

## Article

# 'Refuse Dump, Hurry Up!': A Cognitive Onomastic and Cultural Metaphor Perspective of Nzema Death-Prevention Names

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**Abstract:** African personal names have communicative contents that reflect the experiences and expectations of the name-giver as well as the bearer. Death-prevention names, for instance, provide some assurance and security that are vital for a child's survival, given the implicit assumption that certain spiritual forces are at work. The bestowal of despicable and 'ugly' names on children whose preceding siblings died shortly after birth is also a common practice among the Nzema, aiming at preventing succeeding children from death. This study examines cultural conceptions and metaphorical correlations in Nzema death-prevention names. Using 42 death-prevention names obtained through interviews, the study discusses the implications of the names and their metaphoric connections with the objects used to identify this category of people. The study reveals that features of entities such as *ekpɔtɛ* 'vulture', *nrezenra* 'housefly', *kendene* 'basket', and *fovole* 'refuse dump' are attributed to these children to make them seem 'unpleasant' to the ancestral spirits who are believed to have been snatching them after birth. Other 'long-lasting' entities like *nyevile* 'sea', *bole* 'rock', and *kpɔma* 'walking stick' are used metaphorically to refer to a child with the belief that they would survive right from birth and live long on the earth.

**Keywords:** Nzema; death-prevention names; cultural metaphor; ethno-pragmatics



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## 1. Introduction

Naming is one of the important cultural practices through which many societies demonstrate their cultural values, beliefs and philosophies. In recent times, onomastic research, which generally deals with the study of names and naming practices (Algeo 1992), has increasingly gained scholarly attention. Many researchers have focused on the study of nicknames/personal names (e.g., Ntombela 2019; Abubakari 2020; Owu-Ewie et al. 2021; Mensah and Ndimele 2022), place names (e.g., Matthews 2018; Yankey 2022), church names, the names of institutions (Awukuvi and Israel 2018; Akoto 2023), pet and animal names (see Alqarni 2022; Aziaku 2016; Yakub 2020), and the names of water bodies (Mphasha et al. 2021; Sun and Jiang 2023), among others. Personal naming practices have become part of the core values of human existence (Sekyi-Baidoo 2019; Mensah 2023b). The purpose of this study is to provide an ethno-pragmatic account of death-prevention names among the Nzema, situating the analysis within cognitive onomastics (Reszegi 2023) and cultural conceptual metaphors (Sharifian 2017).

The Nzema are an indigenous Ghanaian ethno-linguistic group (numbering about 342, 090 people) who are situated in the southwest of the Western Region of Ghana, West Africa. Their language is also called Nzema, a Niger–Congo Kwa language (Kwesi 1992). In terms of political demarcation, the Nzema people occupy three Constituencies (Electoral Areas), namely *evaloɛ-Adwɔmɔɔ-Egila*, *ɛɛmgbɛɛ*, and *Dwɔmɔɔ* in the Western Region of Ghana. Many of the Nzema are peasant farmers who also practise trading to supplement their livelihoods. Some also engage in fishing activities, since Nzemaland stretches along the coast (Yakub 2023). The Nzema participate in the House of Chiefs, a system of chieftaincy that is also recognised by the central government. The jurisdictions of the 'paramount

chiefs' and their sub-chiefs are highly respected. Religiously, the Nzema practise Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional Religion. One might notice their traditional belief system through some of their activities and practices such as libation making at marriage and child-naming ceremonies, funerals, and during their *Kundum* festival celebration, among others.

Personal names carry significant interpretations and meanings in African cultures. Scholars (e.g., [Agbedor 1991](#); [Obeng 1998](#); [Agyekum 2006](#); [Mensah 2015](#), among others) have noted that African names, unlike proper names used in the Western world that are sometimes perceived to be meaningless (e.g., [Dixon 1964](#); [Lyons 1977](#)), carry many meanings and are the embodiment of cultural philosophical thought and the reflections of various circumstances surrounding the birth of a person. [Olatunji et al. \(2015\)](#) reaffirm that African names serve as the sociocultural expression and elucidation of self-concept. They add that "names are not just abstract terms couched in indefiniteness; they are more than mere labels, but loaded with meaningful and symbolic connotations" (see [Olatunji et al. 2015](#), p. 74).

African names portray African identity and value systems ([Obeng 1998](#); [Batoma 2009](#); [Mensah and Offong 2013](#); [Sekyi-Baidoo 2019](#); [Mensah 2022](#); [Viriri and Ndimande-Hlongwa 2023](#), among others). As [Ramaeba \(2019, p. 2\)](#) points out, a personal name is an individual's badge of identity in all cultures of the world although the qualities and concepts of the name could vary. [Agbedor \(1991, p. 39\)](#) and [Mensah \(2023b, p. 218\)](#) agree that names are the primary means of identification and a way of individuating or distinguishing members of the society. In the view of [Mensah \(2023b, p. 219\)](#), personal names are the foremost means of constructing social identities. They are used to individuate, reference and address their bearers as unique personalities within a particular society or community of practice. Personal names are also an important means of integrating newly born children into their societies ([Mensah 2023b](#)). This points out that names form an intricate part of culture. Granted that names are inextricably interwoven with the language and culture of a people ([Oweleke 2021](#); [Mensah 2023b](#)), names and naming can be seen as a vehicle to transmit and perpetuate African cultural values and beliefs ([Agyekum 2006](#)). [Mensah \(2015\)](#) and [Mensah and Rowan \(2019\)](#) suggest that names and naming practices have enormous sociocultural, spiritual, and psychological significance in Africa. "Names are believed to have inherent power that can indexicalise lives and behaviours of people either positively or negatively" (see [Mensah 2015, p. 117](#)).

African names are seen to be linked to the spiritual life of a people. Taking the Kusaas<sup>1</sup> traditional context as an example, [Atibiri and Musah \(2022\)](#) maintain that the Kusaas, like most other African cultural groupings, may be strongly spiritual or religious. This is made even more obvious in the kinds of names that are given to children, many of which refer to the nature and essence of the one Supreme Being *Wina'am*, 'God' (see [Atibiri and Musah 2022, p. 53](#)). [Mensah \(2015\)](#) observes that

The conceptualisation of reincarnation is an important element in the cosmological trajectory of African traditional religion. The belief in life after death sanctioned by malevolent spirits is a dominant one in the African cultural and spiritual reality. Cycles of birth between worlds of human and spirit are part of the cultural history that influences the naming practice among African people. In this way, African names are associated with enormous spiritual attachments. ([Mensah 2015, p. 121](#))

Inferring from [Mensah's](#) postulate, one could realise the close connection between African names and the African Traditional belief system. Cross-culturally, death-prevention names, for instance, are believed to link the name-bearer to his/her past, ancestors, and spirituality (see [Obeng 1998](#); [Agyekum 2006](#); [Mensah and Offong 2013](#); [Mensah 2015](#); [Akung and Abang 2019](#); [Mamvura 2021](#); [Jindayu 2022](#); [Abubakari et al. 2023](#), among others). African societies recognise the tension between underworld forces and humans. This mainly results in the bestowal of despicable names on children in order to hide their identities from the underworld spiritual forces and to ensure their survival, as [Mensah](#)

(2023b, p. 220) opines. We will see in this study how the Nzema also demonstrate aspects of their spiritual life and belief system through death-prevention names.

As Mensah (2023b) points out, naming is a culture-specific speech practice. Quite a number of studies on African onomastics, therefore, have employed an ethno-pragmatic approach in examining culturally constitutive ideas and beliefs ingrained in death-prevention names. Obeng's (1998) work on Akan death-prevention names, for instance, focuses on the structural linguistic and pragmatic implications of the names. He provides a socio and ethno-linguistic account of Akan personal names that are used as preventive mechanisms to ensure the survival of children whose preceding siblings died shortly after their birth. The study finds that the ethno-pragmatic readings of Akan death-prevention names depict the lives of both the bearers and the name-givers. Mensah (2015) also adopts the ethno-pragmatic paradigm to discuss Ibibio death-prevention names. He establishes that such names are used to generate and maintain some level of assurance and security that is vital for a name-bearer's survival, given the implicit assumption that spiritual forces are at work. Akung and Abang (2019) use the ethno-pragmatic approach in examining death-prevention names among the Mbube of Nigeria. The study concentrates on the communicative import of the names in terms of ideology, spirituality, and social solidarity among the Mbube. They maintain that naming in the Mbube cultural context portrays deep insights into the relationship between the name-giver and the cultural framework of the Mbube people. The study concludes that Mbube death-prevention names confer honour on both the past (ancestors) and the present (living beings) and serve as symbolic resources that encode deep cultural meanings, construct identity, and reinforce the notion of personhood. Ehineni (2019) explores Yoruba personal names under ethno-pragmatics, showing how these names are formed and their socio-onomastic functions in the Yoruba cultural setting. The author describes Yoruba names as linguistic forms with a deep indexical relationship to sociocultural significations. In another study, Mamvura (2021) investigates death-prevention names among the Karanga people in Zimbabwe within the purview of ethno-pragmatics. In line with Mensah's (2015) observation, Mamvura indicates that death-prevention names serve as a weapon to fight the power of supernatural forces, which are believed to be responsible for the death of children. The study concludes that death-prevention names are not just arbitrary labels but are expressions with larger sociocultural meanings.

Mensah's (2023b) work on animal-related names among the Ibibio and Tiv peoples of Nigeria is rooted in an ethno-pragmatic framework. The study interrogates the motivations for the choice and bestowal of animal names to people in the two cultures. He maintains that in the Ibibio and Tiv cultural contexts, where there are rich faunal experiences, animals are valuable resources in their bio-cultural diversity and are of central concern to the anthropocentric imaginary and contemporary social lives of their societies. He concludes that animal-related personal names may seemingly have little or no connection with the objects they reference but that they have deeper meanings based on Ibibio and Tiv cultural scripts. Similarly, Mensah (2023a) applies the ethno-pragmatic approach to a cross-cultural study of death-related personal names in Nigeria; highlighting the Ibibio, Igbo, and Owe perceptions of death through their onomastics traditions. The author does not focus on the phenomenon of death-prevention names. Instead, he concentrates on parents' opinions and perspectives for bestowing death-based names on children, which are mainly to understand social attitudes and perceptions toward death in the three cultural traditions. From a cultural insider's perspective, the study reveals uniformity in the patterns and locally constitutive significations assigned to death-based names across the three cultures. Mensah concludes that death-related names have cultural semantic implications that are shared cross-linguistically: to acknowledge the inevitability and unpredictability of death, to admit the existence of superior forces that control the affairs of human beings, and to question the temporality of life. These names, therefore, serve as consolatory sites for the expression of grief, tension, and the rebuilding of identity (see Mensah 2023a, p. 1). In another piece of ethno-pragmatic research, Abubakari et al. (2023) examine personal names and naming practices among speakers of Dagbani, Kusaal, Likpakpaanl, and Sisaali, four of the Mabia

(Gur) languages of Northern Ghana. Corroborating previous findings, the authors note that personal names in the Mabia languages are an embodiment of deep cultural anecdotes of, most often, the name-bearer, which allow for the articulation of the cultural norms, belief systems, and values, among other things, of the people through anthroponyms.

Even though research on personal names in general abounds, particularly on death-prevention names across African languages and cultures, it appears that previous works focused largely on the ethno-pragmatic features of the names analysed. A study of Nzema death-prevention names, however, remains empirically unknown. It will be interesting to find out if cultural metaphors and ethno-pragmatic readings are entrenched in Nzema death-prevention names. The current study, thus, aims to fill an essential gap by providing insights into death-prevention names among the Nzema from the viewpoint of cognitive onomastics and cultural metaphors. This perspective will deepen our understanding of culturally constitutive ideas that are conveyed through Nzema death-prevention names. Furthermore, in exploring the pragma-linguistic features of allusive personal names in Nzema, [Yakub \(2023\)](#) contends that onomastic tradition serves as a means to portray the Nzema sociocultural ideologies and lived experiences. The study recommended that future studies on Nzema naming practices investigate the purpose and communicative significance of theophoric names, death-prevention names, nicknames, place names, plant names, pet names, and river names, among others. Such studies, as the author noted, “would be crucial to further deepen our understanding of the naming patterns among the Nzema” ([Yakub 2023](#), p. 54). This observation also serves the need to explore the Nzema death-prevention names in which we are interested here.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The primary data for this ethnographic study consist of 42 death-prevention names ascribed to people in Nzema society, which were obtained during a nine-month period of field data collection in the *evaloe*, *elemgbete*, and *Dwomolo* areas of Nzema. Such names were collected through observations and semi-structured interviews with 30 native participants, selecting 10 people from each area. The participants’ ages range between 19 and 83 years. I interviewed an equal distribution of participants, that is, 6 students, 6 parents, 6 traditional leaders, 6 religious leaders, and 6 teachers. The participants comprise 15 females and 15 males. I selected equal numbers in this regard because both males and females are given death-prevention names (where necessary) in Nzema society. I conducted face-to-face interviews with name-givers/parents and name-bearers to allow for in-depth data collection and a comprehensive understanding of naming among the Nzema. I employed the snowball sampling technique in order to purposively come into contact with the givers and bearers of death-prevention names. In this manner, the participants identified initially were asked to name (and direct me to) other people within the locality on whom death-prevention names had been bestowed. This was crucial, as I could not have easily identified people in the communities who are givers and bearers of death-prevention names. Only those who were interested and willing to take part in the research were interviewed. Importantly, I sought the consent of my participants as a matter of ethics and explained to them the purpose of the interviews. They were also assured of anonymity regarding their names and other identity. This partly boosted their confidence and maximised their cooperation with me to audio-record the interview sessions, using a digital audio recorder.

I met the participants separately in their homes at their convenient hours for the interviews, and each discussion lasted 12–15 min. During the interviews, participants’ socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, educational level, marital status, occupation (socio-economic status), and religious background were also noted. Among the 30 participants, 14 received formal education up to the tertiary level, 10 had secondary education, and 6 had only elementary education. Eighteen (18) of the participants were married, 3 were divorced, 5 were widowed, and the remaining 4 had not married. Regarding their religious beliefs, 6 of them were found to be in Islam, 7 in Christianity, and 17 in

African Traditional Religion<sup>2</sup>. This can have implications for why most of the participants gave their responses by indicating their belief in the lesser gods and water bodies.

The interviews were mainly targeted at understanding the cultural metaphors and ethno-pragmatic readings concealed in the death-prevention names. I interrogated to understand the spiritual aspects of these names, in terms of what parents think about the assumed underworld forces in relation to the death and/or survival of a child. I made ample time to listen to the audio-recorded data over and over again in order to be well acquainted with the recorded information, after which I transcribed and translated the data for analysis. A corpus of 76 names was assembled during the data collection exercise. However, only 42 death-prevention names were sorted from the corpus of names for the analysis in this study. The 42 names were taken because participants explained that their metaphoric correlations and ethno-pragmatic significance were meant for the purpose of death-prevention. The data were categorised based on relevant connected themes and analysed under various subheadings or tropes.

### 3. Theoretical Orientation

The study draws on a combined theoretical approach (cognitive onomastics and cultural metaphors) that offers a holistic analytical tool to guide the analysis of data. Broadly speaking, onomastics deals with the study of names (Algeo 1992). It covers ‘anthroponyms’ (the study of personal names), ‘toponyms’ (the study of place names), ‘ethnonyms’ (names that are used to refer to ethnic groups or tribes), and ‘hydronyms’ (names given to rivers and water bodies) as well as plant names, pet names, company names, brand names, and church names, among others (Algeo and Algeo 2000; Yakub 2020; Akuamah 2021; Akoto 2023). As Reszegi (2023) mentions, cognitive onomastics is a relatively new approach to the study of proper names based on a cognitive approach to language, using the assumptions of cognitive linguistics and other cognitive sciences. It looks at how proper names and different name types exist in the mental system (see Reszegi 2023, p. 1). Algeo and Algeo (2000, p. 265) note that “to name something, as far as human attention goes, is to make it. The unnamed is the unnoticed, and the unnoticed is for cognitive and communicative purposes non-existent”. This claim suggests that an entity that is not named is deemed absent, not captured in human cognition, and so one cannot talk about it. It also points out that human cognitive processes and experiences are fundamental in shaping and understanding the onomastic tradition of a cultural group. This is apparently corroborated by Kileng’a (2020, p. 21) in saying that “people’s language, culture and thought are intimately interwoven”. Dealing with personal (death-prevention) names, this study is inspired by the notion of cognitive onomastics, which provides a conceptual analytical frame to unravel the metaphorical patterns in death-prevention names among the Nzema.

Before I return to a review of Sharifian’s concept of cultural metaphors, which is also intended for this study, it is important to make mention of Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980, 2003) conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) and some other prominent theorists in the cognitive linguistics tradition. Metaphor and metaphoric concepts have been noted to be crucial and pervasive in human daily experiences and communication. In the conceptual metaphor tradition, metaphor is not merely considered a figure of speech used to embellish language use but is seen as a matter of cognition and thought (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1993; Gibbs 1999; Semino 2008; Steen 2011). According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 5), the essence of metaphor is understanding one thing conceptually in terms of another. A central assumption of the cognitive theory of metaphor is the direction of ‘mapping’ from concrete to abstract (Lakoff and Johnson 2003; Kövecses 2006; Diaz-Vera 2022; Dyrmo 2023). Conceptual metaphors typically structure more abstract concepts (target) in terms of more concrete/physical (source) concepts, whereby we are able to understand unfamiliar concepts better (Kövecses 2002). Lakoff (1993, p. 224) uses the metaphoric correlation between journey and love, love is a journey, to aid our understanding of CMT. Lakoff presents love as abstract (target domain) and journey as concrete (source domain). Here,

we can construe lovers as travellers, and the love relationship as a vehicle. Lakoff maintains that travellers in the same vehicle have a common destination, and lovers also have common life goals that they intend to reach (achieve). Challenges encountered by travellers are likened to difficulties in a love relationship (Lakoff 1993, p. 223).

Cultural metaphors (or worldview metaphors), which take significant insights from CMT, are also popularised by Sharifian (2011, 2015, 2017) in his framework of cultural linguistics. Sharifian (2015, p. 482) describes cultural linguistics that is interested in exploring culturally constructed conceptual metaphors as ‘cultural metaphors’. According to Sharifian (2017), cultural linguistics investigates features of language that have a cultural basis. It is a “multidisciplinary area of research that explores the relationship between language, culture, and conceptualisation” (Sharifian 2015, p. 473). Cultural linguistics has benefited from several other disciplines to arrive at a framework best described as cultural cognition and language because it affords an integrated understanding of the notions of ‘cognition’ and ‘culture’, as they relate to language (see Sharifian 2015, p. 476). In other words, this approach to the understanding of language in relation to culture is grounded on the principles of cognitive linguistics (Langacker 1994; Palmer 1996; Sharifian 2017), hence, its applicability for the discussion of cultural perceptions and metaphorical nuances in Nzema death-prevention names.

The analytical framework of cultural linguistics, as Sharifian (2017) observes, provides some useful tools that enable us to examine features of language and the relationship between language and cultural conceptualisations. They include the notions of “cultural schema”, “cultural category”, and “cultural metaphor” (Sharifian 2017, p. 7). Sharifian points out the close relationship between cultural metaphor and the popularly known conceptual metaphor theory initially proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). He explains as follows:

[. . .] very much like *conceptual* metaphors, *cultural* metaphors involve a form of conceptualisation across different domains known as the source domain and the target domain. In more technical terms, we can say that cultural (and conceptual) metaphors are a form of “cross-domain conceptualisation”. (Sharifian 2017, p. 18)

Although the Lakoffian view of conceptual metaphor relates very well to Sharifian’s notion of cultural metaphors in terms of cognitive conceptualisations and cross-domain mappings, Sharifian (2017) rather emphasises an important aspect of cultural metaphors as being fundamentally linked to a culture’s internal perceptions and worldviews. He argues that “for cultural linguistics, however, cultural metaphors are cultural conceptualisations, many of which have their roots in cultural traditions such as folk medicine, ancient religions/worldviews etc.” (see Sharifian 2017, p. 18). This suggests that cultural linguistics and ethno-pragmatics both deal with culture insider perceptions and cultural scripts (Goddard 2006; Goddard and Ye 2015; Wierzbicka 2015). Wierzbicka (2015, p. 339) avers that “cultural scripts are representations of cultural norms which are widely held in a given society and are reflected in language”. The cognitive–metaphoric correlations evidenced in death-prevention names among the Nzema can be said to be culturally constructed. The focus of this study, therefore, is on cultural metaphors, coupled with the cognitive onomastics (and ethno-pragmatic) underpinnings of the names examined herein, in order to fully arrive at a better understanding and interpretation of Nzema death-prevention names. In this study, I show that, based on their cultural environment, experiences, and life trajectories, the Nzema consciously make choices of some ‘long-lasting objects’ and ‘filthy entities’ among others as source domains, which are used as weapons (death-prevention names) against death.

#### 4. Note on Nzema Naming Practices

According to Agyekum (2006, p. 234), names are pointers to people’s ways of life and sociocultural experience and give deep insights into the cultural patterns, beliefs, ideologies, and religion of the people. Ramaeba’s (2019, p. 2) claim that “a name does not exist in isolation, it is a reflection of the society within which it exists”, aptly underscores Agyekum’s

submission. Personal names in Nzema frequently portray the experiences, expectations, and emotions of name-givers (mostly parents) (see [Yakub 2023](#), p. 38). Traditionally, every Nzema child is given two most important kinds of names. The first is the day-of-birth name, known as *ekela duma* ‘name of the soul’. This is a kind of ‘already established’ name bestowed on a person the day he/she is born<sup>3</sup> ([Kwaw 2008a](#)). The second name, given to the child on the eighth day, is known as *sele duma*<sup>4</sup> ‘name given by one’s father’. The Nzema carefully select personal names, as names communicate important family tradition, their religion, and conditions surrounding the birth of a child ([Kwaw 2008a](#), p. 29; [Bisilki 2018](#); [Batoma 2019](#); [Boikanyego and Otlogetswe 2023](#), p. 33). [Possa-Mogoera \(2020\)](#), for instance, observes that in naming a child, the Basotho do not haphazardly pick a name; they pick a name based on the circumstances or for a certain purpose or to name after someone. The belief among the Basotho, like with other African cultures, has always been that when the child grows up, he/she might act according to his/her name (see also [Possa-Mogoera 2023](#), p. 75).

The Nzema also consider many crucial factors and circumstances before naming a child. Aside from the basic day-of-birth names (seen in [Table 1](#)), the Nzema have *awoledianle duma* ‘order-of-birth names’<sup>5</sup> and *erelebule duma* ‘proverbial/insinuating names’ exemplified, respectively, in [Tables 2 and 3](#). They also have *abawuoduale duma* ‘death-prevention names’, the focus of this study which shall be discussed in detail in [Section 5](#). The Nzema, like other African cultures, believe that when a mother suffers constant neonatal deaths, then the reason is that it is the child’s parents or ancestral spirits in the underworld who do not permit the child to stay in the living world. To fight against such an unfortunate situation, the parents give the child a despicable name, aiming at deceiving the underworld parents by making the child seem unattractive. It should be noted that when a child is given a death-prevention name, say *Azelewie* ‘Land is finished’ or *engoko* ‘You will not go again’, that name, due to its spiritual significance, becomes most popular and seen to outwit all the other kinds of names. A death-prevention name is considered special. In essence, a father does not further give any *sele duma* to a child on whom a death-prevention name is bestowed. To a large extent, that ‘special name’ becomes the child’s *sele duma*, as participants mentioned. Even the *ekela duma*, which a child acquires immediately when they are born, normally becomes dormant when the child is later given a death-prevention name.

Unlike day-of-birth names, order-of-birth and proverbial/insinuating names among the Nzema do not appear to make significant gender distinctions. The proverbial names usually communicate parents’ beliefs, experiences, and life trajectories. This category of names can portray the pleasure, satisfaction, and hope of the name-giver. They may also reflect certain discomforts, struggles/conflicts, and other predicaments encountered by the parents before, whilst, and after the child is born. Largely, in the context of hostility, these allusive/proverbial names have targets to whom implicit messages (or insults) are sent and which may best be deduced through implicature (see [Yakub 2023](#)).

**Table 1.** Day-names for male and female children among the Nzema.

Days of the Week	Names	
	Male	Female
Kenlezile (Monday)	<i>Kodwo</i>	<i>Adwoba</i>
Dweke (Tuesday)	<i>Kabenla</i>	<i>Abenlema</i>
Maanle (Wednesday)	<i>Kaku</i>	<i>Akuba</i>
Kule (Thursday)	<i>Koawo</i>	<i>Yaba</i>
Yale (Friday)	<i>Kofi</i>	<i>Afiba</i>
Fole (Saturday)	<i>Koame</i>	<i>Aama</i>
Mole (Sunday)	<i>Koasi</i>	<i>Akasi</i>

Note: Adapted from [Kwaw \(2008a, p. 29\)](#).

**Table 2.** Order-of-birth names among the Nzema.

Order of Birth	[Male/Female Name]
First-born	<i>Belamunli</i>
Second-born	<i>Anwi</i>
Third-born	<i>Anza</i> <sup>6</sup>
Fourth-born	<i>Ndede</i>
Fifth-born	<i>Anlu</i>
Sixth-born	<i>Azia</i>
Seventh-born	<i>Asua</i>
Eighth-born	<i>Nyameke</i>
Nineth-born	<i>Nyɔnra</i>
Tenth-born	<i>Bulu</i> <sup>7</sup>

Note: (Supplied by participants, 24 July 2022).

**Table 3.** Some proverbial/insinuating names among the Nzema.

Name	Standard (Figurative) Meaning [Male/Female]
<i>Bewieka</i>	They have no more comments to make (against me).
<i>ɔnyemenyane</i>	I am not hurt by their deeds/plans against me.
<i>ɛlebieabezewɔ</i>	If you are wealthy, you are recognised as such.
<i>Mekpɔvolekunludwo</i>	My enemy is satisfied/happy (about my mishap).
<i>Wɔmɔseseeyeme</i>	They thought they were causing harm to me.
<i>Nyamenleayea</i>	It is God who makes everything possible.
<i>Nyamenlekyeaɔyia</i>	If God distributes his gifts, it reaches everyone.

Note: Adapted from [Yakub \(2023\)](#) and modified.

## 5. Results: Analysis of Nzema Death-Prevention Names

In this section, Nzema death-prevention names are discussed under metaphor-based and other (non-metaphoric) death-prevention names. The analysis highlights the main features of the names and accentuates the views, opinions, and perspectives of participants in their own words.

### 5.1. Metaphor-Based Death-Prevention Names

The data revealed that some Nzema death-prevention names are metaphor-oriented. This category of survival names is derived from the characteristic features and functions of certain natural and/or artificial objects, as shall be seen in the analysis that follows.

#### 5.1.1. Filth-Related Entities and Places Are Death-Prevention Names

All my informants unanimously agreed that the Nzema construe a surviving child as a filthy entity in the context of death-prevention names. The Nzema bestow some filthy and ‘ugly’ names on newborns based on their worldview metaphors. The worldview metaphors, as [Sharifian \(2017, p. 21\)](#) puts it, are cultural conceptualisations that are part of the speaker’s world. They are real and indisputable beliefs about the world and life. Consider the examples in [Table 4](#):

**Table 4.** Death-prevention names related to filthy entities/places.

Death-Prevention Names	Meaning
1. <i>ekpote</i>	Vulture
2. <i>Nrezenra</i>	Housefly
3. <i>Fovole</i>	Refuse dump
4. <i>Kulaba</i>	Chamber pot
5. <i>Fuazinli</i>	Rag
6. <i>Sane</i>	Broom

Table 4 displays some entities (and places) that are used among the Nzema as personal names for the purpose of combating infant death. The Nzema cultural belief concerning the use of these entities (including some animals) as survival names, as participants reported, is that the assumed underworld spirits would dislike such children and permit their survival. In a study of animal names used as personal names among the Ibibio and Tiv, Mensah (2023b) notes that parents bestow the names of certain animals to their children to project their social, cultural, and religious ideologies, whereas others admire certain specific characteristics of these animals, such as courage/bravery (lions), strength (tigers), resilience (eagles), invincibility (frogs), aggression (crocodiles), and large size (elephants and hippopotamuses). He observes that the desirable features, character, or behaviour of these animals in addition to their actual physical attributes give rise to personal names bestowed on children.

This suggests that the Ibibio and Tiv cultures of Nigeria appropriate animal names and use them as personal names based on certain positive attributions of the animals. Conversely, according to this study, the Nzema use animal names negatively; ‘negatively’ in the sense that the names are despicable, meant to derogate the bearer in order to secure their lives. In a cognitive onomastic sense, the names *ekpote* ‘Vulture’ and *Nrezenra* ‘Housefly’, for instance, are ascribed to children based on the fact that these creatures are construed as ‘dirty’ creatures. Their adoption as names is meant to undermine the name-bearer and make them unattractive to the underworld spirits because these creatures are noted for feeding on carcasses and other stinking objects that are rejected and usually disposed of on the refuse dump<sup>8</sup>. This points to the fact that *fovole* ‘(the) refuse dump’ keeps nothing good or attractive except filthy things, hence, its adoption as a death-prevention name. In talking about the item *kulaba* ‘chamber pot’, the Nzema perceive it strictly as a container for defecating, urinating, and vomiting. Also, *fuazinli* ‘rag’ is often disregarded and may be used as a door mat on which people clean their dirty feet. The *sane* ‘broom’, in spite of its benefit as a symbol of cleanliness (Obeng 1998, p. 176), is perceived among the Nzema as ‘unclean’ because it is used to sweep rubbish and other effluvia deposited on the ground. In cognitive onomastic and cultural conceptual terms, it is the locally constructed perceptions about such entities in Table 4 (as filthy entities) that warrant their ‘appropriation’ as personal names among the Nzema, in this case, for death-prevention. This provides the following specific worldview metaphors: the surviving child is a vulture, the surviving child is a housefly, the surviving child is a refuse dump, the surviving child is a chamber pot, the surviving child is a rag, and the surviving child is a broom. The use of filthy entities and creatures as death-prevention names is also common in many African cultures, such as the following names: *Kyabu* ‘Garbage heap’ (in Konzo, Uganda) (Kahyana 2023); *Mahonye* ‘Maggots’ and *Manyowa* ‘Manure’ (in Karanga, Zimbabwe) (Mamvura 2021); *Nkpó-óbùt* ‘Shameful thing’ and *Mbád idion* ‘Dirty divination’ (in Ibibio, Nigeria) (Mensah 2015); *Ugwunu* ‘Vulture’ and *Okwu* ‘Corpse’ (in Ígálá, Nigeria) (Imoh et al. 2022); *Suminaba* ‘Child of trash’, *Ntomago* ‘Rag’, and *Bonka* ‘Gutter—it stinks’ (in Akan, Ghana) (Obeng 1998); *Tamuli* ‘Refuse dumping-site’ (in Dagbani, Ghana) (Abubakari et al. 2023); *Tapunja* ‘Man of the dump-site’ (in Likpakpaanl, Ghana) (Bisilki 2018); and *Champol* ‘Washroom’ and *Kiyi* ‘Forest’ (in Gonja, Ghana) (Jindayu 2022), among others.

### 5.1.2. 'Disregarded' Items in the Home Are Death-Prevention Names

The data also revealed that the Nzema tend to rather disregard certain useful objects in the kitchen and/or bedroom and use them as personal names for the purpose of death-prevention. Consider the examples in Table 5:

**Table 5.** Domestic items used as death-prevention names.

Death-Prevention Names	Meaning
7. <i>Kendene</i>	Basket (made out of raffia sticks)
8. <i>Kodoku</i>	Sack
9. <i>Buake</i>	Pot
10. <i>Kate</i>	Ladle
11. <i>ekpa</i>	Mat (made out of raffia sticks)

These items are indispensable in the lives of the Nzema. They benefit the Nzema people owing to their socio-economic functions and significance. The Nzema go to the farm holding *kendene* 'baskets' and/or *kodoku* 'sacks' into which they put their foodstuffs and carry them home. The *buake* 'pot' serves as a cooking utensil, used to boil food that provides energy for the Nzema to perform their work. They also keep good drinking water in the pot. The *kate* 'ladle' is equally crucial as it enables them to fetch hot soup. Having returned from the farm and other workplaces and eaten their supper, they rest comfortably on the *ekpa* 'mat'<sup>9</sup>. For the purpose of death-prevention, however, these items are rather deemed worthless and irrelevant and are used as names. Participants noted that the Nzema disregard for these items is premised on the fact that when such items are old and are no longer useful to their owners, they are rejected and thrown on the refuse dump; hence, they tend to be associated with filth. In the context of death-prevention, we can notice the following Nzema cultural metaphors: the surviving child is a useless sack, the surviving child is a useless basket, the surviving child is a useless pot, the surviving child is a useless ladle, and the surviving child is a useless mat. The choice of these items as names is intended to shame the child, and to make them worthless and unattractive to the assumed spirits who are believed to have been responsible for previous neonatal deaths, as participants further explained. By naming the child after any of these objects, the parents acknowledge that they value the child, and yet do not want the child to come into and go out of their lives (see also [Obeng 1998](#), in the case of using items like *waduro* 'mortar', *wɔma* 'pestle', and *praye* 'broom' as death-prevention names among the Akan).

### 5.1.3. Entities in the Natural Environment Are Death-Prevention Names

The names under this category are sourced from some entities believed to exist forever. These have been subcategorised and presented in Tables 6 and 7. Table 6 presents the names of some major rivers in Ghana that run through Nzemaland, including *nyevile* 'the sea'. Table 7 shows other entities believed to be everlasting, and which are also used as death-prevention names. Cognitively, the permanent nature of these entities serves as the **source domain**; used to construe the child as an entity that must continue to survive is the **target domain** ([Lakoff 1993](#); [Steen 2011](#)).

**Table 6.** Water bodies used as death-prevention names.

Object (Death-Prevention Name)	Meaning
12. <i>Nyevile</i>	(The) Sea
13. <i>Amanzule</i>	(The) Amanzule River
14. <i>Tanoë</i>	(The) Tanoë/Tanor River
15. <i>Siane</i>	(The) Siane/Ankobra River

**Table 7.** Other long-lasting objects used as death-prevention names.

Object as Death-Prevention Name	Meaning
16. <i>Kpɔma</i>	(The) Walking stick
17. <i>Bole</i>	(The) Rock
18. <i>Siane</i>	(The) Moon
19. <i>Senzene</i>	(The) Sun

In Table 6, we see a list of water bodies that are permanent. *Nyevile* ‘sea’, for instance, like other major rivers, does not dry up completely although its content may reduce occasionally. Participants noted that, by bestowing the name *Nyevile* on a child, the ‘ever-existing’ nature of the sea is attributed to the child for the purpose of death-prevention. In these examples (in Table 6), one conceptualises the following worldview metaphor: the surviving child is a permanent water body. Probing to know the reason for bestowing the river name *Tanoɛ* on a boy, for example, the name-giver (mother) (aged 42, in ATR) narrated the motivation for the choice of the name as follows:

I encountered neonatal deaths for four consecutive times. Later, when I realised that I had conceived again, I sought spiritual intervention from the traditional priestess who was usually possessed by the god of river *Tanoɛ*, with the intent to making my next baby survive. So, when I delivered safely, the boy was named after the god. Our trust was that, unlike small streams and wells, rivers do not easily dry up even during droughts. Thus, I expected my baby to continue to survive, and truly, it worked out well for me. (Recorded on 15 May 2022)

Among the Akan, [Agyekum \(2006, p. 219\)](#) talks about names of water bodies used as personal names but does not explicitly indicate that such names serve as death-prevention names. He discusses those names rather under ‘anthro-toponyms’, saying that they are names that relate to the place of birth (people who happen to be born close to some water bodies), also referred to as ‘hydronymic-anthroponyms’ by [Obeng \(2001, p. 32\)](#).

From the cognitive onomastic viewpoint, the Nzema death-prevention names displayed in Table 7 are meant to conceptualise the name-bearer as a durable object. This can further generate the following cultural metaphor: the surviving child is a permanent entity. In the olden days, the Nzema obtained walking sticks to aid the movement of their aged ones by cutting a stick from the forest. These sticks lasted a very long time, such that even when the aged person died, their walking sticks were still kept in the room. This has led to the metaphor-based conception that the name *Kpɔma* ‘Walking stick’ can serve as a shield against neonatal death, as a male participant (aged 83, in Christianity) mentioned. The name *Bole* ‘Rock’, is bestowed on a child also because rocks can last for a longer period, giving the following specific cultural metaphor: the surviving child is a rock. In an interview, a male participant (aged 62, in ATR), who had named his daughter *Bole*, gave the following rendition:

You would agree with me that a hard rock does not get rotten. In most water bodies including the sea, rocks are firmly grounded while the waters run over them. It tells us how strong, unmovable and durable rocks are. I named my child *Bole*, so that she would not die after we had lost the first four children, and surely, she survived. (Recorded on 23 March 2022)

Participants observed that the death-prevention names *Siane* ‘Moon’ and *Senzene* ‘Sun’ are used on the basis that these natural entities have existed since creation. Among the Nzema, when the size of the moon becomes very small and eventually ceases to shine, they say *siane ne ewu* ‘the moon is dead’. In a few days, however, the moon reappears and becomes brighter, in which case the Nzema say *siane ne evi bieko* ‘the moon has reappeared’. In Nzema ethno-pragmatics, the latter expression suggests that ‘the moon never dies’. The sun also rises and shines from morning to evening and vanishes at night. The next morning,

it reappears. This familiar experience about these natural objects (moon and sun) is the source domain that is mapped onto the survival of a child in the context of death-prevention among the Nzema, hence, the surviving child is the moon and the surviving child is the sun.

#### 5.1.4. Perceptions about Death Are Death-Prevention Names

A cross-cultural study of death-related personal names in Nigeria, Mensah (2023a) indicates that the Ibibio, Igbo, and Owe peoples use death-related personal names, among other reasons, to acknowledge the inevitability and unpredictability of death. In the Nzema cultural setting, parents’ perceptions about death regarding the survival of a child could be a motivating factor for selecting a death-related name. They believe that death-related names can be used as a weapon against death itself. Usually, such names appear in a truncated form. One would hear a person being simply referred to as *Ewule* ‘Death’. However, participants noted that this category of names rather constitutes complete declarative sentences that communicate the name-givers’ beliefs about death, stressing that what is said to both the child and death works perfectly to ensure the child’s survival. Table 8 presents some death-related names as death-prevention names.

**Table 8.** Perceptions about death as death-prevention names.

Death-Prevention Name	Standard Meaning
20. <i>Ewuleangolawɔ</i>	You have conquered death.
21. <i>Ewuleannwuwɔ</i>	Death could not recognise you.
22. <i>Ewuleenzewɔ</i>	You have nothing to do with death.
23. <i>Ewuleezenwohɔ</i>	Death has bypassed you (and gone away).
24. <i>Ewuleambikyewɔ</i>	Death could not come closer to you.
25. <i>Ewulesulowɔ</i>	Death is afraid of you.
26. <i>Ewule enguloehye</i>	Death does not prefer this child.

In these examples, death is somewhat personified as though it is capable of performing certain human activities. These names embolden the child and provide them with some sort of assurance that they will survive until God ‘invites’ them. The ethno-pragmatic implication of the name *Ewuleangolawɔ* ‘Death could not beat you (You have conquered death)’, for instance, suggests the following metaphoric mapping: a surviving child is invincible. The name is imbued with the following cultural metaphors: to die is to lose a fight against death and to survive is to win a fight against death (see also Yakub and Agyekum 2022). Here, the name-giver conceptualises a battle between death and the child, hoping that death would be on the losing side, while the child lives (wins the battle). Concerning the name *Ewuleannwuwɔ* ‘Death could not recognise you’, a name-giver (female, aged 51, in Islam) explained that the choice of the name, like others, is actually strategic and purposive. It seeks to inform the child to be invisible in the presence of death so that death cannot recognise him/her to snatch him/her away. Here, one sees the following Nzema worldview metaphors: death is a blindfolded enemy and the surviving child is an invisible entity. The following names, *Ewuleenzewɔ* ‘You have nothing to do with death’, *Ewuleezenwohɔ* ‘Death has bypassed you and gone away’, and *Ewuleezenwohɔ* ‘Death could not come closer to you’, are meant to inform both death and the child to go their separate ways; in other words, death should not ‘touch’ the child. As the cognitive onomastic framework assumes, the conceptions of names exist in the mental systems of name-users (Reszegi 2023). Drawing on this assumption, the name *Ewuleezenwohɔ* ‘Death has bypassed you and gone away’, for instance, suggests that the Nzema think of death as a moving object which aims to snatch an innocent person. This points to the following specific worldview metaphors: death is an enemy in motion and the surviving child is a standstill entity. This, according to participants, has the spiritual power and tendency to

grant a child’s survival. In probing to understand the essence of the name *Ewulesulowɔ* ‘Death is afraid of you’, a name-giver (female, aged 46, in ATR) gave the following narration:

My husband and I had suffered persistent infant mortality. We then consulted a traditional priest in a nearby village, and afterwards, I conceived my sixth child and delivered safely. Upon the priest’s advice that certain spiritual forces were responsible for our initial neonatal deaths, we bestowed the name *Ewulesulowɔ* ‘Death is afraid of you’ on the child, and truly, that girl has survived till now. We had the trust that the name could scare death to allow the baby to survive. (Recorded on 10 February 2023)

From the above narration, one realises that the parents’ perception of death generates the following cultural metaphors: death is a cowardly enemy and the surviving child is a brave/fearful entity. Regarding *Ewuleenguloehye* ‘Death does not prefer this child’, a name-giver (male, aged 47, in ATR) said that “we lost three children consecutively, so, my wife and I gave this name to our son immediately he was born. We used the name to deprive death an access to that child’s life, and surely, the boy survived.” Here, the cultural metaphor, the surviving child is an entity rejected by death is noticeable.

### 5.1.5. Slave-Related Names Are Death-Prevention Names

Other death-prevention names were seen to be linked to slavery and its consequences, as exemplified in Table 9:

**Table 9.** Death-prevention names related to slavery.

Death-Prevention Names	Meaning
27. <i>Kanra</i>	Slave
28. <i>Kaya</i>	Carrier of loads

In examples 27 and 28, the surviving child is metaphorically likened to a slave and a carrier of loads, respectively, in order to paint the child as though they are worthless, so as to be spared by the underworld spirits. The Nzema refer to one who is bought from their parents to serve their masters as a *Kanra* ‘Slave’. Such individuals are disregarded because they are not royal members of any clan/family among the Nzema. They are often assigned every herculean and ‘unnecessary’ task to accomplish under strict supervision. Since every *Kanra* was undermined, the term was adopted as a death-prevention name. *Kaya* means ‘Carrier of loads’. One may hear a Nzema person commenting that *Gyakyi ye edweke, na Kayanli ɔdaye ke eye ye e?* ‘Never mind him/her, what are you taking a carrier of loads for? The ethno-pragmatic implication of this expression suggests that such people are not respected even though they render important services to people, especially to strangers and commuters. Agyekum (2006, p. 221) also indicates, in the case of the Akan people, that such death-prevention names may be nasty names for migrant labourers like *Kaya* ‘Carrier of loads’ and *Dɔnkɔ* ‘Slave’.

### 5.2. Other Death-Prevention Names

Nzema death-prevention names may not necessarily be metaphorical. These names appear in the declarative and imperative moods, examined in Tables 10 and 11, respectively.

**Table 10.** Names that seek to assure the child of survival.

Death-Prevention Name	Standard (Figurative) Meaning
29. <i>Azelewie</i>	Land (for burial) is exhausted.
30. <i>Kumaewie</i>	There is no grave (for burial)
31. <i>Taboawie</i>	Wood (for coffin and burial) is exhausted.

**Table 10.** *Cont.*

Death-Prevention Name	Standard (Figurative) Meaning
32. <i>Bewiekɔ</i>	A return to the underworld is ceased.
33. <i>engɔko</i>	You cannot go to the underworld again.
34. <i>Aleeyefe</i>	You must survive to eat delicious food.
35. <i>Debieenleebolɔ</i>	One does not enjoy anything in the grave.
36. <i>embanaɛngɔ</i>	You have come and will not return.
37. <i>Beanzoawɔ</i>	You have not been sent on a mission.

**Table 11.** Names that instruct the child to survive.

Death-Prevention Name	Standard Meaning
38. <i>Ba-denlaaze</i>	Come and be seated (here)
39. <i>Ba-bokayɛɛwɔ</i>	Come and join us (here).
40. <i>Ka-ɛke</i>	Remain here (with us).
41. <i>Mma-sia</i>	Do not return (to the underworld).
42. <i>Mma-toabe</i>	Do not follow the spirits to the underworld.

### 5.2.1. Names That Implicitly Assure the Child of Survival

The death-prevention names in Table 10, except for example 36, are structurally simple sentences. They are rendered in the declarative mood, which provides some sort of information (Kwaw 2008b). Participants agreed that this category of names is presumed to convey messages of cultural truism; pointing to the need for the newborn baby to survive. The ethno-pragmatic implications of the names in examples 29–31, for instance, inform the child not to die because their parents would not obtain such resources as land and a (wood) coffin to bury them. The ethno-pragmatic readings of examples 32 and 33 suggest that the previous children who died have now ‘blocked’ the way back to the cemetery; hence, the child is informed that they have no opportunity to return to the underworld. In examples 34 and 35, the child is told to survive because, unlike the spiritual underworld, which has nothing to offer a person, the physical world has better things including delicious foods that ensure a joyful life; hence, the child needs to stay and eat delicious food. Similarly, among the Akan, Agyekum (2006) gives the death-prevention name *Dinkyene* ‘(Stay and) eat salt’. This shows a part-for-whole metonymy (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, p. 36; Cruse 2011, p. 257), where salt (only one part of the numerous ingredients) is mentioned to stand for all kinds of cooked foods that the child is expected to survive and enjoy. The name in example 36 rather manifests as a compound sentence structure, which spells out to the child the parents’ (and the Nzema) culturally constitutive belief that ‘whoever is born into the physical world becomes stuck and has no right to return’. Concerning the name in example 37, a female participant (aged 61, in ATR) explained the ethno-pragmatic implications as follows:

The Nzema believe that children who die shortly after birth have underworld parents who send them on an errand. They send them to come and take some items from the living world and return to their spiritual parents. The name *Beanzoawɔ* tells the child that nobody has sent them on a mission, and so they have no message to go back to deliver to anyone. This can ensure a child’s survival. (Recorded on 15 September 2022)

### 5.2.2. Names That Instruct the Child to Live

These are names in the imperative mood that command the newborn to survive. The illocutionary acts produced through this category of names suggest some sort of invitation,

requesting the child to stay with their parents and other living beings in the physical world. Take the examples illustrated in Table 11.

The names in examples 38–42 seek to command the child to resist any attempt by the underworld spirits to take them away; in other words, the child must stay with their parents (and other people) in the living world. The names in examples 41 and 42 specifically employ the Nzema negative imperative morpheme {*mma-*} ‘do not’. This reinforces the instruction given to the child not to leave their real parents for the underworld.

## 6. Discussion of Findings, Conclusion and Future Direction

Working within the theoretical lens of cultural metaphors and cognitive onomastics, this study has examined cultural conceptions and beliefs embedded in death-prevention names among the Nzema of Ghana. The study revealed that the Nzema, like many other West African cultures, bestow certain weird names such as *Fovole* “Refuse dump”, *ekpote* “Vulture”, *Nrezenra* “Housefly”, *Kulaba* “Chamber pot”, and *Sane* “Broom” on children to make them seem ‘unpleasant’ to the ancestral spirits who are believed to have been snatching them after birth. This is premised on the Nzema worldview that these entities are strongly associated with filth. We noted through interviews with participants that, in order for the underworld spirits to dislike the child and permit their survival, their names must sound ‘displeasing’ even in the ears of the living beings. Other domestic objects including *Kendene* “Basket”, *Buake* “Pot”, *Kate* “Ladle” *ekpa* “Mat”, and *Kodoku* “Sack” were seen to be bestowed on children for the purpose of death-prevention. The study established that these domestic objects, though indispensable in the daily lives and activities of the Nzema, are rather deemed worthless and are used to refer to a person to secure their lives. We found out that the Nzema also use death-prevention names like *Nyevile* “Sea”, *Bole* “Rock”, and *Kpoma* “Walking stick”. Based on the Nzema cultural metaphors, the everlasting nature of these entities is attributed to the named child, so that they would survive and stay very long in the living world. One of the most intriguing observations was that DEATH itself, though intended to be prevented against the lives of some infants, can feature as part of some Nzema death-prevention names based on the perceptions of the name-giver. Another interesting finding is that some death-prevention names are structurally simple sentences in the declarative mood. This category of names informs the child to survive because certain resources needed for burial are assumed to be non-existent. So, when they die, their bodies would be left to the prey of some carnivorous animals. Other names are rendered in the imperative mood, which seek to instruct the child to survive.

We observed that Nzema death-prevention names give ethno-pragmatic meanings by expressing the cultural ideologies of the people. The traditionally held Nzema beliefs about death-prevention names are that such names are a means to hide the identity of the name-bearer and can deceive the spiritual forces that the child is worthless since he/she has been given a derogatory name by the biological parents. The ethno-pragmatic understanding here is that such a rejection gives the motivation for the child to be permitted to survive. Other death-prevention names instruct the bearer and inform them about the benefits of life, pointing out to them the dooms of returning to the underworld. The study concludes that, like many African cultures, death-prevention names in Nzema are pointers to the Nzema sociocultural experience and social universe which provide deep insights into their cultural patterns, beliefs, language, and spirituality. In this study, I argue that a better understanding and interpretation derived from Nzema death-prevention names is dependent on the sociocultural contexts, belief systems, conceptualisations, and worldviews of the people.

In my interactions with the interviewees, some tried to indicate that they appreciate such death-prevention names, whereas others attempted to show their disdain for such despicable names, pointing out that they were sometimes ridiculed and stigmatised. Though such information appeared insightful, a major limitation of the study is that I have not dealt with name-bearers’ opinions and perspectives regarding their death-prevention names, given the limited scope of this study. Future studies, therefore, could interrogate how

bearers of death-prevention names may either appreciate their names or regret having been given such names, since a ‘bad name’ stigmatises and can also lead to low self-esteem and harm to the bearer, as [Possa-Mogoera \(2020, 2023\)](#) mentions.

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**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The Ethics Committee or Institutional Review Board approval is waived as all information about the participants (including their names) have been entirely anonymised. The participants have further agreed and signed the Consent Form.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to ethical reasons.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kusaas is the name of an ethnic group found in the Upper East Region of Ghana. Their language, a Mabia (Gur) language, is called Kusaal.
- <sup>2</sup> Henceforth, African Traditional Religion is abbreviated as ATR.
- <sup>3</sup> As culture demands, as soon as the baby drops out of the womb, the midwife ‘welcomes’ it into the society by mentioning the *ekela duma* ‘name of the soul’, for instance, *Koasi* (a boy born on Sunday) or *Afiba* (a girl born on Friday).
- <sup>4</sup> In this category of names, a father has the prerogative to select any name used by his kinsmen or ancestors. He could decide to name his child after his own father, his father’s brother or sister, his maternal uncle, his grandparents, etc. A father may name his child after a benevolent friend or any famous person in the society who is morally upright. Preferably, the man must decide together with his wife on the choice of the name.
- <sup>5</sup> These names are also culturally fixed and are strictly based on the counting position a child occupies in terms of the number of births a woman could have. It should, however, be stated that *awoledianke duma* may only supplement the two (most important) kinds of names, *ekela duma* and *sele duma*.
- <sup>6</sup> When the parents have their first, second, and third children all males, the third-born (male) is called *Mieza*. When females also follow in that order, the third-born (female) is called *Manza*, as participants reported.
- <sup>7</sup> Some of the names in this category are closely linked to the numeral (counting) system of Nzema. Ten (10), for instance, is known as *Bulu*, which is rightly used as the order-of-birth name for a tenth-born (*Bulu*). Two (2), Three (3), Six (6), and Seven (7) are likewise known as *Nwiɔ*, *Nsa*, *Nsia*, and *Nsuu*, which are used as the order-of-birth names for the second-born (*Anwi*), third-born (*Anza*), sixth-born (*Azia*), and seventh-born (*Asua*), respectively (with some slight phonetic/phonological changes).
- <sup>8</sup> Even though no person would normally entertain stinking and dirty environments, filth-related names are used in most African cultures, including the Nzema people, for the purpose of death-prevention.
- <sup>9</sup> In contemporary Nzema society, *ekpa* ‘mat’ does not only refer to those made out of raffia sticks but also applies to proper mattresses.

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