbol is not as straight at the base towards the (thing) it represents. In this case, the meaning that are attached to such symbols can be culturally associative or universally accepted. Thus, symbols have an associative nature and are conventional to the particular society using them. No wonder, Agyekun (2006:123) recapping Larson (1998:837) states that “meaning is the representational effect produced and conditioned exclusively by the immanent properties of the sign.” Specifically, there is a need to consider that sign features are meant to indicate the relationship between the object and the use of the sign. Consider this below:

<b>The Signifier</b> ~~~~~ (Object/word)	<b>Sign</b> ~~~~~ (Medium)	<b>The Signified</b> (Idea- in a (concept))
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As it is shown above, the sign occupies the center position as the intermediary between the signifier and the signified. That is the meaning given to a sign is a response which requires yet another interpretant. With this illustration we agree with the views of Ponzio (2007), that signs are symbolic. The application of the semiotic theory in the analysis of the data in this paper is to show how names are communicative and symbolic.

## The Symbolization in *Òsà* (God) in Edo Personal names (previous views)

In onomastics research, it is generally accepted by scholars that proper names, especially personal names constitute in the main “a symbolic system of individual identification” (Akinnaso 1980: 277; Abd-el-Jawad 1986: 80). According to Akinnaso (1980), the linguistic and cultural implications of names vary from culture to culture, with some cultures associating heavy linguistic and cultural information with names, and others very little or none. He further explains that these names are loaded with “elaborate linguistic structure and sociocultural significance” Akinnaso (1980: 277). *Òsà* literarily translates as ‘God’ in Edo. Below are the various forms/concepts or ideas and philosophies of *Òsà* names: Agbedo (2018: 279-278), opines that the people of Edo have different prospection of God and spirituality in general and these are indicated in their choices of names given to their children. He further states that in the formation of names associated with God, the people look up human as supernatural powers which make it possible for him to perform great deeds. Hence, some lexical forms are chosen to reflect God’s greatness as illustrated in the data below. These Edo names reflect the paramountcy of the divinity as the earliest ancestors of the people are thought to have a direct link with God *Ogiso* ‘king from the sky’. Thus, the reverence for ascendancy of God demonstrates the link between the Edo society and God and the roles he plays in the spiritual well-being of the people.

### Methodology

This study involved a three-month ethnographic process of data collection within Benin Metropolis in Edo State, Nigeria. Although Edo Metropolis comprises of seven (7) Local Government Area (LGA), which include Oredo, Egor, Ikpoba-Okha, Ovia Northeast, Ovia Southwest, Uhunmwonde and Orhionmwon, but the researchers’ concentration was within Ovia Northeast, Ugbowo axis precisely. The

choice of this location was strictly because the researchers live and work within this local government area, and for ease of data collection from Ugbowo axis, which was the focus area of the research. Some of the names which form the data for this paper were collected from entries in primary and secondary school registers including the University of Benin schools on campus. A good number of the names were obtained from the class lists of students of the Department of Linguistics Studies (100 level to 400 level), University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria. Oral interviews were conducted for some older Edo speakers to find out the meanings of the names and reasons for giving such names. Three different groups were investigated: The first was from oral tradition where elders above 70 years, who are the actual custodian of the Edo tradition and culture were interviewed. Also, those between the ages of 40 and 60 years were interviewed. Then some persons who were between the ages of 20 and 30 years who, bear some of these names were also interviewed.

### **The Edo and their naming system**

Naming systems vary from culture to culture. Among the Edo people of Southern Nigeria, names are bestowed on children based on the circumstances during, before or after their birth. Personal names can also be given with the consideration of certain events surrounding the birth of the child in question. All the situations that lead to naming is usually determined by members of the child's immediate or extended family. It is pertinent to note that families love to give names that portray positivity (good-luck, success, posterity, long-life, and so on) to their children rather than names that portray negativity. The reason for this is that tradition has it that name is a person's identity. Basically, in every culture, the birth of a child comes with merry and happiness. Thus, among the Edo people there is traditionally a ceremony performance on the seventh day after the birth of the child.

One of our male respondents attests that in a typical Edo setting, on that seventh day of the naming ceremony elders and very close friends of the family assemble at the home of the father of the born child in the morning to pray for the child and his/her parents. According to him, the prayer points centre on long life, good health, prosperity, etc.

Here, the family name is presented to the parent of the child, this is also followed by some oracle consultations and divination. He claims that the other ceremonies are then performed in the evening. Another respondent also attests that naming ceremony is mostly a family affair in Edo tradition compared to other ceremonies like, burial, marriage, etc.

At the naming ceremony, all who are present are seated including the parents of the child, if it is a low-key ceremony, the sitting room can be used. In this gathering the oldest man who is usually the representative of the family opens the ceremony with a prayer in the Edo Language. On the other hand, the female members of the family take turn to sing. The name giving is done in turns by each family member, with the presentation of a gift to the new-born. Another respondent informed us that non-family members who are present at the ceremony given opportunity to bestow a name on the child too, after which singing and dancing are performed to climax the ceremony, followed by merriment (eating and drinking).

### **The Symbolism of the function material in the Edo naming ceremony**

In every traditional and cultural ceremony, there are various materials that are used for performance that make the ceremony colourful. These materials vary from culture to culture. In African settings the materials are similar. In the Edo naming ceremony, materials like; kola-nut, wine, (palm or orthodox), gin, native chalk, honey, sugar, bitter kola nuts, alligator pepper, coconut, yams, pigeon (symbolising peace in the life of the child), guinea fowl (symbolising

protection), palm oil and water (symbolising life). In the African setting, all of the above-mentioned items play very important roles in the naming ceremony. Presented below are the various symbolism of the Òsà names.

### Òsà names as a symbol of God's Protection and Strength

These Òsà names as a symbol of protection are circumstantial names given to a child when the family had to show the supreme power of God who is seen as the protector and strength during the expectancy of the born child. Presented below are some of these names that portray Òsà (God) as the protector and strength of all mankind especially a woman at the different stages of pregnancy.

- |                     |   |                                 |
|---------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. Òsà̀rùgúémwé     | - | 'God is my shield'.             |
| 2. Òsà̀súm̀wè       | - | 'God is my companion/guide'.    |
| 3. Ètínòsà̀sèrè     | - | 'God's power is supreme'.       |
| 4. Ìgbìnòsà         | - | 'I take refuge in God'.         |
| 5. Òsà̀múdiàmé      | - | 'God is my support/backbone'.   |
| 6. Òsà̀rètìǹm̀wè   | - | 'God is my strength'.           |
| 7. Ìyègbékòsà       | - | 'I lean on/trust in God'.       |
| 8. Àìgbòvbíòsà      | - | 'No one kills God's children'.  |
| 9. Òsà̀má̀gú̀m̀wèdè | - | 'God did not allow me to fall'. |

For instance, the names Òsà̀rùgúémwé which is literally interpreted as 'God is my shield' shows the significance of God's protection of the mother and child during conception. Also are the names; Ètínòsà̀sèrè which means 'God's power is supreme', Òsà̀súm̀wè which means 'God is my companion/guide'. In the vein of representing Òsà (God) as the strength of the family or the new mother. Names like Òsà̀múdiàmé which means 'God is my support/ defence', Òsà̀rètìǹm̀wè 'God is my strength', Ìyègbékòsà 'I lean on/trust in God' and Òsà̀má̀gú̀m̀wèdè 'God did not allow me to fall/fail'.

### Òsà names as a symbol of Gratitude to God

Generally, in African tradition families often give special thanks to God at the birth of any child. To some extent, some families bestow a name that take the symbolic nature of God to show a deeper gratitude to God. This usually is based on the circumstances behind the birth of that child. These names that are symbolically epitome of gratitude to Òsà (God) includes the ones below:

- |                 |   |                          |
|-----------------|---|--------------------------|
| 10. Òsàrumwèsé  | - | 'God has done me well'.  |
| 11. Òsàmà       | - | 'God is good'.           |
| 12. Ìkpònmwòsà  | - | 'I thank God'.           |
| 13. Òsàriémè    | - | 'God gave me'.           |
| 14. Òsàyémwèrrè | - | 'God has remembered me'. |
| 15. Òsàrumè     | - | 'Glory to God'           |
| 16. Úyìoghòsà   | - | 'Glory to God'           |
| 17. Òsàrujèsè   | - | 'God did good'.          |

The names Òsàrumwèsé 'God has done me well', Òsàyémwèrrè 'God has remembered me' Òsàriémè 'God gave me' these names are names bestowed to children born out of serious challenge. For instance, a family who would have stayed for years without children has every reason to see the given child as God given and remembrance to them at that point of the child's arrival.

### Òsà name as a symbol of God's Wealth and Blessings

Among Benin people, there are some names given to children to appreciate God. These are names we captured under the symbol of God as the giver of all blessings and wealth. In this case, the family sees the born child as wealth and blessing bigger than other material blessings. Thus, the bestowal of the types of names captured in the data below:

- |               |   |                                 |
|---------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 18. Èfòsà     | - | 'God's blessing or wealth'      |
| 19. Òsàzùwà   | - | 'God choses prosperity'         |
| 20. Òsàzòdúwà | - | 'it's God who chooses the path' |

		way of prosperity’
21. Òsàgiòdúwà	-	‘It’s God who shows one the pathway to prosperity’
22. Òsàyámè	-	‘God gave me’.
23. Òsàòruoname	-	‘It’s God who did this for me’.
24. Òsàdòlò	-	‘God replenishes one
25. Óghósà	-	‘Gods’ own
26. Òsèkhúkhuòmwa	-	‘God does not deprive one of one’s inheritance’.
27. Òsàhonerhumwe	-	‘God heard my prayer’.
28. Òsàyánòmò	-	‘children belong to God’.
29. Òsàimíánmíán	-	‘God does not forget’.
30. Òsàyémwèrè	-	‘God has remembered me’.
31. Òsàhénmwidámwé	-	‘God know my needs’
32. Òsàtóhánmwé	-	‘God took pity on me’.

The names Èfósà ‘God’s blessing or God’s wealth’, explains the fact that only God can make a man rich. Then Òsàzúwà ‘God choses prosperity’ expresses the relationship God keeps with us. Here the names given, explain what holds for the other names like Òsàhonerhumwe meaning God heard my Prayers. There are cases where a pregnant mother may be praying and wishing for a son, since she already had four daughters, only for her to finally give birth to a son after four trials. The father of such a son can name the new child; Òsàhonerhumwe.

Another instance is a case of a woman who finally had her first child at age 55, after the doctors have warned her never to try have a child again after several miscarriages. People may begin to call the child Òsàimíánmíán; meaning God did not forget me or God finally remembered me.

### Other ‘Òsà Personal Names

The names captured here and presented below are various names that show the symbolic nature of God in diverse ways. For

instance, the name *Ìyálèkhuósà* or *Osayabo* which literally means 'God's forgiveness' portrays God as a symbol of forgiveness. On the other hand, the names *È̀nòsákhàrè* 'God's opinion is the final' and *È̀ghósàşèrè* 'God's time is the best' portrays God as the symbol of time. Hence, at the appointed time He performs all our wishes. The names *Ọ̀sàgbémwénórhuè*, 'God has cause me joy', *Òdòsámágbè* 'God's way is the best' and *Ọ̀sàròmwiníyèké* 'God is my support' are names that portray the loving image of God when one has totally handed over all issues to Him; there is usually that inner joy and happiness that bring glorification to God.

The names *Ọ̀sàsénàgá*, 'God is worthy of worship' and *Ọ̀sàsógìè*, 'God deserves the crown' are two names that acknowledge the worthy nature of God that deserves a crown, praise, adoration, etc. Also, the names *È̀nòsákhàrè* 'God's opinion is the final' literally portrays God as all knowing, this symbolic nature of God as all-knowing applies to the names *Ọ̀bòsàemwínhiáyé* 'Everything is in the hand of God' and *Ọ̀sàzémwindé* 'God determines what one can acquire'.

- |                             |   |                                    |
|-----------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| 34. <i>Ìyálèkhuósà</i>      | - | 'God's forgiveness'                |
| 35. <i>È̀gúásà</i>          | - | 'God's palace'                     |
| 36. <i>Ọ̀sàgbémwénórhuè</i> | - | 'God has made me to rejoice'       |
| 37. <i>Òdòsámágbè</i>       | - | 'God's way is the best'.           |
| 38. <i>Ọ̀sàròmwiníyèké</i>  | - | 'God is my support'.               |
| 39. <i>Ọ̀sàsénàgá</i>       | - | 'God is worthy of worship'.        |
| 40. <i>Àígbùsàtílè</i>      | - | 'you don't challenge/bet with God' |
| 41. <i>Ọ̀sàìgbókàn</i>      | - | 'God does not reproach one'.       |
| 42. <i>Ọ̀bòsàemwínhiáyé</i> | - | 'Everything is in the hand of God' |
| 43. <i>Ọ̀sàmúyì</i>         | - | 'It's God who glorifies'           |
| 44. <i>Ọ̀sàsógìè</i>        | - | 'God deserves the crown'.          |
| 45. <i>Ọ̀sàyòmóré</i>       | - | 'It's God who gives children'.     |
| 46. <i>Ọ̀sàzémwindé</i>     | - | 'God determines what one can       |

		‘acquire’.
47. Òsàdébàmwé	-	‘God is me partner/ally/companion’
48. Òsàròdíón	-	‘God is first/God comes first’.
49. Ènòsákhàrè	-	‘God’s opinion is the final’.
50. Èghòsàséré	-	‘God’s time is the best’.
51. Òsàkpòlò	-	‘God is big or great’.
52. Òsàdòlò	-	‘God brings tranquility or calmness’
53. Eseòsà	-	‘God’s gift’

On the other hand, the names Òsàkpòlò ‘God is big or great ’and Òsàdòlò ‘God brings tranquillity or calmness’ portray God’s greatness in critical situations like waiting earnestly for children. In this case, He answers prayers.

### Conclusion

This paper has attempted an analysis of the concept of ‘Osa’(God) names in Edo. The Benin people, hold dearly the believe of ‘Osa’ as the supreme God and the source of all powers and capable of doing all things for them. The symbol of God is manifested in the names they give. They are positive in all their understanding of the power of God. It is observed that these names are symbolic in nature. The symbolic nature of these names is captured as follows: ‘Osa’ names as a symbol of God’s protection and strength. ‘Osa’ name gratitude to God, ‘Osa’ names as a symbol of Gods’ blessing to humanity and several other ‘Osa’ names that symbolises God’s forgiveness, peace, greatness, greatness, gift, crown, support, giver of children, companionship, etc. The Benin people are also positive in all their understanding of the power of God.

It is important to note that no Benin man will name any child after the devil ‘Esu’ as they will name their children after ‘Osa’ (God).

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