

**Deciphering Nigerian Naming Culture and Identity through their  
Presidents' Names: A Sociolinguistic Study**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the interplay of religion, culture, and historical identity in the naming patterns of Nigerian past and present rulers. The study adopts socio-onomastics as the theoretical framework which considers names as linguistic markers of identity shaped by social structures.

Qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis are adopted to analyse the names of 15 Nigerian leaders comprising of 1 Prime Minister, 9 Presidents and 5 military heads of State across different geopolitical zones through historical and linguistic sources. The qualitative aspect unveils the origin and the contextual meanings of the names. It is discovered that religion significantly influence name choice, as observed in Arabic and Hebrew influences among Muslim and Christian leaders, respectively. Culture also plays a crucial role, particularly among the Yoruba, who bear praise names and deity-related names. Northern naming conventions are often derived from toponyms. Additionally, intercultural interplay is seen in names that combine Arabic, English, and indigenous influences. The quantitative analysis presents the statistical distribution of the names following Adeniyi (2017) classification of names. Thus, given/birth name has the highest percentage (33.33%); followed by God worshiped/deities name which holds 23.53%. Royalty/nobility has 15.7% while place name owns 9.80%. Animal oriented names, plant names and hydronyms attract the same percentage of 3.92% each. Destiny/situational names, infantile mortality names and personal praise names take the least frequency of 1.96% with just a single token in

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each. This study concludes that Nigerian names are complex identity markers that enshrine religion, ethnicity, history and culture.

**Keywords:** *Name, Nigeria leaders, Culture, Socio-onomastics, Religion, history*

### 1. Introduction

A name, in Africa, is more than just a label for identification; it bears cultural, historical, educational, political and spiritual significance. According to Akinnaso (1980), names serve as linguistic markers that reflect personal identity, societal values, and ancestral heritage. In Nigeria, like many African societies, names are carefully selected to express meanings that showcase the religious beliefs, cultural practices, ethnic identity, and historical narratives of the named/namer's society. The Nigerian naming system is richly shaped and influenced by the country's ethnic, cultural, linguistic diversity and colonial experience. As noted by Odebode (2010, 2019), Nigeria is heterogeneous and multicultural in nature, as it comprises about 450 ethnolinguistic communities that cut across six geopolitical zones. Consequently, naming conventions vary significantly in these zones, but remain deeply rooted in cultural and historical contexts.

Due to its heterogeneity, Nigeria was officially divided into six geopolitical zones in 1996 under the administration of General Sani Abacha to ensure equitable distribution of federal power and resources (Agbaje, 1988). These zones include the Northeast (Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe States); Northwest (Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara States); North Central (Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau States as well as Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory); Southwest (Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo States); Southeast (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States) and South-South (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers States). This regional division has shaped Nigeria's political, economic, power and resource allocation (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

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Each geopolitical zone is characterised by peculiar and unique naming patterns shaped by their native language(s), tradition, and historical experiences. In the South-West, Yoruba names often incorporate elements of religion, royalty, destiny and praise. For instance, Oluwasemilore (God has done good things for me) points to Christianity, Adewale (the crown comes home) signals royalty while Asake (selected for pampering) epitomises praise. Aside these, Yoruba names reflect occupation, circumstance surrounding the family and the birth of a child, among others. In this regard, Adeniyi (2017) classifies Yoruba names into destiny/situational name, name by profession/occupation of the family, infantile mortality, given or birth names, the deities/gods worshiped in the family, name by loyalty or nobility, the physical appearance of the child, personal praise name, nick names or sobriquet, proverbs as names, animal names as human names, plant names as human names and place names. The South-East, predominantly Igbo, bear names that capture the circumstances of birth or the family, divine favour and Christianity which is an aftermath of colonisation (Cookey & Ijioma, 2019). For instance, Anyaomachi (the good eyes of God) or Amarachi (God's favour) signifies divine favour; Ositadiḡmma (If it starts today to be good) and Taabugboo (Today is early) are circumstantial names. The South-South region, home to the Ijaw, Efik, and other ethnic groups, often features names that emphasise nature and ancestry such as Tari (which denotes love in Ijaw) or Ekanem (Efik word for Precious). In the North-West, Hausa-Fulani names are blend with Arabic names. For instance, names of prophets such as Musa, Zainab, Ibrahim, are in vogue among others. The North-East follows a similar pattern but also incorporates Kanuri and other ethnic infiltration, producing names such as Zannah (Leader in Kanuri). Meanwhile, the North-Central zone, with its diverse ethnic groups such as the Tiv, Nupe, Ebira and Idoma, showcases names that reflect resilience and community values. For example, the Ebira name, Oshengwudo (Endurance) depicts resilience

while Oziohu (Child is the best) projects the belief that nothing is comparable to having the gift of a child from God.

Therefore, this study will explore the naming patterns of past and present Nigerian leaders from different geopolitical zones to illuminate how their names embody cultural heritage, leadership expectations, and socio-political influences. By analysing these names, the paper seeks to illustrate the preservation of Nigeria's diverse traditional systems through naming practices, offering insight into the nation's historical and cultural evolution and underscoring the profound idea that a name serves not merely as a label, but as a representation of identity and legacy.

### **2. Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework apt for this study is socio-onomastics. Socio-onomastics, as a theory, is a subfield of onomastics which studies names in general and their associated conventions. It focuses on the interconnectedness between names and social structures. It also investigates how names reflect, influence, and interact with social identity, group membership, and cultural practices. This branch of onomastics explores how socio-cultural, historical, and political meanings are embedded in names, thus giving insights on issues such as ethnicity, class, gender, as well as the socio-economic characteristic of the various environments.

Basically, socio-onomastics is interested in the societal functions of names, the impact of names on social relationships and hierarchies, the processes behind naming practices, and how societal factors like race, class, and gender influence naming conventions. In this regard, Ainiala and Ostman (2017) cited by Odebode (2024) posits that socio-onomastics covers the spectrum of names, naming, sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. From this submission, it could be said that socio-onomastics is not just about understanding the linguistic properties of names, but also about how names serve as

instruments of identity, social markers and cultural symbols. Since this theory is concerned with the intersection of names and social structure, it is considered appropriate in exploring the social indices enshrined in the naming patterns of Nigerians, particularly, their leaders.

### **3. Literature Review**

Bamidele (2010) employs the theory of ethnology to compare the Igbo Culture and Yoruba culture naming ceremony. The researcher employs a qualitative method of data analysis to examine how naming ceremonies are carried out among the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic individuals that reside in the Abadina residential area of the University of Ibadan. It is discovered that naming ceremonies in both cultures are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, social identity, and religious significance, with names serving as reflections of family history, reincarnation beliefs, and aspirations for the child. The timing and rituals of the naming ceremonies between the two ethnic groups, as well as variations in the materials used for the ceremonies mark their differences. The study concludes that though modernisation and globalisation have introduced some deviations from the traditional practice of naming ceremonies between the Yoruba and Igbo cultures, it remains a crucial cultural institution that reinforces communal values, heritage, and societal continuity. However, the present study is designed to consider the names of all the 15 political/military rulers in Nigeria.

Odebode (2019) explores the multicultural aspects of name and naming in Nigeria by highlighting the sociolinguistic dimensions of naming practices in Nigeria. The study, grounded in Halliday's socio-semiotic theory, the VARIES model, and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), examines how names in Nigeria capture linguistic, cultural, and historical influences. Names from Nigeria's three major ethnic groups (Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo) were analysed. Findings reveal that Nigerian names are deeply multicultural, reflecting influences from indigenous languages, foreign

religions (Christianity and Islam), and colonial history. Names serve as markers of identity which signal religion, historical narratives, social status, and ethnicity. The study concludes that naming in Nigeria is not just a linguistic practice but a social and historical phenomenon that embodies the nation's diverse cultural heritage. The study informs the present work in scope. However, they differ in data and theories. While Odebode (2019) considers the general names based on the three cultures from the VARIES model, Halliday's socio-semiotic theory and Communication Accommodation Theory's (CAT) perspectives, the present study considers the specific names of Nigerian rulers from a socio-onomastics standpoint.

Fakuade, et al. (2020) highlight the traditions, patterns and practices of the Yoruba Personal Naming System. The study is anchored on indexicality theory, which posits that the context of a name determines its meaning. The findings establish that Yoruba names are deeply embedded in cultural norms, because they reflect family histories, religious beliefs, economic status, and aspirations for the child's future. Yoruba names are thus categorised into different typologies, such as destiny names (Oruko Amutorunwa), circumstantial names, theophoric names, and occupational names. The Western culture (Christianity and Islam) also influences the Yoruba naming pattern. Although, modernisation and religious influences have led to modifications in Yoruba naming traditions, the fundamental beliefs associated with naming remain resilient. The study is based only on the Yoruba naming system; hence the difference between it and the present study which considers naming and the major cultures in Nigeria from the rulers' names perspective.

Mensah et al. (2020) view the Afrocentric perspective of Names, Naming and the Code of Cultural Denial in a Contemporary Nigerian Society. The study is rooted in the Afrocentric paradigm, which emphasises cultural assertion, self-pride, and Africa-centred identity. The researchers employed a qualitative ethnographic

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approach, using participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and metalinguistic conversations to collect data from 30 young men and women in Calabar, Nigeria, who had engaged in self-renaming over the previous quinquennium. The findings indicate that young Nigerians adopt foreign first names to challenge stereotyped ethnic identities and contest traditional naming norms, driven by social, personal, and religious motivations, including style, creativity, religious conversion, and social capital. The study concludes that first name-changing among Nigerian youth serves as a contemporary response to evolving cultural references and acts as a tool of resistance against traditional African naming systems which leads to the gradual erosion of indigenous identity and cultural heritage. The study is related to the present work because it is based on Africa. Thus, it praises the use/adoption of foreign names by Africans. As a corollary, we have the manifestation of at least one English or Arabic name in the names of the Nigerian rulers under study, as a replica of the whole society. Notwithstanding, the two studies differ in data and theories.

Ezenwafor-Afuecheta and Onyeocha (2021) study the dynamics of name-taking in Igbo society from the linguistic anthropology standpoint which explores the interrelationship of language, culture, and identity. The findings explain that responsorial nicknames, a subset of personal names, serve as honorifics and self-adopted identifiers which reflect individual philosophies, life experiences, and societal values. Unlike given names, these names are intentionally chosen by adults to communicate principles such as truthfulness, resilience, gratitude, and the unpredictability of life. The idiomatic nature of these names, their structural complexity, and their use as a form of greeting are also established in the study. Ezenwafor-Afuecheta and Onyeocha conclude that responsorial nicknames mirror the Igbo worldview, reinforce the cultural identity and social interaction while serving as an expressive tool for personal and communal values. The study is related to ours because it is based on Igbo society which is one of the major ethnic groups the present

research is considering. However, while the study considers nicknames preponderantly, the present work is based on the anthroponyms (personal names) of Nigerian rulers from different ethnic groups in the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria.

Osimen et al. (2023) examine the Nigerianness and Misrepresentations of Names and Signatures. The study adopts a theoretical framework that integrates the concepts of Nigerianness, identity construction, and naming conventions to understand the impact of colonial legacies on Nigerian naming practices. Data collection involve the use of questionnaires administered to 200 respondents and interviews conducted with judicial workers, while statistical tools such as Chi-square tests are used to analyse the correlations. Findings establish that misrepresentations of names and signatures in Nigeria stem from a lack of awareness, inadequate education, and colonial influences on naming conventions. Additionally, there is a strong correlation between name arrangement and identity validation, highlighting the legal and social implications of name misrepresentation. Conclusively, Nigeria must standardise its naming system, similar to the way Pidgin English has gained global recognition, and recommend public sensitisation programmes to address widespread errors in name and signature representation. The study is based on misrepresentation and standardisation of Nigerian names while the present research is based on socio-onomastics of Nigerian names from the standpoint of the rulers' personal names; hence the divergence in the two studies.

Williams (2023) examines the binary personal naming system of the Baatombu people in Nigeria and Republic of Benin. The study adopts an anthroponymic and sociolinguistic theoretical framework and focuses on how names reflect power structures and social stratification within the Baatombu community. Findings hold that the Baatombu people operate a binary naming system that classifies personal names into two distinct categories: Set A, which includes



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names associated with the elite class (Wassangari rulers, Aboriginal aristocracy, and Islamic missionaries), and Set B, which comprises names given to commoners and circumstantial names linked to birth conditions. The naming practices in Baatombu society are deeply intertwined with genealogy, social status, and power dynamics, with personal names serving as indicators of class hierarchy and historical lineage. Conclusively, the Baatombu naming system functions as a tool for social differentiation, reinforces historical power structures and cultural identity within the community. The study updates our knowledge of one of the minority groups in Nigeria as far as onomastic studies is concerned. The present study considers the larger ethnic groups and their naming patterns from the perspective of the leaders' given-names.

Folami et al. (2024) investigate identity and culture of naming among the Yorubas of West Africa. They explore the impact of Westernisation, foreign religions, and globalisation on Yoruba naming traditions. Using Edwin Sutherland's Differential Association Theory, which highlights how social interactions influence behaviour, the study examines significance of naming in Yoruba culture, the erosion of indigenous Yoruba names and the reasons behind the decline of traditional names. Findings reveal that Yoruba names reflect social identity, heritage, and historical context, with naming practices influenced by factors such as royal lineage, wealth, chieftaincy, and birth circumstances. However, Westernisation and religious influences have led to the replacement of indigenous names with foreign ones, disrupting Yoruba cultural identity. The study concludes that preserving Yoruba naming traditions is central to maintaining cultural heritage and advocates for the rejection of foreign names in favour of traditional ones to safeguard Yoruba identity. The work considers Anglicism as one of the naming indices among the Yoruba. However, the present study goes beyond name borrowing to include other sociocultural factors that dictate the given-names of Nigerian rulers within the society.

### 4. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative and quantitative approach to explore the naming system among Nigeria's past and present leaders with a view to providing a deeper understanding of the cultural, historical, and socio-political influences that shape naming conventions. Fifteen Names of Nigerian past and present rulers culled from the internet (see appendix) constitute the population and primary data for the study. Existing related literature and articles form the secondary data for the study. The qualitative method of data analysis accounts for the origin and contextual meaning of the names while the quantitative method captures the statistical representation of the names based on Adeniyi (2017) taxonomy.

### 5. Data Analysis

- a. Abubakar Tafawa Balewa: He was the only prime minister Nigeria ever had. He ruled between October 1957 and January 1966. Before Nigeria became a republic in 1963, Nigeria was ruled by Queen Elizabeth II. He belongs to the North East Region. The name *Abubakar* has an Arabic origin. It denotes 'father of the camel' (BabyNames, 2007). *Tafawa* and *Balewa* are associated with the Fulfulde words *Tafari* 'black' and *Baleri* 'rock' which implies 'blackrock.' Also the name is a toponymy which he was named after (Memorial Libraries, 2025). The cultural integration here demonstrates the multi-ethnic background of Nigeria, as Tafawa Balewa belongs to the Bolewa ethnic group but was widely associated with Hausa identity.
- b. Nnamdi Benjamin Azikiwe who hails from the South East, was one of the revolutionary leaders who fought for Nigeria's

independence. His name signals the integration of the Igbo and Anglo/Jewish culture into the country's onomastic lexicons. *Nnamdi* is a reincarnated name which means 'my father is alive.' Benjamin is an Anglo/Jewish name which denotes 'son of my right hand' while Azikiwe has its root in the Igbo culture. It captures 'the one who comes from the great forest.' It, therefore, has a connection to strength and nature. By extension, the name indicates 'a chosen child who upholds the legacy of his father and leads the way for others.' This aligns with his revolutionary leadership in Nigeria.

- c. Johnson Thomas Umunnakwe Aguyi-Irosi took over the state of affairs as a military president after the Military coup in 1966. He hails from the South east region of Nigeria. He possesses two English names, one local and family name. *Johnson* is an English name that draws its root from the Hebrew John (which denotes God is gracious). By extension, Johnson derived from the Anglo-Norman origin to indicate the son of *John*. *Thomas* on the other hand is a Hebrew name which means 'twin' (Ancestry, 2025). The choice of *Thomas* over *Ejima*, the Igbo word for twins, resonates the influence of English on Nigeria's naming system. *Umunnakwe* and Aguyi-Irosi originated from Igbo. The former denotes 'the family has accepted' while the latter is a compound name which signals bravery and strength. Therefore, this name combines the Igbo, English and Hebrew to indicate multiculturalism and multilingualism which characterise the Nigerian onomastic culture preponderantly.
- d. Yakubu Dan-Yumma Jack Gowon: General Yakubu Gowon played a key role in Nigeria's unity and emancipation. At just 32, he became the Head of State during the country's most challenging

period, leading through the 1966 coups and the ensuing civil war, six years after independence. *Yakubu* is the Hausa version of *Jacob*, a biblical name meaning 'supplanter.' This attests to his Baptist Christian background. Similarly, *Dan-Yumma* has a Hausa origin which means the 'son of the blessed.' *Jack*, however, is of the English origin which means 'God is Gracious,' (Parents, 2024). *Gowon* is also a Hausa originated name. This name suggests 'resilience and the ability to rise to power,' which aligns with his military and political career. Meanwhile, *Nigerian Vanguard* (2024) reported that people punned with GOWON as an acronym for *Go On With One Nigeria* during the civil war. The cultural integration in his name is evident in the fusion of a Christian biblical name with his indigenous Hausa background and English culture. This situation which is peculiar to the educated elite in Nigeria is captured by Odebode (2021) as multilingual/multicultural naming in Nigeria.

- e. Murtala Ramat Muhammed was a Nigerian military officer who served as the country's fourth head of state. He hails from the North West region of Nigeria. Murtala has its root in the Arabic culture, its meaning is derived from the name Murtaza which means 'the chosen one' (Vernere, 2025). *Ramat* is the masculine version of the Islamic name 'Rahmat' which means 'gift of mercy/companion' (Vernere, 2025). *Muhammed* is patterned after the name of the Prophet, meaning the 'praised one.' The name is religious-based and honorific. The cultural integration reflects the dominance of Islamic and Arabic influences in the North of Nigeria.

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- f. Olusegun Matthew Okikiola Ogunboye Aremu Obasanjo hails from the South West region (*Africa commons.net*, 2025). The name infuses the Yoruba and English culture. The Yoruba cultural elements in his name comprises the destiny/situational, praise and family name. *Mathew* is an English name derived from the Hebrew name *Matityahu* 'gift of God' (Campbell, 2024). The Yoruba name *Olusegun* is a blend of Christianity and Yoruba culture. The prefix 'Olu' means 'Lord' while *Segun* means 'triumphs' (Babalola & Alaba, 2003). This is suitable for a person who overcame obstacles to achieve high positions in Nigeria's military and politics. It should be noted that the choice of the prefix, Olu, is a deviation from the usual pattern of initiating Yoruba names with the deities of the land whereby names begin with prefixes such as Ogun (god of iron), Ifa (oracle), Osun (god of water), Sango (god of thunder) as evident in these names, Oguntunde (the god of iron has come again), Sangowande (the god of thunder has visited me), Ifaponle (the oracle god has made me feel honoured), among others. This attests to the influence of Christianity and Western culture. Odebode (2021) posits that the practice of replacing Yoruba deities with 'the Lord (Jesus Christ)' in traditional names stems not only from the impact of Christianity but also from a colonial influence. Meanwhile, *Okikiola* denotes 'fame/herald of wealth' (Babalola & Alaba, 2003); *Ogunboye* signals the Yoruba belief in polytheism. Thus, it means '[the child from] the god of iron has chieftaincy title' as opined by Babalola and Alaba, (2003). It also denotes that 'the god of iron intersects or catches up with royalty.' We can then infer that an average Yoruba believes in a god in his lineage before the advent of Christianity. Thus, *Olusegun* and *Ogunboye* showcase the fusion of the Yoruba cultural belief in gods and Christianity. *Aremu*

is a praise name which means 'child whose foes shall row weary whenever they strive to seize him' (Babalola & Alaba, 2003) while 'Obasanjo' which is his last name signifies 'God repays/rewards my past deed,' (Odebode, 2019).

- g. Shehu Usman Aliyu Shagari is from North Central. *Shehu* originates from the Arabic 'shaykh' which signifies 'master,' *Usman* also stems from the Arabic word for 'man's protector.' *Aliyu* comes from the Arabic *Ali*, meaning 'high' or 'exalted,' with the 'yu' added as a term of compliment. So, 'Aliyu' essentially means 'the beloved or exalted one.' *Shagari* is a Fulani word which implies 'warrior.' Thus, Arabic and Fulani cultures interact in Shagari's name. This situation captures the naming style in the North of Nigeria where the name of a prophet, an Arabic name as well as the name of a town/city are arranged to feature in an anthroponym (given/personal name).
- h. Muhammadu Buhari: This name integrates the Arabic and the Islamic culture. It reflects his Islamic faith and the strong religious influence on naming traditions in Northern Nigeria. *Muhammadu* is the localised version of the Arabic name *Muhammad* which implies 'praised/praiseworthy.' It derived from the name of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). *Buhari* on the other hand, is a Hausa originated name which can be likened to 'prosperity/blessing.' The interplay of cultures signal where Buhari hails from, North West and the influence of Arabic on Fulani and Hausa cultures.
- i. Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida is a military head of state who ruled Nigeria between 1985 and 1993. He came from Niger state in the North Central region. His name *Ibrahim* is the Islamic version of Abraham which means 'father of nations;' *Badamasi* and *Babangida*

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are Hausa originated names. *Badamasi* is the Hausa variant of 'Gbadamosi' among the Yorubas. It implies 'servant of generous one' while *Babaginda* means 'the master of the household' (The meaning of names, 2025). However, as in vogue in the north, the last name, Babangida points to a town's name. This is the case in *Shagari* and *Balewa* where the names point to a town/village name. The name (Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida) therefore, is multicultural and multilingual in nature as it captures Arabic, Jewish and Hausa/Fulani cultures.

- j. Ernest Adegunle Oladeinde Shonekan also hails from Ogun State in the South West zone of Nigeria. He served as an interim head of government between August and November, 1993, after the military (under General Babangida) annulled the presidential election presumed to have been won by Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola, another Yoruba from Abeokuta, Ogun State. Subsequently, the Court declared the interim government illegal. Abiola was arrested by the military and died in detention. Chief Shonekan's name is influenced by the Western culture. This is notable in the name *Ernest* meaning 'sincere or serious' (Ancestry, 2025, Venere, 2025). His other names are rooted in the Yoruba culture. *Adegunle* implies that 'the crown is well established,' *Oladeinde* denotes 'the new member of our noble family has arrived' (Babalola & Alaba, 2003); and *Shonekan* which is the last name signifies 'sorcerer/the god of fertility has an offshoot' (Babalola & Alaba, 2003). This combination of names shows the syncretism of Western and Yoruba cultures, which is a famous practice among Yoruba Christians during the colonial and post-colonial eras.

- k. Sani Abacha was born in Kano, the North West to a Kanuri family who hailed from Borno State (North East). He was a military dictator who governed Nigeria between 1993 and 1998. *Sani* is an Arabic name which means 'brilliance' (BabyCentre, 2025). The last name *Abacha* reflects Hausa culture, specifically, the Kanuri heritage. It denotes 'great father.' Thus, the name elements highlight the influence of the rich Hausa/Fulani ethnic culture in Northern Nigeria, where Arabic names are common due to religious influence.
- l. Abdulsalami Abubakar: *Abdulsalami* is a compound name with the combination of *Abdul* and *Salami*. It is a localised form of the Arabic name *Abdulsalam* which means 'servant of peace.' The name *Abubakar* has an Arabic origin. It denotes 'father of the camel' (BabyNames, 2007), a name of historical significance in Islam as it was borne by a close companion of Prophet Muhammad (World History Encyclopedia, 2025). This naming tradition is common among the Hausa/Fulani. It reflects religious devotion and cultural heritage. The adoption of Arabic names highlights Islam's strong influence in Northern Nigeria.
- m. Umaru Musa Yar-Adua ruled Nigeria between 2007 and 2010. He is from Kastina State in the North West zone of Nigeria. *Umaru* is the Hausa adaptation of the Arabic name *Umar*. It means 'flourish/prosper'. *Musa* is the Arabic form of the Hebrew name *Moses*. It denotes 'drawn out of water.' The last name *Yar-Adua* is a Fulani and a compound name. *Yar* means son while *Adua* is a toponym in Northern Ethiopia. This put together, *Yar-Adua* means 'son of Adua.' This highlights the intersection of the Islamic



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influence on the Fulani tradition and the use of toponyms in the anthroponomys of Northern Nigerians.

- n. Goodluck Ebele Azikiwe Jonathan hails from Ogbia, Otuoke of Bayelsa State in the South South region. He ruled Nigeria between 2010 and 2015. The name has a blend of Anglo/Jewish and Igbo names. Goodluck is an English word which signifies 'fortune;' Ebele is an Igbo name denoting 'kindness.' Similarly, Azikiwe also has its root in the Igbo culture which means 'comes from the forest.' The last name Johnathan is rooted in Christianity and means 'given by God'. This signals that Christianity influences the naming pattern not only in the South West but also in the South South region.
- o. President Bola Ahmed Adekunle Tinubu: *Bola* is clipped variant of *Adebola*, a Yoruba name which signifies 'A crown meets wealth.' *Adekunle* is also a Yoruba name which means 'crown fills the house' thus indicating prosperity and royal status. *Ahmed* is of Arabic origin and means "Most praiseworthy," aligning with his Islamic faith. *Tinubu* is a Yoruba originated name that signifies 'that of water/ocean.' This by extension commensurate the regional origin of Tinubu. He is from the South Western part of Nigeria, Lagos precisely. Lagos, a derivation of the Portuguese expression for lakes, is believed to be the water area of the South western part of Nigeria. Hence, its aptness with the name *Tinubu* (that belongs to the ocean). "Ibu" is a Yoruba expression for large water or the sea. Alternatively, the name also showcases the religious cum cultural system among the Yoruba where polytheism and freedom of religion are in vogue. Thus, in a family, there can be an animist, a Muslim and a Christian. The names fuses the Yoruba and Arabic/Islamic culture.

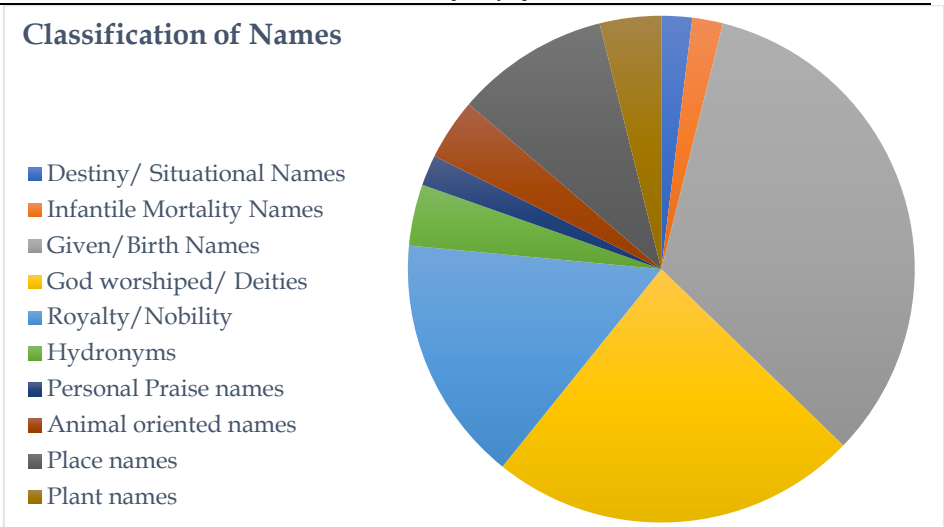
### 6. Statistical Analysis

This section classifies the elements that constitute the names of Nigeria past and present leaders, following Adeniyi (2017) name classification. It also captures the percentage distribution of the names on a pie chart.

S/N	Classification of Names	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Destiny/ Situational Names	1	1.96
2.	Infantile Mortality Names	1	1.96
3.	Given/Birth Names	17	33.33
4.	God worshiped/ Deities	12	23.53
5.	Royalty/Nobility	8	15.7
6.	Hydronyms	2	3.92
7.	Personal Praise names	1	1.96
8.	Animal oriented names	2	3.92
9.	Place names	5	9.80
10.	Plant names	2	3.92
	Total	51	100

**Table 1:** *Classification of Name Element in Nigeria Leader's Names*

Source: Authors (2025)



**Figure 1:** A chart showing the frequency of the classification of Nigeria leader's names

Source: Authors (2025)

The above pie chart presents the percentage distribution of the names of Nigeria past and present leaders, following Adeniyi (2017) classification of names. Given/birth names which are names given to individuals at birth has the highest percentage (33.33%). Following this is God worshiped/deities name (names that reflect the faith of the people) holds 23.53%. Royalty/nobility names reflect family background as either noble or royal has 15.7%. Names that are ascribed to geographical locations (place name) owns 9.80%. Animal-oriented, plant names and hydronymy (a name given to a body of water) attract the same percentage of 3.92%. In the same vein, destiny/situational names (a name a child brings from heaven), infantile mortality names (names given to children believed to die young and reincarnate repeatedly) and personal praise names (names

used to eulogise) take the least percent of 1.96% with just a single token in each.

### **6. Discussion of Findings**

From the analysis above, the naming system in Nigeria is significantly influenced by religion, particularly, Islam and Christianity. For instance, Nnamdi Benjamin Azikiwe who is from the South East is influenced by Christianity. Azikiwe is an Igbo man who has two of his names (Nnamdi and Azikiwe) in the Igbo language and an Anglo/Jewish derivative name, Benjamin. Similarly, Bola Ahmed Tinubu has an Arabic influenced name Ahmed. This is as a result of his religion (Islam). Even though he is from the South West where Christianity is the predominant religion, he still bears an Arabic name due to his religious affiliation. Hence, religion determines naming pattern irrespective of location.

Aside religion, the individual's peculiar culture is also enshrined in their names and this defines the divergences in the kind of names borne by Nigeria leaders from different parts of the country. The South West (predominantly Yorubas) often bear names relating to gods of the land (see Odebode, 2019). This practice is evident in Shonekan's name, Ogungboye, (Ogun intersect chieftaincy). This projects the deity, Ogun (the god of iron) worshipped in Shonekan's lineage. However, this practice has been influenced by Christianity. For instance, the usual prefix – Ogun, has been replaced with Olu in Obasanjo's name, *Olusegun*. Invariably, the name could have been Ogunsegun/Ifasegun/Sangosegun but for the influence of Christianity and Western culture, it changes to Olusegun. Also, it is a common practice in the South West to give praise names that may indicate

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prayer/shield over the bearer. This act is observable in Obasanjo's name, *Aremu* which means that the child's foe will grow weary whenever they strive to seize him (Babalola & Alaba, 2003). In the same vein, the northern practice of giving place names to individuals is demonstrated in the names of Tafawa Balewa, Yar-Adua, and Ibrahim Babangida as Tafawa Balewa, Yar-Adua and Babangida are specific names of towns in Bauchi, Northern Ethiopia and Niger respectively. This is done to preserve one's cultural heritage and reflect the feelings of individuals and collective identity attached to the places. (Helleland 2012). Jonathan's name *Azikiwe* (comes from great forest) points to nature.

Coupled with religion and individual's culture is the intercultural interplay. Yakubu Gowon, though a Christian, bears an Arabic name *Yakubu* (an Arabic version of the Hebrew, Jacob) and an adopted English name *Jack*. In this case, there is a cultural interaction of the Hausa, the English and the Arabic in his name. The intercultural interaction is also reflected in Aguyi-Ironsi's name, *Thomas* which means 'twin'. Rather than using the Igbo word for 'twin', *Ejima*, he chooses *Thomas* which is the English equivalent.

Some Nigerian leader's names are toponymic (place names) in nature. Names such as Yar-Adua and Tafawa Balewa are place names. *Yar-Adua* is a name of a location in the Northern Ethiopia, *Tafawa Balewa* is a settlement in Bauchi State, Babangida and Shagari. Additionally, the only evident praise name is that of Obasanjo. *Aremu* means 'one who is pampered to get.' It is safe to say that praise names are peculiar only to the Yoruba culture. Similar to praise names is circumstantial names. Circumstantial names are believed to be names that a child brings from heaven. *Thomas* in Johnson Thomas Umunnakwe Aguyi-Ironsi is a circumstantial name which means 'twin.'

### Conclusions

The study examines the intricate interconnection of religion, culture, and historical influences that shape the naming system of Nigerian leaders. Their names are strongly influenced by Islam and Christianity which is evident in the widespread adoption of the Arabic and biblical names. This demonstrates how faith transcends regional boundaries in the country. Despite the religious influence that cuts across the names of the leaders from varying geo-political zones, individual peculiar cultural traditions remain deeply ingrained in the names; particularly in the Yoruba naming system, where praise names and deity-related names function as expressions of heritage, identity, and spiritual importance. The Northern preference for toponymic names illustrates the enduring significance of place-based identity in the region's socio-cultural phenomenon. In like manner, the Igbo indigenous name reflect their cultural belief such as reincarnation.

Additionally, the study highlights the role of intercultural contacts in Nigerian naming practice. The combination of Arabic, English, and indigenous elements within an individual's name shows the country's history of migration, colonial influences, and religious pluralism. The adoption of destiny/situational names, as seen in the name *Thomas*, reflects deeper traditional beliefs about destiny and birth circumstances. This reinforces the spiritual and cultural dimensions of naming practices in Nigeria.

We may, therefore, conclude that Nigerian names transcend mere identifiers; they function as repositories of history, cultural values, and religion. Thus, through the exposition of the Nigerian presidents' names, this study affirms that naming practices are a testament to Nigeria's complex identity, colonial experience and rich multicultural heritage. As the country navigates its paths forward, ~~continues to grow~~, its unique naming patterns will inevitably remain

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as crucial elements of cultural continuity that reflect the resilience of indigenous traditions within an increasingly globalised environment.

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### Appendix

1. Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (1 October 1957 to 16 January 1966)
2. President Nnamdi Benjamin Azikiwe (1 October 1960 to 16 January 1963)
3. General Johnson Thomas Ummunnakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi (16 January 1966 to 29 July 1966)
4. General Yakubu Dan-Yumma Jack Gowon (1 August 1966 to 29 July 1975)
5. General Murtala Ramat Muhammed (29 July 1975 to 13 February 1976)
6. General Olusegun Mathew Okikiola Ogunboye Aremu Obasanjo (13 February 1976 to 1 October 1979)
7. President Alhaji Shehu Usman Aliyu Shagari (1 October 1979 to 31 December 1983)
8. General Muhammadu Buhari (31 December 1983 to 27 August 1985)
9. General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (27 August 1985 to 26 August 1993)
10. Chief Ernest Adegunle Oladeinde Shonekan (26 August 1993 to 17 November 1993)
11. General Sani Abacha (17 November 1993 to 8 June 1998)
12. General Abdulsalami Abubakar (8 June 1998 to 29 May 1999)
13. President Olusegun Obasanjo (29 May 1999 to 29 May 2007)
14. President Umaru Musa Yar-Adua (29 May 2007 to 5 May 2010)
15. President Goodluck Ebele Azikiwe Jonathan (29 May 2010 to 29 May 2015)
16. President Muhammadu Buhari (29 May 2015 to 29 May 2023)
17. President Bola Ahmed Adekunle Tinubu (Current President)

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- (2024): "From Revitalization to Bastardization towards Attrition", *Reflections on Linguistic-onomastics Inaugural Lecture*. Ede: Redeemer's University Press.
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