

## Onomastics of Personal Names among the Meru People of Tharaka Nithi County in Kenya

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to assess the naming systems of the Meru community in relation to semantics of names. The survey was conducted in Mimi Division of Tharaka Nithi county in Kenya since there has been inadequate research done to date to explain the naming systems of the Meru community. The results of the study would answer the following research question; what system do the Meru people use in naming their children? A sample of seventy respondents comprising of fifty youths and twenty elders was selected since they would provide clear and accurate information on the naming systems and since they also represented all classes of people in the community. Structured interview was employed in order to garner clear and accurate information that was later used for data analysis. The research was guided by Critical Discourse Analysis and specifically followed Ruth Wodak's Discourse historical approach to C.D.A the data for this research was purposefully sampled from Meru personal names that children are given after birth and a qualitative analysis of the data was done based on the research question, objectives and theoretical framework. The survey established that the Meru people have four naming systems, namely: Naming according to ones clan, Character of the child or his or her name sake, Age group names and names derived from ones "nyoni" The result of this study acted as a strong base for other social linguists who would aspire to study the naming systems of other Bantu tribes. The researcher recommended that the old men should explain to the youths and children the meaning of their names and the systems used in according them these names. Further, he recommends that other linguists conduct a research on morphology and phonology of the Meru names.

**Keywords:** Systems, clan, *ntagu*, *nyoni*, age group and age set.

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### INTRODUCTION

Naming of a child is a valuable cultural practice among many societies of the world. Whenever a child is born, the choice of his or her name becomes the first priority. The name bestowed gives identity to the child and a place in the society by distinguishing him or her from others. It is therefore a normal practice for every person to have a name that accords identity and a sense of belonging to a group. Today, as in the past, a child could be given a name with or without a ceremony. According to the new Kenyan constitution [1], section 13, the child has a right to bear a name immediately after birth. Edwards [2] asserts that names are signifiers of one's character in life. The child would be named according to the established customs of the community. Dr. J.N.K Mugambi, asserts that naming ceremonies are highly valued in all communities of the world and that the name gives the child a complete identity in the society.

Berly [3] states that naming according to the African community is a creative phenomena that brings a special growth structure. Africans believe that names are something that is live and they possess the ability to

continue existing from God. A person's name distinguishes him or her from others and reveals their character regardless of how it was acquired. To discern the meaning encoded in an African name helps one to understand the power in that name. That is why Africans never revealed the name of a child upto a certain age especially to those who were believed to possess the power of witchcraft. Africans believe that a name could be good or evil and that's why giving a child an evil name would be a way of getting a curse or a bad omen. Nevertheless, the name of a person changes according to different stages in life. For instance, the change from childhood to adulthood or from a low status to a higher status.

Laura [4] holds that the Meru community like other African communities is known for its traditions that are full of ceremonies such as marriage, burials and especially the child naming ceremony. Naming is an act that never ceases in life since the fathers and mothers choose names for their sons and daughters respectively after circumcision. The Meru people have a distinct system that differentiates male and female names in

morphology, semantics and pragmatics and this is by having prefixes on the names that differentiates gender.

Pamela R. and Linda L [5]. States that a child should be given a name that will suit him or her from childhood even into adulthood without provoking a nick name or any negative attitude. They hold that the name has power to make the child self actualized and be known. According to them, deciding a name for the child is a serious business than giving birth because somebody makes a permanent choice in life.

Greg [6] concurs with the above by saying that a name describes a person and is a signifier of how the person will be viewed and taken by others. Naming is an act that is valued by everyone in the society and therefore names are not picked anyhow but instead, there are laid down procedures, criteria and patterns that are followed.

Beidelman Iman [7] argues that there is little information on the east African naming systems. Therefore, the concept of naming systems is necessary in sociolinguistics study and especially in the African communities where such study has not been done adequately.

#### **Statement of the Problem.**

The main function of the name is to identify the person individually. Naming of a child is a valuable cultural practice in all societies of the world. Whenever a child is born, the choice of his or her name becomes the first priority. Various societies have different ways of getting names for their children. Meru have a unique system of naming that differentiates gender by prefixes on the names. Nevertheless, there is no adequate research done to date to investigate clearly the Meru people's systems of naming in relation to semantics. This study therefore assessed the systems of naming in relation to semantics among the Meru people of Mwimbi division ,Tharaka Nithi county in Kenya.

#### **Purpose of The Study.**

The purpose of the study was to assess the systems of naming in relation to semantics among the Meru people of Mwimbi division, Tharaka Nithi county in Kenya.

#### **Objectives of The Study**

The research objective was:

To assess the systems of naming in relation to semantics in Mwimbi Division of Tharaka Nithi county in Kenya.

#### **Research Question**

What system do the Meru people use in naming their children in Mwimbi Division Tharaka Nithi County in Kenya?

#### **Literature Review.**

##### **Naming according to social integration and relationship.**

Barnes [8] asserts that naming is governed by rules according to social interaction and relationships. He gives an example of Hidasta and Omaha societies of America that use names of visible and invisible things such as colour names, knives , iron, whirl wind, sounds of animals such as cattle and personal values like knowledge, cooking tricks and people's success.

##### **Backformation of names.**

Buren [9] studied the structure of names that are formed by use of the backformation style. He quoted names like Beck from Becky, Pen from Penny and Deb from Debbie. According to him, the use of such style displays pleasure to the bearers and the one that uses them to refer to others. The use of these suffixes 'ie' and 'y' sounds childish especially when used by those who don't share a common relationship. For instance, secondary school girls will call their counterparts 'Lyd' for Lydiah , 'Jaq' for Jackie, 'Al' for Alison and 'Deb' for Debbie. In this case, their teachers cannot use this system because they don't share a common relationship.

On the same note, Wirzibicker [10] dealt with the American, Polish, and Russian naming system. Her research was based on female and male names that are separable and inseparable. Her approach was aimed at scrutinizing the differences in structure or formation leaving the gap on semantics and people's attitude towards their names.

##### **Naming according to the condition of the child.**

African societies like Ghana and Nigeria had a system of naming in which the same name would be given to twins especially in a situation where a small child died and so the one born later would bear the same name. Another situation is where a man had two wives; the child of the first wife would bear the same name as that of the second wife. Among the GAO society, twins would be given the same name but one of the names would be lengthened for easier differentiation. For example, Oko-Akuele , Akwate-Akwate.

On the same note, Berly [3] states that African societies used different patterns in naming. The Sudanese gave names depending on the condition of birth of the child, for example, the one that was born in good health was called Nyawela and the last born was called Kongel. The same sentiment was aired by Mbiti [11] that, incase children died after birth, the one that survived was given a name of an animal or a thing that was ugly. This was an indication that the parents had lost hope for his or her survival and this too was an attempt to hide their identity to save them from being taken by the ghost. For example, the Kikuyu and Embu

called the boy Ngari (Hyena), and Njogu (Elephant). The Meru called the boy Iguna (Monkey) and a girl Kaguna all with the same meaning. They also had Mati (dry leaves). The Luhyah had makokha meaning rubbish.

#### **Naming according to the seasons and times of birth**

According to Idowu [12] some African communities had the system of naming according to the days of the week. For example, the Swahili of East Africa had names like Mwajuma born on Friday, Esi born on Sunday, Khamisi born on Thursday and Jumaane born on Tuesday. Yoruba of West Africa had names like Bosede meaning born on Sunday. Other tribes used the order of birth, for instance the Khan of Ghana and the Swahili of East Africa. For example Nkruma of Ghana meant he was born being the ninth in the family and Nsia was Sixth, Mosi meant first among the Swahili. Other tribes that used names with religious connotation were the Egyptians and the Chaga. Berly [3] has the same view that Rhabai meant the rain bringer, Naolfa the one born between seasons and Diah born during new moon. According to Berly, the choice of names was mostly influenced by the happenings in the sky and the seasons too. This was therefore marked with ceremonies with food, drinks and dancing.

Idowu [2] and Mbiti [11] have explained the patterns of naming among the Kenyan tribes like the Luo, Kalenjin, Luhyah, Kikuyu and the Meru. They have mentioned factors like the seasons and weather conditions as having great impact on the choice of the name of the child. Among the conditions mentioned are; flood, drought, hunger, harvesting and planting time, times of the day and major historical occurrences. According to the examples given, the Luo called the boy Okoth and the girl Akoth, the Kikuyu used Kiambura (boy) and Nyambura (girl) the Kamba used Wambua and Syombua (boy and girl) the Kalenjin called the boy Kipro and the girl Cherop and the Meru called the girl Kambura. These were born during the rainy season. The Luhyah called the girl Nekesa and the boy Wekesa meaning they were born during harvesting time. The girl born during planting time was called Nakhumicha. The main reason for using this system of naming was to keep record of main occurrences and to remember the time the child was born because there was no other method of preserving historical events. This was a procedure that was followed as a rule in naming.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **The Research design.**

This research adopted descriptive survey design to determine the systems of naming in Meru. This was adopted because the research was a social linguistic study concerned with the gathering of facts and reasons as to why people were given specific

personal names as well as explaining their origin and meaning. This design was also suitable in this research because of its flexibility in the field and since it allows face to face interview as a means of collecting the data. According to Mugenda and Mugenda [13], survey research is probably the best method available for Social linguists who are interested in collecting original data. Good [14] asserts that "survey design is useful in that, it allows not only scores evidence concerning an existing situation or current condition but also identifies stands or norms with which to compare the present condition in order to plan for the next step." This design also provides first hand information on the Meru community's naming system and the meaning of personal names and for this matter, this is the focus of the research. This research design also saves time which is however, a limitation to this research.

### **Location of the Study.**

This research was carried out in Mwimbi division, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya

### **The Sampling Procedure**

The researcher used purposive sampling method to identify five different secondary schools from different locations in the division in which the research was carried out. The researcher used stratified sampling method to single out students based on the criteria of boys and girls who were residents of the area of research and bore the names of the Meru community. The research further employed snowball method of sampling to get 20 elders both females and males for the purpose of this study. The sample of this study was fifty youths and twenty elders. The sample size was congruent with the acceptable size in descriptive research. According to Onyango 2001 a sample size of between 10% and 20% of the population is adequate for the study, but the bigger the sample the better, especially where the target population number is bigger.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The researcher used oral interview to collect data because it was appropriate for the study since they collect clear, accurate and dependable information from the interviewees concerning their feelings, attitudes as well as the experience of the individuals about the systems of naming in their society. Interviews also captured the intended sample size conveniently, owing to small the size. The researcher also used video camera to record the response from the interviewees and also recorded some information on the field note book for later data analysis. These instruments were necessary because no information would be lost, forgotten or distorted. There were logistical issues that were undertaken before going to the field to collect data. Such issues were, obtaining a letter of approval from the university and seeking permission from the

principals of the sample schools in order to be allowed to gather respective students for interview.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

Data obtained from the oral interview was analyzed according to the study objective and consequently the research questions. It was analyzed using descriptive method since it was a qualitative kind of analysis that required no arithmetics nor tables. The researcher was also able to make a summary of the findings by recording the results of the interview after going through the data that was collected and identifying the main points according to the research topic.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

#### **Naming systems of Meru.**

The question asked was: What are the naming systems of Meru?

#### **Naming according to the character of the child or namesake.**

This research revealed that naming in the Meru community was influenced by the character of the child and that of the namesake. These were visible or abstract characteristics, the property he or she owned, could be characteristics of a place, certain conditions of weather or seasons and his or her physical characteristics. The following names and their meaning were analysed.

**Kirimi** - according to M.R and F.R and Ys, Agriculture was the major activity of the Meru people through which they had their food and cash crops. This was a name that referred to a man who worked on the farm especially cultivating and weeding. The term Murimi could be used for either gender when referring to the action of working on the farm but when used in naming was for a man. Prefix -mu- was added to verb -rima to mean any person whose activities was working on the shamba. Therefore if a child was named after a person of such character would be called Kirimi (boy) and Karimi (girl). The name Murimi was for males only.

**Kithinji** – The meaning of this name is slaughter. This was an activity done only by men according to the Meru culture. Though this activity could be done by any man, there were experts who were used to slaughter for other people especially during ceremonies where many animals were slaughtered. Therefore a child who was named after a person that was known for this activity was called Kithinji. This was a male name since women were not allowed to slaughter. This was a way of degrading women and uplifting masculinity on the basis of accepted ideologies. A child that was given this name was not necessarily an expert in such an activity so it was a way of getting the name for identity.

**Mugendi /Mutembei** - These names were derived from Meru roots *temb* – and *gend* – that means moving here and there or not settling at one place. A child was given this name because of his namesick who used to move to several places or was always on a safari. A girl could be called *kagendi* or *kagendo* because of their love for travelling.

**Kinyua/Kanyua** – The name means one who drinks. It is derived from Kiswahili root -nyw- that means drink. A child was named after a person who used to drink seriously. There were several drinks like bear, gruel, water or milk. A person who was known to love drinks of any kind would be referred to as Kinyua (boy) or Kanyua (girl). This name was generally associated with notorious taking of beer. It was a way of ridicule to a person of such character. It was not obvious that the child would follow this behavior but was a way of identity. Today the name is not common to the youths because of its negative connotation – drunkenness. The research revealed that females of age 50 and above possess the name but for the youth the name was uncommon. This is an indication that naming is becoming dynamic and evolving.

**Makena** - According to M.F.R and YS this is a female name that means one who is always in a jovial mood. This was given to a baby girl whose namesake was always jovial. She was always happy perhaps even when annoyed by somebody she did not display anger. The name comes from the Meru root *kena* meaning being happy. The name that was synonymous to this was *Kagwiria* and *Mugwiria* for a female and male respectively. According to respondents, this name was nice and liked by all due to that positive meaning. It is still a name that is commonly given to children to date. There was no old woman referred to with this name indicating that it is a modern name that is now embraced by all young parents.

**Kendi** – This name means one who loves. It is a female name that was given to a girl whose namesake was known for loving people. She talked well, did good to people or was good in physical appearance that made people love her. According to M.R 2 and F.R 3 – 4, This name was given to a child who was the only one in the family because parents had no other child to love. Synonymous to this is *Kiende* and *Mwendwa* though the latter could also be given to a boy. By giving the child such a name, the parents aspired that the child would possess the same character though this never happened always.

**Konini** - This means something small. The name was given to a girl child whose namesake was physically small by either being slender or short. This

character could not be attributed to a man in connection with naming because of masculinity. To give a man this name would be a sign of disgrace and belittling but for women it was viewed as normal. According to all F.R there was no negative attitude towards this name nor did they realize its diminutive connotation. They regarded the name as normal and appreciated it.

**Mucheke** – This is a male name that is given to somebody who is slender in physique. According to this research slenderness was distinguished from thinness in that the former would be attractive and natural but the latter was as a result of unpleasant condition such as illness or starvation. According to all respondents of this research, slenderness for whatever reason was disparaged and despised. The name Nchengu that had a similar meaning was disparaged because it was not natural. Young children and the youths would use this as a nickname for a thin person. In this case this name was not liked by the bearers since they had negative attitude towards it.

**Ngai/Kangai** – According to the Meru community, Ngai means God. The name was given to a child who survived following the death of his or her predecessors. Parents named their children Ngai in order to save them from being taken by the ghost that took the former ones. It was also a way of showing dependence upon God who was powerful when all their efforts had failed and conditions became worse. The name could also be given to a child who escaped death narrowly perhaps due to sickness.

**Muchuku** – This is a Meru name that refers to a European. According to M.R 4, This name was given to a boy who was either born during the colonial period or the white men came to the region of this research and was liked by the residents hence the child was named Muchunku for remembrance. This name also could have been given to a child whose *Ntagu* was known by this name or possessed some European characteristics such as talking, keeping time, cleanliness, or giving orders. The baby girl was called Gachunku. These names were therefore applicable during the colonial era and post colonial era.

**Ruguru** – This name means west in the Meru community. It is the direction to which the sun sets. The Meru people had the system of naming according to the four directions of the campus points. The child was given such a name in case his or her namesake lived in the western side from the home of their parents.

**Umotho** – This means south. It is the opposite of Urio (North). The Meru community also used these names for children whose namesake lived in the south or in the north. The person could have been a resident

of the place following marriage, migration or even for business purpose. The female was called Umotho while the male was Kimotho for the ones who resided on the northern side and for the southern was called Mwario.

**M’Nyiri** – This was a name given to a man who travelled and stayed at Nyeri for the purpose of business or employment. In the olden days young boys who were uncircumcised went to seek employment in various towns and places in Kenya especially in the central province. On their return and after being circumcised one of them would be named after the place they had gone to represent others and for the purpose of remembrance. That’s why some are called M’Nyiri because they went to Nyeri the headquarters of nyeri county and the former central province. Other such names were M’Ragwa went to Maragwa and M’Muru went to Meru. These names were rejected by the youths who termed them as archaic and outdated. The prefix -m- that was put before the name stands for the person of the place for instance M’Muru would mean the person from Meru.

#### **Clan naming system**

According to M.R 1 – M. R 6 and F.R 3 and 4, the origin of Meru is Mbuia a place in the coastal region. They migrated to the current regions of residence in three phases. The first group arrived at night while it was dark and were referred to as Njiru (darkness) the second group arrived early in the morning when the eastern horizon was red due to the rising sun and were called Ntune. The final group arrived during the day when the sun was up in the sky and its brightness was all over. They were referred to as Njeru. These three groups were the original clans of Meru and the other sub clans emerged from these three. Examples of clan names are:

**Mukwanjru** – It was a clan name that was given to a baby girl whose namesake belonged to the clan of Airu. The male name was Njiru.

**Mutune** - It was a clan name given to a baby girl whose namesake belonged to the clan of Ntune. Since ntune means red, it was also possible that the name could have meant that the namesake of the child was brown but according to the Meru community, there is no brown colour, instead, red is termed as brown. Other clan names are Mukwairu, Mtweithiru, and Ithiru.

#### **Naming according to ones *nyoni***

This was another naming system that was rarely known by the young generation. This system was explained by M.R 1 - 6 and F.R 1 - 3. The rest was silent on this. It was a means of identifying one self by use of a name that was unique and derived from the three clan names. According to M.R 1 - 2 every old man had his *nyoni* name among other given names. Women

possessed the *nyoni* names of their fathers while a child possessed that of their namesake. Therefore *nyoni* names were passed from one generation to another (hereditary). Such names were:

**Dadi** – It was a *nyoni* name that was given to a child whose namesake's *nyoni* name was Dadi. A female name would be Mukwadadi meaning wife to Dadi. It meant that the name sake of the baby was married to a man called Dadi as his *nyoni* name. Other names were Njue or Mukwanjue, Njagi or Mukwanjagi and Ireri.

#### Age group naming system

According to M.R 1- 4, age group naming system was a pattern of naming that identified people according to circumcision periods. Circumcision was done yearly or at an interval of three years depending on the readiness of the circumcision candidates. One age group comprised of three age sets and the name for the age group was chosen from one of the age sets especially the first one. According to M.R 1 – 10, age group names were given to people who already had their 'given' names. These names were prefixed by 'M' or 'Ji' for males and females respectively. This was done for boys after circumcision and for girls after marriage. The purpose was to show dignity and respect for crossing the important stage in life - circumcision or marriage. Examples of such age group names were:

**Ragu** – According to M.R 2 and 4, this was a very old age group that probably existed around 1700 AD. Other age set names that were included in this age group were Kaburia and Kubai. This research revealed that the current generation does not use these names and the only few people with these names were beyond sixty years old.

**Kiraithe** – This is the name of the age group that followed Ragu and especially Kaburia age set. It comprised of three age sets namely Kiraithe, Riungu and Miriti from which names like M'Kiraithe, M'Miriti and M'Riungu were derived. Female names from these were Jiakiraithe, Jiariungu and Jiamiriti. These names are also not common nowadays except only for men and women who are sixty years and above.

**Nkongge** – This age group followed Kiraithe and had the following age sets: Nkongge, Kiruja and Kaburu and female names such as Jiankongge, Jiakiruja and Jiakaburu. Today these names are used but with omission of prefixes 'm' and 'ji' on the names of men who are beyond sixty years and for women beyond seventy years.

**Athena** – This followed Nkongge –three age sets that made up this age group were: Kabae and Kibabu. According to M.R 1 – 5, these age sets comprised of circumcision candidates of 1950 after

which the age set and age group system of naming seized. This research revealed that, this system of naming is not followed today as it was in the past, since the current generation feels that it is outdated.

#### SUMMARY

In a nut shell, the study revealed that the Meru community has four distinct naming systems. Naming according to characters of the child and those of his / her name sake such as physical characteristics, deeds that are visible or abstract and, the place and condition of birth. This was the major naming system. The other systems were clan naming system, age group naming system and naming according to ones *nyoni*. The study further revealed that following these Systems of naming a typical Meru of the old generation has four names that identify him or her with each category of names. It was also realized that today children are identified with two names; the given and the baptismal names.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Since this research studied the system of naming in relation to semantics among the Meru community, the researcher recommends that other researchers study morphology and phonology of the Meru community.

#### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

M.R 1 – 10: Male respondent number one to ten

M.F 1 – 10: Female respondent number one to ten

YS 1 – 5: Groups of youths that were interviewed - one to five

*Ntagu*: A Meru name that refers to the namesake of the child

*Nyoni*: A male name that somebody chooses for himself according to his clan. It is hereditary.

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