

Kipsigis Cultural Values in Birth Names

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Abstract

The present study investigated cultural values in Kipsigis personal names of the birth name category. The study was done in Kericho and Bomet counties, Kenya, from December 2022 to August 2023. A total of 20 personal names were collected and analyzed using the anthroponym-pragma-semio-semantic decompositional theory which proposes that a name is first broken down into its various morphological components so as to arrive at its meaning. The birth names were analyzed and sub-categorized into time birth names, season names, location names and ancestral names. Each name is broken down into its various morphemes and the literal meaning is established. From this analysis several morphological processes are noted such as prefixation, compounding involving several word classes and deverbalization. From the process of prefixation, the feature of gender is brought out whereby names of boy begin with *kip-* and girls' names beginning with *chep-*. Several cultural implications were brought out which include the need to mark history surrounding the birth of a child, herdsman culture and belief in the supernatural.

Keywords: meaning, cultural implications, values, herdsman culture

Introduction

A simple definition of a birth name is a name that a name-giver gives to a child upon its birth. Kipsigis children are first given a name that will reflect the circumstances surrounding their birth and thereafter an ancestral name. Birth names are also referred to as true names (Jerono, 2019). Wahed (2009) asserts that birth names mark the day of a child's entry into the Earth whereas Agyekum (2006) terms it a default name which a child is given and can never be changed in any way. According to him, a birth name is also regarded as a "soul's name" due to the belief that a child receives a name from their soul (Agyekum, 2006, p. 210). The Nandi people, who are a sister group to the Kipsigis living in the western highlands of Kenya, refer to a birth name as *kainet ab musarek* which means "porridge name" due to the fact that during one's childhood, porridge is the main meal and that is the period in which the name will be mainly used to refer to the individual (Ogechi & Ruto, 2002).

Names are given for different reasons in different cultures (Madende, 2009). One's culture dictates when a child is to be named as well as how the whole process will be carried out. Madende (2009) gives an example of the Akan, which is a language group in Ghana belonging to the wider Niger-Congo classification, who name children according to the day of birth. The name will reflect the exact day of the week and the name of the deity to be worshipped that day. For example, Kofi is a child born on a Friday and Kwame on a Saturday (Agyekum, 2006, p. 213).

This paper presents the Kipsigis naming pattern and the cultural implications to the naming.

Methodology

This study used qualitative research method which enabled the researcher to get first-hand information from the Kipsigis people through interviews with the elderly and knowledgeable people of the community. In this study, Anthroponym-pragma-semio-semantic decompositional theory which was developed by Makondo (2009) in his PhD study of Shona names, has been used. This theory borrows tenets from anthropology, semantics, morphology and pragmatics so as to obtain the meaning behind a name. It proposes that to get to the pragmatic level of a name, one must first break the name into its various morphemes. This will enable a researcher to establish the denotative meaning as well as identify the morphological processes that are used by language speakers to come up with a name. The semantic analysis of names would enable a researcher to pinpoint the connotative meaning of a word. In order to get to the onomastic meaning of the name, Makondo (2009) proposes that a researcher identifies the motivations of the name-givers in giving a name. This would entail looking at the context of the name. The names collected were therefore analyzed using the tools obtained from the above theory which enabled the researcher to arrive at the denotative as well as the connotative meaning of the names. Generalizations were then made on the cultural implications based on the meanings of the names.

The research study was done among the Kipsigis people of Kenya living in two counties: Kericho and Bomet because they are at the heart of the Kipsigis culture. Snowball sampling was employed so as to reach the respondents who could best discuss the cultural values in the land. Five elderly respondents who are well versed in the culture of the community were identified who also recommended other respondents who had similar expertise which led the researcher in the path of 10 other respondents who could divulge more knowledge on the subject area.

Focus group interviews with eight respondents, five men and three women of age bracket 50-90, also enabled an interactive session with the participants. Face-to-face interviews were also conducted to gather information from ten respondents. This formed part of the survey method that was used to find out the past as well as current naming pattern among the Kipsigis.

Morpho-Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis of Birth Names

The birth names have been categorized into four depending on the factors surrounding the birth of a child as marked through the name. These are time birth names, special circumstances names, location of birth names and ancestral names. Below is the presentation of the analysis of the names and their cultural implications. First the names are broken down into their various morphological units to establish the literal meaning.

The second level of meaning in a name is called the connotative meaning according to the onomastic theory. Batoma (2009) asserts that an onomastician obtains this meaning by finding out the factors that led to a person being given such a name. Once the motivation has been determined, a link between them might emerge. Hence the other name for the connotative meaning is cultural meaning because it is a “window on the history and philosophy” linked to the name (Batoma, 2009, p. 217).

Time of Birth Names

There are many time of birth names in Kipsigis.

- 1) *kip-ko-rir*
MASC-INF-before dawn
'boy born at the break of dawn'
- 2) *chep-ko-ech*
FEM-INF-dawn
'girl born at dawn'
- 3) *kip-mutai*
MASC-morning
'boy born in the morning'

In the above examples, the morphological structure comprises of a gender prefix and a root indicating time reference. The female names start with the prefix *chep-* and the male names with the prefix *kip-*. Hence we see the morphological process of prefixation. Semantically, time birth names (1-3) depict children born in the morning hours which has been divided into before (1), during (2), and after dawn (3). This shows a specific marking of the time as guided by the position of the sun. It is clear that the culture was very particular at pinpointing the arrival time of a child.

There are several motivations that the name-giver has in giving these names. From the discussion during the focus group interview with eight respondents from Fort-Tenan location, several details on naming patterns and motivation emerged. Respondent B2 explained that the name-giver was traditionally the paternal grandmother. According to B2, the name-giver has to identify and mark the gender of the child hence the choice of *kip-* for a boy and *chep-* for a girl. The midwife together with the other women who were assisting in the birth would reveal the gender of the child after birth by ululating four times if it is a boy and three times if it was a girl. Next is to document the exact time the child was born because a child is associated with his or her time of birth. Another motivation is to choose a time-birth name that has not already been given to the sibling, parent, grandfather or paternal uncle of the child. One of the traditions in child name-giving is that a time-birth name cannot be shared among the family members. For example, if a mother's birth name is *chepkoech* "girl born at dawn" then her daughter born at the same time cannot be called *chepkoech* because time of birth names are not shared among the immediate family members. In that case, the name-giver will have to choose another name depicting a girl born in the morning hours such as *chemutai* "girl born in the morning". The reason for the custom is that the identity of a person is marked with a name. If siblings are given

the same personal name, then it may bring about confusion as to who is being referred to. This identity cannot be shared.

The above examples show names marked according to the position of the sun. Another way of marking time is using the daily activities of the Kipsigis livestock as illustrated below:

- 4) *chep-nget-tich*
FEM-wake up-cows
'girl born when cows were waking up/ going for pasture'
- 5) *chep-ñé-no*
FEM-wake up-goats
'girl born when the goats were waking up'
- 6) *kip-rot-tich*
MASC-come back-cows
'boy born when the cows were coming back from grazing'
- 7) *chep-ro-no*
FEM-come back-goats
'girl born when the goats were coming back from pasture'

The above examples have the morphological process of compounding and prefixation. Example (4) *chep-nget-tich* "girl born when the cows were waking up" is a name derived from the combination of the verb *nget* meaning "wake up" and the noun *tich* "cow" to form the compound root *nget-tich* "cows wake up". The name *chep-nge-tich* is made up of the verb *-nget* "wake" and *-tich* which is the definite form of the word *teta* meaning "cow" in singular and *tuga* which means "cows" in plural. Example (5) *chep-ng'et (v)-no(n)* "girl born when goats were waking up" and (6) *kip-ro(v)tich(n)* "boy born when cows were coming back from grazing". They all have the structure of verb-noun combination.

The Examples 4-7 reflect the herdsman culture because of the reference to cows waking up (4 and 5), goats waking up (6) and their coming back in the evening (6-7). The Kipsigis in the past used the activities of their livestock to tell the time of the day because there were no clocks. This tradition still remains even when the members of this community can now tell their time using reference of the clock. For the mothers who give birth away from home, this is usually

done in consultation with the grandmothers who could be physically present or through phone. The above personal names show that the Kipsigis kept cows and goats as a way of livelihood and that is why it is seen in their naming system. The rhythm of the livestock from going out for pasture in the morning hours to their coming back in the afternoon is captured through name-giving.

Special Circumstances Names

Through name-giving, events that are mostly unexpected like a difficult birth, arrival of visitors during the birth of a child or a mother going into labour before the expected period are marked. Indeed, even the birth of a child in a home where the other children have been born and died are marked. Both harsh and favourable weather conditions are also marked through names.

These names include:

- 8) *kip-terer*
MASC-mud wall peelings
'Boy of peelings from a mud wall'
- 9) *kip-sich-kee*
MASC-give birth-self
'boy whose mother gave birth by herself'

Example (8) *kip-terer* "boy resuscitated by mud peelings" is a name given to a child who faints just after birth. The term *terer* is a noun which means "mud wall peelings". The midwife together with the women present have to resuscitate him using mud peelings from the wall which are burnt so as to emit smoke. This smoke is directed to the baby's nose and it may rouse him back to regain consciousness. By giving this name, the name-giver's motivation is to document this medical emergency that could have been fatal. The name is metonymic as the 'mud peelings' represent not only the individual but also the emergency situation that necessitated the traditional first aid.

Example (9) has a compound root *sich* meaning “give birth” and *kee* meaning “self”. The meaning is to give birth by oneself, with no one to assist. This kind of a name shows the kind of difficulties mothers had to go through in the process of giving birth. It is also showing the strength of the Kipsigis woman who were able to give birth by themselves.

In Kipsigis culture, there are special circumstances birth names that involve rituals that were done before the names were given. These names include:

- 10) *kip-kering*
MASC-grave
‘boy put on a grave’
- 11) *teger-eet*
set apart-SG
‘one set apart’

Example 10 has deep cultural implications. The noun root *kering* literally means a ‘hole’ and when it is combined with the male prefix *kip-* it shows it is a name given to a boy child. Contextually, it is not just any hole but actually a grave.

The cultural context of giving such a name is that of a child who is born into a family where several children have all died in their infancy. To ensure that the present child lives, a ritual is done whereby the family members perform a mock burial pretending that even the child that has just been born has also died. According to Respondent C3, the midwife might even declare that the newborn is an ugly thing, unwanted or a beast and so they do not even want it that is why they are getting rid of it through burial. This is meant to confuse the spirits responsible for the deaths of the children in that family. The spirits will think that that child has died also hence they will not come for him. The ritual is usually done in the presence of close relatives and neighbors. After the ritual, the child is picked from the grave by one of the relatives and handed over to the parents in pretext that it is not the same child. This is a very spiritual

matter and it is their faith that prevails. Nobody doubts as to where the other child might have come from.

The cultural significance of such a name is that it shows how the Kipsigis believed in spirits. Their philosophy of death being brought about by spirits is shown. The name also evokes the desperate situation of the parents and relatives as they try to do everything to keep the child alive.

The next name is Example 11: *tegereet*. The root verb is *tegeer* which means “set apart” and *-eet* is a singular suffix. This is a special name given to a child who has been born into a family where children have been born and have died. To set the child apart, the child would be made to wear a special bangle or a necklace and the hair shaved leaving a little hair on the forehead. A petition is then directed to God through a ritual. Everyone meeting the child would know that this is an only child and would treat him kindly. The cultural significance about the name therefore is that it is a sign of petition from the parents that this is the only child, and they beg the spirit to let him survive. It was believed that those who will be born after him too will not die. The name-giver gives this name to document this important event.

Other special circumstances names reflect the weather conditions in the land that directly affected the Kipsigis community which in the past was predominantly a pastoralist one. They therefore observed the weather conditions keenly. A drought would spell doom for both their livestock and them whereas a rainy season was welcomed with joy. The name-givers kept a record of the different climatic conditions their community went through by giving names that reflected this different weather conditions. Consider the name below:

- 12) *chep-rógóot*
 FEM-starve
 ‘girl born during famine/when people were starving’.

Some personal names also depict happy times when there is plenty in the land and ceremonies were done to celebrate various events. The Kipsigis brew traditional beer that was drunk by the elders during such ceremonies giving rise to the following names to mark the events:

- 13) *chep-maiywa*
 FEM-beer
 ‘girl born during drinking period’
- 14) *kip-túm*
 MASC-ceremony
 ‘boy born during a ceremony’

In Example 13, the root is *maiywa* which means “beer”. It is given to a child who is born during a celebration where people were drinking traditional beer. The name-giver would therefore want to document this season by giving this name to the child. In Example 14, the root noun *tum* means “a ceremony”. The Kipsigis had various ceremonies in different seasons. The major ones were harvests and circumcision ceremonies. A child born during any of the ceremonies would be given that name to document these social activities.

Location of birth names

The third subcategory is the place name which marks the location where a child was born. The community being a pastoralist one, would not linger in one place for long. In the event of a dry period or when they felt congested, the Kipsigis people would move to other new places or lands where they could get enough pasture. Consider the following examples:

- 15) *kip-ruto*
 MASC-go on a journey
 ‘boy born when mother had gone on a journey’
- 16) *kip-sói*
 MASC-new lands
 ‘boy born in new lands far from home’
- 17) *chep-mabwai*
 FEM-family altar
 ‘girl born at the family altar’

Sometimes a mother could have travelled far away from home for some reason and ended up getting a child away from home. The name-giver would mark this using the name *cheruto* for a girl or *kipruto* if it is a boy. The root of the name is a verb *ruto* which means “go on a journey” This is what is being denoted in Example 15.

Example 16 *kipsoi* has the root noun *soi* which means “newly cultivated land”. It is given to mark the birth of a child who is born far away from their original home. This name conveys the history of the Kipsigis of moving from place to place in search of pasture and more land for cultivation which is a herdsman lifestyle.

In Example 17, the root of the name *chep-mabwai* “girl born at the family altar” is *mabwai* which means “altar”. Every Kipsigis homestead had a specific place of prayer which was done at least once a day. This altar was built using sacred trees. All the sacrifices to God would be done there. If a child was born and failed to cry, he or she would be rushed to the altar by the midwife who often was the paternal grandmother. According to B1, the midwife would pour milk and millet at the altar and make a prayer for the child. After that, the child was supposed to live. This name therefore documents the event.

Ancestral Names

To crown it all, a child would receive an ancestral name called *kainetab oik* translated as “name of the spirits”. The other name for it is *kureneet* which means “a name for calling”. The root of the word is the verb *kur* which means ‘call’. This is an important category of birth names. According to Respondent C1, when a child was born, the midwife would hold the baby and ask, “who are you?” The name-giver would begin mentioning names of the departed relatives until the child sneezes twice. If the child is a boy, they will mention names of the deceased male

relatives and vice versa for the girls. The name giver would only stop when the child sneezes which is a sign of acceptance that he or she is the one.

- 18) *ko-ee*
 ASP-return
 ‘Girl who has come back home’.
- 19) *kip-ma-ru-tim*
 MASC-NEG-sleep-wild
 ‘One who does not sleep in the wild’
- 20) *chep-bo-kósóbo*
 FEM-POSS-kisii
 ‘girl from Kisii people’

According to Respondent C1 who gave the name in Example 18 to her daughter, it is given to a baby girl who is born after a female sibling who died as a bride and was buried in her husband’s home. The fact that her biological parents give birth to another girl soon after the death of the young bride, would be believed that the deceased girl has been reborn. This would mean that the young bride has left her matrimonial home and has come back to her original home. The other names of the reborn bride would be *chemilgaa* “one who is amused by her ancestral home” or *chepmurer* “a young bride”. “To be amused” is another way of saying she loved her home much more than where she went, which is why she has come back albeit through a different body.

Example 19, *kipmarutim* “one who does not sleep outside” is a whole sentence. It is made up of the negating morpheme *ma* ‘not’ and the verb-noun compound root *ru* “sleep” and *tim* “wild”. It is an ancestral name given to a child who is born immediately after the death of a close relative. The birth of the child is seen as very timely in that the newly-deceased person will be brought back to life through the child. This means his spirit is no longer in the wild but back in the homestead where the living people are. The verb root *-ru* means “sleep” which is a euphemistic term for “death”. The verb root *-tim* which means “the wild” refers to place the

corpse would be thrown, so when a person has been “thrown to the wild” he or she is said to be “sleeping in the wild”. When the deceased is called back through name-giving, it means he is no longer sleeping in the wild. Hence the deceased person’s new name is “one who does not sleep in the wild”. To make it into an ancestral birth name the gender prefix *kip* or *chep-* is added.

For example, (20) *chep-bo-kosobo* “girl from the Kisii people”, Respondent B2 explained that his grandmother was originally from Kisii land, and she was brought to Kipsigis land through a cattle raid where captives were brought home. She was given the name *chebokosobo* “girl from Kisii land” to mark her place of birth. When she passed on, her grandchildren were named after her in order to keep her memory alive.

In summary, ancestral names point to a cultural belief of the Kipsigis that death is never final because one would always be brought back through newborn children. It therefore shows the importance of name-giving in bringing back the dead and keeping the link between the living and the dead alive.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed birth names and categorized them into time birth names, special circumstances names, location names and ancestral names. It can be concluded that the birth names are not chosen arbitrarily but that name-giving is a well- thought out process among the Kipsigis. Name-giving is used to mark several aspects which include the time when the child was born, the season of birth, circumstances surrounding it and the experience of the mother or midwife during the birth of the child. They are also used to keep the memory of the dead alive through ancestral names. All these factors point to a cultural norm of the Kipsigis bid to record history or the need to keep memories of their experiences as explained by C1 that in announcing the birth of a child, people need to know what time it was and what circumstances surrounded

the birth of the child. Another finding is the evidence of herdsman culture in the names particularly the time of birth and location names. Finally, the Kipsigis philosophy of death is seen through special rituals in naming and ancestral naming (Toweett, 1979, p. 21).

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