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Naming As Conceptual Sovereignty: African Feminist Philosophy and the Politics of Self-Definition

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the politics of naming in African feminist thought as a struggle for conceptual sovereignty. It argues that naming is not a neutral linguistic act but an epistemic and political practice through which African and Black women claim authority over their experiences, identities, histories, and emancipatory projects. Through content analysis and philosophical hermeneutics, the paper draws on African feminist scholarship and decolonial thoughts to comparatively investigate the different conceptual frameworks for naming women's struggles, identities, and emancipatory aspirations. The article shows that African and Black women have often been named through colonial, patriarchal, nationalist, developmental, and Western feminist categories that either misrepresent or incompletely capture their realities. Against this background, feminist naming becomes a form of self-definition and epistemic resistance. Through concepts such as womanism, motherism, African feminism, Stiwanism, and nego-feminism, African and Black women revise inherited categories and produce alternative vocabularies grounded in their own histories and social locations. The article also argues that conceptual sovereignty does not require intellectual isolation, but the authority to engage, reject, revise, and reconstruct concepts according to lived realities. It concludes that feminist naming remains central to African philosophy because it determines whose knowledge counts, what forms of oppression become visible, and how liberation is imagined.

KEYWORDS: African Feminist Philosophy, Conceptual Sovereignty, Feminist Naming, Motherism, Womanism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Naming is never a neutral act, and in African feminist philosophy, the politics of naming emerges from a history of misrecognition, where African and Black women have often been named colonial anthropology, missionary discourse, patriarchal tradition, nationalist politics, development institutions, and Western feminist theory (Frazer & Kimberly 2020; Md. Masud, 2023; French et al. 2013). These external forms of naming have frequently represented African women as passive victims, cultural symbols, dependants, mothers, wives, objects of rescue, or signs of African backwardness. Such representations are not merely inaccurate descriptions; they are epistemic acts that shape how African women are studied, governed, spoken for, and included or excluded from public life. This paper argues that the politics of naming is best understood as a struggle for conceptual sovereignty. The need for conceptual sovereignty becomes clearer when one considers the limits of universalist feminist categories. Feminism has been an important global language for challenging women's oppression, but its dominant forms have sometimes treated "woman" as a universal subject whose experiences can be theorised without sufficient attention to race, colonial history, culture, class, religion, family, and communal life. Kimberlé Crenshaw's critique of single-axis frameworks shows how Black women may disappear when gender and race are analysed separately, because their experiences are not fully captured by either antiracist or feminist categories alone (Crenshaw 1989, 140). In a related but distinctly African context, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí argues that Western gender categories cannot be uncritically universalised without distorting African social realities (Oyěwùmí 1997). These critiques show that naming is not a secondary matter.

African and Black women's creation of alternative feminist names, such as womanism, motherism, African feminism, Stiwanism, and nego-feminism, should therefore be understood as a philosophical response to epistemic domination. Alice Walker's womanism, Chikwenye Ogunyemi's African womanist interpretation, Catherine Acholonu's motherism, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism, and Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism all show that African and Black women have not merely accepted inherited vocabularies.

They have renamed their struggles in order to capture experiences that dominant theories either ignored or misrepresented. Walker's womanism foregrounds Black women's creativity, spirituality, cultural memory, and communal wholeness (Walker 1983). Ogunyemi develops womanism as a framework attentive to Black women's literary, cultural, and communal realities (Ogunyemi 1985, 63-64). Acholonu's motherism reinterprets motherhood, nurture, care, and social continuity as Afrocentric resources for thinking about women's agency (Acholonu 1995). Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism shifts emphasis to social transformation, including women, while Nnaemeka's nego-feminism highlights negotiation, relationality, and contextual strategy (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Nnaemeka 2004, 377). These naming practices reveal that African feminist thought is a field of conceptual struggle, and the central question is what African and Black women suffer? Who has the authority to define that suffering and to determine what liberation should mean? Naming determines whether oppression is understood primarily as patriarchy, coloniality, racial exclusion, cultural marginalisation, economic dependency, religious domination, devaluation of care, or a combination of these. It also determines whether liberation is imagined as individual autonomy, communal wholeness, cultural reform, maternal ethics, legal equality, negotiation, social transformation, or decolonial self-definition.

This article argues that the politics of naming in African feminist thought is a struggle for conceptual sovereignty, including the right of African and Black women to define their own experiences, identities, histories, and emancipatory projects. It treats feminist naming as both epistemic and political. It is epistemic because it shapes what can be known, whose knowledge is recognised, and which categories organise interpretation. It is political because it determines visibility, representation, belonging, and the terms of collective struggle. Naming, therefore, is not merely a preface to feminist theory; it is one of the central sites where feminist theory is made.

Methodologically, through content analysis and philosophical hermeneutics, the paper draws on African feminist scholarship and decolonial thoughts to comparatively investigate the different conceptual frameworks for naming women's struggles, identities, and emancipatory aspirations. The article proceeds in six sections. Following this introduction, the second section clarifies the relationship between naming, identity, and feminist self-definition. The third section examines naming as both power and resistance, showing how imposed names can dominate while self-naming can become a form of agency. The fourth section discusses African women's thought and the problem of conceptual dependency, especially in relation to colonial and Western feminist categories. The fifth section develops the main argument that feminist naming is a struggle for conceptual sovereignty. The sixth section considers the ambivalence of naming, showing that while names empower, they may also exclude or simplify. The article concludes that African feminist philosophy does not require one final name for women's liberation; rather, it requires a critical vocabulary capable of recognising the plurality of African and Black women's experiences while preserving their authority to define themselves.

2. NAMING, IDENTITY, AND FEMINIST SELF-DEFINITION

The relationship between naming and identity is central to African feminist philosophy because names shape how persons and communities are recognised, interpreted, and represented. A name is not simply a linguistic marker attached to an already settled reality. It is a conceptual act that gives form to experience and places that experience within a field of meaning. To name women's struggles as feminism, womanism, motherism, Stiwanism, nego-feminism, or African feminism (Ogunyemi 1985; Walker, 1983; Acholonu 1995; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Nnaemeka 2004) is to make a claim about what kind of oppression is being confronted, what kind of subject is being defended, and what kind of liberation is being imagined. The politics of naming, therefore, begins from the recognition that identity is not only lived; it is also interpreted, narrated, and contested. Colonial discourse frequently represented African women as passive, oppressed, primitive, or in need of rescue (Begum 2006). Patriarchal traditions have often defined women primarily in relation to men, marriage, reproduction, domesticity, and obedience (Cecen-Celik & Tuysuz 2026). Some strands of Western feminism, while committed to women's liberation, have also universalised women's experiences in ways that do not fully capture the realities of race, coloniality, culture, religion, class, and community. In each case, the problem is that external naming can deny women interpretive authority over their own lives. Hence, feminist self-definition responds to this problem by reclaiming the power to name.

The issue of self-definition is particularly significant in Black feminist thought. Patricia Hill Collins argues that self-definition and self-valuation are central to Black women's resistance because controlling images have historically distorted Black women's identities and justified their subordination (Collins 2000). Although Collins writes primarily from an African American context, her insight is relevant to African feminist philosophy. African and Black women have both encountered representational regimes that speak about them while denying them the power to speak as theorists of their own realities. Self-definition, therefore, becomes an act of epistemic resistance, which challenges imposed images and creates space for women's own accounts of their lives. Womanism illustrates this process of self-definition. Alice Walker's use of "womanist" gives language to Black women's experiences in ways that mainstream feminism did not adequately provide. Her definition links Black women's identity to creativity, boldness, spirituality, love, community, and the survival and wholeness of an entire people (Walker 1983). Chikwenye Ogunyemi's womanism similarly names Black women's literary and social experiences through a framework that attends to gender, race, family, culture, and community (Ogunyemi 1985, 63-64). In both cases, naming allows Black women's experiences to become visible on their own terms rather than as additions to a pre-existing feminist category.

Motherism also reflects feminist self-definition, although through a different conceptual route. Catherine Acholonu's motherism attempts to define African women's agency through nurture, motherhood, care, nature, complementarity, and communal responsibility (Acholonu 1995). Whether one agrees fully with Acholonu's framework or not, motherism reveals the importance of naming in African women's thought. It refuses to assume that women's emancipation must be described only in the language of Western liberal individualism. It seeks instead to retrieve African communal and maternal values as resources for thinking about women's social significance. The critical question, of course, is whether such a name expands women's agency or risks confining women to expected roles. But even this critique confirms the philosophical importance of naming: the chosen name shapes the boundaries of liberation.

African feminism further demonstrates the relation between naming and self-definition. African feminism relocates feminist thought within African histories, cultures, economies, religions, and political struggles. It asks how patriarchy operates in African contexts, how colonialism reshaped gender relations, how customary and statutory laws affect women, and how African women negotiate power within family and community. Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's critique of Western gender discourse is relevant here because it shows that categories assumed to be universal may distort African realities when they are imposed without historical sensitivity (Oyěwùmí 1997). Therefore, African feminism becomes a naming practice through which African women insist that their experiences must be theorised from their own social worlds. For this reason, feminist self-definition must be distinguished from mere identity assertion. A name becomes philosophically useful when it helps explain experience, expose domination, and imagine liberation. If a name only celebrates identity without interrogating power, it may become symbolic rather than transformative. Conversely, if a name critiques oppression but fails to recognise women's cultural location and self-understanding, it may reproduce the external authority it seeks to oppose.

Naming also has a collective dimension. Terms such as womanism, motherism, African feminism, Stiwanism, and nego-feminism create conceptual communities. They gather women, texts, histories, debates, and struggles into recognisable fields of thought. They make it possible to teach, debate, criticise, revise, and transmit African women's ideas. Without names, intellectual traditions may remain scattered or invisible. In other words, naming contributes to the formation of African feminist philosophy as a field of inquiry (Gaie 2013). At the same time, self-definition must remain open to plurality. A name that empowers one group may not fully represent another. This means that feminist self-definition should not become conceptual closure. The aim is not to replace one imposed universal category with another. Rather, the aim is to create a flexible and critical vocabulary through which women can define themselves while remaining attentive to difference.

In this sense, naming, identity, and feminist self-definition are inseparable. Naming shapes identity by providing the concepts through which women understand themselves and are understood by others. Identity gives naming its urgency because women's lives are affected by the categories imposed upon them. Self-definition transforms naming into agency by allowing women to produce, revise, and contest the terms of their own representation. African feminist philosophy begins from this struggle over meaning because the fight for liberation is also a fight over who has the power to say what women's lives mean.

3. NAMING AS POWER AND RESISTANCE

Naming operates in two related but different ways: it can dominate, and it can liberate. It dominates when powerful groups impose categories on others and thereby control how their identities, histories, and struggles are understood. For example, Basil Davidson was a pioneering British historian who helped popularise the study of Africa's rich pre-colonial history, famously countering the narrative that Africa had no history in his work *The Lost Cities of Africa* (1959). This work became a classic in the field. Naming liberates when marginalised groups rename themselves and recover the authority to define their own experiences. In African feminist philosophy, this double function of naming is especially important because African and Black women have historically been named through colonial, patriarchal, racial, religious, nationalist, and Western feminist categories. The paper rightly presents naming as a significant act of reclaiming identity and resisting erasure, especially where women's experiences have been marginalised by inherited structures of power. Colonial knowledge systems often named African women in ways that supported colonial rule, as backward, oppressed, domestic, primitive, or in need of rescue. Such categories justified intervention while ignoring women's own forms of authority, resistance, labour, and knowledge. Naming, in this sense, became part of the machinery of domination.

Patriarchal naming also exercises power. In many social contexts, women are defined primarily through their relationship to men and family, daughter, wife, mother, widow, or caregiver. These identities are not oppressive in themselves, but they become limiting when they exhaust the recognised meaning of womanhood. This is why feminist theory must interrogate the language through which women are socially positioned. The question now is not only whether women are oppressed, but how the terms used to describe them make that oppression appear normal, natural, or divinely sanctioned. Kimberlé Crenshaw's critique of single-axis analysis shows that Black women's experiences can disappear when oppression is named only as racism or only as sexism (Crenshaw 1989, 140). If the category "woman" silently means white woman, and the category "Black" silently means Black man, then Black women are left conceptually invisible. Their suffering is real, but the available language fails to capture it. This demonstrates that domination does not always operate by openly denying experience; sometimes it operates by failing to name experience adequately.

African feminist thought confronts a similar problem. When Western feminist theory universalises its own categories, African women may be interpreted through frameworks that do not fully capture their realities. Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí argues that Western gender categories cannot be assumed to organise all societies in the same way, because such assumptions may distort African histories and social structures (Oyěwùmí 1997). Her critique shows that naming can become epistemic domination when concepts developed from one historical experience are imposed as universal. The power to name is therefore also the power to define what counts as knowledge.

Yet naming is not only a tool of domination; it is also a practice of resistance. Marginalised groups resist by refusing imposed names and creating new ones. Self-naming allows them to challenge the categories through which they have been controlled. Womanism, for example, resists the racial limitations of mainstream feminism by naming Black women's experiences in relation to culture, spirituality, family, race, and communal wholeness. Alice Walker's womanism affirms Black women's creativity and commitment to the survival and wholeness of an entire people (Walker 1983). Chikwenye Ogunyemi's womanism further identifies Black women's literary and social experiences as requiring a framework attentive to gender, race, culture, and community (Ogunyemi 1985, 63-64). In both cases, naming becomes resistance because it refuses the erasure of Black women within dominant feminist and antiracist discourses.

Motherism also functions as resistant naming, though differently. Catherine Acholonu's motherism rejects the assumption that African women's emancipation must be theorised only through Western feminist categories. By foregrounding motherhood, nurture, care, nature, and complementarity, Acholonu attempts to recover African communal values as philosophical resources (Acholonu 1995). The concept is open to critique, especially where it risks reinforcing maternal expectations, but its importance lies in its refusal to accept conceptual dependency. It insists that African women's social significance can be named from within African ethical and cultural traditions. Similarly, African feminism resists by modifying feminism itself. Rather than simply adopting feminism as a universal doctrine, African feminist thinkers have reworked it in relation to African histories and realities. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism shifts attention to "social transformation including women," thereby reframing feminism as part of a larger African project of social change (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism names African feminist practice through negotiation, relationality, and contextual strategy (Nnaemeka 2004, 377). These frameworks show that resistance does not always mean rejecting a concept entirely; it may also mean revising, relocating, and renaming it.

Naming as resistance, therefore, has two major functions. First, it rejects misrepresentation. It refuses imposed categories that reduce African and Black women to victims, dependants, mothers, cultural symbols, or objects of development. Second, it creates new conceptual possibilities. It allows women to define themselves as thinkers, agents, caregivers, critics, community-builders, political actors, and producers of knowledge. In this sense, naming is both defensive and creative: it defends against distortion and creates new forms of intelligibility. However, resistant naming must also remain critical. A name that begins as resistance can become restrictive if it hardens into dogma. Womanism may exclude some continental African realities if applied too broadly. Motherism may marginalise women whose identities are not organised around motherhood. African feminism may become too general if it treats Africa as a single experience. This means that naming must always be accompanied by reflection. The power to name must include the willingness to revise names when they no longer serve the plurality of women's experiences.

Thus, naming as power and resistance reveals the central philosophical problem of African feminist thought: who has the authority to define African and Black women's lives? If others name them, their experiences may be distorted or subordinated. If they name themselves, they recover agency, but they must also remain attentive to difference and exclusion. The politics of naming is therefore not a minor linguistic issue. It is a struggle over knowledge, identity, and liberation.

4. AFRICAN WOMEN'S THOUGHT AND THE PROBLEM OF CONCEPTUAL DEPENDENCY

The problem of conceptual dependency arises when a people's experiences are interpreted primarily through categories produced outside their own histories and social realities. In African women's thought, this problem is especially serious because African women have often been theorised through concepts shaped by colonialism, Western feminism, patriarchy, development discourse, and nationalist politics. Conceptual dependency is not about the use of foreign ideas. No intellectual tradition develops in isolation, and African feminist philosophy can productively engage Western feminism, Black feminism, postcolonial theory, decolonial thought, ethics of care, and human rights discourse. Anta Diop, in *The African Origin of Civilisation: Myth or Reality* (1974), believes that history should guide political and social reconstruction, and that intellectuals ought to study the past not for the pleasure they find in so doing, but to derive lessons from it. The problem begins when external categories become the only legitimate categories of interpretation. When this happens, African women appear as examples within someone else's theory rather than as producers of theory in their own right.

Western feminist universalism presents another dimension of the problem. Feminism has provided a powerful language for challenging women's oppression, but some forms of feminism have treated Western women's experiences as if they represent the condition of all women. This can produce conceptual dependency when African women's realities are judged by categories that do not adequately reflect African histories, cultures, religions, kinship structures, economies, or communal ethics. Oyěwùmí's work is important because it questions the assumption that gender categories derived from Western societies can simply be applied to

African contexts (Oyěwùmí 1997). Her critique does not mean that African societies are free from gender injustice; rather, it means that African gender analysis must begin from African social realities. African women thinkers have responded to conceptual dependency by producing alternative names and frameworks. These include womanism, motherism, African feminism, Stiwanism, nego-feminism, Africana womanism, snail-sense feminism, and other related concepts. The significance of these names lies not only in their content but in the act of naming itself. They show African and Black women refusing to be permanent consumers of imported categories. They claim the authority to revise feminist language in light of their own histories and struggles.

Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism is a clear example. By proposing "social transformation including women," she reframes African women's liberation as part of a wider transformation of African societies (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). This avoids reducing women's struggle to imitation of Western feminism while also refusing patriarchal dismissal of feminism as foreign. Nnaemeka's nego-feminism similarly resists conceptual dependency by theorising African feminism through negotiation, relationality, and contextual practice (Nnaemeka 2004, 377). Her approach shows that African women's strategies need not conform to a single model of confrontation or autonomy in order to be politically meaningful. Womanism and motherism also address conceptual dependency, though in different ways. Womanism challenges the erasure of Black women within dominant feminist and antiracist categories. It insists that Black women's experiences require a vocabulary that recognises race, gender, culture, community, spirituality, and historical marginalisation together (Walker 1983; Ogunyemi 1985). Motherism, meanwhile, attempts to retrieve African communal and maternal values as resources for thinking about care, social reproduction, and women's agency (Acholonu 1995). Both frameworks show that African and Black women's thought is not merely reactive; it is creative and generative.

However, the critique of conceptual dependency should not lead to intellectual isolationism. African feminist philosophy need not reject all non-African concepts simply because they come from outside Africa. The more important question is whether such concepts are critically examined, historically situated, and transformed where necessary. Crenshaw's intersectionality, for example, emerged from Black women's legal and political experiences in the United States, but it has become useful in many contexts because it helps explain overlapping forms of oppression (Crenshaw 1989). African feminist thought can use such concepts productively, provided they are not imposed mechanically or treated as substitutes for local analysis. Conceptual independence, therefore, does not mean conceptual purity. It means interpretive authority. African and Black women must be able to decide which concepts illuminate their realities, which ones distort them, and which ones need to be renamed or reconstructed. This is the foundation of conceptual sovereignty. It allows African feminist philosophy to engage global thought without surrendering its own authority.

The problem of conceptual dependency is therefore central to the politics of naming. If African women depend entirely on categories produced elsewhere, their experiences may remain partially visible but not fully understood. If they name themselves, they create the possibility of theory grounded in their own histories, languages, struggles, and aspirations. Feminist naming becomes a way of breaking dependency, not by refusing dialogue with other traditions, but by entering that dialogue as an equal source of knowledge.

5. FEMINIST NAMING AS CONCEPTUAL SOVEREIGNTY

Feminist naming becomes philosophically significant when it is understood as a claim to conceptual sovereignty. Conceptual sovereignty refers to the authority of a people to define their own experiences, generate their own categories, and determine the terms through which their histories, identities, and emancipatory projects are interpreted. In African feminist thought, conceptual sovereignty means that African and Black women are not merely objects of colonial, patriarchal, nationalist, or Western feminist interpretation. They are subjects of knowledge who can name their own realities and decide which concepts adequately express their struggles. It is necessary because African and Black women's experiences have often been named through categories that do not emerge from their own histories, where African women are interpreted through frameworks that may partially reveal their experiences while also distorting them.

Feminist naming resists this distortion by enabling African and Black women to become authors of their own conceptual worlds. Alice Walker's womanism, for example, claims conceptual space for Black women's creativity, spirituality, cultural memory, and communal wholeness (Walker 1983). Chikwenye Ogunyemi's womanism further grounds Black women's experiences in literary, cultural, racial, and communal realities (Ogunyemi 1985, 63-64). Catherine Acholonu's motherism names African women's agency through care, nurture, motherhood, nature, complementarity, and the preservation of life (Acholonu 1995). Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism reframes the debate as one of social transformation including women, while Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism emphasises negotiation, relationality, and context-sensitive strategy (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994; Nnaemeka 2004, 377). These concepts are not merely descriptive labels; they are acts of philosophical self-positioning. The sovereignty involved here is not political in the narrow sense of territorial control. It is epistemic and conceptual. It concerns who has the authority to say what African women's experiences mean. This point is crucial for African philosophy. African philosophy has long been concerned with questions of identity, coloniality, cultural recovery, and intellectual self-definition. African feminist philosophy extends this concern by asking how African women specifically are named within philosophical discourse. It asks whether women appear as full subjects of thought or only as symbols of culture, tradition, family, or morality. It also asks whether African women's experiences are treated as philosophical sources or merely as social examples. Feminist naming becomes a way of inserting African women into philosophy, not as objects of discussion but as creators of concepts.

Conceptual sovereignty also clarifies why the plurality of feminist names should not be dismissed too quickly as confusion. The proliferation of names in African women's thought reflects the fact that no single inherited category has been sufficient to capture the complexity of African and Black women's lives. Womanism names one dimension of the struggle, Black women's wholeness within racialised and communal histories. Motherism names another, the ethical significance of care, nurture, and social continuity. African feminism names another, the critique of patriarchy, coloniality, and socio-cultural domination from within African realities. Stiwanism and nego-feminism further name social transformation and negotiation as key dimensions of African women's agency. The plurality of names is therefore a sign of conceptual production. However, conceptual sovereignty does not mean that every name is beyond criticism. A name may emerge from resistance but still reproduce exclusion. Motherism may elevate care while narrowing womanhood around maternal expectation. Womanism may affirm Black women's wholeness while requiring contextual adjustment when applied to continental African realities. African feminism may resist Western universalism while risking an overly general idea of "African women." Conceptual sovereignty therefore requires critical reflexivity. African and Black women must have the authority not only to name themselves but also to revise, contest, and multiply those names when they become restrictive. Feminist naming as conceptual sovereignty thus has three major implications. First, it shifts African women from the position of objects to subjects of knowledge. Second, it challenges the universal authority of external categories by insisting on historically grounded self-definition. Third, it opens feminist philosophy to plurality, because different names may be needed to capture different dimensions of women's lives. The aim is to establish the authority of African and Black women to determine which vocabulary is adequate to their experiences. In this sense, conceptual sovereignty is the foundation of African feminist self-definition, a philosophical practice through which African and Black women claim interpretive authority. It is a refusal to be permanently named by others. It is also a constructive act through which new concepts are created for understanding identity, power, culture, community, and liberation. The politics of naming becomes, at its deepest level, a struggle over who has the right to define the meaning of African women's lives.

6. THE AMBIVALENCE OF NAMING: INCLUSION, EXCLUSION, AND FEMINIST PLURALITY

Although naming is central to conceptual sovereignty, it is also ambivalent. It empowers, but it can also exclude; clarifies, but it can also simplify; creates solidarity, but it can also produce boundaries that leave some women outside the recognised field of struggle. This ambivalence shows that the fluidity of feminist terms can produce both conceptual richness and fragmentation within feminist movements, a tension that is central to African feminist philosophy. When Black women's experiences are named through womanism, they are no longer treated as secondary to white feminism or male-centred antiracism. When African women's care labour is named through motherism, the work of nurture, social reproduction, and generational continuity becomes philosophically visible. When African women's struggles are named through African feminism, patriarchy, coloniality, culture, law, religion, economy, and political power become central to gender analysis. However, a name selects certain experiences as central and leaves others less visible. Womanism may centre Black women's wholeness, spirituality, and communal survival, but it may not fully account for women whose experiences of community are marked primarily by violence, silencing, or exclusion. Motherism may value care and motherhood, but it may inadequately represent women who are unmarried, childfree, infertile, widowed, professionally oriented, or resistant to maternal expectations. African feminism may speak powerfully of African women's struggles, but it may obscure the differences among African women if it treats Africa as a single cultural or political experience. This exclusionary possibility is a feature of all conceptual naming (Rousseau 2026). Every concept draws a boundary. The problem arises when the boundary becomes rigid and refuses to recognise experiences that complicate it. A feminist name becomes oppressive when it speaks for women without listening to them, or it treats one group's experience as universal, or when it silences those who do not fit its preferred image of womanhood.

The ambivalence of naming is especially visible in the tension between unity and plurality. Feminist movements need shared names because shared names enable solidarity, mobilisation, scholarship, and political recognition. Without common categories, struggles may become fragmented and difficult to organise. However, feminist movements also need plurality because women's lives are not uniform (Carastathis 2014). African and Black women differ by class, religion, ethnicity, nationality, generation, sexuality, education, marital status, rural or urban location, and historical experience. A single name may help build collective identity, but it may also flatten differences. The challenge, therefore, is to develop a politics of naming that is both unifying and plural. Such a politics would recognise that names are necessary but not final. It would allow womanism, motherism, African feminism, Stiwanism, nego-feminism, and other frameworks to function as dialogical concepts rather than closed identities. Additionally, the ambivalence of naming reveals why feminist self-definition must be ongoing. A name that once captured a crucial dimension of struggle may later require revision. African feminist philosophy must therefore treat naming as a continuous practice of interpretation rather than a completed act.

In this sense, the ambivalence of naming is productive. It keeps feminist thought from becoming dogmatic. It reminds African feminist philosophy that every category must remain answerable to the women it claims to represent. It also prevents feminist naming from becoming merely symbolic. A name matters only if it helps clarify oppression, deepen agency, and imagine liberation. When a name no longer performs this work, it must be revised or supplemented. The plurality of feminist names in African women's

thought should therefore be understood not as failure, but as evidence of intellectual vitality. Womanism, motherism, African feminism, Stiwanism, and nego-feminism reveal different attempts to think through gender, race, culture, care, community, patriarchy, coloniality, and transformation. Their differences do not necessarily divide African feminist philosophy; they can enrich it, provided they remain in critical dialogue. The task is to make plurality philosophically responsible.

7. CONCLUSION

The politics of naming in African feminist thought is a struggle for conceptual sovereignty. Naming is not neutral because it shapes how women's experiences are classified, interpreted, represented, and valued; it determines who appears as a subject of knowledge, what counts as oppression, and what forms of liberation become imaginable. African and Black women have often been named by colonial authorities, patriarchal traditions, missionary discourses, nationalist narratives, development institutions, and Western feminist theories in ways that produced distorted or incomplete representations of their lives. Against this background, African feminist thought insists that women must not merely be included within inherited categories but must possess the authority to define, revise, and contest those categories. Through names such as womanism, motherism, African feminism, Stiwanism, and nego-feminism, African and Black women challenge imposed meanings and produce alternative vocabularies grounded in their own histories and struggles. Naming, therefore, functions both as power and resistance: it can misrepresent and subordinate, but it can also reclaim interpretive authority and open new possibilities for thought and action. The problem of conceptual dependency shows why this matters, for African women's experiences cannot be adequately theorised if they are interpreted only through categories produced outside their own realities. Conceptual sovereignty, however, does not mean intellectual isolation; it means the authority to engage, appropriate, revise, or reject concepts according to lived contexts. At the same time, naming remains ambivalent because every name can empower by making experiences visible while also excluding those who do not fit its preferred category. For this reason, African feminist philosophy does not need one final name for women's liberation; it needs a critical, dialogical, and revisable vocabulary capable of holding together plurality, historical specificity, and conceptual clarity. The right to name must include the right to rename. Feminist naming is therefore not a marginal issue in African philosophy but one of the ways African and Black women claim philosophical presence, move from being objects of discourse to subjects of theory, and affirm their authority to define what their experiences mean, what structures oppress them, and what forms of freedom they seek.

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