

IDEOLOGIES OF WOMEN'S NAMES AMONG THE NSO' OF CAMEROON

A Contribution to the Philosophy of Naming, Decolonization and Gender¹

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ABSTRACT. This article deals with the impact of colonialism on culture, as exemplified by women's names among the Nso' of Cameroon, a strongly hierarchical society with a complex pattern of social organization. The affirmation of local identity and the defiance of cultural erosion through colonialism is brought out by the author's refusal to offer an abstract and key words unless in the Nso' language. The mechanisms of this erosion are studied in the first part of the article, with a rich inventory of the items of material culture, and the associated lexical items, involved. A contradictory effect has been that European and mission-derived names have been greatly en vogue among the Nso'. The church-related dynamics of this phenomenon is closely studied by the author, with special emphasis on women, and contrasted with the intricacies of the historic Nso' system of personal names.

KEY WORDS. Cameroon, Christian missions, church, cultural erosion, European, impact of colonialism on culture, lexical items, material culture, naming system (historical), Nso', personal names, social organization, women, words

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Yír sé vikìy seé Liì Nso' si dzè jeéy fo sé aliì veé wòŋ símó' sí. Á kù yii yám shu yír sé vikìy é Liì Nso' réŋrèŋ moo yír sé vilum. Kóy vilum wùn à kóy vikìyí yii táti wún kfàn ji kifá kimò'ón e Liì Nso'. Nso' yii dzè'èr Fon, á dzè'èr Yaà. Atàrla' Nso'o kù yii kér sa wán woo wíy woó la' wùmò' wo

¹ Our abstract in Lam Nso' instead of the usual English or French versions is intentional. It is a corollary of some of our contentions in favour of the initial practical use of African / Cameroon languages in scholarly Journals and reviews. However, our main contention is, therefore, that the time is now ripe for Africanists and African scholars writing in European languages to present at least an abstract in the languages of the peoples who are directly concerned with their research findings. In this way, instead of speaking as it were behind Africa's / Cameroon's languages, we can sound the opinions of those directly living within and experiencing their cultures mainly through the use of African / Cameroon languages.

á yii lóo dzè'èr áwune á lèm. Nso' yii shurì yír sé wón nyù y à vee vilume, à vee vikíyí rénréñ sikweè sikweè: Lúkòñ, Tàatà, ñgón wùn à Túkòv fo vilum mbìv; Bìy, Sheè, Ntàn, wùn à Kfǎkfǎ fo vikíy mbìv.

Yii bèy, a Liì vitum ve Bàrà' wiy ne a sùm Nso' sùmen e yír sí. Nso' yò' dzè shó ashàr ve á sí laysin Liì Nso' woo kùm yír sé vikíy. Wánlè wíy lóo dù lán e lum vé lav, wù nèn a mà'ày yír ré má'ayin, a li a dzè yé lum vè ji dzè á ndzè yee lèn. Nso'-oò kì kév jii, lùmèn wùn wiiy vè kù yii kér a yír sév wír adzè. Á yii lóo tooví wón bo lum wùn wiiy vè bóñrí e kòóy yír se fíy si e sè Taàlúkòñ kìn Yeèlúkòñ fo wan wo mbìy kì dzèèn lumen, Taàbìy kìn Yeèbìy fo wan wo mbìy kì dzèèn wíy. Kin kì din ji yii yám yii wón é liì Nso' e ghan símó' sí é bo wíy wáa kuvsín yír ré. Liì vitum ve Bàrà' wiy ne a yii moo ji wù waà shem a Liì Nso' woo shooy bèy. Wánlè wíy lo lán wù nèn a biimé a dzè yír tàr wov cá'cá'. M lòo suñnén e fèn, a dzèr ji Nso' sà ta' a mà'ày Liì Nso' woo ben má'ayin á! A Bàrà'-aà wiy e vífá vi moo mbàm sév, cíwàr wóv, ñwà' wóv, ñgar wov, wùn à kintam kév kí, bo bó yò' dzè ji Nso' yò'-oò waà sí bunrì, ma' rér, fer vinyo vév é njà kimfèr, yii wáy, kúr vífám vév. Shií wo mbìy dzè ji Nso' wàa leéy e sàyrí ji sà bòñ kaá, e bóo a bì'nèn Liì vitum ve Bàrà' bí'nen (taaka kinyo kee kùm yír sé vikíy), là kwa'tì!

Sàñ: Bónaasu Tanla Kishaane

Introduction

In a way similar to the Fondoms in the Cameroon Grassfields, the Fondom of Nso' in today's Cameroon boasts a longstanding authority. The latter is woven from pre-colonial times by the Nso' people and vested in the hands of the Fon (King) and the *Atarla'* (Nobles). the Fondom of Nso' is significantly marked by its culturally distinctive, localized patrilineal, and, spatially mixed, but identifiable matrilineal units. But, beginning with the trauma of colonialism which was earlier preceded by the plague of the Transatlantic Slave Trade there has been a continuous interaction between these centuries-old units of indigenous Nso' / African culture and the influential European colonial and neo-colonial institutions of a wider-range of political power. To judge from the practical ambitions of their agents and goals of their institutions, these Western European colonial and neo-colonial powers have always been anxious to implant a different cultural dynamism rather than to empower and promote the ones they found already developed there. Moreover, the foreign character of the European powers and cultural systems rarely shared the same common interests with their African local counterparts.

As a result, Western colonialism or neo-colonialism and African local

cultures compete for separate goals of cultural interest in terms of the names of individual peoples, places, and countries. Our interest here cannot, completely avoid those issues of cultural misunderstanding and conflict which result from the pursuit of these separate goals. For, all African names and the cultural values they confer, arise from, depict and reflect a variety of cultural origins from both inside and outside Africa, even if they tend at times to call some of their conflicting choices and practical uses into question.

By relying mainly on their locally contextual and cultural origins, this essay presents an insider's point of view which can account for a better understanding of women's naming systems among the Nso' from the pre-colonial era to the period of African independence. In other words, Western European colonialism and African / Nso' cultures constitute the entire corpus from which we can choose and determine some of our main interests and goals. Africa as represented by the ethnic traditions of its peoples and Europe as experienced in Africa through the tentacles of its colonization, spreading along with the Transatlantic Slave Trade into the American continent will constitute our main focus, as we interrogate them all in an attempt to gain inspiration for a better comprehension of the ideologies of naming among human communities. Our emphasis on women's names and naming systems as cultural values aims at reflecting both the cultural experiences of Nso' women and the cultural network of the entire Nso' ethnic group. Our study of Nso' women's names cannot be carried out in isolation from the study of the Nso' men's names, since the Nso' themselves are ever culturally self-conscious of their complementary roles as men and women, in general, and in fact, also manifest this self-consciousness through their naming systems.

Ambiguous Tools of Colonization

It is important to find out why and how Western European colonization interacted with African ethnic cultures in a way that ambiguously rendered it simultaneously contestable and acceptable, especially as this can enable us to have a balanced view of its contributions as regards African naming systems and names. The conflict within and the resistance against Western

European colonization, which arose essentially from its inhuman principles, corollaries, and assumptions in relation to Africa, had their repercussions in the African naming systems. For, according to scholars and thinkers like Aimé Césaire, author of *Discourse on Colonialism (Discours sur le Colonialisme)*, one of the best representational equations for European colonization was the historically shameful ‘equation: colonization = thingification’,² whereby Africans were arbitrarily forfeited their rights to name even themselves independently of the languages of colonial European powers. This meant that the essential cultural differences between the Western powers and their more numerous African counterparts were quite often wrongly presented in terms of a sheer power struggle. For, it is still important to note that, contrary to the aspirations of the local units of culture and power, the colonial Western powers though numerically smaller, kept to their already propounded wrong principles as well as to the colonizing directives of their own politically misguided intentions.

In fact, Western European colonialism from its early stages gradually made inroads into the most receded hinterlands of Africa through its practical use of, and faith in the strength of its ‘Five C’s’: its *coin*, its *cannon / gun*, its *cross*, its *cloth / flag* and its *crayon* or *computerizing pen*.³ All of these human-made instruments enabled European colonialists to sap and drain Africans of their identity including their names and naming systems, thus treating them as if they were things or merchandise, but not human beings. Historically, even before the actual official colonization with European flags began to partition and name Africa and Africans, country by country, according to the corresponding names of their Western European colonial powers in the Berlin Conference of 1884, these ambiguous magnetic elements of attraction and repulsion had been inseparably employed by European explorers, adventurers and missionaries to promote by various violent means what later became known and defined as the *mission civilisatrice* of the European colonial task or mission to civilize African men, women and children by depriving them among other things of their rights to name and to be named in accordance with African cultural traditions.

² In Eze 1998: 226.

³ A pun on the English expression concerning the so-called three R’s in primary education: *wRiting, Reading, and aRithmetic*.

As barbaric and obnoxious as this was, it was rare even to find groups of Africans who could present a common front of resistance against such odious intentions. The immediate concern of Western European colonization in Africa was neither the task of nation building nor that of consolidating existent and contesting African nations. The European colonial enterprise employed various strategies to rename (call it 'baptize'), destroy, plunder, denigrate and enslave Africans and Africa itself. Nation-building would have given every African an identity or citizenship in nations of their own in the same manner that any consolidation of pre-existing African Ethnic States would have done. Consequently, with their own instrumental agents of the *mission civilisatrice*, Western European powers set out to subdue and usurp Africans in every cultural domain of their rights to name even themselves. Their naming systems and names were ignored, contested, and downgraded as inferior to those of their Western European counterparts, which they were more than encouraged psychologically to use or to embrace in the original Latin meaning of grabbing a hold of something with both arms. So, to judge from the devastating cultural havoc which the introduction of these elements generally caused to African names of women, children and men, as well as to other cultural aspects of human life in Africa, one can only wonder how Africans successfully resisted and withstood such a high degree of an unprecedented cultural trauma.

For, the assumptions of the colonial *mission civilisatrice* were licentiously imposed on Africans as if Africans had only learned about *commerce* (the *coin*), *religion* (the *cross*), *warfare* (the *cannon* or the *gun*), *government* (the *clothe* or the *flag*), and *education* (the *crayon* or the *computerizing pen*) from their cultural contact with the European colonial powers. Actually, the *mission civilisatrice* gave Europeans, as it were, the unquestionable right not only to name, but also to plunder, wage wars, and, as Aimé Césaire puts it, *thingify Africans*, if not through a barbaric, at least through an inhumanly atrocious and unprecedented colonizing mission. As we know, in the course of the execution of *this mission civilisatrice*, the Western European powers introduced several colonizing systems: a *commercial system* in which African men and women and children could be bought and sold at will by Europeans with European money. Africans during the Transatlantic Slave Trade were often arbitrarily given names of the ships which transported them as slaves from Africa, the names of those Europeans who bought and sold them

under the name of ‘slave masters’ or otherwise, and even the names of the prices paid to procure them as slaves... in replacement and defilement of their African languages in general, and their African names and naming systems in particular. According to the 1854 *Polyglotta Africana* of Rev. Sigismund Koelle of the *Church Missionary Society*, the only spokesman out of the presently known *five slaves of Nso’ origin*, resident in *Free Town (Sierra Leone)* by 1840 was ironically identified and named, Robert *Shilling*.

Along with this kind of commercial colonial system *a new religious system* was also introduced marked by the sign of the cross and the notion of being believers (Christians) and non-believers (who identified themselves more as ‘home-keepers’ than as the so called Pagans) to the same creating God; *a new system of warfare* whereby European captors systematically nullified both the humanity and the names of their African captives whom they transferred abusively like commodities away from the cultural roots of Africa; *a system of government* in which the roots of the rivalry between local African and foreign European originated cultural administrative styles began to grow and deepen; and finally *a partial and imported system of education* whereby Africans were obliged to abandon their past – already stigmatized as devoid of history and therefore, uncivilized, unlettered and unworthy to rely upon – simply because knowledge of the ‘oraural’ past (i.e. an already spoken and heard past whose forte was the conversational use of the sense of hearing, functioning day and night, more than the use of the sense of sight, functioning only where there is light) of Africans (Kishani 2001), could only afford to promote a recollection of the past rather than its memory.

Aimé Césaire perhaps best summarizes some of our ideas here when he writes without any shades of rhetoric:

‘What, fundamentally, is colonization? To agree on what it is not neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law. To admit once and for all, without flinching at the consequences, that the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies... the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest ‘equation Christianity = civilization, paganism = savagery, from which could but ensue abominable colonialist

and racist consequences, whose victims were to be the Indians, the yellow peoples and the Negroes' (Discourse on Colonialism in E. Chukwudi Eze: 1998 p. 222).

These facts become more evident in our examination of women's names among the Nso' of Cameroon or from similar research studies. Colonial powers, in exporting their cargoes to establish themselves among Indians, Japanese and Africans, have always surprisingly prided themselves in the fruits of their *coin* (Economy / Commerce), their *cross* (varieties of Christian religions), their *constitutional clothe / flag* (Government – Administration), their *cannon / gun* (Warfare – Empires – Industrialization – Science) and their *crayon or computerizing pen* (Education – Alphabetical Writing – Technological know-how – Philosophy), in a way indigenous cultures neither admittedly did nor knew. By considering these latter more as faithful messengers or agents for achieving their own colonial cultural goals than as culturally able human partners and / or competitors, colonial European powers instead prepared their own 'boomerang effect of colonization.'

Yet, mindful of its aftermath, this attitude which historically and contextually initiated and attached a certain degree of human superiority complex to the Western European violation of cultures is what we would like to refer to here as the *colonial mentality* of which the *mission civilisatrice* was ever its shadow and best form of application. For, beginning with "the Assimilados", "the Been-tos", "the Évolués", "the Saros", "the White-man-black-man", etc., who have been identified, known and referred to in the relevant African Literature and oraurality on the subject as "the first fruits of Western European Colonialism", or "the first generation of Westernized / colonized Africans", this *colonial mentality* traumatized, plundered and deprived Africans of every right to live with any form of human dignity, especially in matters concerning names and naming systems.

In the name of its *mission civilisatrice*, colonial mentality did more than merely denying the cultures of Africans. In fact, based as it was on the denial of the humanity of Black men, women and children, colonial mentality allowed Europeans to sell and buy Africans at will with currency as if they were commodities . Thus, forced to conjugate their own physical lives as an etymological biological verb of denigration, Africans were expectantly believed to become more docile and blind to the atrocities of the *mission civilisatrice*.

As a matter of fact, the agents of the *mission civilisatrice* really had no essential interest in understanding specific African systems of culture like the Nso' progressive naming system, which we shall explain later on in this article. Such specific cultural systems were only obstacles to the Western apparently static naming systems which the power of the colonial pen was eager to impose and implant in a somehow permanent way in Africa as a means of civilizing whatever was not yet subject to its invading colonial principles and assumptions. Actually, as it is evidently illustrated by the names of most African Christians, numerous Africans were influenced to take European names, which later seemed to mark them as militants in favour of the *colonial mentality* rather than as able competitors or rivals. In other words, any continuous and exclusive use of African names in themselves constituted a real challenge to the European colonial enterprise.

Not only was it the order of the day for the slave men, women and children to be obliged to forsake their African names, but ever since the advent of European colonialism in Africa, the Nso' like most African ethnic groups were more or less either given or cajoled to take Western European names simply as a sign that they had embraced the Christian European road to civilization. Today, contrary to expectations, such a historically passive involvement in the choice of their Western European names prevents any researcher from adequately determining an African's real sympathy for the choice of some names which were introduced by those historical Westernized colonial and neo-colonial institutions of power. For, there were times when the European *colonial mentality* seemed to have triumphed and established itself, politically and culturally in relation to the choice of the names of African men and women, in general, and Nso' men and women, in particular, so that it soon appeared normal to equate Christianity with having a European name.

This African / Nso' euphoria in favour of European names triggered by the religious interests of a pioneering African / Nso' Christianity which made it fashionable more or less for some Nso' men and women to arbitrarily choose and use European originated names, often revealed its weak and porous assumptions in the choice of names whose historical and contextual meanings were clear neither to the name-givers nor to the name-bearers of African / Nso' origin. The choice of such European names like *Hitler* and *Napoleon* can speak for themselves. But there have also been times, for ex-

ample, around the 1970s following the maiden historic visit of Pope Paul VI (June 21, 1963 – August 6, 1978) alias *Giovanni Battista Montini (1897-1978)* to Africa South of the Sahara in 1969, precisely to Kampala and actually on the same day that *Neil Alden Armstrong*, the first American astronaut to have walked on the moon was achieving his own feat, when it was quite fashionable for Nso' / African Catholics in particular to have recourse to a choice of Christian names from such names of the Ugandan martyrs like *Kagwa, Kisito, Luanga*, etc., instead of choosing a Christian baptismal name as a rule only from some of the European-culture based set of Christian names. And although the choice would have led to a kind of collaborative renewal and homecoming on their part, Nso' / African women do not seem to have joined hands with Nso' / African men in the practical use of such names like *Kagwa, Kisito* or *Luanga* in spite of the African basis of these names.

Could this have been due to the fact that most of the Ugandan Martyrs were men? Can one predict that an era will come in this Third Millennium when men and women from the Western World will initiate a change by choosing and using African names voluntarily and indiscriminately for themselves and their children? Whatever might be the case, since no sheer remorseful stain cleaner is really capable of effacing the already more than once historically disfigured, downtrodden and downgraded African's body marked by the shameful colonial acts of inhuman abuses and insults, humiliation, and genocide, it is necessary to liberate Africans from the colonial mentality which still dominates their main choice of Christian names thereby limiting it more often as a rule everywhere in Africa only to the names of Semitic and European colonial origin. Perhaps, by also choosing eventually to use African names in the future, both men and women, Christians or otherwise, from the Western countries might discover more comprehensive ideas for the re-formulation of their own religious systems and thus assist indirectly in eliminating the still haunting colonial prejudice against the naming systems and names of Africans in general. After all, once we perceive a universality that is simultaneously and equally enriched by its particularity, it becomes obvious that 'in conclusion, universality resides in this decision to recognize and accept the reciprocal relativism of different cultures, once the colonial status is irreversibly excluded' (Frantz Fanon in Eze 1998: 310).

An African Complex for European Values

In fact, the truth is that, on account of the colonial premium of a superiority complex attached to Western European names, even at the beginning of Christianity in Nso' not a few Nso' people gave themselves Christian names before they actually became Christians, while some of those who became Christians took names which tended to betray rather than to portray to a certain degree their limited acquaintance with the meanings of their chosen Christian names. To have chosen, for an example, a name like *Peter Ñgò'* / *Peter Tíydzéé* portrays either a repetition or a reduplication since *Ñgò'* in Lamnso' means rock which the name *Peter* stands for, and *Tíydzéé* signifies the rocky / stony road through which every pilgrim on earth goes.

Some Nso' people including women on the other hand successively attended various denominational Christian churches for curiosity's sake and acquired names, which never became permanent due to the fact that they were soon disgusted with the very practice of Christian religious churchgoing. In this way, some of the Nso' have only reluctantly submitted to the exigencies of the *mission civilisatrice*, although from the beginning they were not less divided and dissuaded in time and in space by some of the motivations and ideologies underlying Christian beliefs and naming systems than were most Africans in other parts of Africa. Actually, depending on the era, the European-originated *cuius regio, eius et religio* principle that equally affected some Nso' villages as other parts of Africa, was not only resisted and challenged, but also at times entirely rejected on account of the foreign nature of its cultural history.

Moreover, since the Nso' like most Africans inserted religion into their daily public lives, thereby manifesting a different cultural approach to religion, Western European segregated and compartmentalized Christian Churchgoing was in almost every aspect of it, alien. Even within a particular denomination like that of Catholic churchgoers, the same women's name could acquire, if not a multiplicity of pronunciation, at least a significant variety of different meanings which were not always orthodox to Catholicism. For example, the English language name, *Mary*, pronounced *Meèri* was indicative of, and most often used by a scholar in the then 'Shisong Girls' School, ' which its Lamnso' version of *Maària* was equally indicative

of, and used by, an elderly Catholic lady in some Nso' villages like Shisoñ, Ñkar, Kimbo', Kiyán, Kitiwum, Sov, Mbam-Ndzéàvru', Meluv, Memfu, Jotin, or Mbo'ntsém which first welcomed the Catholic Faith in the Nso' region. The same name became *Miriaya* / *m* among the Basel / Presbyterian Churchgoers in the Nso' villages of Kishooñ, Kiyán, Nsé' or Mantum-Mbiame, even if these Presbyterians had the impression at times of using only a name from the Old Testament.

It is however interesting to note that while some of our informants disputed the idea, others simply suggested that the Islamic name *Mayrama*, is still a version of the same name which surfaced with the advent of an increasing number of Nso' Islamic Churchgoers in the early 1950s. This means that like

'the missionaries who were largely responsible for spreading the use of the European colonial languages, which created a demand for people educated and able to communicate in them (...) (as) the most important tie which later bound the independent African nations to their former colonizers economically, socially and politically' (Karen Jenkins in Sandberg 1994: 86),

early Nso' Churchgoers constituted linguistically and culturally a bridge between Nso' / African religions and Christianity. As such, this bridge served at identifying to suppress or make use of areas of both cultural obstacles or inroads to Christianity, if not to the *mission civilisatrice* as a whole.

There was room, therefore, for what could be orthodox or not from the religious points of view of both the Western Christian religions and the African cultural religions. For this reason, the initial stage of the religious acculturation of Nso' Christians was reassuring since Nso' culture was seen to be inter-playing with Christian ideas. This is significantly revealing since contextually a woman's Christian name like *Mary* was not only linguistically and religiously pregnant with meaning, but also had a corresponding *Yír Nso' yee fó la'* (a Nso' homestead name) together with which it constituted a Nso' Christian's full names as well as a richer source of related cultural information. For an example, to the extent that both names were written in a Christian Register or in a Christian Baptism Card, while the daily usage of the names expressed and reflected their oraural values in this that they were spoken and heard among the Nso', it is enough to draw our attention to the opposition between writing and orauralizing (communicating them through

speaking and hearing) them, in ethnic cultural societies whose members had only just began to use the Western European form of an alphabetical writing.

Mary in its Lamnso' pronunciation was neither uniform in its meaning nor in its form / morphology. It was *Maària* for the elderly Catholic Churchgoers, *Meèri* for the schooling youth, *Miriaya / m* for the elderly Presbyterian Churchgoers and *Mayrama* for the Islamic Churchgoers. On the basis of this analysis and without having known her religious beliefs, our guess is that the South African professional singer, *Miriam Makeba* is / was a Presbyterian Churchgoer since it is equally likely that she is not of a Jewish origin to own the name *Miriam*. As we were explaining earlier, it was within this diversity of practice and usage that the Nso' characteristically, though not exclusively, conferred their own cultural stamp of values to the Christian European names of Nso' women. In other words, though simultaneously expressing and reflecting the *European mission civilisatrice* and the corresponding notion of *Western colonial mentality*, Nso' Christian names of men and women today still reveal Nso' / African men and women as being at once, though in varying degrees, the beneficiaries, agents and victims of the disadvantages more than the advantages of colonialism in Nso' / Africa itself. Generally speaking, Western European explorers, missionaries, administrators, etc., only viewed African cultures in terms of barbarism. In fact,

“The missionaries conceived that the teaching of Christianity and the skills of reading, writing and arithmetic had to be accompanied by the adoption of Western dress, names, food and styles. They insisted that a good Christian must drink tea and take walks with his wife. They could see little but barbarism in the traditional African institutions and sought to destroy the vestiges of African culture.” (R.L. Okonkwo in Eze 1998: 256).

Essentials of the Nso' Naming Systems

Consequently, while the Nso' woman in particular or the African woman in general, should be encouraged to enrich and be enriched by a more or less colonial initiative towards a 'global gender equality' rather than being hindered from it, today more than ever before, she also needs to be conscientiously aware of the historical and contextual cultural intricacies and

interplays of the underlying colonial and neo-colonial alliances for or against her interests. For, to argue simply that an alliance of patriarchal system in Africa, elsewhere, or both, was responsible for marginalizing women's systems of rule and/ or complementary roles to men, is to ignore some of the nuances which those differences, not only between historical and contextual cultural underpinnings of naming systems and concrete names, but also between the cultural systems of the single sex, dual-sex, etc. can offer.

For, if African women must defend their naming systems against whatever is marked and marred by the Western colonial mentality and / or by some of its subtlest policies, they need to rely on their knowledge and rights expressively reflected through the frameworks of their African cultures. Prof. Eugenia Shanklin has pertinently shown in a telling scholarly article on the Anlu – a women's organizational name among the Itañikom speakers of Cameroon, entitled 'Anlu Remembered: The Kom Women's Rebellion of 1958-1961' that

'Women were not only defending themselves, their crops, and their children; they believed they were defending Kom territory from outsiders who threatened to usurp control of the land and political control of the Kom kingdom as a whole... What political *anlu* did was usurp government (and men's) functions and rule Kom for three years; what they thought they were doing was exercising a right that belong to Kom women from time immemorial, the right to take over when their men had failed to protect them against the encroachments of a foreign regime. Accepting the outsider / minority view results both in fundamental misunderstanding of the anlu movement and in a failure to emphasize the movement's important aspects in other perspectives, that is anti-colonial use of the militant symbols of aggression and war. Accordingly, weapons, violence, and radical attempts to restore pre-colonial social structure have been de-emphasized, thus perpetuating the outsiders' misreading of events.' (Shanklin 1998: 163).

One of our ambitions in examining the ideologies of women's names among the Nso' is first to gain inspiration from the Nso' naming systems; and secondly to contribute in a way that can best clarify and present a reliably comprehensive insider's view of some frequently experienced cultural phenomena and philosophies like the essential characteristics of, and within these very Nso' naming systems. But, since Nso' names and naming systems have been conceived, collected, conserved and communicated orally for centuries and also in the Western European alphabetical lettered form since

the 1850s, it is interesting to determine what complementary role orality plays vis-à-vis alphabetical writing in order to avoid merely perpetuating some of the lettered misinterpretations of some Nso' women's names in particular. But still one would also like to know how the Nso' express their oraural usage of names and their discourse of / on their naming systems in a way that alphabetical writing either cannot or does not adequately represent.

In Lamnso' (the language of the Nso'), *Liì Nso'* (the culture of the Nso') has both *kóy vikiy* (the arm of women), and *kóy vilum* (the arm of men). In other words, without implying that every form of blessing is a feat, and every sin a failure, even in matters which concern la raison d'état, (for the sake of the state), Nso' culture simultaneously always counts its blessings of feats and its sins of failure which together make it what it is. This means that there must always be a certain cultural balance or equity, since above everything else, both the left and right arms of any human being are physically part and parcel of what forms the equilibrium of his or her integral physical body. In other words, since the physical left and right arms of every human being are constitutively complementary, they should reflect and serve as a guide to the ideologies of power in favour of leftism or rightism. As such, both left and right simultaneously constitute what is characteristic in a people's culture, to a certain extent the role played by, and the relation between the physical and the metaphysical perspectives in every human cultural life, according to, and from, this Nso' cultural point of view.

It is, therefore, significant that an American researcher of Miriam Goheen's standing entitled her more mature research findings and 'work over the past 16 years' among the Nso' in 1996 as *Men own the Fields, Women own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Grassfields*. Though more or less politically conditioned by a female gender militancy, her research pertinently underscores the point that

'In many ways traditional views of gender persist in present-day Nso'. Farming-food-female continue to be linked as a gender marker while the axiom, amounting almost to a taboo, that 'men own the fields, women own the crops' remains central.

However, while women on the one hand have lost much of the complementarity of power inherent in pre-colonial gender roles, on the other hand at least some of them have gained access to new forms of symbolic capital embodied in education and jobs and in the ability to make decisions about their lives, which has put negotiations over the meaning of gender and gender roles at the heart of a discourse of counter-

hegemony' (p. 185).

Yet, it is equally significant that Nso' men and women as parents and / or children during the final stage in the progressive naming of the *wón nyù* (*children of God* i.e. sacred children), can all receive an equal number of codified names. Still,

'it is significant that, in the Nso' beliefs about conception, the man and woman are thought to play an equal role in the making of the embryo children derive flesh and blood from both parents' (Kaberry 1969: 186).

Co-Existence of Naming Systems

In other words, to judge from some characteristic Nso' cultural practices which have proven to be as expressively consistent as they are dynamic: farming, art, social organization, etc., there is evidently something which tellingly maintains a balance, if not culturally, at least philosophically, challengingly and metaphorically, in order to render it manifestly complementary in the naming systems and names of Nso' men and women which to say the least, analogously characterize the left and right arms of the Liì Nso' (Nso' culture) as being consistently and simultaneously upheld by and belonging to both men and women. In fact, Phyllis M. Kaberry, the first woman anthropologist whose pacesetting research among the Nso' has so far been rarely rivalled, was pertinently right to observe that 'The Nso' do not live by patrilineages alone. Marriage, the elementary family, ties of complementary filiation with maternal kin, and cosmological beliefs also have a hearing on the concepts of sexual offences, and a full understanding can be reached only by taking these into account (Idem p. 192-193).

But, in our Nso' world of today, things are actually falling apart and seem to disrupt that balance and to be moving away in a speedy and unpredictable manner from the Nso' classical or established cultural matrix and ideals. For, even if we were to agree with D.A. Masolo that

'the whole game of moral judgements is an appraisal of our approximation to the ideal, ' (Masolo 1994: 154)

the very concrete lives of contemporary African cultures enriched or impov-

erished by a certain peculiar cultural cohabitation with Western European cultures of influence, have not only been tearing Africans and African things apart as the novelist Chinua Achebe's expresses in *Things fall Apart*, but have also been obliging almost every cultural choice in Africa today to depend on more than one ideal. Truly speaking, in Africa today the former cultural ideals are somehow caught in or thwarted by an irreversible cultural web of Westernization in which every cultural choice constitutes more or less an *Ambiguous Adventure*, as the novelist Cheikh Hamidou Kane puts it. For, together with her African counterpart, apparently, the Nso' Westernized lettered woman has already betrayed her intention of introducing a different type of equality which consists in using either a father's or husband's name instead of her own full names as a form of her personal identity and appellation (especially in the alphabetical lettered expression), 'thereby producing what their Western models have never been known to practise without modifications in such explicit terms, such as identifying a gentleman as a *Mr. Theresa / Theresia, Susan, Mary or Magdalena* (Kishani 1998, 2002). In other words, it is quite striking and peculiar in a dual-sex naming system when a Westernized African / Nso' girl, woman or lady is called *Miss / Mrs. Lukoñ*, just as it is peculiar and striking to call a boy, man or gentleman *Mr. Theresa / Theresia* or by a highly codified woman's name. The point here is that today a Westernized Nso' woman readily identifies herself by her father's or husband's name as a *Miss / Mrs. Lukoñ, Taata, Ñgoñ, Tukov*, etc. which culturally are all men's names par excellence, to the detriment of a women's counterpart set of names such as *Biy, Shee, Ntañ, Kfèkfè*, etc., which equally exist among the Nso'.

To the extent that this Westernized attitude owes its origin to the advent of the colonial mentality or colonialism, though it never ended with the departure of Western European colonial powers or the dawn of the Independence of African nations, it has become a source of conflict, if not that of the rejection of some longstanding cultural values of the Nso'. Theoretically, therefore, it sins against the Nso' traditionally classical practice of genderization, even on the score of Elizabeth Lane Beardsley's definition of genderization as

'the linguistic practice of requiring a sex-distinction in discourse about human beings, in such a way that to disregard the sex-distinction produces a locution which is incor-

rect., or inappropriate' (1981: 155).

Precisely, from the Nso' point of view, not only a certain Westernized use of men's names, but also some uses of the Westernized Nso' names are incorrect and inappropriate even when they do not necessarily imply any type of prejudice and / or domination. As such, their de-colonization becomes an urgent necessity.

Setting out ploys from an interdisciplinary perspective, this essay is therefore exploring some of the cultural paradigms of women's names among the Nso' in order to assess some of the contemporary issues of the use and abuse embedded in or raised by them in a more comprehensive manner. However, without necessarily presenting an exhaustive list, even though it presupposes a good knowledge of some Nso' women's names, one of the essay's main arguments is that the apparently patrilineal *Fondom of Nso'* through its naming system reveals itself as influenced to a higher degree by the longstanding but dynamic oraural tradition, as well as by the use of more recently acquired alphabetical writing which tends to impose more culturally static uses and values of names. Moreover, Nso' naming systems have in terms of gender a basis on bifocal cultural system rather than on

'a single sex system that obtains in most of the Western World, where political status-bearing roles are predominantly the preserve of men' (Kamene Okonjo quoted by both Gilkes 1994: 88 and Shanklin 1998: 137).

In other words, one of our contentions here is that it is somehow necessary to set contemporary Nso' cultural life within the dynamic exigencies of both its oraural and alphabetically lettered cultural contexts of a dual-sex system which is similar to, but not identical with, some of the neighbouring ethnic groups, like its South-Western neighbour of Kom, in order to understand and appreciate the significant uses and / or abuses of Nso' women's names, in particular, and Nso' names in general. In order to achieve such a goal, one requires and expects a certain justifiably comprehensive analysis of consistent or coherent principles on which depend the cultural equilibrium, tensions and aspirations which we find persuasively inherent within the Nso' naming systems themselves. Such underlying cultural principles should, therefore, enable us to contrast the Nso' naming systems with other cultural naming systems in a creatively profitable manner. In other words,

such a cultural evaluation, if and when adequately carried out should serve as one of the guiding persuasive sources of reference for discerning and cross-checking every kind of error, including any misinterpretations of Nso' names. Both the Nso' naming systems and the entire corpus of Nso' names need to be well analyzed and interpreted in order to illustrate their coherence and consistency within the Nso' culture itself. For, just as from a certain Nso' classical vantage point of view both men and women play equal roles in the conception of the embryo, the names of both men and women must neither favour the one nor the other by allowing either men or women to exercise an abusive use of the other's set of names. In fact, such is the convincing impression one gets from a closer examination of the functional system of the Nso' codified names of *wón nyù* (verbally, children of God), sacred children. This means that there must be some logical correlation or complementarity between the underlying logical thought and its practical expressive materialization in some accessible areas of the Nso' naming systems which can enable us to affirm their consistency.

Lamnsó' codified names of both men and women are not only always in pairs, but also consistent, i.e. with an equal number of names for both men and women, the non-codified names by virtue of their capacity to belong invariably to both men and women, challengingly and apparently refuting and blurring the very idea of a consistent genderization with the Nso' naming systems. In other words, in so far as some Westernized forms of naming among the Nso' are concerned, philosophers of Nso' origin could either not be quite comfortable with a non bifocal genderization, or merely be in search for a better form of its conceptualization rather than work towards its complete elimination. For, Nso' cultural naming systems and names in the past have had various kinds of both genderized and non-genderized bifocal names, eponymic names known as mekfem, borrowed foreign names, etc., all of which rendered both individual names of men and women traditionally and creatively dynamic. This means that such creative traditions though upheld from the past are ever too weighty to be discarded off hand. On the contrary, without an indiscriminate attempt to discredit them, the Nso' naming systems or more concretely, the Nso' past oraural names and naming systems should serve as a persuasive springboard from which to evaluate our ways of using foreign names to renovate them.

In other words, since two main conflicting cultural systems apparently

now characterize the contemporary phase of the cultural values of the Nso' naming systems – the Nso' / African – mainly oraural system versus the Westernized European – mainly alphabetically lettered system – a choice between names requires not only an appropriated / appropriating cultural justification or substantiation, but also their contrasting contextual comprehension as items and issues of distinctive but perhaps integrating cultural systems. To opt for the use of one or the other, or for both, usually entails a dialectical cultural practice which may at times run the risk of leaving some of the users on the bridge instead of leading them to the expected opposite river bank of cultural transformation, innovation, or creativity. But, if an insider's tentative solution needs to first serve as a caveat by inviting a look-before-you-leap attitude which, otherwise, can easily turn into a sheer leap in the dark, it is to avoid an indiscriminate condemnation of centuries-old cultural values in the face of the relatively recent presence of the Westernized ones. For, evidently, today more than ever before, we are in search of new ways of a balanced cultural or inter-cultural renewal. Yet, what is best needed in a world of cross-cultural or inter-cultural exigencies should not overshadow our needs at the grassroots, even though, according to a Kiswahili proverb,

'a simple emancipation of the tree by the roots is no liberty for the tree' (courtesy of Prof. G. Kalonji of Washington University, Seattle, USA).

The heyday of colonialism introduced some new values which still need to be critically reassessed in relation to those of the pre-colonial times, even if this does not necessarily imply their acceptance or non acceptance especially, on the part of the insider-users and / or producers of those cultural values.

As Nso' cultural experiences of their progressive systems of naming tend to confirm, it is necessary to be prudent as regards what we, Nso' / African insiders choose from outside cultures as a replacement of ours. According to Kwasi Wiredu,

'I should like to repeat, however, that the process of sifting the elements of our traditional thought and culture calls for a good measure of analytical circumspection lest we exchange the good as well as the bad in our traditional ways of life for dubious cultural imports' (Wiredu 1980: 50).

In other words, one cannot, therefore, overemphasize the necessity of a pertinently cultural *caveat emptor* (let the buyer be aware) in the choice and use of both women's and men's names in the Africa of today. For, it is neither true that "everything that belongs to African cultures, especially those of the pre-colonial times is always bad", nor that "everything that originates from the Western European world, especially its contemporary technological organs of cultural conceptualization, collection, conservation and communication is always good."

In fact, a certain innovative use of Westernized Nso' / African names of women tend to favour more the perpetuation of men's names as they occur in a single sex cultural system rather than offer an elaborate development of the existing dual-sex traditions which have been comparatively more or less satisfying and promoting the aspirations of both men and women in Nso' / African classical thinking. For example, to the extent in which the very use of the Western systems of naming, some European women pioneered a certain new use of the African names of their African husbands in a way that might seem advantageous for the spread of African cultural values through names in the Western world, to refer respectfully or not, to a lady as late *Mrs. So and So*, (followed by the late husband's name) i.e. more or less the English equivalent of the French, *Madame Veuve telle ou telle* (followed by the late husband's name) is, from a dual-sex point of view and to a certain extent, a way of depriving the lady in question, or women in general of an equivalent use of their names. In fact, this manner of naming married women promotes even posthumously and connotatively the use of a husband's name at the expense of the wife's own name. Cultural systems of naming which are more avowedly dual-sex usually in principle also posthumously, consistently, metaphorically and / or symbolically reflect this dual-sex quality in their linguistic paradigms and systems of naming in favour of both married women and men.

What seems questionable, therefore, is why the Westernized Nso' woman cannot choose and use the non-westernized Nso' traditions of women's names in this particular context since they already respect the use of women's names. Moreover, although some people may still argue in favour of the cultural context in which a given name in use best establishes the quality of its value as being the ultimate norm on which a culturally pertinent name depends, the real issue is whether women requiring names as a

possible source of their identity should consistently appropriate men's names or not, especially within the centuries-old ethnic cultures like the Nso' culture which is reputed for its conscious traditions of a genderized bifocal system of naming. Should women and men encourage themselves to mutually exchange and use their names, or should they willingly or unwillingly avoid in principle any forms of intrusion into the use of one another's names?

In other words, practically conscious of the positive exigencies of some dual-sex naming systems in most African societies, how can and should we, Africans preserve the positive qualities of our naming systems and still remain critically selective and creative within our own dual-sex naming systems when we borrow from other cultures to inspire our own creative potentials? After all, a dual-sex naming cultural system does not only promote equity for both men and women, but also generally expresses its edge over other comparable naming systems thanks to its equally distinctive corpus of names which constitute a more democratically open or a more just system of naming. To what extent, then, can men and women establish and maintain their mutual relations through a naming system which, besides reflecting their socio-cultural values and problems to be solved, allows members of the opposite sex to respect their distinction by using their names without any psychological prejudice or complex of domination? Must a people's cultural naming system and language reflect an evident biological datum such as the dual-sex of men and women? In other words, how do human societies function with or without culturally expressive bifocal genderization i.e. sex reflecting systems of cultural values in their naming systems, since the truth is that

'The most important fact of human existence is that women can have children and men cannot. The distinction at issue is the one which traditionally marks the juncture at which a female becomes an expected bearer of children'(Michael Levin in Vetteerling-Braggin 1981: 221).

Conclusion

Actually, once we remain conscious of this evident biological distinction,

these two naming systems which we have been describing as dual-sex or single sex will be judged to follow more or less from the type of cultural options of the societies which consciously express and practise them. But they are neither apparently nor exhaustively the only ones in human societies. A single sex naming system in which men and women can be named with or without an explicit or implicit reference to their sex, and a dual-sex or genderwise bifocal naming system in which both women and men are named accordingly, cannot but be reflected in the languages of the societies to which their speakers / listeners or members belong! This is because naming itself is part and parcel of a people's language and culture.

This, therefore, essentially means that to begin an examination of how a cultural naming tradition or system functions through the whole corpus of the names both men and women as well as children of a given cultural community bear from birth to death, and / or beyond, is to confide not only in language, but also in the entire human culture. After all, the way we identify things is often reflected in or betrayed through our linguistically artistic conception of them in our various taxonomic cultural systems. Yet, when all is said and done, taxonomies such as those of human names are a special category of linguistic units, since the names of men and women can help to distinguish them among themselves, initiate, recall and aspire for some historical or cultural values which depend on the name-bearers, etc., in a way other linguistic units do not.

One of our informants told us that one would keep on waiting for her to come out from that house, if someone called for Theresia / Theresa or Biy to come out of a particular house, but, instead a man came out of it. This was in a way to convey the idea that Theresia / Theresa or Biy is a name more or less synonymous with a woman's personality, if not identity, than with that of a man. To Christian a girl, a woman or a lady as Theresia / Theresa Biy among the Nso' is, therefore, in a way to overemphasize her womanhood, though apparently in the name of Christianity. But then, we might want to specify the pertinent notions of when, where, how and why, etc., to justify the use of each of the names or both. Moreover, since the use of foreign European names usually follows historically the use of non-foreign ones among such African ethnic groups like the Nso', it becomes convincingly clear that both the foreign and the non-foreign names cannot always have the same cultural values in the eyes of the foreigner and the non-foreigner who

use them. But then, what role precisely does a foreign name play within its own cultural community that differs from a non-foreign one? Perhaps, such should be one of the basic questions for us to ask before engaging on an itinerary of any cultural borrowing of foreign names.

For the rest, so far we have argued that, since

'the waters of the Niger can efface the stain from the body but cannot wipe out an insult,' Niane 1965/1997: 20)

the scars of the insults of naming which Western European colonial and neo-colonial powers have been inflicting on Africans, at least psychologically still persist. We equally argued that the Nso' like most ethnic groups in Africa possess their own naming systems which merit and call for the researcher's more comprehensive analyses. The importance of such analyses is to confirm or refute not only the authority of alien names or borrowed naming systems within the framework of ideals already established by some earlier or contemporary oraural traditions in Africa, but also the idea that there is a cultural authority which predates the advent of Western European colonialism into Africa where its alphabetically lettered tradition is today increasingly exerting its own influence among other things and taking roots. We also tried to illustrate that women's names as cultural values pose problems which issue from, and are due to, cultures in contact like the Western European cultures and their African counterparts, though they are still marked and distinguished by their countless new issues of cultural prejudice, if not their unending stories of racism. For, it is certain that contemporary cultural values of naming systems and names of women in Nso' or in the Cameroon Grassfields as elsewhere in Africa tend to depend on the historical and contextual prejudices of both African centuries-old oraural traditions as well as the recently acquired alphabetically lettered Western European traditions, together with their so-called global problems.

With these ideas in view, we intend to successively examine the names of women's organizations, the ex officio names of women, and the individual names of women in Africa – particularly in the Cameroon Grassfields, using the Nso' cultural experiences within their contextual and historical perspectives as the pivot of our general analysis of naming systems and names among us humans.

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