

# A Linguistic Overview of the Patronymic and Gender Names amongst the Selected African Communities

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**Abstract** Most family systems world over are basically patriarchal in that children are given names bearing those of their fathers. The tendency cuts across almost all cultures in the world. This trend has continued to exist from the ancient epoch to date with varied procedures exhibited amongst various communities in the world. An analysis of these personal names shows applications of some aspects of morphology especially the use of free morphs and affixes with various denotations. For instance, a free morph may be used to refer to ‘a son of’ or ‘daughter of’, and or an affix used to indicate someone’s name by adding it on the father’s name in the case of patronymic studies. There are also some affixes that are used to denote the common gender of either masculinity or femininity of community members. Thus, the article intends to provide a linguistic overview of the patronymic and gender names amongst the selected African communities in an attempt to examine how these aforementioned aspects of morphology manifest themselves. It intends to show if there is uniformity and or variations in the use of free morphs and also affixes that indicate gender.

**Keywords** Morphology, Patronymic, Gender names, Affixation

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## 1. Introduction

It is not known who first felt the dire need to name himself or any other person in any given community [1]. This statement clearly indicates that the processes and practices of giving names to persons in any given society is a subject worth discussing and requires the involvement of various approaches from the historical intelligentsia among other scholars of different disciplines. Though [1] tends to give a notion that it is not known when humans started giving names to fellow people, there is a clear testimony that shows that man started giving names right from creation time. From a religious point of view as witnessed in the book of Genesis chapter 2 verses 19-20 of the Holy Bible, man was given the mandate to give names to other creatures in his environment. This is clarified in the excerpt below:

‘Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.’ [2: 2].

This excerpt tends to assert that it is the man himself who gave out names to the other living things. In this case we can then assume that the same man gave names to his

descendants owing to the fact that he was already given the powers to do so by his maker. In addition, many names that we have now seemingly have been modified according to our cultural orientations, religious beliefs and globalization among other factors. Though, the process of giving and studying names has not been given much attention by various linguistic scholars, it has seemingly become one of the very interesting disciplines in the academic circles due to its interdisciplinary nature. In this regard we are highly required to give attention to the studies of names of persons and places from our various communities.

Study of names of persons and places is generally referred to as onomastics [3-8]. Though it has commonly been regarded as a linguistics study [4], many scholars have done extensive researches about it from different perspectives. This therefore qualifies onomastics to be referred to as an interdisciplinary study [8]. In this regard, onomastics can therefore be discussed from various stand points such as anthropology, commerce, oral literature, history, lexicography, linguistics, literature, politics, psychology, religion and sociology among others [9]. Sometimes onomastics is alternately named as onopatology [7].

Though onomastics appears as a contemporary discipline, other scholars like [10] opine that studies on onomastics can be traced back to ancient Egypt almost 5-6 thousand years ago whereby proper and common names especially of gods and kings were written using the hieroglyphic system of writing. For example, Cleopatra’s name was written as here below:

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Figure 1. Cleopatra's name in hieroglyphic writing [10: 7]

Later, both horizontal and vertical signs were used to refer to proper names in the ancient Akkadian and Assyrian writings, and also Chinese, Greek and Latin writing systems [10]. However, onomastics as a distinct discipline in various learning institutions has tended to be basically contemporary [5]. Currently, onomastics studies have shown that it has various branches namely: anthroponomastics, toponomastics, ethnonymy and glottonymy [3, 4, 6, 7]. Anthroponomastics deals with people's names, toponomastics is concerned with place names, ethnonymy discusses names of ethnic groups and glottonymy refers to names of languages.

This paper is based on anthroponomastics that deals with names of persons in the community. According to The Genealogical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (henceforth referred to as GDCJCLS) [11], history has tended to show that from the ancient epochs, people were given single names in the community because of the smaller population that existed then. However, due to population growth, the single names that were given tended to confuse people. This confusion occurred because seemingly almost everybody tended to have similar names in their groups in a given community. Therefore, the communities involved decided to come up with quick surnames that were basically regarded as bynames and aliases specifically used to help in differentiating them [11]. Besides this trend, communities came up also with other ways of naming people by using fathers' names.

The practical use of father's name is what has been referred to as patronymy in the studies of onomastics. It is a proven fact that most family systems world over are basically patriarchal. This means that children are therefore given names bearing those of their fathers. This patriarchal approach to naming children tends to cut across almost all cultures in the world and has continued to exist right from the ancient epoch to date with varied procedures and alterations exhibited amongst various communities.

Besides patronymic names, anthroponomastics includes other typologies such as environmental, familial, theological, cognomen, apotropaic (names used to shield the bearer from evil spirits), matronymic, gender names, anonyms and apronyms (names derived from someone's work/occupation) among others [4, 6]. This paper focuses on names of people especially proper names but with emphasis on patronymics and gender names. The term patronymic emanates from Greek lexeme 'Patronimika' [11]. Linguistically, patronymic names are defined as those that are given to a child by considering his or her father's name or names that are basically derived from the father's personal name [12, 13, 6, 14]. This tendency is commonplace in many communities world over. On the other hand, gender names are those that

are given to an individual based on his or her gender.

In order to accomplish this discussion, the paper is guided by the following one objective: to give an overview of patronymic and gender names amongst some selected African communities that speak varied languages. This will be done with an emphasis on how such names involve in their structures the application of various aspects of morphology especially affixation and free morphs.

## 2. Related Literature

Patronymic names practices tend to be somehow similar amongst various communities in the world [15, 16, 11, 12, 17, 1, 14]. According to these scholars, patronymic names are defined as those that are derived from the father's names. However, this derivation can be done by using many similar and dissimilar perspectives. These perspectives include the use of free morphs denoting 'son of' or 'daughter of', and also the use of affixes appended on the father's name either before or after the root. In addition, there are also other affixes that are appended on the given names in order to denote gender of a person thus resulting to what is referred to as gender names.

Patronymic studies have given various results as can be witnessed in the works of many scholars. For example, in the structure of the Afghan names, a child of whichever gender can be addressed using his father's name. For example, if the father is *Sharif* then his son may be called *Bache Sharif* (that is son of Sharif) and his daughter may be referred to as *Doxtare Sharif* (that is daughter of Sharif) [17]. In this regard, 'bache' means 'son of' and 'doxtare' means 'daughter of'. Sometimes, the suffixes are also used when referring to a son of. For instance, the suffix {-zai} which is an inflected form of the morph {-zoy} is used with the father's name to denote 'son of' like in the case of *Yousafzai* meaning son of *Yousaf* [17].

The tendency is manifested in the patronymic names of the Tuvan community from Russia whereby the suffixes {-ov} and {-ova} are suffixed onto the father's name to denote *son of* or *daughter of* respectively. For example, if one's father is *Troyak* then his son will be *Troyakov* and his daughter may be referred to as *Troyakova* [15]. In 1944, the Tuvans tended to adopt the Russian system of naming whereby suffixes like {-ovic} for males and {-ovna} for females were used together with the father's name. This was later replaced by the proposed use of {-oglu} meaning son of and {-kizi} meaning daughter of.

Patronymic names among the Swedish people also show the use of some affixes on the father's name to denote son of or daughter of. For example, the suffixes {-son} and {-dotter} are suffixed to the father's name. In this regard, if the father is called *Anders*, then the son whose other name is Erick may be called *Erick Andersson* and the daughter whose other name is Karin may be referred to as *Karin Andersdotter* [16]. The trend is also common in the matronymic names among the Swedish especially whereby a child has a mother whose

father is not known as can be seen in names such as *Brittasdotter* (daughter of Brittas) and *Brittasson* (son of Brittas) [16]. The term matronymic also emanates from a Greek word 'Matronimika' [11].

Patronymic names amongst the Dutch people also manifest the usage of suffixes such as {-son} and {-daughter}. For instance, Wilfred son of Lutgar will be referred to as Wilfred *Lutgarson*, and Cornelia daughter of Hendrick will be named as Cornelia *Hendriksdaughter* [11]. Besides patronymic system of naming, the Dutch also tend to give names depending on one's occupation, aliases and nicknames, and geographical origins. For example, one may be called *Gaastra* meaning a resident of a farmstead [11]. The suffix {-stra} tends to denote *resident of*. The use of suffix {-son} is also witnessed among the English people. For example, Robert's son will be referred to as *Robertson* [1]. There are also occupational names that include *John Smith* and descriptive names such as *John Long* and *John Armstrong* among the English [1].

There are common applications of prefixes such as {-ab} and {-ap} among the Welsh [14]. However, these prefixes are infused or mutated in a name to give a different form altogether. For example, *Bowen* is a name formed by the infusion or mutation of a prefix {-ab} to a name *Owen* thus instead of using 'ab owen', the Welsh will refer to it as *Bowen* [14]. This refers to son of *Owen*. The prefix {-ab} is used when the father's name begins with a vowel and {-ap} is used when the father's name begins with a consonant. For example, 'ap Robert' will be mutated to form *Probert* [14]. Among the Irish people, the prefix {Mc-/Mac-} is prefixed to the father's name to provide the patronymic name of a child [4, 14]. For example, if the father is *Donald* then the son may be referred to as *McDonald* or *MacDonald* [6].

According to [13], use of free morphs, prefixes and suffixes tend to be common place among other communities around the globe like the Bulgarians, Greeks, Czech and Slovak, Polish, Portuguese, Romanians and Arab Muslims. The Bulgarian patronymic names relied on the following suffixes suffixed onto the father's name {-ov/-ev/-ski/-sky/-in} for males and {-ova/-eva/-ska/-ina} to denote females. For example, if the father is called *Petr* then the male child whose other name is *Emil* may be called *Emil Petrov*.

Among the Greeks, patronymic names derived from the fathers usually tend to have a suffix {-ou} that basically refers to 'of'. For instance, *Spyros Georgiou* means *Spyros* son of *Georgios*. The Czech and the Slovak have a scenario whereby besides having {-ova} appended onto the father's name to denote female names, there is also the use of a rare prefix {-z} to denote 'of' as can be seen in the name *Karel z Zerotina*. The Polish, masculine names have suffixes such as {-ski/-cki} and {-ska/-cka} for femininity thus giving names such as *Kowalski* for males and *Kowalska* for females.

The Portuguese also tend to have free morphs placed before the father's name to denote a child of. These morphs include {do/dos/da} as can be witnessed in the names such as *Dos Santos* (child of Santos) and *Da Silva* (child of Silva). The Romanians have suffixes such as {-escu/-eanu/-aru} to

denote son of as can be seen in the names such as *Ionescu* (son of Ion), *Tariceanu* (son of Taric) and *Gradinaru* (son of Gradin).

The Arab Muslim community has a tendency of showing that someone is a son of or daughter of somebody in a name by using free morphs such as {Bin/Ibn} for males and {binti} for females. For example, *Ahmad Bin Hussein* would basically mean *Ahmad* son of *Hussein* and *Fatuma binti Mazrui* would mean *Fatuma* daughter of *Mazrui*. There are also instances whereby names may indicate father of or mother of somebody. In this case, free morphs especially {Abu/Bou} referring to 'father of' and {Umm} referring to 'mother of' are used. In such scenarios, we get names like *Abu Mohammad* (father of Mohammad) and *Umm Mohammad* (mother of Mohammad).

From the numerous examples given across the world, we can clearly ascertain that there is interplay between onomastics and other disciplines or other branches of pure linguistics, morphology being one of them. In fact, this could be the reason why [18] opined that 'proper names are complex signs with specific linguistic, pragmatic, logical, philosophical, semiotic, historical, psychological, social and juridical properties, and hence represent a vast interdisciplinary field of study'. He therefore categorizes studies of proper names from two varied perspectives of linguistic and non-linguistic [18].

Linguistic perspective on onomastics involves branches such as syntax, semantics, pragmatics, psycholinguistics and neuro-linguistics among others. It is in this perspective where the interplay between onomastics and morphology comes in. On the other hand, non-linguistic perspective includes logic, philosophical, stylistic and psychological aspects. This paper basically focuses on the linguistic interplay existing between morphology and onomastics studies on patronymic and gender names. Morphology refers to the study of internal structural arrangements of words [8]. In this paper, I explore the structural arrangements of names particularly patronymic and gender names amongst selected African communities.

Morphologically, patronymic names of people in communities outside Africa may tend to be categorized as follows: derivative, inflectional and compound [12]. Derivative patronymic names occur when a derivative ending is added to a father's name as we can see in the Germanic case such as *Wulfung* (meaning Wulf's son). In this case, a suffix is added onto the father's name. Inflectional patronymic name occurs when the father's name is added in a normative or genitive form for example *Williams* (William's son). On the other hand, compound patronymics occur when the father's name is compounded with the word 'son' as in the case of *Williamson* (son of William). Such scenarios tend to manifest themselves among the African communities with different modifications of forms of prefixes and suffixes, and also various applications of the free morphs. This paper looks at the morphological aspects in the selected African patronymic and gender names in Kenya amongst the Luo, Abagusii, Kamba, Kalenjin,

Abaluhya, Meru, Kikuyu and Maasai communities.

### 3. Methodology

The work is premised on a descriptive design whereby patronymic and gender names of selected communities in Africa specifically Kenya were described and analyzed. The data involved was collected from the library based documents through the application of critical observation and non formal interview of interviewees from some few members from the selected African communities specifically Luo, Abagusii, Kamba, Kalenjin, Abaluhya, Meru, Kikuyu and Maasai. Basically, the work relied on purposive sampling technique in which few patronymic names that exhibit free morphs and few gender names that manifest some kind of affixation were sampled. The names sampled were morphologically analyzed whereby the free morphs, prefixes and suffixes involved were identified from the various names and their usages defined and later presented in continuous prose.

### 4. Results and Discussions

It has been vehemently explained from the cited scholars in the literature review of this paper that it is possible to study patronymic and gender names through a morphological sun-glasses [15, 16, 11, 12, 18, 13, 17, 1, 8, 14]. These works indicate that free morphs and affixes can be used to show patronymic names in various communities. However, gender names normally tend to rely on affixes either prefixes or suffixes in order to denote gender that can be male or female. The use of these affixes is a common tendency but not compulsory formulas to be followed by each and every member of any given community. Thus, in the subsections below, I explore the linguistic manifestations of the aspects of morphology in the patronymic and gender names amongst the following African communities in Kenya: Luo, Kamba, Abagusii, Abaluhya, Kalenjin, Maasai, Meru and Kikuyu among others.

#### 4.1. Morphological Aspects in Patronymic Names

Patronymic names among many Kenyan communities tend to have names of the fathers as an additional one after the first and second names of the child. For example, amongst the Luo community, when the father is called *Okal*, then the children will automatically add this after the first and second names. For example, *Benard Odoyo* will add *Okal* so as to have *Benard Odoyo Okal*. In this case, one will automatically know that *Okal* is *Benard Odoyo*'s father. The trend is common even amongst the other communities where the third name becomes the father's for example, *John Mutinda Musyoki* (among the Kamba whereby Musyoki is the father), *John Ondieki Mageto* (among the Abagusii whereby Mageto is the father), and *Daniel Wangila Barasa* (among the Abaluhya whereby Barasa is the father's name).

Though the trend is common amongst many Kenyan communities, there are also instances when free morphs are used to indicate 'son of' among the communities such as Kalenjin, Maasai, Kamba, Meru and Kikuyu among others [19]. However, the additional free morphs placed before mentioning the father's name are just for self exaltation. That means they are basically facultative and therefore not purely and canonically entrenched as a cultural dictum. For example, the word {*Arap*} is used amongst the Kalenjin to denote 'son of'. However, this free morph is not commonly practiced by many people in this community. The term Kalenjin was coined during the World War II and it includes sub tribes such as Keiyo, Kipsigis, Marakwet, Nandi, Pokot, Sabaot, Terik and Tugen [20]. For instance, the second president of the Republic of Kenya was called *Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi*. In this case, the morph {*Arap*} indicates that he is son of Moi. Some Maasai people also tend to use a free morph {*ole*} to denote 'son of'. Few examples include *Simon ole Kina* whereby the word {*ole*} denotes son of *Kina*.

In addition, the free morph {*mwana'a*} meaning 'child of' is also exhibited amongst some Kamba people. For instance, in the name *Wambua mwana'a Nzeki* (Wambua is one born during rains), there is an indication that *Wambua* is a child of a person called *Nzeki*. Some Tirikis who constitute a sub tribe within Abaluhya also tend to use the free morph {*kwa*} to denote 'of' a person. A good example is witnessed in the name *Cyrus kwa Jirongo* who was one of the presidential contenders during the Kenya's election of 2017. Other Luhyias from different regions also tend to use {*wa*} to denote 'of' for example, *James Asiko wa Marende*.

The Meru community has a facultative practice whereby the morph {*mtō*'-} that is shortened as {*M*'-} is prefixed onto the father's name. For instance, if a child is called *Samwel Kiraitu* child of *Mkindia* then the name can automatically be reframed as *Samwel Kiraitu M'Mkindia*. The trend amongst the Meru seemingly appears also amongst some Luos whereby the prefix {*Mc*'-} is prefixed onto the father's name. That means, if one is called *Daniel Ochieng'* child of *Onyango* then we may have a name such as *Daniel Ochieng' McOnyango*. The trend amongst the Luo is not a very common practice all over. It may have come about because of Western culture influence. This could be because the practice is normally very common among the Irish people whereby the prefix {*Mc*'-/Mac-} is prefixed onto a father's name [4, 6, 14]. The Kikuyu community also has a facultative tendency of using the free morph {*wa*} to indicate 'child of'. The use of such a morph is witnessed in names such as *John Ngugi wa Kamau*.

#### 4.2. Morphological Aspects in Gender Names

Most gender names that show masculinity or femininity have common roots but different prefixes and suffixes. There are specific prefixes and suffixes in many communities in Kenya that when used on a name then automatically indicates that the bearer of such a name is male or female. In this section, I bring to the attention of the readers the various

morphological aspects that are used in gender names from the aforementioned selected communities in Africa.

In the Luo community, the prefixes {*O-*} and {*A-*} are commonly used to denote gender whereby the former denotes males and the later refers to females [6]. In this case, we may have names such as *Odoyo* (male person) and *Adoyo* (female person) especially those born during weeding season. Amongst the Abaluhya community, the prefixes {*Wa-*} are used for males and {*Na-*} for females are commonly used [21, 7]. For example, *Wanjala* (male person) and *Nanjala* (female person) born during famine. Among the Kalenjins, the prefixes {*Kip-*} for males and {*Chep-*} for females are commonly used [19]. For example, *Kiptalam* (male person) and *Cheptalam* (female person) indicating somebody who was born during a locust invasion.

The Kamba community basically tends to have suffixes to indicate gender in some names. From the examples given by [21], Kamba names such as *Mwende* and *Mwendwa* show a scenario whereby the suffixes {*-e*} and {*-wa*} are used to denote female and male respectively. In the above names, *Mwende* that has the suffix {*-e*} refers to a loved female child and *Mwendwa* that has a suffix {*-wa*} refers to a loved male child. From the few people interviewed, the Kambas also tend to have numerous suffixes that can be used to denote either male or female. These other suffixes include {*-i*} and {*-e*}. The former denotes male child like in the case of *Mbithi* (male child who could not be noticed in the mother's womb) and also *Mbithe* (female child who could not be noticed in the mother's womb).

## 5. Conclusions

The paper has indicated that giving patronymic names to children is a common trend that tends to cut across cultures of various communities in the world. Since most communities uphold the patriarchal system of families, children are given names derived from their fathers. Among the selected African communities, children are given first and second names then add the third name which is normally that of the father. However, there are instances whereby free morphs are added before the father's name is mentioned. This is normally added for self exaltation thus should be considered facultative. For example, we have {*Arap*} for Kalenjins, {*ole*} for the Maasai, {*mwana'a*} among the Kambas, {*mto'M'*} among the Meru people, and also {*wa*} among the Kikuyus and Abaluhya. Some Luos also tend to have prefixes such as {*Mc-Mac-*} prefixed onto the father's name basically for self exaltation and probably used due to the influence of the Western culture.

Besides patronymic names, there are also gender names that tend to have specific prefixes to denote either males or females. Amongst the Luo, the prefix {*O-*} denotes male and {*A-*} denotes female. There are also prefixes such as {*Kip-*} for males and {*Chep-*} for females among the Kalenjins. Abaluhya tends to have prefixes such as {*Wa-*} to denote males and {*Na-*} to denote females. The Kamba community

tends to have some names with suffixes that are used to denote either males or females. These include, {*-e*} for females and {*-wa*} for males. However, sometimes suffixes like {*-i*} denoting male and {*-e*} denoting female are used in some names. In general, it has clearly been established that studies on onomastics are very interdisciplinary in that its analysis can be approached from various stand points ranging from pure linguistic to the non-linguistic disciplines.

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