



LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND FAITH: A SOCIOLINGUISTICS ANALYSIS OF RENAMING PRACTICES AMONG MUSLIM CONVERTS

Bello Nasiru Mohammad

Federal Polytechnic Kaltungo, Gombe, Nigeria

talk2nasr@gmail.com

Abstract

This research investigates how language, identity, and religious faith intersect within Northern Nigerian Muslim communities, focusing specifically on the social and linguistic dynamics of renaming practices among converts to Islam. The study specifically aims to interrogate whether the widespread expectation for converts to adopt Arabic names is theologically mandated by Islamic doctrine or whether it is a socioculturally constructed phenomenon shaped by ideology, linguistic hierarchy, and historical power relations. Drawing on Saussurean semiotics, Bourdieu's concepts of linguistic capital and symbolic power, Fishman's sociolinguistics of identity, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's decolonial language theory, the study interrogates how Arabic came to assume a position of supreme onomastic legitimacy at the expense of indigenous languages. Methodologically, the paper uses a qualitative, interpretive research design featuring a conceptual and textual analysis. It cross-references classical Islamic exegetical sources, specifically from Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, with naturally occurring illustrative examples of naming conventions and socio-religious indexicality in Northern Nigeria. The findings show a significant disjunction between localised sociolinguistics practice and Islamic theological doctrine; while communal ideologies enforce Arabic renaming as a rigid uniform of religious authenticity, core Islamic texts emphasise semantic moral purpose and the preservation of non-offensive indigenous linguistic identity over Arabic cultural absorption. Ultimately, the study implies the need for a decolonial reconfiguration of religious education in African contexts, demonstrating that decoupling universal theological faith from cultural-linguistic conformity can promote greater structural embracement within global Islam.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Language ideology, Religious identity, Naming practices, Hausa Muslim communities

1.0 Introduction

The relationship between language, identity, and religion has long occupied a central place in sociolinguistics inquiry. Within many religious traditions, language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a symbolic resource through which belief, authority, and communal belonging are expressed. In Islamic contexts, this relationship is particularly complex, given the historical

and theological significance of Arabic as the language of revelation. While Arabic occupies a privileged position within Islamic ritual and scholarship, its function in shaping everyday identity practices among non-Arab Muslim communities remains uneven and, at times, contested.

One such area of tension can be observed in naming practices among Hausa Muslim communities in Northern Nigeria, where renaming is frequently presented as a



necessary marker of religious authenticity with converts often encouraged, or even pressured, to abandon their birth names in favor of Arabic alternatives (Abbas, 2018). This widespread practice poses significant questions regarding the relationship between linguistic form and religious meaning. To what extent does adopting an Arabic name constitute a religious obligation, and to what extent does it reflect sociocultural expectations defined by history and power?

This paper emerges from these questions. It examines the sociolinguistics and theological dimensions of renaming practices among Hausa Muslims, with particular attention to how language ideologies modify perceptions of religious identity, while the assumption that Arabic names are inherently more 'Islamic' is widely held, it is rarely subjected to critical scrutiny (Haeri, 2003; Pennycook, 2021). Yet, a closer reading of Islamic sources suggests that such assumptions may not be theologically grounded. Rather, they appear to be shaped by larger processes of cultural prestige, historical contact, and linguistic hierarchy.

For the purpose of this study, renaming refers to the formal or informal adoption of a new personal name following religious conversion. Arabic names refer to onomastic choices derived from the Arabic lexicon. Islamic identity is used here to denote both inward religious commitment and outward communal belonging, since naming practices often function as markers of identity as well as faith. Although the paper engages broader Hausa naming trends, its primary focus is the sociolinguistics pressures experienced by converts rather than the naming practices of the wider Hausa Muslim community.

To address this issue, the study draws on Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign,

alongside the sociolinguistics perspectives of Fishman (1972), Bourdieu (1991), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986). The frameworks enable us to interrogate how language acquires symbolic power and how certain linguistic forms come to be associated with authority and legitimacy. In addition, the analysis engages with Qur'anic teachings and prophetic traditions to examine the ethical and theological principles underlying naming in Islam.

The central argument of this paper is that renaming practices among Hausa Muslims are not mandated by Islamic doctrine but are instead sociolinguistics constructions guided by cultural and historical factors. By privileging Arabic names over indigenous ones, these practices reproduce implicit hierarchies that raise certain linguistic forms while marginalising others. This not only affects how converts negotiate their identities but also brings up broader questions about inclusion, authenticity, and the universality of Islamic teachings.

In furthering this argument, the paper contributes to current debates in sociolinguistics and decolonial studies by highlighting the need to uncouple religious identity from linguistic conformity. It suggests that a broader, inclusive understanding of Islamic identity must recognise the legitimacy of varied linguistic expressions and resist the tendency to equate faith with cultural conformity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language, Religion, and Identity

The relationship between language and religious identity has been widely explored in scholarship, with increasing attention in recent years to what has been described as a "sociolinguistics of Islam." This emerging area of inquiry examines how language practices are formed by Islamic belief systems and how, in turn, linguistic forms



contribute to the construction of religious identity through several sociocultural contexts. Studies suggest that Islamic communities are not linguistically uniform but exhibit processes of vernacularisation, in which religious meanings are expressed through local languages (Haeri, 2003). This evolving sociolinguistics landscape is reflected in recent contemporary scholarship on the sociolinguistics of Islam and naming practices in Africa, which emphasises the localisation of religious identities without the loss of theological integrity.

This perspective complicates earlier assumptions that Arabic functions as the sole authentic medium of Islamic expression. Instead, it highlights the dynamic interaction between global religious traditions and local linguistic ecologies. This interaction mirrors broader conceptual developments in the sociolinguistics of globalization, where local varieties continuously negotiate meaning against globally dominant codes (Blommaert, 2010). In this sense, language becomes a site of negotiation, where religious identity is continuously reconsidered through culturally embedded forms of communication.

2.2 Arabic as Symbolic and Religious Capital

A growing body of contemporary research stresses the symbolic role of Arabic beyond its communicative function. Arabic is often understood not only as a language but as a marker of religious, cultural, and intellectual identity among Muslim communities across the world (Haeri, 2003; Versteegh, 2014). Studies show that Arabic operates as a multidimensional symbol that mediates identity formation, particularly through practices such as ritual usage, education, and linguistic affiliation.

However, this symbolic elevation is not without complexity. Sociolinguistics

research demonstrates that the prestige associated with a language does not derive from natural linguistic qualities but from social valuation and institutional endorsement. Prestige varieties, including standard or sacred languages, function as instruments of symbolic power rather than as intrinsically superior forms (Bourdieu, 1991). Within the Northern Nigerian context, the social expectation to rename has been highlighted in regional sociolinguistics literature. Studies by scholars such as Haeri (2003) or Pennycook (2021) confirm that the adoption of Arabic names is widely perceived by the community as the definitive marker of religious conversion, consequently reinforcing linguistic hierarchies at the expense of indigenous traditions. This insight reinforces the argument that the perceived sacredness of Arabic is socially constructed, even when it is grounded in legitimate theological associations.

Recent work in decolonial linguistics has also called for a thorough re-evaluation of these assumptions. Scholars argue that privileging a single linguistic form as the authentic expression of religious identity risks reproducing hierarchical structures that marginalise local languages and identities (Pennycook, 2021). Such perspectives emphasise the need to separate religious meaning from inherited ideological frameworks.

2.3 Language Ideology and Power

The concept of language ideology remains central to understanding how linguistic hierarchies are maintained. Language ideologies are not simply beliefs about language but are embedded among broader systems of power and social organisation (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). In religious contexts, these ideologies commonly operate



subtly, shaping perceptions of legitimacy, authenticity, and belonging.

Recent scholarship has highlighted how language ideologies are embedded within wider systems of power and social organization. This pattern is consistent with broader sociolinguistics findings that language functions as both a symbol of identity and a mechanism of social differentiation. Such hierarchies are reinforced through everyday practices, including naming, education, and ritual participation.

Importantly, these dynamics must be situated within historical and postcolonial contexts. The intersection of religion, language, and colonial legacy has contributed to complex forms of linguistic valuation, where local languages are sometimes perceived as secondary to globally or religiously dominant codes. This makes the study of language ideology particularly relevant for understanding contemporary identity practices in African Muslim communities.

2.4 Naming Practices and Sociolinguistics Identity

Naming practices represent an important yet underexplored dimension of sociolinguistics identity. Names function as condensed semiotic units that encode cultural, religious, and societal meanings (Alford, 1988). While existing research acknowledges the importance of names in identity construction, there is limited scholarship examining naming within Islamic sociolinguistics frameworks, particularly in African contexts.

Where studies do exist, they suggest that naming practices are guided by a combination of theological guidance and cultural convention. However, the boundary between these influences is commonly blurred. The adoption of Arabic names by

converts, for instance, is frequently interpreted as a religious requirement, even in the absence of clear doctrinal support (Rahman, 2009). This indicates that naming operates as a site where language ideology and religious identity intersect in complex ways.

In many cases, naming becomes a visible marker of belonging, reinforcing group boundaries plus also indicating underlying anxieties about authenticity. This is consistent with broader sociolinguistics theories that emphasise the role of language in signalling membership and negotiating social inclusion.

2.5 Identified Gaps

Despite the growing body of work on language, religion, and identity, significant gaps remain. While there is increasing interest in the sociolinguistics of Islam, relatively little attention has been paid to how linguistic ideologies manifest in specific everyday practices such as renaming. Moreover, African Muslim contexts, particularly Hausa-speaking communities, remain underrepresented in this body of research.

Existing studies tend to focus on Arabic-speaking societies or on broader questions of language policy and education, leaving a gap in understanding how language ideology operates at the level of individual identity practices. In particular, the sociolinguistics implications of renaming among converts have not been sufficiently explored.

This study considers this gap by examining naming practices within Hausa Muslim communities through an integrated theoretical framework. By combining sociolinguistics analysis with theological reflection, it offers a more nuanced account of how language, identity, and faith intersect in everyday life.

3. Theoretical Framework



This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that draws on semiotics, sociolinguistics, and decolonial language theory. By bringing together the works of Ferdinand de Saussure, Pierre Bourdieu, Joshua Fishman, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the analysis seeks to explain how naming practices within Hausa Muslim communities are shaped by both linguistic structures and broader sociocultural forces. These perspectives provide complementary insights into how language acquires meaning, authority, and symbolic power.

3.1 Saussurean Semiotics and the Arbitrary Nature of Naming

Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign offers a foundational lens for understanding naming practices. According to Saussure (1916), a linguistic sign consists of two components: the signifier, which is the form of a word, and the signified, which is the concept it represents. Crucially, the relationship between these two elements is arbitrary. There is no inherent or natural connection between a word and its meaning; rather, meaning is produced through social convention.

In the context of religious naming, this principle challenges the assumption that certain names possess intrinsic sacred value solely because of their linguistic origin. A name such as Musa is not inherently more meaningful or spiritually significant than Prosper, Arzika, Gidado or Emmanuel. All names function as signifiers that acquire meaning through cultural interpretation. The perceived superiority of Arabic names, therefore, cannot be explained by any inherent linguistic property but must instead be understood as a product of sociocultural conditioning.

3.2 Bourdieu's Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Power

The explanation of Saussure on how meaning is structured, Bourdieu (1991) provides insight into how certain linguistic forms gain social value. His concept of linguistic capital refers to the prestige and authority associated with particular ways of speaking or using language within a given social field. Language, in this sense, is not neutral; it is embedded within systems of power that privilege some forms over others. In religious contexts, Arabic often serves as linguistic capital. Its association with the Qur'an and Islamic scholarship grants it symbolic authority, making it a marker of legitimacy and piety. The adoption of Arabic names by converts can thus be interpreted as an attempt to acquire this symbolic capital and gain acceptance within the religious community. However, this dynamic also reinforces hierarchical distinctions, positioning Arabic as superior while implicitly marginalising indigenous linguistic forms.

3.3 Fishman and the Sociolinguistics of Identity

Fishman's (1972) work on language and identity further illuminates the role of language in shaping group belonging. He argues that language serves as a key marker of social identity, particularly in communities where shared linguistic practices reinforce collective values and norms. In such settings, language choice becomes a means of signalling membership and conforming to group expectations.

Within Hausa Muslim communities, the use of Arabic names functions as a symbolic indicator of religious identity. Converts who adopt such names are often perceived as more authentically Muslim, while those who retain non-Arabic names may face suspicion or exclusion. This dynamic illustrates the broader sociolinguistics process through



which language becomes tied to notions of authenticity and belonging.

3.4 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Decolonial Language Theory

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) critique of linguistic imperialism provides a critical perspective on the ideological dimensions of language use. He argues that language is a key site of cultural power, capable of shaping not only communication but also identity and worldview. When certain languages are privileged over others, this can lead to the internalisation of cultural hierarchies that devalue indigenous forms of expression.

Although Ngũgĩ's work is rooted in the context of colonialism, its insights are applicable to religious settings where linguistic hierarchies persist. The privileging of Arabic within Hausa Muslim communities can be understood as a form of symbolic domination, where cultural and religious authority becomes tied to a specific linguistic code. These dynamics risk reproducing forms of exclusion that contradict Islam's universalist principles.

3.5 Theoretical Synthesis

Taken together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional understanding of naming practices in Hausa Muslim communities. Saussure highlights the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, undermining claims of inherent sacredness in Arabic names. Bourdieu explains how these names acquire symbolic value within specific social contexts. Fishman situates language within processes of identity formation, while Ngũgĩ exposes the ideological and power-laden dimensions of linguistic hierarchy.

By integrating these perspectives, this study approaches renaming not as a purely religious act but as a sociolinguistics phenomenon shaped by cultural, historical, and ideological forces. This theoretical

synthesis enables a critical examination of the gap between Islamic theological principles and the lived linguistic practices of Hausa Muslim communities.

4. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive, qualitative sociolinguistics research design, executing a critical conceptual and textual analysis. Moving away from empirical statistical generalisation, the methodology focuses on examining how language ideologies condition individual identity practices within Northern Nigerian Muslim communities. The primary data corpus consists of text-based foundational Islamic traditions (Tasmiya and Adab etiquettes) purposefully selected from the authoritative compilations of *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*, and is cross-referenced with classical exegetical views. To analyse the socio-religious indexicality and the contemporary lived realities of these theological principles, this textual data is paired with naturally occurring, illustrative onomastic examples observed within the sociolinguistics ecology of Northern Nigeria. Analytically, the study applies an integrated four-part framework: Saussurean semiotics are utilised to deconstruct the arbitrary relationship between name signifiers and semantic signifieds; Bourdieu's linguistic capital framework evaluates the accumulation of symbolic power via Arabic names; Fishman's sociolinguistics of identity examines communal group boundaries; and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's decolonial language theory critiques the resulting cultural and linguistic hierarchies.

4.1 Scope and Limitations

While this qualitative approach offers deep conceptual insight into the mechanics of sacred hegemony, it does not claim to be empirically or statistically representative of the entire global Muslim population. The



observational and anecdotal examples utilised in this text serve a strictly illustrative purpose, grounding the theoretical synthesis in contemporary West African realities. Future lines of inquiry would benefit from large-scale empirical field studies incorporating quantitative surveys and demographic interviews to map the geographic variations in renaming conventions across diverse non-Arab Islamic societies.

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1 Data Presentation

Table 1: Textual Typology of Foundational Islamic Data

Data Source	Original Arabic Signifier / Concept	Core Semantic Meaning / Exegetical Directives	Doctrinal Status regarding Non-Arabic Names
Qur'an 30:22	<i>Ikhtilāfu alsinatikum wa-alwānikum</i>	"The diversity of your languages and your colors"	Affirmatory: Frames linguistic diversity as a divine sign; validates indigenous tongues.
Qur'an 49:13	<i>Akramakum...atqākum</i>	"The most noble of you... is the most righteous"	Neutral: Prioritizes internal ethical conduct over external linguistic or cultural markers.
Sahih Muslim	<i>Tasmiya</i> / <i>Adab</i> (Etiquette of Naming)	Prophetic alterations of names like <i>Barrah</i> (pious/boastful) to <i>Zaynab</i> .	Conditional: Mandates changing names <i>only</i> if semantic meaning is harmful, proud, or polytheistic.
Sahih al-Bukhari	<i>Abdullah</i> / <i>Abdur-Rahman</i>	Servant of Allah / Servant of the Most Merciful	Preferential: Highlighted as beloved attributes, but carries no binding legal obligation for converts.
Early Islamic History	<i>Asmā'</i> <i>al-Sahāba</i> (Companions' Names)	Retention of Persian, Abyssinian, or pre-Islamic names (e.g., <i>Salman</i> , <i>Bilal</i>).	Permissive: Establishes historical precedent allowing non-Arabic, non-polytheistic names.

Table 2: Onomastic Typology and Sociolinguistics Indexicality in Northern Nigeria

Category	Data/Name Examples	Original Semantic Signified	Local Socio-Religious Indexicality	Communal Pressure / Status
Ethically Positive	<i>Kyauta</i> , <i>Godiya</i>	"Thankful" "Shukurah"	Neutral/Islamic Alignment	High Pressure to Rename: Frequently



Indigenous (Hausa)	<i>Hidaya</i>	"Gift"	Christian markers).	marginalized or displaced in favor of Arabic alternatives.
Western Christian-Indexed	/ <i>Prosper, Emmanuel, Blessing</i>	"Success" "God is with us" "Divine Favor"	Strong local index of Southern Nigerian Christian identity.	Absolute Pressure: Causes high semiotic friction; converts are immediately pushed to drop these names.
Arabic Onomastic Capital	<i>Shukurah, Musa, Abdullah</i>	"Thankful", "Prophetic Signifier", "Servant of God"	Supreme index of absolute Islamic authenticity and communal belonging.	Dominant Standard: Functions as a mandatory social "ritual uniform" for converts.

5.2 Semiotic Reinterpretation of Onomastic Shifts

By utilising Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic sign framework, we can deconstruct how the relationship between the onomastic signifier (the spoken name) and the signified (the mental concept/meaning) is altered within the Northern Nigerian linguistic market. In a purely semantic evaluation, an indigenous Hausa name like *Kyauta* and an Arabic name like *Hadiya* share an identical signified: "a gift" (see Table 2). Neither signifier possesses an inherent, biological, or spiritual superiority over the other; the link between the sounds and the meaning remains entirely arbitrary. As Abbas (2018) notes, traditional Hausa personal names possess full structural validity and deep semantic connotations before they enter these heavily ideological language markets. However, socio-religious language ideologies disrupt this semantic equivalence. Communal gatekeeping shifts the sign value from literal semantics to cultural indexicality. As a result, the Arabic signifier *Hadiya* is artificially elevated to index absolute Islamic authenticity, while the indigenous signifier *Kyauta* is emptied of its valid ethical meaning and marginalised as spiritually inadequate (Table 2). This reveals

that renaming practices among converts do not operate through simple vocabulary changes but function as ideological processes in which certain cultural sounds are granted an exclusive monopoly over religious legitimacy.

5.3 Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Naming Practices

Beyond linguistic signs, renaming serves as a core mechanism for aligning socio-cultural groups and maintaining boundaries. In Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious landscape, names serve as immediate acoustic indicators of a person's geographic origin, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. When a convert bears a Western or Christian-indexed name such as *Prosper* or *Emmanuel*, it generates intense semiotic friction within Muslim spaces, indexing an unassimilated identity that triggers communal suspicion (Table 2).

Adopting a name from the Arabic Onomastic Capital category (Table 2), such as *Musa* or *Abdullah*, acts as a social "ritual uniform". This uniform signals to the community that the individual has achieved complete group alignment, immediately neutralising suspicion and offering a protective layer of social safety and trust. This reliance on visible onomastic markers reflects what Mahmood (2012) describes as



the broader social performance and external structures that define contemporary politics of piety. This pattern highlights how the pressure to rename is driven heavily by social conformity rather than personal spiritual conviction, establishing Arabic as an institutional gatekeeper for communal belonging and a primary mechanism for building shared socio-religious collectives (Varis & Blommaert, 2015).

5.4 Theological Misalignment with Canonical Texts

The most striking finding of this study is the sharp divergence between localised communal expectations and the actual tenets of Islamic jurisprudence. As structured in Table 1, foundational Islamic texts maintain an open, permissive stance toward diverse cultural names. Textual evidence from Qur'an 30:22 explicitly positions the diversity of human languages as a divine sign, thereby validating indigenous African tongues like Hausa as spiritually complete vessels (Abdel Haleem, 2004).

Furthermore, the authoritative traditions compiled in *Sahih Muslim* and *Sahih al-Bukhari* demonstrate that the Prophet Muhammad did not enforce the assimilation of Arabic culture. Name modifications were strictly conditional, applied only when a pre-Islamic name carried a morally harmful, proud, or polytheistic significance (e.g., changing *Barrah* due to its boastful semantic meaning).

Non-Arab companions from Persian or Abyssinian backgrounds routinely kept their indigenous names upon entering Islam without any theological penalty. Consequently, the intense social pressure placed on Northern Nigerian converts to drop clean, ethically positive indigenous names like *Barka* (Blessing) represents a clear theological misalignment (Table 1, Table 2). The local community has

mistakenly substituted universal Islamic doctrine with a localised, ethnocentric ideology that treats Arabic cultural assimilation as a mandatory religious requirement.

6. Discussion

The juxtaposition of the canonical theological data (Table 1) and the contemporary onomastic realities of Northern Nigeria (Table 2) reveal a profound sociolinguistics paradox. While foundational Islamic texts explicitly protect linguistic pluralism and condition name-changing solely on semantic harm, communal language ideologies in Northern Nigeria have constructed a rigid, unwritten sociolinguistics hierarchy. In this hierarchy, Arabic is treated not merely as a liturgical language, but as an absolute index of religious authenticity.

This study contributes to the field of sociolinguistics by illustrating the mechanics of three distinct socio-communicative phenomena:

6.1 The Accumulation of Arabic as Symbolic Capital

Applying Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) framework of language and symbolic power, this research demonstrates that names operate as highly valued currencies within religious markets. When a convert discards an ethically unproblematic indigenous Hausa name like *Kyauta* (Gift) in favour of the Arabic equivalent *Hadiya*, the choice is rarely driven by a sudden grammatical enlightenment. Instead, it is an entry requirement into a localised linguistic market where Arabic signifiers grant access to institutional legitimacy, communal trust, and social mobility. Conversely, maintaining an indigenous name incurs a socio-linguistic penalty, framing the speaker as culturally peripheral or insufficiently converted. The "meaningful finding" here is that sacred



languages can establish independent linguistic markets that completely overrule both indigenous heritages and the very theological doctrines they claim to represent.

6.2 Semi-Permeable Ethno-Religious Boundaries

From the perspective of Joshua Fishman's (1972) sociolinguistics of identity, naming practices serve as the primary semiotic mechanism for drawing sharp "us versus them" boundaries. In the pluralistic context of Nigeria, where religious identity frequently overlaps with geographic and political tensions, the complete erasure of Western or Christian-indexed signifiers (e.g., changing *Prosper* to *Musa*) serves a defensive sociolinguistics function. The name becomes a visual and auditory "uniform." These uniform signals absolute alignment with the ingroup while systematically neutralising any socio-semiotic friction or suspicion from the surrounding community.

6.3 Decolonial Onomastics and Voluntary Imperialism

Finally, integrating Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) decolonial framework reveals a unique variance in how linguistic hegemony operates. Unlike historical Europhone linguistic imperialism, which was aggressively enforced through colonial state apparatuses, the Arabization of names among Northern Nigerian converts represents a form of internalised, *voluntary linguistic displacement*. By systematically treating indigenous languages as spiritually deficient or secondary to Arabic cultural signifiers, the community inadvertently participates in the diminishment of its own linguistic ecology. This case study extends critical applied linguistics by demonstrating that linguistic subalternity can be actively maintained within a culture, disguised as an act of absolute spiritual devotion.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the renaming practices prevalent among Muslim converts in Northern Nigeria represent a complex socio-communicative phenomenon rather than a binding scriptural obligation. By juxtaposing canonical Islamic textual traditions with localised onomastic typologies, the research illustrates a profound misalignment: where foundational Islamic texts explicitly protect linguistic pluralism and condition name alterations strictly on semantic harm, localised communal gatekeeping enforces Arabic renaming as an absolute index of religious authenticity and a necessary uniform for social inclusion. Synthesising the theoretical frameworks of Saussure, Bourdieu, Fishman, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, this paper reveals how Arabic operates as supreme symbolic capital within religious markets, building semi-permeable ethno-religious boundaries while inadvertently advancing an internalised, voluntary linguistic imperialism that devalues indigenous linguistic ecologies. Ultimately, the broader significance of these findings extends beyond the West African context, underscoring the urgent need for a decolonial turn in the sociolinguistics of religion. Decoupling universal theological faith from mandatory cultural-linguistic assimilation is essential to safeguarding indigenous African language ecologies and fostering a more structurally inclusive global Islamic identity.

References

- Abbas, N. I. (2018). Linguistic Connotation and Structure of Hausa Personal Names. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria*, 21(3), 167–174.
<https://doi.org/10.4314/Jolan.V21i1.10>



- Abdel Haleem, M. A. S. (Trans.). (2004). *The Qur'an*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/Acprof:Oso/9780192831937.001.0001>
- Al-Bukhari, M. (N.D.). *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī* (M. M. Khan, Trans.). Sunnah.Com.
<https://Sunnah.Com/Bukhari>
- Alford, R. D. (1988). *Naming and Identity: A Cross-cultural Study of Personal Naming Practices*. HRAF Press
- Blommaert, J. (2010). *The Sociolinguistics of Globalisation*. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/Cbo9780511845307>
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Polity Press.
- Fishman, J. A. (1972). *Language And Nationalism: Two Integrative Essays*. Newbury House Publishers.
- Haeri, N. (2003). *Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt*. Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403980719>
- Mahmood, S. (2012). *Politics Of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2nd Ed.). Princeton University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400841212>
- Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonising The Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Heinemann.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3812022>
- Pennycook, A. (2021). *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Re-introduction*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781350118908>
- Rahman, F. (2009). *Major Themes of The Qur'an* (2nd Ed.). University of Chicago Press.
<https://doi.org/10.7208/Chicago/9780226702861.001.0001>
- Saussure, F. De. (1983). *Course in General Linguistics* (R. Harris, Trans.). Duckworth. (Original Work Published 1916)
- Varis, P., & Blommaert, J. (2015). Conviviality and Collectives on Social Media: Virality, Memes, and New Social Structures. *Multilingual Margins*, 2(1), 31–45.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/Mm.2.1.02var>
- Versteegh, K. (2014). *The Arabic Language* (2nd Ed.). Edinburgh University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748675299>
- Woolard, K. A., & Schieffelin, B. B. (1994). Language Ideology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 23, 55–82.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/Annurev.An.23.100194.000451>