



WHAT IS IN A NAME? THE FACTS FROM SUKUMA PERSONAL NAMES.

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Abstract

This study was conducted so as to effect a discernment of the norms and values of Kisukuma expressed through names. The study was conducted in Mwanza region, particularly in Kwimba district, specifically in the five wards of Kikubiji, Sumve, Mantare, Malya and Ngula. The sample of 50 respondents consisted of native speakers of the Kisukuma language were chosen for their suitability for providing the information necessary to do the analysis. The study brought to light the fact that there are a number of dimensions considered during the process of naming in the Sukuma society. Names are chosen, for example, that correspond to a state of happiness, to the arrival of visitors, to death, to the untimely flight of a parent, to the manner of birth, to the place of birth, to the time of birth, or to a conflict or quarrel within the family. Also the study brought into consideration the nick-names in Sukuma society that people give to each other. All in all, the study concentrated on the fact that Sukuma names convey meanings that depend on the manner – either according to custom or idiosyncratically – by which the process of naming is conducted. This is to say that naming derives from an existing phenomenon that those who are doing the naming wish to highlight.

Key words: Name givers, semiotic theory, anthroponomy

Introduction

The study of personal names is referred to as anthroponomy. Anthroponomy is related to genealogy, sociology and anthropology. Anthroponomy falls under the umbrella of onomastic that deals with the study of proper names including their forms and use (Algeo 1992: 727). In logical and philosophical sense, a name refers to a different element of human experience and names are pure referential (Rey 1995:26). In every culture, names have cultural and social contexts that identify the bearer. This is to say that every person in this world has a name that solely identifies and marks him/her from all other peoples in the world. Algeo (1992: 728) aptly points out that “People are almost invariably named, indeed, a human being without a name would be socially and psychologically less than a fully man.” In Saussure’s notion, the name is the sign and the denotatum is the signified. Simply put, the name is a label that refers to a person.

Personal naming is a fascinating subject that varies much around the world and tells us much about a country or a society. Everywhere names mean something, but often the meaning has been lost or obscured by time. (Suzman, 1994, p.353). However, Alford (1988 p. 29-30, 69) asserts that personal names carry a great deal of information about culture in question: about people’s values, cultural practices ethic background and religious background. Names are part of every culture and they are of enormous importance both to the people who receive names and to the society that give them (Middleton, 1961, p.34)

Kisukuma language

Kisukuma is one of the Bantu languages spoken in the north- western sector of Tanzania, mainly in Mwanza, Shinyanga, Simiyu, and Geita, but also in some parts of the Kagera and Singida and in small sectors of Kigoma and Rukwa (Chenya, 1988). The name Kisukuma originated from the word Sukuma which means ‘north’. The people who speak this language are called Bhasukuma which means ‘northern people’. This is because the Sukuma people came from the South and established their settlement in the North. Approximately 5,500,000 Tanzanians speak Kisukuma as their mother tongue. This means that 12% of the population speak Kisukuma; indeed it is the most spoken language in the country (MLUTA). The Kisukuma language has four major dialects: all the dialects are understandable to Kisukumaspeakers. The dialects consist of Kemunang’weli, Kemunadakama, Kemunasukuma and Kemunakiya (Batibo, 1985). The names of the Kisukuma dialects are associated with directions. Ng’weli means East, Kiya means West, Dakama means South and Sukuma means North.

Semiotics theory as a naming framework

Semiotics is the theory of the production and interpretation of meaning. Its basic Principle; is that meaning is made by the deployment of acts and objects which functions as signs in relation to other signs. Semioticians generally understand signs to have meaning within larger system. The words and phrases of a language, for example, have meanings within the language; and have meaning only because of their place in that languages structure. These systems of signs are constituted by the complex meaning-relations that can exist between one sign and other primary relations of contrast and super ordination/subordination (for example, synonymy, homonymy, antonym, meronymy, and hyponymy). Signs are part deployed in space and time to produce „texts“ whose meanings are construed by mutually conceptualizing relations among sign. Text is both a product and a process. It is a product in sense that it is an output within a certain construction represented in systematic ways, and a process in the sense of a continuous process of semantic choice made in a network of further potential choices, an interactive event, and a social exchange of meaning. Similarly, it is both an object and an instance Pierce CS (1940).

The lexical loading of Kisukuma personal names can be studied as a text and in context. This is because names and their meaning is a product of the environment. Therefore, it becomes important to study how different sign systems are physically and semiotically integrated in Sukuma texts“.

Naming and Culture

Beattie (1957) asserts that, one of the many ways in which language and culture go hand in hand concerns the naming process; the ways in which different cultures select and assign names. It has become evident that personal naming practices interact in significant ways with various patterns of social and cultural organization and can be keys to broader cultural changes, in view of their intimate connections with values, traditions, hopes, fears and events in people's lives. When one names a baby and a word is consciously chosen to refer to a specific child, that word has enormous potential symbolic power. As well as identifying (and classifying) a particular person, the chosen word can be used to send a message, to express a wish, hope or prayer, to resonate with the past and with selected national and religious groups, or simply to sound good. Naming is a specifically linguistic act, revealing the complexities of social relationships, roles and statuses. (Suzman 1994)

The Name-Givers

Herbert (1995), name-givers are people who have the responsibility of naming the child. In traditional African culture not everyone can take on the task of naming the child. This is reserved for the elders of the family. It is evident that the introduction of Christianity and European culture in some traditional African societies has weakened the customs of naming children. Traditionally, the elders of the family or the community or the traditional doctors or religious leaders were the only name-givers. People who play an important role in name-giving differ from one culture to another. There is no clear distinction between people who may or may not fulfill this role.

Herbert (1995:5), in his research on the South African Bantu-speaking people such as the AmaXhosa, the Basotho and the AmaZulu, found that family members, especially parents and grandparents, give the bulk of names. Parents are the most common name-givers, followed by paternal grandparents and then maternal grandparents, especially the grandmother. He found that this was different from Western culture where usually only the parents play an important part in bestowing personal names on their children.

Methods of data collection

The study used in-depth interview, participant observation and self-intuition in the whole process of data collection. The interview guide comprised of open ended items focusing on identifying the aspects of name giving and their meaning in Kisukuma was prepared. Participant observation was possible and was efficiently conducted since the researcher is a native speaker of Kisukuma language. Also the researcher used his intuition about names and their meaning because it was easy to associate with people in the daily activities and interactions to get the pure information.

Data analysis plan

In managing the data, thematic analysis technique flexible data analysis plan that qualitative researchers use to generate themes from interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2013)- was applied, which involved grouping the names into various categories basing on meanings and projected connotation as well as naming criteria. Accordingly, the findings are presented in subsequent sections in descriptions and explanations. The presentation and discussion based on the aspect of name giving in Sukuma society and the meaning of personal names were discussed.

The Findings

The aspects of name-giving in Kisukuma

The study revealed that, there are different aspects of name-giving in Kisukuma which considers the circumstances and events of the child's birth. The aspects of name-giving in Kisukuma mentioned by the informants were; naming related to delaying of getting a child, naming related to the time of birth, naming denoting place of birth and naming related to seasons and events in the year.

Also during in-depth interview, the informants revealed other aspects of name giving in Kisukuma which included; naming denoting runaway of the parent, naming related to problems experienced by the mother during pregnancy and naming related to death. Other aspects mentioned included naming related to death, naming related to Conflict or Quarrel within the family members, naming related to war naming related to happiness or joy, naming related to the arrival of visitors, naming related to manner of birth, naming related to the first and last-born and names related to family names. Also the informants during in-depth interview added that;

“There are names we give to children or people after they have born. These names are called nick-names. These names are given to children or people according to the character or physical disabilities. So nick-names is another aspect of name-giving in Sukuma society”.

So, another aspect of name giving in Kisukuma is called Nick-names which is named to people or children according to physical character or physical disabilities of a particular person after birth.

Therefore, the researcher summarized these aspects of name giving given by the informants as follows;

The Meaning of Kisukuma Personal Names

Through in-depth interviews and focused group discussions, the respondents reported that nearly all the Sukuma personal names convey meanings which depend on the circumstances of the naming process. Examples would be naming related to the time of birth, to the delay involved in begetting a child, to the place of birth, to the season (meteorologically speaking) or to the events of the year, to the running away of the parents, to death, to quarrels or conflicts among the family members, to the manner of birth and to the milieu of euphoria, happiness or joy.

Names Related to the Place of Birth

A child may be given a name that coincides with the place where he/she was born. Such places may include farms, roads, hillsides, or lakeshores.

Name	Gender	Meaning
Mashamba	male gender	“farm”
Matongo	male gender	“farm”
Malale	male gender	“farm”
Mayila	male gender	“a way”
Nzila/ Nyanzila	female gender	“road”
Kadutu	both genders	“a leaf”
Mandege	male gender	“maize”

The names *Matongo*, *Mashamba*, and *Malale* are the names given to male children who are born on a farm. The names *Mayila* for a boy and *Nyanzila* for a girl are the names given to children born when the mother was travelling. The names *Kadutu* or *Madutu* are given to children born when the mother had laid upon some tree leaves when she was giving birth.

Names Given Related to Seasons and Events in the Year

The seasons or events of the year may include hunger, famine, floods, high rainfall, invasion of locusts on a farm and drought. The names given to children according in these circumstances include:

Name	Gender	Meaning
Mayala	male gender	“hunger”
Nyanzala	female gender	“hunger”
Ng’wakami	female gender	“bad year”
Mabula	male gender	“plentiful rainfall”
Kabula	female gender	“little rainfall”
Mayige	male gender	“locusts”
Nyanjige	female gender	“locusts”

Names Related to the Time of Birth

The meaning of Kisukuma personal names may depend on the time when the child is born. The Kisukuma notion of time gives rise to the categories of morning (Dilu), late morning (Misana), afternoon (Limi), evening (Mhindi) and night (Bujiku). The Sukuma people may use the time of birth to name their new-borns. The following are the names which are related to time of birth.

Names	Gender	Meaning
Dilu	both genders	“morning”
Misana	male gender	“late-morning”
Kasana	female gender	“late morning”
Malimi	male gender	“afternoon”
Limi	female gender	“afternoon”
Mhindi	both genders	“evening”
Wile	male gender	“when it’s dusk”
Nyawile	female gender	“when it’s dusk”
Bujiku	male gender	“night”
Majiku	female gender	“night”

Names Related to Parents Who Flee or Refuse the Baby

The Sukuma names may come from the tragedy that either one of the parents leaves the family or that one parent especially the father refuses to accept the woman’s pregnancy. When the child is born within this situation, there are names relevant to what has happened that may be bestowed upon them. The names include:

Names	Gender	Meaning
Mpelwa	for both genders	“to be left by someone”
Kulekwa	for both genders	“to be left”
Shileng’wa	for both genders	“the refused one”
Kuleng’wa	for both genders	“to be refused”

Names Related to Happiness or Joy

In the Sukuma society, there is a period during which the people are celebrating festivals. The festivals may include the giving of the bridal price whereby people join together in happiness and drink some local beer, and dance together. So when a mother gives birth during this occasion, she may call the new-born baby any one of the following names:

Name	Gender	Meaning
Bukombe	male gender	“traditional wedding”
Masanja	male gender	“bringing people together”
Walwa	male gender	“local beer”
Buyegi	male gender	“happiness/ joy”
Butogwa	both genders	“happy”

Masanja is a very common name in Kisukuma for the baby boys connoting the bringing together of couples who hitherto had been separated due to misunderstandings between them.

Names Related to Conflicts or Quarrels within the family

In the Sukuma tradition, there are various names given to a new-born child that are related to conflicts or quarrels within the family. Hence these names show various circumstances prevailing during birth when the mother was pregnant. During the pregnancy of a mother, for example, other members from the family may dislike her, hate her, abuse her and use a variety of hate words or gossip about her. Commenting on a society unrelated to the Sukuma, Suzman (1994:26) asserts that friction names are commands or questions that often identify the source of conflict and so provoke a situation where the sources of the conflict become public.

Name	Gender	Meaning
Nemelwa	female gender	“failure”
Nh’oyela	female gender	“talks to him/ her”
Baliyinjaho	female gender	“they remove themselves”
Bankolwa	female gender	“they hate her”
Bahayage	both genders	“discuss them”
Shiduki	male gender	“the abused one”
Yombo	male gender	“quarrels”
Mihayo	female gender	“many words”
Balinago	female gender	“they have”
Balahaya	female gender	“they will say”
Manugwa	both genders	“the hated one”

Names Related to Death

Death may affect the naming system of the Sukuma. Parents give death-related names to children especially when the parents have lost hope for the survival of their children due to the fact that several children may have died in consecutive order. The names are as follows:

Names	Gender	Meaning
Gema	both genders	“try again”
Kwigema	both genders	“try for each other”
Mgema	male gender	“the one who tries”
Njile	female gender	“goer”
Dalali	both genders	“nothing”
Milembe	female gender	“cheater”
Maduhu	male gender	“nothing”

There are occasions, therefore, when the names *Gema*, *Kwigema* and *Mgema* are given to the children of either gender because the parents have been hesitating to feel confident that the new born baby would survive. Because they have had to try again to have a baby, they give the baby a name, *Gema*, that literally means “try”.

Names Related to a Delay in Getting a Child

There are circumstances which may lead a mother to experience a delay in her attempts to be pregnant or have a baby. This situation may lead the mother to consult a traditional healer in Kisukuma, who is called a *nfumu*; and a mother may be given some traditional medicine to cure her fertility problem. So children born after this exercise may be called by one of the following names:

Names	Gender	Meaning
Maganga	male gender	“traditional medicine”
Nyamiji	both genders	“roots”
Kulindwa	both genders	“awaited”

Names Related to the Mourning of a Deceased Person

The Sukuma people have the tradition of mourning when a person in the community dies. This period of mourning may coincide with a woman's pregnancy. When a mother gives birth during the community's time of grief, she may give the new-born baby a name that is related to mourning. This helps a mother to remember what happened when she was pregnant. The names include:

Name	Gender	Meaning
Misoji	female gender	“tears”
Shililo	male gender	“tears”
Nhungwi/ Nhungu	female gender	“the one who laments”
Malongo	both genders	“soil”
Masalu	male gender	“sand”
Ponyiwa	both genders	“channel away”
Mayanga	male gender	“death problems”

Names Related to the Manner of Birth

There are names which may be given to a child because of the manner by which the child came to see the light of day. These names include:

Name	Gender	Meaning
Kashinje	both genders	“a child born legs first”
Bundala	male gender	“a child born by normal delivery”
Munde	female gender	“a child born by normal delivery”
Kabisi	female gender	“unripe”
Mabisi	male gender	“unripe”
Ndebile	both genders	“not yet fully ready to live on its own”
Kanagana	both genders	“not yet fully ready to live on its own”

The names Kabisi, Mabisi, Ndebile and Kanagana refer to the premature babies born before nine months. The comparison with unripe fruit seems apt in their regard. So when the baby is born, the families pay much attention to that baby so as to make sure that the child is kept alive to bring it to maturity.

Names Related to Twins

In Sukuma society, there are special names that correspond to the twin scenario. The names include:

Name	Gender	Meaning
Kulwa	both genders	“the first to come out from the womb”
Doto	both genders	“the second to come out from the womb”

The Sukuma people also assign names to the children born following the twins.

Shija	both genders	“the one who remained”
Mhoja	both genders	“comforter of the twins”
Kamuli	male gender	“light giver”
Kasanda	male gender	“driving away the twins”
Buholo	male gender	“end of delivering twins”
Kija	both genders	“carrying the twins”

Conclusion

Personal names do not merely distinguish people from each other; they also operate as linguistic indicators of how socialization takes place within families. Names may reflect the traditional patterns and the idiosyncrasies that may be representative of various social relationships within the family. African personal names give insight into the socio-cultural changes or events in the community. Personal names reflect the history, culture and socio-political events which have marked the national scene. What perhaps may be most important is the fact that the names and the people identified by the names become unrepeatable, irreplaceable, irreducible and unique threads in the fabric of the nation's identity.

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