

Kiswahili Personal Names Selection in Tanzania: A Sociolinguistic Analysis

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Abstract

This paper deals with form and use of proper names, specifically Kiswahili personal names. The paper carries out research into various social issues behind Swahili personal names. It focuses on identifying what is behind Swahili personal names and analyzes different sociolinguistic issues that make people to be named as they were named. The paper contributes to sociolinguistics especially on how language serves and shaped by social and cultural context. However, the paper tries to evaluate if people know the meaning of their names and the circumstances under which a child was given the name. The paper argues that a proper name refers not to a referent, but to a set of true propositions that uniquely describe a referent (Seeman (2014)).

1.0 General Review of Names and Naming Practices

What is in a name depends on the particular culture from which it is framed (Mphande, 2006). A name in African cultures tells about the individual that it signifies, the language from which it is drawn and the society that describes it. Names and naming in general are fundamental and universal aspects that can be found in all languages. However, the difference lies in the process that each language employs in naming (Baitani, 2010).

With regard to researches on place names in Bantu and Non-Bantu languages, scholars like Nash (2011), Angus (2005), Rye (2006), Ash (2009), Diagne (1984), Dalby (1984), Cornevin (1984), Kashif (2001), Mbenzi (2009), Schotsman (2003), Buberwa (2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016) to mention but a few, have conducted some studies. Aspects like structures, meanings in name giving and social connotations behind place names have been investigated in those studies. Generally, it has been observed that place names are not arbitrary labels but are connected with particular socio-cultural phenomena such as unique events, community heroes or persons who made remarkable contributions to society or people who had achieved particular notoriety.

On the other hand, a considerable number of scholars have conducted research on baby naming practices basing on various perspectives. Mphande (*op cit*) analyses African names in American culture basing on a morphological perspective. The paper discusses at length the concept of names and naming in Zulu language of South Africa. It was observed that a name may indicate the linguistic structures and phonological processes found in a language, the position in the society of the name's bearer and the collective history and life experiences of the people surrounding the individual. Mphande concludes by demonstrating that African and American cultures share similar rhetorical strategies in verbal exposition in creating new personal names reflective of their socio-political environment. Obeng (1998) presents a general overview of the socio-political roles of names. He reveals that African naming practices show important insights into the socio-political roles and relationships of the individual. In clarifying this point of view, Obeng provides the following example:

Example 1

Name	Translation	Language
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Akuwudike
Odefo

“wealth in power”
“the wealthy one”

Igbo¹
Akan²

An example above asserts that personal names in Igbo and Akan languages are connected with social, economic and political issues of a given society.

Furthermore, Marjie-Okyere (2015) presents a linguistic survey of types of names among the Babukusu of Kenya. The paper reveals that names of people, place and things are given by society. Since the main objective of the paper was to analyze the morphological patterns of Babukusu names, issues concerning name selection and social issues that inform names were not discussed. The present paper deals with these issues basically reflecting on Kiswahili personal names.

In line with that, Agyekum (2000) discusses about sociolinguistics of Akan personal names basing on linguistic anthropology. The paper considers names as not being arbitrary labels but socio-cultural tags that have social functions and meanings. The paper identifies ten types of Akan personal names. These include day names, flora and fauna names, circumstantial names, theological names, family names, weird and reincarnate names, achievement names, insinuating and proverbial names, bodily structure names and finally kinship names. That paper lays emphasis on the typology of Akan names without exploring their meanings and social connotations attached to inform those names. In this paper we try to show that meanings of personal names do not always reflect what forced the namer to choose a certain name for the named. Therefore, this paper deals with the meaning and the social issues behind Swahili personal names.

Discussing about the swahilization of Kenya’s socio-political cultures, Agwekum (ibid) observes that in Kenya the use of Kiswahili language has been growing and expanding. As an outcome of this growth, there is significant use of Kiswahili names for people and place. King’ei (ibid) adds on by saying that names give both form and moral forces to people, place and society. Naming is not just labeling of existing or new concepts but a dynamic way of making phenomenon intelligible. The paper concludes by insisting that personal names are constructed out of what is familiar, relevant and desired. This statement triggers some challenges regarding personal name selection. If personal names are selected from what is desired, how come some names refer to undesirable things like death, problems and pain! This paper therefore, tries to discuss various social issues behind Kiswahili personal names construction.

Seeman (2014) addresses unconscious meanings of personal names in general without specifying the language. The paper argues that personal names serve many purposes for the namer and for the named. The etymology and linguistic associations of personal names are grasped without conscious knowledge of semantic roots. They impart information about genealogy and social standing. However, Seeman raises an observable point that in some languages names are selected consciously where by boys’ names prescribes courage, generosity or prosperity while girls’ names prescribe grace, poise, gaiety or attractiveness. Since this paper does not focus on the language and gender field; these issues were not addressed in detail. The paper recommends on

¹ Igbo is the principal native language of the Igbo people, an ethnic group of Nigeria.

² Akan is a language of the Akan ethnic group of Ghana.

doing research on the field in order to reveal how naming processes in Bantu languages are gender sensitive.

On the other hand, Rubanza (2000) addresses about Ruhaya personal names and argues that Ruhaya personal names like any African name are typically meaningful. His paper explains that personal names can be selected by considering circumstances during birth, family frictions as well as conflicts. The paper focused mainly on the morphological technicalities involved in name construction. The analysis reveals that there are three main categories of Ruhaya personal names. These include basic names (underived names), derived names and compound names. The present paper takes departure from Rubanza (2000) by focusing on the sociolinguistic perspective of Kiswahili personal names.

2.0 Data Collection Methodology

This paper presents results of a small research conducted in Msewe street, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The study dealt with meaning of Kiswahili personal names and the sociolinguistic issues relating to them. The paper uses the primary data which was collected from March, 2015 to June, 2015 using face-to-face non-structured interviews. The targeted population was the Kiswahili speakers from the targeted area. Respondents who participated in this study were stratified according to age group and gender. Therefore, Kiswahili speakers aged between 18-30 years and 31-75 years were consulted to provide the meaning of their Kiswahili names and sociolinguistic factors behind them. A sample of 40 people from each group was used as presented below:

Table 1: Research Sample from Msewe Street, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Years Old	Male	Female	Total
18 - 30	20	20	40
31-75	20	20	40
Total	80		

Source: Field Data

3.0 What is behind Kiswahili Personal Names?

It was observed that there are many factors to consider prior to the selection of Kiswahili name for a new baby. The research shows that parents choose names for their babies basing on their religious beliefs, names of their deceased family member or relatives who are still alive, physical traits, popular names and good or bad things that happened before or during birth. The results prove the point raised by Seeman (2014) that, a proper name refers not to a referent, but to a set of true propositions that uniquely describe a referent and the society in general. The following sections present meaning of Kiswahili personal names and factors that influenced the parents in choosing a given name for their baby.

3.1 Names Expressing Days of the Week or Time when the Child was Born

In choosing Kiswahili names for babies, it was observed that some parents relate their children's names with the period of their birth. Those names may indicate the day or specific time when the child was exactly born, as illustrated in Table 3.1:

Table 2: Names Expressing Days of the Week or Time when the Child was Born

No.	Swahili Personal Names	Gender	Meaning
1.	Alhamisi	Male	on Thursday
2.	Jumanne	Male	on Tuesday
3.	Chausiku	Female	during night
4.	Asubuhi	Male	in the Morning
5.	Jumapili	Male	on Sunday

Source: Field Data

As examples above reveal, the name *Alhamisi* refers to one of the days of the week beginning from Saturday. It was reported by the respondent that he was named *Alhamisi* because that was the day when he (the named) was born. Also, such names as *Jumanne* and *Jumapili* refer to Kiswahili days of the week as revealed in Table 2 and those names were selected because the named persons were born in those days. On the other hand, names like *Chausiku* and *Asubuhi* indicate the specific time when entire children were born. This means that *Chausiku* was born in the night while *Asubuhi* was born in the morning.

3.2 Names Expressing Order in which the Child was Born in Particular Family

It was observed that some Kiswahili personal names reflect the order in which the children were born. Kiswahili names of this category correspond with Kiswahili numerals like *moja* – one, *mbili* – two as well as *tatu* – three. The following examples represent Kiswahili names under this category:

Table 3: Names Expressing Order in which the Children were Born in Particular family

No.	Swahili Personal Names	Gender	Meaning
1.	Mosi	Male	One
2.	Pili	Female	Second
3.	Tatu	Female	Three

Source: Field Data

It was reported that, the names above were not selected arbitrarily. The name ‘*Mosi* – one’ was selected because the child was the first born in a particular family. However, the name ‘*Pili* – second’ was selected because the child was the second born while the name ‘*Tatu* – three’ based on the reality that the owner was the third child in her family.

3.3 Names Expressing Believes in Supernatural powers and Thanks giving to God

Another typology of Kiswahili names observed were the names indicating attributes of God and expressing praise or thanksgiving to God. Examples numbered 1 to 5 in the table below represent such Kiswahili personal names under this category:

Table 4: Names Expressing Believes in Supernatural Power and Thanks giving to God

No.	Swahili Personal Names	Gender	Meaning
1.	Shukuru	Male	thank
2.	Huruma	Male /Female	sympathy
3.	Baraka	Male	blessing
4.	Bahati	Male / Female	fortune
5.	Sala	Female	prayer
6.	Imani	Male	faith

Source: Field Data

Like other names discussed before, the names listed in Table 4 were not selected arbitrarily. It was reported that the name *Shukuru* was selected because grandparents gave that name aiming at thanking God for having the baby since previously the parents had not got any child for nine years of marriage. The name *Huruma* was chosen because parents believed that they got that child because of God’s sympathy. It was reported that the name *Huruma* indicates also the aspect of the situation during pregnancy. Thus, instead of nine months of pregnancy, *Huruma’s* mother went 12 months.

On the other hand, the name *Baraka* was selected because the parents had not gotten any child for 12 years of marriage. So getting *Baraka* was real a blessing from God. On the side of the name *Bahati*, parents reported that the name was given to the child because they had seven female children. Therefore, for them getting a baby boy was a good lucky. Moreover, the name *Sala* was reported to be an outcome of parents believes that they got a child as a result of prayers. This was because they struggled for years without getting a child and had lost hope of getting

one.

However, parents of a different family who were consulted about the name of their daughter “Sala” reported that since they are Christians, they got the name from the Bible and they had no any reason for choosing the name. From the reasons discussed under this section, it has been observed that some Kiswahili personal names indicate some attributes of God and supernatural believes of the family and society surrounding the child.

3.4 Names Expressing Place and Manner of Birth

Names expressing manner of birth was another observed category of some Kiswahili personal names. The following examples represent names of such category:

Table 5: Names Expressing Place and Manner of Birth

No.	Swahili Personal Names	Gender	Meaning
1.	Msafiri	Male	traveler
2.	Safari	Male	journey
3.	Salama	Female	safe
4.	Hatari	Male	danger
5.	Shida	Female	problem

Source: Field Data

Regarding the factors for the selection of names, respondents reported that the name *Msafiri* was selected because the child was born while the mother was away from home; while the name *Safari* was chosen since the child was born when the father had travelled. The name *Salama* was the result of the fact that the child was born safely while the names *Shida* and *Hatari* were selected since the situation during the time of pregnancy and during birth was risky, full of trouble, worries and complications. Also, it was reported that the name *Huzuni* was given to the child because the mother of the child died soon after giving birth.

3.5 Names Expressing Flora and Fauna

Another category observed were the names expressing flora and fauna. Kiswahili personal names under this category were selected from names of flora or fauna as described in the following examples:

Table 6: Names Expressing Flora and Fauna

Na.	Swahili Personal Names	Sex	Meaning
1.	Maua	Female	flowers
2.	Simba	Male	lion

The names in Table 6 were selected because of various distinguished significant features. The name *Maua* was selected by the child's parents because the child was born as beautiful as flowers. The name *Simba* was selected on the grounds that the child was born with long hair like a lion and therefore parents had hoped that their child would grow up and be distinguished like a lion. Under this category, the names of flora and fauna selected as baby names were based on association between the baby distinguished features related to the fauna or flora characteristics.

3.6 Names Expressing Relationship among Parents and Society

These are Kiswahili personal names that express love or hatred among parents or the family and society in general. Under this category, we came across the following Kiswahili personal names:

Table 7: Names expressing relationship among Parents and Society

No.	Swahili Personal Names	Gender	Meaning
1.	Chuki	Male	hatred
2.	Upendo	Female	love
3.	Majuto	Male	regret
4.	Sikujua	Male	I didn't know

Source: Field Data

It was reported by respondents consulted that the name *Chuki* was given to the baby by the mother who was trying to convey the message about the relationship between her and her husband during pregnancy. The respondent added that the father did not want more children, so having pregnancy caused misunderstanding between the father and the mother. Therefore, the father hated the mother of the child. On the other hand, it was reported that the name *Upendo* was selected because the mother experienced love from her husband in time of pregnancy than before. Also, the names *Majuto* and *Sikujua* were selected because the fathers of those children were misbehaving in such a way that those mothers regretted to have married the husbands.

3.7 Names Expressing Parent's Expectations or Wishes to their Babies

These are names that reflect parents' wishes or expectations on what the baby would be expected to become in future. Observe the following Kiswahili personal names:

Table 8: Names Expressing Parent’s Expectations or Wishes

No.	Swahili Personal Names	Gender	Meaning
1.	Waziri	Male	minister
2.	Raisi	Male	president
3	Hakimu	Male	magistrate

Source: Field Data

Examples above reveal that, parents selected names that portray have positive expectations. Names mentioned refer to various title names. It was reported that the name *Waziri* was given to the child because the father was wishing his son good omen of becoming one of the minister in his life. Also, the name *Raisi* was given to the baby because the grandfather was hoping that the baby might become a president in future. The name *Hakimu* was selected because the father had hopes of his son to become a magistrate in his life. It should be noted that names under this category play a role as a blueprint for what the parents and the society expected from the child during his life. However, it was observed that no name under this category was given to a baby girl. From these grounds, the paper recommends that research on how Kiswahili personal names are gender sensitive be carried out.

From the described, analyzed and discussed data under this section, it is concluded that Kiswahili personal names refer not to a referent (the baby) but to a set of various social cultural issues surrounding the baby.

4.0 Do People Actually Know what their Names Mean?

The analysis under this section utilizes interview data collected from March, 2015 to June, 2015 using face-to-face non-structured interview. The aim was to examine people’s knowledge of the meaning of their names. Exact wording used was as such, “Do you know the meaning of your name?” The responses were “Yes” or “No”. As Table 9 shows, a total of 80 respondents were consulted and the results were as follows:

Table 9: Responses on if People Actually Know what their Names Mean?

Responses	Respondents (18 - 34 years old)	Respondents (35 – 75 years old)	Total
YES	15	20	35 (43.75%)
NO	35	20	45 (56.25%)
	40	40	80

Source: Field Data

As revealed in Table 9, a total number of 80 valid responses were collected whereby 43.75% (35) said “YES” and 56.25% (45) said “NO”. It was observed that many people especially youth do not know the meaning of their names. This entails the need for a detailed research on baby naming system in Tanzania. The point is cemented by the use of names from foreign languages where by even the parents do not know if those names have meaning. However, it should be noted that looking at the few Kiswahili names collected one notes that names tell a lot about the individual that it signifies and it is the resource for reproducing social reality.

5.0 Do People actually know the Circumstances under which they were Given Names?

The analysis under this section utilizes interview data collected from March, 2015 to June, 2015 using face-to-face non-structured interview. The aim was to evaluate people’s knowledge about the circumstances under which they were given names. Exact wording used was as such, “Do you know why you were given such name?” The responses were “Yes” or “No”. As Table 10 shows, a total of 80 respondents were consulted and the results were as follows:

Table 10: Responses on if People know the Circumstances under which they were given names

Responses	Respondents (18 -34 years old)	Respondents (35 – 75 years old)	Total
YES	11	25	31 (38.75%)
NO	29	20	49 (61.25%)
	40	40	80

Source: Field Data

As the data in Table 10 reveals, many people especially the youth do not know the factors governing the choice of their names. On the other hand, even some parents could not tell the circumstances under which the name(s) of their children were chosen. It was observed that some parents under this group considered names to be arbitrary labels. Thus, they were just choosing names for their babies from any foreign language and they could not even know what those names mean. This result motivated the researcher to do a detailed research on to what extent do Tanzanian parents name their babies using Kiswahili names and why.

6.0 Conclusion

This paper presents the meaning and social circumstances behind Kiswahili personal names. The paper reveals that parents do not choose Kiswahili names for their babies randomly. They always choose names that reflect the social circumstances in which the baby is born. These include the time when the child was born, order in which the child was born, parents’ beliefs and place and manner of birth. Also, some names are chosen on the basis of parents’ relationship with the society and parents expectations and wishful thinking regarding their children. Generally, Kiswahili names reflect traditions, values and people’s lives in the societies in which the babies are born and to which they belong. The paper also reports that many people, especially the youth, do not know if their names convey any meaning and if there are some social circumstances behind them. This fact was observed from respondents who had either foreign or names from ethnic languages. The paper recommends that a detailed research should be conducted to examine the extent to which Tanzanian parents name their babies using Kiswahili names.

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