Personal Name Attribution among the Dogon of Mali: A Socio-Onomastic Analysis of Naming Motivations and Cultural Practices.

Abstract

Sociolinguistics studies the relationship between language and society, and in particular the way linguistic practice carries the cultural values and representations of a community. Among the Dogon, given names are an important part of that linguistic and cultural heritage. A name is tied to the circumstances of a birth, to family events, to beliefs and to shared experience. This study examines Dogon naming practices from a sociolinguistic angle: the criteria by which a name is chosen, the way names are formed, what they mean, and how they connect to cultural tradition and social values. It also groups names according to the contexts and circumstances in which they are given.Observation, content analysis and individual interviews make up the qualitative approach used in the study, and onomastics, the study of proper names, supplies the theoretical framework. The names collected carry social and cultural meanings, connected with events, places, beliefs andcollective memory. Naming practices are therefore informative about the relationship between language, culture and social organization, and they are one of the channels through which Dogon identity and cultural heritage are transmitted.

Keywords: cultural identity, nomination, onomastics, Dogon anthroponyms, sociolinguistics

Résumé

La sociolinguistique étudie les relations entre la langue et la société, et notamment la manière dont les pratiques langagières portent les valeurs culturelles d'une communauté. Les prénoms occupent une place importante dans le patrimoine linguistique et culturel dogon. On les attribue selon les circonstances de la naissance, les événements qui touchent la famille, les croyances et selon ce que la communauté a vécu. Cette étude analyse les pratiques de nomination chez les Dogon afin d'en dégager les critères de choix, les modes de formation, les significations et les liens avec les traditions et les valeurs socioculturelles. Elle cherche également à catégoriser les prénoms selon les contextes de leur attribution. La recherche est qualitative : elle repose sur l'observation, l'analyse de contenu et des entretiens individuels, et prend appui sur l'onomastique. Les prénoms recueillis portent des significations sociales et culturelles liées aux événements, aux lieux, aux croyances et à la mémoire collective, et participent de ce fait à la transmission de l'identité culturelle dogon.

Mots-clés : identité culturelle, nomination, onomastique, prénoms dogon, sociolinguistique

Introduction

An anthroponym identifies an individual, but it is also a linguistic, social and cultural marker through which a community expresses its values, its beliefs and its experience.Personal names are the object of anthroponymy, a branch of onomastics; sociolinguistics then situates them in relation to social and cultural realities. A name in an African society may carry any number of things including the circumstances of a birth, an event within the family, a religious belief, something the parents hoped for, a fragment of collective memory.A number of studies have worked on these dimensions. In Mali, Minkailou (2017) examined anthroponymy among the Bamanan of southern Mali, and Kodio et al. (2021) investigated the morphological and

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

semantic characteristics of theophoric Dogon and Khassonké names. Comparable work exists on Zulu (Machate-Kabinde et al., 2023), Ibibio (Mensah et al., 2024), Fe'efe'e (Djomeni & Lappi, 2024) and Dangme (Dautey, 2025) naming practices, and Mensah (2025) has examined what names contribute to ecocultural identity. Earlier studies of Igbo (Ibemesi, 2011) and Yorùbá (Ìkòtún, 2014) surnames documented their role in expressing family origins and cultural identity. Taken together, this body of work shows that personal names carry meanings that reach beyond individual identification, and that they reflect the social and cultural environments in which they are used.

The reasons why parents in the Dogonland choose the names remain less well documented. The motivations behind a choice, the criteria that guide attribution, and the social functions an anthroponym goes on to serve are underexplored. Kodio et al. (2021) examined the morphological and semantic dimensions of theophoric Dogon names, but a wider examination of naming practices is needed if the sociocultural factors, the sources of inspiration and the circumstances that weigh on parents' choices are to be understood. Describing names linguistically is one thing. Investigating the processes through which they are attributed is another matter, and it is the second question this study takes up.

Its overall objective is to analyze the socio-onomastic factors that bear on the choice of children's given names among the Dogon. Three specific aims follow: (1) identify the main categories of personal names and examine their meanings; (2) determine the sociocultural factors and sources of inspiration behind their attribution; and (3) analyze the social and cultural functions these names fulfill within the community.The main research question iswhat socio-onomastic factors influence the choice of children's given names among the Dogon? Three specific questions guide the investigation. (1) What categories of personal names can be identified, and what meanings are attributed to them? (2) What sociocultural factors and sources of inspiration bear on their attribution? (3) What social and cultural functions do these names fulfill within the Dogon community?

Anthroponymy and sociolinguistics are used here as complementary analytical approaches. Anthroponymy supplies the tools for classifying personal names and for examining their linguistic forms and meanings; sociolinguistics interprets naming practices in relation to family relationships, cultural beliefs, social experience and collective representations. Together they make up a socio-onomastic framework for analyzing three dimensions: the categories and meanings of names, the motivations behind their attribution, and their social and cultural functions.

After this introduction, the methodology section describes the research design, the participants and sampling method, the data collection procedures and the analytical approach. The results and discussion section presents the main findings and interprets them in relation to the objectives of the study and to the relevant literature. The conclusion summarizes those findings and states what the study contributes.

1. Methodology

1.1. Research Site and Design

The study was carried out in Sangha, located in the Bandiagara region of Mali in January and February 2025. The approach is qualitative, descriptive and interpretive, grounded in

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

sociolinguistics and socio-onomastics. Its purpose was to understand the linguistic, social and cultural motivations behind the choice of given names among the Dogon.

1.2. Participants and Sampling Method

Thirty participants took part, 20 men and 10 women. They were selected for their knowledge of Dogon traditions, cultural practices and naming conventions. A preliminary survey in the area of investigation served to identify these resource persons.The sampling was purposive. The aim was to obtain information relevant to the research objectives rather than to build a statistically representative sample of the population.

1.3. Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Data collection rested mainly on semi-structured interviews, preceded by a documentary review. The interviews covered the names given to children, what those names mean, the circumstances in which they were attributed, and the cultural or social motivations behind the choice.Notes were supplemented by audio recordings where necessary and with the permission of the participants. The recordings preserved their accounts and made the later analysis easier.

1.4. Corpus Construction

The corpus consists of personal names collected from the informants, together with their explanations of what the names mean and of the circumstances in which they were attributed. The number of names collected was substantial, so the analysis concentrates on the examples judged most relevant and most representative of the practices the participants described.This selection makes it possible to present the main categories identified in the data without multiplying examples at the expense of close analysis.

1.5. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed descriptively and thematically. Personal names were grouped according to the categories that emerged from the corpus, then examined for their forms, their reported meanings and the sociocultural circumstances of their attribution.The interpretation rests on the explanations given by the informants and on a socio-onomastic perspective that takes proper names within their social and cultural contexts. Reported meanings were kept distinct from established linguistic etymologies wherever the latter had not been independently verified.

1.6. Ethical Considerations

Before each interview, participants were told what the research was for and how the information collected would be used academically. Free and informed consent was obtained from the participants before any data were collected, and nothing was recorded without their permission. Personal information remained confidential throughout. The cultural practices discussed in the interviews were approached with respect for the participants and for their traditions.

2. Results and Discussion

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

2.1. Results

2.1.1. Data Presentation and Analytical Approach

The data collected through fieldwork, individual interviews and observation point to a diversity of motivations behind the choice of given names among the Dogon. The documented examples refer in particular to religious beliefs, to family or community events, to characteristics attributed to the child, to birth order and to twin births. They also indicate that naming may involve several family members and be shaped by customary norms.

The analysis that follows identifies the main categories of names present in the data, examines the motivations the informants reported, and considers the social functions attached to naming. It takes a socio-onomastic perspective, which treats personal names as social phenomena as well as linguistic units, and whose interpretation depends on the circumstances of naming, on the people involved and on the ways names are used within the community. The perspective is consistent with Mensah, Rowan and Ekpe (2024), who examine Ibibio personal names in relation to their sociocultural meanings, and with Dautey (2025), who investigates the motivations and social functions of gendered given names in Dangme.The classification proposed here distinguishes six analytical categories including theophoric names, event-related or circumstantial names, descriptive names, ordinal names, twin names and sacred names. No category here excludes another. One name can refer to a religious belief and recall the particular circumstances of a birth at the same time. The data are organized into the main motivational aspects identified.

2.1.2. Naming Agents and Naming Practices

The interview data indicate that the attribution of a given name may involve the biological father, grandparents, uncles, and other relatives or ancestors. According to the data collected, members of the paternal family may consult one another to propose a name for a newborn. Grandparents and other members of the lineage may therefore take part in the decision, with the father confirming the name eventually selected. The informants also mentioned, in some situations, the involvement of the *Hogon*, described as a spiritual authority, or of an elderly family member.

Naming, on this evidence, is not always an individual decision.It can also be a collective matter, in which the father’s authority has to reckon with that of elderly relatives and with customary rules. In such cases the name symbolizes relations between generations and helps keep family traditions alive. This description should be grasped with some caution because the data do not reveal that every child in the Dogonland systematically receives three names, or that the same naming practice applies in all Dogon communities.

These practices have to be understood within the limits of the research setting. Determining how often one practice or another occurs would require further information about the localities investigated, the families consulted and the variations observed.

2.2. Typology of Names and Motivations for Their Attribution

2.2.1. Theophoric Names: Expressing a Reference to the Divine

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

A theophoric name carries a reference to a deity, either explicitly or by interpretation. Several forms in the corpus examined contain the name *Ama*, which the informants identify with God. These forms illustrate the importance of spiritual reference in certain naming practices. The informants read Amasomu as an expression of God's primacy and omnipotence, and the name brings with it a worldview where the divine occupies a central place in the order of existence.

Baraama is analyzed through two morphemes: *bara*, associated with a body of water or a river, and *Ama*, interpreted as God. On the explanations provided, the name establishes a connection between the divine and a place associated with water.

Binrunseru is associated in the data with ancestors and with their place in the community's understanding of the world. The informants interpret *Binru* as referring to ancestors or to spiritual powers associated with them.

Lɛɓɛseru is linked to traces attributed to *Ama* and to the memory of elements that ancestors are said to have brought from the Mandé. The interpretation ties a spiritual reference to ancestral memory transmitted through tradition.

Names of this kind express beliefs, recall particular understandings of the world, or situate a child symbolically within a set of spiritual and ancestral references. They connect in this respect with Kodio et al. (2021), whose study of the morphological and semantic dimensions of theophoric Dogon and Khassonké names unveiledthe importance of the name *Ama* in the Dogon forms investigated.

The present analysis adds to that perspective by concentrating on the meanings reported by the informants and on the motivations attached to the choice of a name.Whether every name containing these elements carries the same interpretation across all Dogon communities is not something the analysis establishes. A more detailed linguistic investigation would be needed to verify the proposed segmentations and to identify possible variations in meaning.

2.2.2. Event-Related or Circumstantial Names: Preserving the Memory of Experience

Some names refer to events that precede a birth, occur during pregnancy, or coincide with the arrival of a child. The data revealed several sources of motivation such asfamily difficulties, traditional ceremonies, deaths, and events associated with the exercise of a spiritual office.

Amaigɛrɛ is associated with situations in which a couple has lost several newborn children. For the informants, *Ama* refers to God, while *igɛrɛ* conveys the idea of raising a child, of keeping the child alive. The name is interpreted as expressing hope for survival after painful experience. It recalls the family's earlier difficulties and its wish to see this child grow up.

Yasigi is associated with the *Sigi*, a traditional ceremony that, according to the data collected, takes place in a sixty-year cycle. A girl born during this event may receive the name, which the informants gloss as "the sister of the masks". The name thus ties an individual birth to a collective ritual event.

Ɔgɔdana is attributed, according to the interview accounts, to a child born during the installation of a *Hogon*. The informants associate *ɔgɔ* with power and *dana* with the idea of continuity or longevity. The name recalls an important ceremony and may express the idea of continuity in spiritual authority.

Ɔgɔbara is associated with events regarded as fortunate, particularly those involving wealth or the acquisition of power. The informants link *ɔgɔ* to power and *bara* to increase, and the name is accordingly interpreted as expressing growth or prosperity.

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

Ɔgɔtɛmɛlu is linked to the death of a grandfather who held the position of "Hogon". On the explanations collected, the name recalls a situation in which succession to the position was uncertain, or a successor hard to find. It preserves the memory of a death and of a particular moment in the community's spiritual organization.

Amɔn(male) and **Yamɔn**(female) are given to a child whose biological father died before his/her birth or during the pregnancy. These names refer directly to the family's situation and, in a symbolic way, makethat loss part of the child's identity.Names of this sort enliven the memory of happy or painful events, of ceremonies and of changes in the family. The experience behind the name is recalled each time it is used, or whenever its origin is questioned.

The observations corroborate Minkailou's (2017) findingswho show that theBamanan names studied in Mali may be associated with birth order, the time of birth, gender and with particular experiences, among them the wish for a child to survive. They also connect with Djomeni and Lappi's (2024) study of Fe'efe'e anthroponyms in Cameroon, which identifies the influence of birth circumstances, social events and community experience on naming practices.

References to lived experience appear, then, to be an important feature of several African anthroponymic systems. The same names and beliefs do not exist everywhere, of course. That is precisely where the value of studying Dogon names lies, in documenting what they mean locally, and in documenting the social circumstances that bear on their attribution.

2.2.3. Descriptive Names: Naming Based on Physical Characteristics

Some names refer to a physical characteristic attributed to a child. Two examples appear in the corpus.*Apiri*, a form given mainly to boys and associated with fair or light skin, and *Yapiri*, a feminine form associated with the same characteristic.
The pair suggests a distinction based on gender. The bound morpheme *ya-* in the feminine form points to a possible morphological relationship between the two, though confirming this would require a more systematic linguistic analysis.
Descriptive names differ in motivation from theophoric and circumstantial names; they rest on a feature observed in the child, or considered distinctive. They show that the choice of a given name may follow from how family members perceive a child's physical appearance.

The interpretation of this category calls for caution. The available data do not show how far these characteristics are socially valued, nor whether their significance varies from one context to another. The reported meaning of a name should be kept distinct from any social judgment a researcher might be tempted to attach to it.

2.2.4. Ordinal Names: Situating the Child within the Sibling Group

Other names indicate a child's birth order within the sibling group. The data collected show conventional forms that differ according to sex. The table below presents the forms provided by Niaba Dolo, a resource person from the Dɔgɔsɔ unit at DNENF-LN, in 2025.

Table 1. Ordinal Names by Birth Order and Sex

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

Rank	Male	Female
1st	Atoi	Yatoi
2nd	Alɛ	Yalɛ
3rd	Ataanu	Yataanu
4th	Anai	Yanai
5th	Anu	Yanu
6th-9th	Ordinarynames	Ordinarynames
10th	Apɛlu	Yapɛlu
11th	Asigɛ	Yasigɛ
12th and above	Ordinarynames	Ordinarynames

Source: Personal interview with Niaba Dolo, Dɔgɔsɔ unit, DNENF-LN, 2025.

The table shows correspondences between male and female forms: Atoi / Yatoi, Alɛ / Yalɛ, Ataanu / Yataanu, Anai / Yanai, Anu / Yanu, Apɛlu / Yapɛlu, Asigɛ / Yasigɛ. The correspondences point to formal distinctions associated with gender. Whether that distinction follows a general morphological rule, or applies only to certain sets of names, the available data do not establish.

The distribution of these names is also discontinuous. Specific forms are reported for the first few birth positions and for the tenth and eleventh, while ordinary names are used for several others. It would therefore be inaccurate to describe the system as a regular numerical sequence. Naming practices for higher birth orders, and the counting rules applied to different family relationships, call for further investigation with additional informants.

The motivation behind these names is classificatory. They situate a child within the birth order and identify that child's position among siblings. The function is supported by Minkailou (2017)who identified birth order as one of the factors influencing the choice of Bamananpersonal names in southern Mali. The comparison disclosed a function shared by different naming systems, without assuming that their linguistic forms or counting rules are identical.

2.2.5. Twin Names: Distinguishing Children Born in the Same Pregnancy

A further set of names is associated with children born during the same pregnancy. According to the informants, the following forms distinguish twins by birth order and sex.

Table 2. Names Associated with Twin Births

Rank	Male	Female
First-born twin	Adiyɛ	Yadiyɛ

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

Second-born twin	Asɛ / Asɛgɛ	Yasɛ / Yasɛgɛ

Source: Personal interview with Moctar Douyon, Dɔgɔsɔ unit, AMALAN, February 2025.

According to the informant, *Adiyɛ* and *Asɛgɛ* designate the first-born and second-born twins respectively, with *Yadiyɛ* and *Yasɛgɛ* as the corresponding female forms. The informants also mentioned *Ana* and *Yana* as names given to a boy and a girl born after a pair of twins.

These names serve a classificatory function; they distinguish children born as twins and indicate their birth order, and in doing so they make a particular family configuration visible. The existence of specific forms indicates that twin birth is a naming criterion in the practices documented.

How widely these names are used, and whether the forms hold steady across localities, would need further investigation. The data identify a practice reported by the informants; they do not establish that it is uniform throughout Dogon country.

2.2.6. Sacred Names: Recognition and Ritual Practices

The data also include names associated with places considered sacred, with libation practices, or with circumstances interpreted as manifestations of spiritual intervention. Some of these overlap with the theophoric category. The distinction adopted here is functional; a theophoric name puts the reference to the divine in the form of the name itself, whereas a sacred name reflects above all the ritual context reported at the time of naming.

Table 3. Sacred (Theophoric) Names

Anthroponyms	**Meaning / Cultural significance**
Baraama	God of the water site.
Lɛbɛseru	A woman who was previously unable to conceive but gives birth after making a ritual offering (libation) to the patriarch. The patriarch is informed of the birth. The name expresses gratitude and recognition of the benefactor, Lɛbɛ.
Binrunseru	A woman who was previously unable to conceive but gives birth after making a ritual offering to Ama (God). The name expresses gratitude and recognition of the benefactor, Binru.
Lɛbɛniju	A woman who was previously unable to conceive but gives birth after making a ritual offering to the patriarch. The name expresses gratitude and recognition of Lɛbɛ, the benefactor.
Amaseru	A woman who was previously unable to conceive but gives birth after making a ritual offering to Ama. The name expresses gratitude and recognition to Ama.

Source: Field data

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

The examples collected include *Baraama*, associated with *Ama* and a water site; *Lɛɓɛseru* and *Lɛɓɛniju*, reported in situations where a child was born following a libation to the patriarch; *Binrunseru*, associated with a libation to *Ama*; and *Amaseru*, linked to a ritual practice to which the informants attribute a meaning of recognition or gratitude.

In the cases described, a family reads the birth of a child after difficulties with conception and the performance of rituals as an event calling for gratitude towards a spiritual power or beneficent entity. The name then preserves the memory of that experience and recalls the relationship the family establishes between the birth and the ritual performed.

Names of this kind serve symbolic and commemorative functions. They express the meaning attributed to a birth and keep the memory of a ritual practice alive in the child's identity. The analysis agrees with studies of African personal names showing that naming practices can reflect beliefs, worldviews and collective experience (Mensah et al., 2024; Dautey, 2025).

Sacred and theophoric names should not, however, be treated as entirely separate categories. A name may be theophoric by its linguistic reference and sacred by the ritual circumstances of its attribution. The overlap shows why the typology proposed here is best taken as an analytical tool for examining naming motivations rather than as a rigid classification into mutually exclusive categories.

2.3. Discussion

The analysis uncoveredthree major dimensions in the naming practices documented; they are spirituality, the memory of events, and the classification of individuals within the family. These dimensions answer the research question by showing that the choice of a name follows from motivations that may be individual, familial or community-based.

The firstdimension concerns references to the divine and to ritual practice. Theophoric and sacred names bring out the place of spiritual belief in the meanings attributed to personal names. The observation agrees with Kodio et al. (2021), whose study examines theophoric names among the Dogon and Khassonké. The present study extends that perspective by relating spiritual references to the circumstances of naming and to the explanations the informants provided.

The second dimension relates to social memory. A family event, a ceremony, a difficult experience are what event-related names recall. *Amaigɛrɛ*, *Yasigi*, *Ɔgɔdana*, *Ɔgɔtɛmɛlu* and *Amɔn* all show how a name can serve as a reminder of something that happened to a family or to a community. Minkailou (2017), working on the anthroponyms of southernMali, and Djomeni and Lappi (2024), working on Fe'efe'e personal names in Cameroon, report comparable observations. Birth circumstances and social experience bear on naming choices in those settings too.

The third dimension concerns the classificatory function of ordinal and twin names. These forms situate children within the sibling group and distinguish particular birth configurations, giving information about an individual's position in the family. In their study of the Ibibio anthroponymic system, Mensah et al. (2024) likewise show that personal names can express social categories and collective representations. Names serve, then, as linguistic resources for expressing social relationships in different contexts, even though naming categories and rules vary from one society to another.

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

The socio-onomastic approach makes it possible to look at all these dimensions together, without reducing an anthroponym to its dictionary meaning. It considers who takes part in the naming, the circumstances in which the name is given, how speakers interpret it, and how it is used in social life. In the data analyzed, one name may work at once as an identifier, as a reminder of an event, as an expression of belief and as an indicator of family position.

These findings are nonetheless read in the light of what the corpus does not contain. The available data do not specify the total number of names collected in each category, their frequency, or their geographical distribution. There is therefore no basis for claiming that one category dominates quantitatively, or that the practices described are shared by all Dogon communities. The contribution is qualitative: it characterizes the main documented motivations and offers a socio-onomastic reading of the examples collected.

2.4. Summary of the Findings

The anthroponyms collected bring out the diversity of motivations at work in Dogon naming practices. The data support six analytical categories including theophoric, event-related or circumstantial, descriptive, ordinal, twin and sacred names. An antroponym, then, may refer to God, recall an event, describe physical traits of the child, or indicate the child's place among siblings. The choice of the name may involve several people. The data reported that the biological fatheris consulted in the naming process; the eldest of the family members gives final approval. Naming is thus a social matter. Both individual authority and groupexpectationsare considered.

Comparison with studies of anthroponyms in southern Mali, of Fe'efe'e anthroponyms in Cameroon and of the Ibibio anthroponymic system shows that names can reflect beliefs, experience and social relationships in different African contexts. What the present study contributes is the documentation of Dogon examples and an examination of the relationship between their reported meanings, the circumstances of naming and the people involved.These results are still exploratory. Further fieldwork in other localities, with a larger corpus and a closer linguistic analysis of the forms, would make it possible to check these interpretations, record local variation and see how far the proposed categories hold. Such work could also feed into reference resources on Dogon anthroponyms and into the documentation of the community's linguistic and cultural heritage.

Conclusion

This socio-onomastic study examined personal naming practices among the Dogon through fieldwork conducted in Sangha, Bandiagara Region. Naming, on the evidence collected, serves purposes beyond identification; it is shaped by sociocultural, linguistic, circumstantial, spatial and religious motivations. The analysis brought to light the part played by the extended family, and by elderly relatives in particular, in the naming process, together with the bearing of birth circumstances, family events and beliefs on the choice of a name. These practices indicate a close relationship between anthroponymy, collective memory and social organization, and they also show that naming practices are not necessarily uniform across all Dogon communities.The research contributes to the documentation of Dogon anthroponymy and opens the way to name corpora, specialized lexicons and comparative studies of naming practices. A personal name, as the examples collected indicate, is a means of designation and at the same time a marker of cultural values and social relationships.

UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR

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UNDER PEER REVIEW IN IJAR