

A Socio-Semiotic Study of Personal Names among the Ameru of Central Kenya

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Abstract

The study of names and naming systems among communities has not received sufficient scholarly attention in linguistic research, especially among Kenyan scholars. This paper examines the socio semiotic value of proper names among the Ameru of Central Kenya. The main objective of the paper was to examine the structure as well as the semantic content of Meru proper names. Pierce's (1967) theory of proper names as well as the descriptive theory proper of names by Frege-Russel (1970) were used to guide on data generation and interpretation. Ethnographic study design using a non- probability snowball technique by Saville Troike (1997) further guided the study. There was a purposive sample of twenty (20) native speaker informants drawn from a cross-section of the dialectal variations that exist in Meru County. The main instruments of data collection were face to face interviews and native speaker intuition. In particular, data was drawn from a cross-section of ages, the two sexes and the main cluster sub-clans (Imenti, Tigania, Igembe, Tharaka and Chuka). Sixty (60) selected proper names were analyzed structurally according to their forms and semantic content. The findings of the study reveal that Meru names structurally fall into three broad categories; lexical, phrasal and sentential. For the Ameru, a name is not just a tag of identity or a label, but an expression of the events and circumstances surrounding the birth of a child as well as the circumstances of the child's parents as well as the person to whom the child is named after. The results of this study will immensely benefit scholars in applied linguistics, cultural anthropologists and the general public. It is recommended that more studies should be carried out on cross-cultural differences in naming and the social significance of various names and address terms.

Keywords: Ameru, proper names, semantic content, structural analysis.

Introduction

The Meru people live primarily on the north-eastern slopes of Mount Kenya. The name 'Meru' refers to both the people and the location. The Meru geographical region consists of approximately 13000km² stretching from River Thuchi in the South which is the traditional boundary between the Meru and Embu people to Igembe which borders Isiolo to the north. Meru comprises nine major territorial subdivisions based on dialectal differences, variation in culture traits and tradition. These subdivisions are formally recognized as sub-tribes.

Proximate to the Kenya Central Highlands and circling the slopes of Mount Kenya to the north east, between 1200 to 1500 meters above sea level, live the Imenti, Miutine, Igoji, Muthambi and Chuka sub-clans of the Ameru. The Igembe occupy a similar altitude to the north in the Nyambene ridge. The Tigania and Tharaka occupy the lower north-eastern and northern plains in the adjoining lowlands (Spear, 1981). These sub-clans comprise chains of east-west extended dialect clusters separated by eastward flowing rivers and streams of various sizes. Meru's neighbours to the south and around Mt Kenya area are the Embu, Mbeere and the Kikuyu, and to the east are the Kamba. To the north are the Borana and Samburu communities. Although the Chuka and the Tharaka sometimes consider themselves non-Merus due to different myths on the origin of their language, their cultural practices are similar to those of Imenti, Tigania, igembe, Igoji and Muthambi sub-clans.

The Ameru have a rich tradition with respect to the naming custom. Generally Meru children are named after a well-structured system of kinship relations. In a majority of cases names in Meru community represent events as well as circumstances surrounding the person;

an individual child is named after during an individual's time of their birth. In recent times, however, many Meru names are losing their meaning for reasons which are not clear yet. The meaning of these names is continually becoming vague and others are completely getting lost. There is therefore need to preserve these meanings as an important Meru heritage before they are lost. This study investigated the structure and meaning of selected Meru proper names as one way of preserving this heritage. The study was guided by the following two objectives: to find out the form and structure of Meru proper names; and to examine the semantic content of Meru proper names.

The Concept of Sign in Naming

A sign is anything that can be used to represent or stand for something else. It can take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, acts, flavours, or objects (cf. Chandler, 2002: 17). Saussure (1983: 66), one of the early theorists of signs, opines that signs encode both a 'signifier' and a 'signified' component. In his argument, the signifier is the form that the sign takes; the material or physical form of the sign, while the signified is the concept to which the signifier refers. Saussure's model of sign as having the signifier (in this study's context, the name) and signified (in this study, the person named) helps to create correlates with it as form or shape and content or meaning. In respect of the subject of this study, the form is the morphological components and formations or style involved in the creation or generation of proper names. The form is thus made up of basic sounds and larger units employed in the creation of these names and the rules involved in this creation. Although Saussure's theorizations on the concept of sign are considered insightful, they are however deficient in the context of this study because of his concentration on formal systems at the expense of the social practices that shape the exercise of naming.

In a social semiotics perspective, a sign in practical use functions in human interactions. According to Halliday (1985), the function of language in use is to create meaning. The meaning-making process cannot be separated from its social and cultural context. The form of a name is not enough in itself for it to be called a sign; rather, it is the contextual interpretation of the form, which is the meaning of the sign that helps to identify it as a sign. So, if meanings cannot be invoked from signs, then they cannot be seen as signs. Their meanings are contextual; that is, they are identified as meaningful only in the situations where they occur. In this regard, the social functions of names are identified through their indexical links with the signs in which they are represented.

Proper Names as Signs

Names are taken as referring expressions which are used to point out and identify human beings in their society. Harder (2008) identifies different kinds of human names. These include: personal names, which are used to designate both male and female in the human society; and first names, which are the names that are given to people at birth. According to Harder (2008), first name is also known variously as forename or Christian/Baptismal name among English speaking people. The last in his classification is last name which is also called family name or surname. The last name indicates a person's family background. It could depict the occupation of the person's lineage (like, Smith, Baker, Miller, Chapman.), location where such a person lives (for example, Hill, Woods, Appleby) and the person's parentage (names prefixed with Mac or Mc). This paper neither focuses on family names nor does it target baptismal names.

Mbonu (2010: xiv) defines a personal name as a story, functioning as a place-holder, social location and part of belonging in most African societies. Ezeana (1994: 9) notes that a person sometimes receives a new name to indicate a change in his social standing. Following Ezeana, Mbonu (2010: 70) observes that in Ibo tradition, names are powerful symbols of an

individual. The name of a child to a number of societies mirrors the circumstances surrounding birth of that child. From the names children carry, the intensions/life-experiences of the parents are revealed. According to Onumajuru (2016), child naming is a ceremony which is usually accompanied with feasting and great joy in many cultures. Onumajuru notes that among the Ibo of Nigeria and the Jews, the name giver is supposed to be one of the elder relatives who take into consideration the circumstances surrounding the family (the situation of the parents, the number of children and their sexes before the child in question and the parent's social standing). The circumstances may concern the mother of the child, the father of the child, their material circumstances, their spiritual inclinations and so forth.

According to Onumajuru (2016), names express the power of God and what expectations the name giver expects of this power and their beliefs about the power. Onumajuru further argues that there are some names which show revengeful spirits, indignation or jealousy, depending on the sentiment that is uppermost in the mind of the parents, relative or the name giver at the time. In general, names can be used to show what the name giver thinks and feels about the person named.

Rutere and Kirigia (2013: 29) argue that names are usually given after childbirth and rituals such as circumcision. In respect of child birth, the first child is given a name reflecting a quality bestowed upon the paternal grandfather if the child is a male or paternal grandmother if the child is a female in that order. The next child is named after the uncles or aunties in male-female alternating sequence. The children named after the qualities reflecting the paternal side are referred to as *ciethe*, literary 'born of the father' and children named after qualities reflecting the maternal side are referred to as *ciongina* 'born of the mother'.

Theory and Method

Pierce's (1967) socio-semiotic theory of proper names in which names are perceived as verbal signs of their human referents and the descriptive theory of proper names by Frege-Russel (1970) in which the meaning or semantic content of a proper name is identical to the descriptions associated with it by speakers provided the basis upon which data was generated and analysed.

According to Pierce (1967), a proper name when one hears it for the first time, is essentially connected with some percept or other equivalent individual knowledge of the individual it connects. It is then, and then only, a genuine index. The next time one hears it, one regards it as an icon of that index. The habitual acquaintance with it having been acquired, it becomes a symbol that represents it as an icon of an index of the individual named. According to Pierce, a sign is something (A) which brings something (B); its interpretant sign determined or created by it into the same sort of correspondence which itself stands to C.

Russel's (1970) descriptive theory of proper names is the view that the meaning of a given use of a proper name is a set of properties that can be expressed as a description that picks out an object that satisfies the description. Russel argues that a name refers to a description, and that description like a definition, picks out the bearer of the name. The description then functions as an abbreviation or a truncated form of the description. Referents are determined by the objects that satisfy these descriptions. A simple descriptivist theory of names can be thought of as follows: *for every proper name P, there is some collection of descriptions D associated with P that constitute the meaning of P.*

A corpus of both male and female names was selected. A random sample of twenty (20) respondents drawn from each of the five main Meru sub-clans identified as The Imenti, The Tigania, The Igembe, The Tharaka, and The Chuka provided the data, with each sub-clan providing 4 informants. The main instruments of data collection were structured face to face interviews and native speaker intuition. The data was sourced from native speaker informants

in Meru County from a cross-section of the dialectal variations that exist in the County represented by the five sub-clans cited. In particular, data was drawn from a cross-section of ages, the two sexes and the sub-clans. Selected 50 proper names were analysed structurally according to their forms and meaning.

Using a non-probability snow ball technique, four (4) respondents were purposively drawn from each of the main five (5) Meru ethnic subgroup clusters. This made a total sample of twenty (20) respondents. The four respondents in each group comprised two (2) men and two (2) women; Out of these two gender based respondents in each category, one was picked from an age of sixty (60) to eighty (80) years and the other from an age of eighty one years and above. The respondents were asked to provide five most common male names and five most common female names and their meanings. In total, two hundred (200) names were provided. Out of this sample, two hundred names, the twenty five most cited common male names and twenty five most cited common female names were selected for analysis.

In respect of the face to face interviews, respondents were asked to provide five most common and varied male names and an equal number of female names and their meanings as well as the circumstances of their use. The responses were recorded on a notebook. A backup tape recorder was used for future reference. All ethical considerations were observed; the reasons for the research were well explained and the respondent's permission was sought for each case. Sufficient time was provided to each respondent to make their contribution.

Once the data was collected and coded appropriately, using a socio-semiotic approach, a structural and semantic content analysis of the Meru names was carried out. This is presented and discussed in the sections that follow.

Structural Analysis of Meru Names

Structural analysis of the names under study involved a morphological analysis of individual components of each name cited as well as an analysis and discussion of the semantic content of the individual names cited. In the next two sections, a morphological analysis of individual Meru names is done and thereafter followed by semantic content analysis of the same.

Morphological Analysis of Meru Names

Under morphological analysis, we discuss lexical names, phrasal names and sentential names

Lexical Names

With respect to lexical names analysis consisted of morphemic scrutiny of single unit names. Basically Meru lexical names comprise single root morphemes as obtains in isolating languages. There are no inflections on them and the name is not divisible into meaningful parts. Below are examples of Meru lexical names for both males and females.

(a) Male lexical names

- (i) **Kieni** - an open field
- (ii) **Nkoroi** - a colobus monkey
- (iii) **Kaaria** - age group (of a child's namesake)

(b) Female lexical names

- (i) **Karuki** - a small monkey (the male equivalent is Kiruki, which is a big monkey)
- (ii) **Gaiti** - from the east
- iii) **Ruguru** – from the west

Phrasal Names

Phrasal names comprise loosely connected multiple morphemes/words with single unit meaning equivalent to a single phrase. Phrasal names describe the attributes of the person a child is named after but in form of a phrase in structure; the name comprises a whole phrase as the following examples illustrate:

(a) Male phrasal names

- (i) **Mutuaruchiu** (male name) - *drawer of sword*; a compound of {**mutua**} drawer + {**ruchiu**} sword

(b) Female phrasal names

- (i) **Mukomunene** (female name) - *chief's wife*; a compound of {**muka**} wife + {**o**} of + {**munene**} chief
 (ii) **Kangai** (female name) – {**ka**} (diminutive for ‘muntu wa’ (child of) + ‘ngai’ (God)

Sentential Names

Sentential names are equivalent to whole clauses in structure. The names basically consist of a whole sentence made up of loosely connected words or morphemes and expressing a complete thought typical of a sentence. The following examples describe sentential names:

(a) Male

- (i) **Muthomi** - one who is read; {**mu-**} morpheme for ‘doer’ converting verbs into nouns + {**thoma**} root verb meaning ‘read’
 (ii) **Kirimi** - one who farms; {**ki**} male morpheme for denoting large size + {**rima**} root verb meaning ‘farm’
 (iii) **Mugambi** - one who speaks for; {**mu**} morpheme for ‘doer’ converting verbs into nouns + {**gamba**} root verb meaning ‘speak for’

(b) Female

- (i) **Gakii** - one who makes good porridge; {**ga**} noun morpheme for small size + {**kia**} root verb meaning ‘grind’
 (ii) **Kananu** - one who is praiseworthy; {**ka**} noun morpheme for small size + {**nania**} root verb meaning ‘praise’
 (iii) **Kathure** - one who is chosen; {**ka**} noun morpheme for small size + {**thura**} root verb meaning ‘choose’

Further on the structure of Meru names, a close scrutiny shows that in Kimeru naming custom, there is a prefix morpheme for ‘bigness’ {**ki**} which is prefixed on many male names reflecting power in Meru gender relations. This morpheme has a number of allomorphs which are largely morphologically conditioned. The allomorphs include [**ki-**] as in ‘Kirimi’ (a big farmer), [**mu-**] as in ‘Mutwiri’ (a big provider) and [**gi-**] as in ‘Gitonga’ (a rich person).

The equivalent prefix morpheme for ‘smallness’ for women {**ka**}, reflecting a subservient gender relation, has also a number of allomorphs such as [**ka-**] as in ‘Karimi’ (a small farmer), [**ga-**] as in ‘Gatwiri’ (a small provider) or ‘Gatonga’ (a person of little wealth, usually a term for effeminate men). Note that for the latter case there is no direct female equivalent name for a rich female presumably because women are not perceived as deserving the quality of richness.

Generally, the morpheme for ‘normal sized’ quality {**ki-**} has the allomorphs [**ki-**], [**mu-**] and [**gi-**]. Similarly the morpheme for ‘small sized’ quality {**ka-**} has the allomorphs [**ka-**] and [**ga-**]. Graphically, the two morphemes and their allomorphs appear as follows;

deviated from the expected behaviour were chastised with such names as **Ciokiuria** (the nosy one) and **Karegi** (the stubborn one). Further, female children were given such names as **Kagwiria** (one who makes others happy), **Karwirwa** (one who is fought for), **Kananu** (the praiseworthy one) and so on when they are named after individuals who exhibit beauty and modesty. These names are still very popular among the Meru.

The Meru have an elaborate naming system. According to Rutere and Kirigia (2013: 29), the Meru people have a naming system structured in such a way that a person's name reflects any one of the following sample of attributes of the person one is named after.

a. Names for normal qualities/virtues

- i. **Kirimi** (big farmer for a male) and **Karimi** (small farmer for a female); *rima* is the root verb meaning 'farm'
- ii. **Mutwiri** (big provider for a male) and **Gatwiri** (small provider for a female); *tuirira* is the root verb meaning 'provide'
- iii. **Mwenda** (male) 'lover of people'; no female equivalent; *enda* is the root verb meaning 'love'

b. Names for exalting qualities/ virtues (women are not usually given such names)

- i. **Mugambi** (spokesman for a male) - no female equivalent; *gamba* is the root verb meaning 'arbitrate'
- ii. **Munene** (ruler for a male) - no female equivalent; *unene* is a noun for 'leadership'
- iii. **Mutuma (male)** 'peace maker'; there is no female equivalent; *gutuma* is a root verb meaning 'to join together'

c. Animal and mysterious phenomenon names for exorcising evil spirits (usually given to a child after the death of a previous sibling)

- i. **Njoka** (snake for a male) - no female equivalent
- ii. **Mwitu** (dark forest for a female) - no male equivalent
- iii. **Kijira** (picked from a wide path for a male) and **Kajira** (picked from a narrow path for a female)
- iv. **Kithure (male)** 'the unwanted'; name for warding off the spirits of the dead.

Generally to exorcise spirits of the dead, a child may be named after an animal or a natural phenomenon following the death of a previous sibling. Male children are given names of big or fierce wild game like **Njogu** (elephant), **Nkari** (leopard), **Kiruki** (monkey), **Nkoroi** (colobus monkey), **Njoka** (snake), **Kibiti** (hyena) and **Mpaka** (cat). Female children are given names of small or cowardly animals such as **Kanugu** (a small squirrel), **Karuki** (a small monkey) and **Kabaka** (a small cat). Note that the female names still retain the diminutive [ka-] allomorph or its alternant even when there is no male equivalent and vice-versa in that males retain the 'big size' allomorph [ki-] or its alternant when there is no female equivalent

d. Names for demortalizing the dead

Muriuki (a reincarnated person for a male) – there is no female equivalent; *riuka* is the root verb for reincarnation

e. Names for marking age group (invariably male)

- i. **Kaaria** (carrier age-group of the 1914-1918 world War for a male) - no female equivalent. *Kaaria* is the 'Merunized' version of the English word 'carrier'

- ii. **Mbae/ Mbaya**; defiant age group of the early 50s in Kenyan struggle for freedom for male)- there is no female equivalent
- iii. **Maabu** - Born in the early 30s and active in the independence days

f. Names for marking clans and directions (the names are invariably feminine)

- i. **Kagoji** (demeaning name for a group of people described as ‘new clan’ by virtue of their deviant character for a female)- no male equivalent
- ii. **Karuku** (disparaging name for warlike people comprising a clan) for a female)- no male equivalent
- iii. **Nkuene, Ngeta** and **igoki** (praise names for respected clans given for a female child) - no male equivalent
- iv. **Gaiti** (standing for east direction in origin for naming female children)- no male equivalent
- v. **Ruguru** (standing for the west direction for naming female children)- no male equivalent

g. Names for denunciation of character

- i. **Kirea** (greedy big eater for a male) and **Karea** (greedy small eater for a female); *rea* is the root verb meaning ‘eat’
- ii. **Kinyua** (excessive big drinker for a male) and **Kanyua** (excessive small drinker for a female); *nyua* is the root verb meaning drink
- iii. **Karegi** (female) ‘stubborn one’
- iv. **Kanugu**- squirrel (female)
- v. **Mpaka/ mbaka** (male) and **Kabaka** (female) - cat

h. Names for ‘ungendered’ qualities

- i. **Mukiri** (humble person) for both male and female; *kira* is the root verb meaning ‘remain calm’
- ii. **Mwendwa** (loved person) for both male and female; *enda* is the root verb meaning ‘love’

i. Pampering /praising names

- i. **Nkatha** (a woman of influence) - no male equivalent
- ii. **Kagwiria** (one who endears or makes others happy) – no male equivalent; *gwiria* is the root verb meaning ‘make happy’
- iii. **Kaigongi** (female) ‘proud, self-praiser’

A detailed observation shows that upon undergoing the rite of circumcision, a majority of male youth drop their childhood names and acquire new names with an invariable prefix morpheme M’ as a new title for their new status going side by side with a new quality depicting their character. The examples of such venerating names are **M’Muketha*** (harvester) *guketha* is the root verb meaning ‘harvest’). **M’Marete** (a go getter - *kureta* is the root verb for the meaning ‘bring’), **M’Mukiri**, (a **humble** person - *gukira* is the root verb for the meaning ‘be calm’).

All the above male names, like other exalting names, are reserved for men and have no female equivalents. In case of **Mukiri**, an apparently gender-neutral term, the name loses the neutrality once further prefixed with [m] morpheme. Strictly speaking, there are no gender neutral names since a name like **Mwendwa** (a loved one) is normally feminine unless prefixed with a [m’] morpheme for masculine gender as in **M’Mwendwa** (a loved and revered man).

Certain treasured qualities such as wisdom, wealth and leadership are the preserve of men and female children are not named in reflection of such qualities. For instance, names like **Koome** (wise one), **Gitonga** (rich man) and **Munene** (ruler) have no female equivalents. Similarly, some female qualities have no equivalence in men. Such female names include **Kagwiria** (one who pleases), **Kathure** (the chosen one) and **Kananu** (the pampered one). Generally, the morpheme for 'normal size, quality [ki] has the allomorphs [ki], [mu] and [gi-]. Similarly, the morpheme for 'small sized' quality {ka-) has the allomorphs [ka] and [ga-].

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to investigate the socio-semiotic value of Meru personal names. Names are linguistic signs of great significance and the meanings they carry derive from a social practice. Personal names among the Ameru are non-deitic signs denoting specific individuals and their unique identities. The concept of name and naming is not just an identity marker; it is also an important system in Meru cosmology. The process involved in giving a name to a child and the act of naming in Meru is taken very seriously. This is because the name of a child tells much about the circumstances of its birth. The data for the paper consists of personal names of both male and female native speakers from a cross-section of dialectal variations in Meru. From the analysis, the study reveals that Meru names structurally fall into three broad categories; lexical, phrasal and sentential. The study further shows that a name is not just an identifying or a label, but that a name is an expression of the events and circumstances surrounding the birth of a specific child as well as the circumstances of the child's parents and that of the person whom the child is named after. The study recommends more studies on cross-cultural naming practices as well as the semiotics of nicknames.

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