

A Comparative Analysis of Selected Circumstantial Names among the Akurmi (Kurama) and the Atyap (Kataf) People of Southern Kaduna

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Abstract

Names are as old as time. From the beginning of time, everything; both animate and inanimate has a name by which it is addressed. This paper specifically focuses more on a comparative analysis of personal names of human beings among Akurmi and Atyap that are circumstantial in nature; names that the bearers are given based on the circumstances surrounding their conception or birth. As such, these circumstantial names are collected and dissected to work out their meanings with a view to establishing whether they are really circumstantial names or not and how the giving of such names remain some forms of the people traditional norm that must be preserved because of its relevance.

Keywords: Circumstantial Names, Akurmi (Kurama), Atyap (Kataf), Southern Kaduna, Names.

Introduction

There is an interface between human cultures worldwide in areas such as food, dressing, and greetings. The act of naming is not an exception to this regard. Although this study focuses on Akurmi and the Tyap people of Southern Kaduna, an overview of circumstantial naming among the Hebrew (Israelites), the Yoruba and the Hausa are randomly sampled and discussed in passing. This is in a bid to buttress the analysis of circumstantial naming (otherwise known as *Liliyot Gan* in Tyap language) among Akurmi and Tyap people as a window through which circumstantial naming of the other tribes of the Southern Kaduna might be viewed, analyzed and appreciated.

Burling (1970, p.1) observes that “whether we are casual observers of the

world around us or taxonomic biologists, we feel compelled to give names to the objects we examine.” It is apt to reiterate Shakespeare's question here: “What is in a name?” Naming is one of the values of society that may not be easily discarded. This is because names give individuals a unique identity and place in the society. Once a person is given a name, the name becomes synonymous with the bearer. Whatever name is given to an individual, the reason has always been the need to create a sense of personal identity and uniqueness in what is generally referred to as the referent. Perhaps the essence of naming is more succinctly captured by Buba (2010) in Ibrahim (1997) as:

From the traditional rites of naming a child to attract a hoped for character trait, to the branding of companies hoping to etch themselves in our collective memory, naming of ships, buildings and stars above, the aim of naming remains the desire to activate knowledge and understanding of the referent once it is uniquely and officially proclaimed. In repertoire of knowledge, gender, circumstances of birth, day of birth, religion, ethnic identity and status may all be foregrounded in assignment of appropriate names to people and places.

Names and naming cultures have received scholarly attention from different people. Scholars from the northern part of Nigeria such as Labaran (1990), Ahmad (2001), Buba (2003), Amos (2015) have conducted researches in order to show the structure, significance and communicative values of personal names in Hausa, Akurmi and other northern Nigerian languages. However, in most cases, these names are studied on a general note, along sides other classification of names. There is dearth of studies as far as the researchers know that exists, specifically on circumstantial names in both Akurmi and Tyap languages. This is why this study is undertaken as a contribution to knowledge on circumstantial naming among the aforementioned tribes in the southern part of Kaduna state.

Names and Naming

It is a fact that there is a strong affinity between language and culture and to that effect, Agyekum (2006) in Adjah (n.p.) postulates that the Akan (Ghanaian) personal names system and practice is a marker of a people's belief, ideology, religion, culture, philosophy and thought. This assertion equally buttresses the view of the researchers in this paper.

The bestowal of personal names sometimes depends on some experiences in the bearer's life or that of his family or society. It is based on the above observation that Eglewogbe (1987), observes that personal names are intimately associated with various events in the life of an individual, the family or the society as a whole. This paper further builds on these ideas by proffering that personal names can also be seen as sources of information which provide substantial insight about the circumstances surrounding an individual's conception and birth. The people

therefore who speak the same language with a person who bears a given name may easily work out the meaning of the name on hearing it. They do not only work out the meaning of the name but the reason for which it is given as well.

Circumstantial Names

Mill (1867) while discussing the connotative and denotative implication of names observed that, "...in various ways, proper names can be associated with attributes; but such associations are never essential to the functioning of the name itself. For example, speakers often have a reason for giving an object one name rather than another; the town Dartmouth was so named for being situated at the mouth of the river Dart." This goes to show that sometimes, names need more than denotation to be accounted for.

The foregoing indicates that when names are circumstantial, something within the setting must have given rise to it. A person must have had an experience and that experience came to be seen as a part of the person's name and the name comes to be seen as a memorial of that experience. This experience could be that of the bearer himself or that of his parents or it could be an event that happened in a society at the period of conception or birth of the bearer.

Circumstantial names may be given to the bearer at birth due to events around that period. For example, the name Gwonzwang in the Tyap language is only given to male children born during war times. At the same time, circumstantial names could be given to a person who already has a name. This case of giving a name to a person who already has a name is what Lyons (1970) calls a case of renomination. This may be brought about by a situation where a person who already has a name is given a name because of certain qualities or attributes that they manifest later in life. For instance, in Akurmi, a woman who constantly leaves the husband's house to return to her parents' house is normally renamed 'Agudu.' *Gudu* is the Hausa word for running, but has been adopted into Akurmi by the addition of the prefix: 'a'. And among the Atyap people, such a woman is called "*Naswali*."

Circumstantial names may be attached to seasons of the year in which the bearer is born, physical appearances, happy/sad experiences, suffering, abundance or even a societal experience and other such events that surround the period of conception and birth.

Methodology

The paper largely depends on secondary data research approach, which involves the summary and analysis of existing data, giving findings new and different meanings. The paper also draws from personal intuition, observation and knowledge of the researchers as speakers of Akurmi and Tyap respectively. The names are therefore collected and analysed based on Bach and Harnish's theory of Mutual Contextual Beliefs.

Theoretical Framework

This paper finds Bach and Harnish's theory of Mutual Contextual Beliefs very useful. "Language users depend on a shared knowledge or set of beliefs in order to disambiguate a piece of language." Bach and Harnish (1979) tag this knowledge-Mutual Contextual Beliefs (MCBs) in their theory of 'intention inference'. They believe that for two interlocutors to communicate, both the speaker and hearer must possess some kind of prior knowledge which comes to play in instances of communication. In their words in Abaya (2008, p.193), they say of MCBs, "the contextual belief that figures in speaker's intentions and hearer's inference must be mutual if communication is to take place." In this case, we could say that both speaker and hearer must have a common understanding. The hearer must understand the angle from which the speaker is coming in order to infer the meaning of an utterance accordingly. This is because sometimes a speaker may say the opposite of what he really means in a particular situation. Sometimes an utterance may be direct and sometimes indirect. In this case, interpretation is left to the hearer to make the right inference depending on the utterance.

This paper therefore finds the theory of Mutual Contextual Beliefs to be useful because circumstantial names in Akurmi can only be understood if the bearers of the names and hearers of the names have a mutual background knowledge and understanding of the meanings of the names.

Circumstantial Names among Akurmi and Atyap People

The Akurmi people who are found in Lere local government of Kaduna State, and the Atyap people of Zango-Kataf local government area of Kaduna State, just like any other language group, have high esteem for the culture of naming and the meanings of these names depend to a large extent on context. It is from the contexts that circumstantial names are derived. Since circumstantial names are not given at random, then their disambiguation depends on the context in which they are given. Some of these circumstantial names are outlined below:

Wahala (suffering): '*Wahala*' rendered with a Akurmi accent is the Hausa word for 'suffering', adapted into the Akurmi language. The name *Wahala* is given to children who are born in a period of great suffering or strife. This suffering may be the one experienced by the family or the society in general. A woman who is greatly maltreated by the husband may also be re-named *Wahala* based on the situation in which she has found herself. The name therefore describes the situation of the bearers rather than any of their physical attributes. It is pertinent to state that most people do not want to give their children such a name because it is believed that the bearer lives true to the name by suffering throughout their life time.

Ekwama (hunger/famine): *Ekwama* is the Akurmi word for hunger or

famine. As a circumstantial name, *Ekwama* is given to a child who is born in a period of great hunger or famine.

Riango (only surviving child): The original meaning of *riango* as a word is deceit. However, it has come to be used as a name for a child who finally survives after several before it have died. The name expresses the fact that the parents feel that they are only being deceived because they feel that the child would also die just like others before it, as such they name the child deceit.

Onaa (she/he is lost): Like *Riango* above, *Onaa* is also given to a child who finally survives after all others before it have died. *Onaa* means he or she lost her way, instead of going back to the world of the dead, the child stays in the world of the living and that is why it is said that the child lost its way by staying in the world of the parents.

Awura (the one with the bottle): *Awura* is derived from *n'wura*, which is the Akurmi word for bottle. *Awura* as a circumstantial name is given to a child who survives on the bottle because the mother could not breast feed it due to sickness or death.

Vuwam (exonerate/deliver): *Vuwam* means to take by force. As a name it expresses the fact that the parents of the bearer believe that the birth of the child will bring good luck and also exonerate them from some kind of bad situation.

Tuna (to swear) *Tona* means to swear. Normally when a person is being accused of something and the person denies it, the person is normally asked to swear in order to; prove their innocence. When the person who is asked to swear is a pregnant woman, she swears by her pregnancy such that if she is guilty, she loses the pregnancy and if otherwise, the pregnancy remains in place. A child who is born in such circumstances is then named '*Tona*', having survived the ordeal.

Onina (Army worm) *Onina* is the Akurmi word for army worm. Army worms are tiny green worms that sometimes infest a particular farming season to destroy crops. Farmers are always at a loss when this happens, and always dread its occurrence because the sad experience is always etched in their memory. A child that is born in such a period is called *Onina* and anywhere an Akurmi person hears the name, the meaning is easily worked out.

Amutu (death): Sometimes, some families experience series of deaths within short intervals. When a child is born amidst such occurrences, it is called *Amutu*. *Amutu* is derived from the Hausa word *mutuwa* which means death. However, as time passes, people are beginning to avoid such names because it is believed that they (the names) have deterministic effects on the bearers.

Akwane (the sickly one): *Akwane* is derived from the Akurmi word *Nkwane* which means illness. As such, a person who constantly falls ill is re-named *Akwane*, which is circumstantial in nature and the person who is given such a name would normally have an original name. The *Akwane* is therefore later given based on

circumstance.

Ayina (What is it?): *Ayina* is a word in Akurmi though when translated to English it is a sentence- “What is it?” The name is also circumstantial because it expresses exhaustion and frustration from trying situations. Normally when a family is befallen by several difficulties that seem unending, and a child is born in such circumstance, it is named *Ayina* because the situation seems so confusing and agonising.

Some Circumstantial Names (Also Known As *Liliyot Gan*) In The Tyap Language and Their Meanings Translated Into English

Kukwui (Mutuwa): The name given to a child who is given birth to in a period when many people are dying. Such a child, especially the male child, is named *Kukwui* or *Mutuwa*, its Hausa equivalent, while in Akurmi it is *Amutu* as discovered in this paper before now.

Atyusan (Saviour): The name is given to a child who is seen as the saviour to the family or as one who brings succour to the suffering of his parents as well as the entire family or clan. Its Hausa equivalent is *Maiwada*, which means, the source of blessings to the parents.

Nakhwu: This name is given much later in life to a woman who is childless, after being married for many years. This kind of name is what Lyons (1970) called renomination. This may be brought about by a situation where a person who already has a name is given a name because of certain qualities or attributes that they manifest later in life. In this instance, the woman is barren.

Nvan: This literally means in English, “I am tired.” The name is given to a child who was born at a time when the mother or father becomes frustrated and tired of suffering in life. The Akurmi equivalent of this name is *Ayina*, which is rendered in a question form to mean “exhaustion and frustration” from trying situations of life.

Shyieyhin/Bwayhin: These names are sometimes used interchangeably to mean the same. It can mean that the father of the child had lost his siblings and is the only surviving child or parent left as at the time of the child's birth.

Zwandyen (regret): Is a name that implies either a parent or both regret some past experiences prior to the birth of the said child. Such a name is one of the names that are not too common today with the advent of Christianity.

Bobai: The name for a male child who is believed to have re-incarnated like Yoruba synonym, *Abiku*. Or who was born shortly after the demise of his father, grandfather or a male child. Till today, many Atyap sons still bear such a name. Literary, Bobai means, “he has returned.”

Aboi (Dodo): The name given to children born during pre-western era; also associated to masquerade or traditional religious rites. Children initiated into such cult practices are also called *Aboi* and its Hausa synonym is *Dodo* which means a

member of masquerade cult or a masquerade. The practice of such religious rites or worship has gone extinct in most parts of the Southern Kaduna due to the encroachment of Christianity in the garb of western civilization.

Nyanasan: This name sometimes ends with a suffix in the Tyap language, thus: *Nyanasan- zit – Nyanasan- zit* which means, who will save us or who will deliver us? The name is given to a child who is born in the period when either the society or his parents are passing through difficulties such as famine or war.

Kankhu: The name given to a child whose father had died before the child's birth. Its Hausa version is “*Audi*.”

Amos (2015) observes that “circumstantial names suggest that the situations do not affect the child alone but the parents and the community as well. In Labaran (1990, n.p.), Oseni (1981) says of circumstantial names that, “most names are determined by the circumstance surrounding the birth (or the entire lives) of the people who bear them.” She further observes that the circumstances may be historical, socio-economical, social, and so on. It is from these factors that the names are derived and also explained. Giving names according to circumstances is a fact across many other indigenous languages because people use them as reminders of experiences they have passed through in their lives.

In an attempt to answer the question raised earlier by Shakespeare: “what is in a name?” unarguably, there is everything in a name as argued by the writer of proverbs in the bible, that “a good name is more precious than gold.” A name as observed in this paper gives the bearer a unique identity in the society. Beyond this, a name could be a prayer, a wish or a prediction on the bearer and other times. Wilkinson (2000, p. 21) supports this position by stating that in the Old Testament times, a man and his name were so intimately related that “to cut off the name” of an individual amounted to the same things as killing him. He further emphasized that a name was often taken as a wish for or a prophecy about the child's future.

People usually live to the true meanings of their names. Conversely we do not have to look too far to find answers to this postulation. The following illustrations suffice to support our argument from the biblical perspective as Wilkinson also concurs that Jacob means “Grabber.” The name Jacob as others see it also connotes a “schemer” and a “trickster” as interpreted by other biblical scholars.

The following are examples of circumstantial names picked from the Hebrews or Israelites of the Palestinian land and the Hausa to lend support to this paper's argument. Jabez for instance means “pain.” Literally, it could mean a child that will cause pain or sorrow to his parents. Perhaps the choice to this name was consequent upon a very painful pregnancy, emotional or a traumatic delivery. Just as it was the case with Jacob's wife, Rachel in Genesis 35:18, named her son Ben- Oni as she breathed her last- for she was dying when she gave birth to Ben- Oni, which means “son of my trouble.” But Jacob, her husband, knowing the negativity of that name quickly changed it to Benjamin, which means, “son of my right hand.” Jacob

did that because he was a victim of a name that has negative denotation and connotations. This episode shows that there is something and many things in a name. Talle is one amongst the Hausa circumstantial names (*Sunayen Lakabi*) that is given to a child whose mother dies shortly after his or her birth, like it was the case with Rachel, Jacob's wife who named her son Ben-Oni, before she gave up. The name Ben-Oni "son of my trouble" is synonymous with Jabez name, "pain."

Conclusion

The paper has been able to look at names that are circumstantial in nature. This is because they express different circumstances in which people have found themselves that are similar to almost all the Nigerian and Palestinian cultures. Circumstantial names and naming among the Akurmi and the Atyap people of Southern Kaduna are a window through which other circumstantial names amongst other Southern Kaduna tribe and beyond can be appreciated. This in fact goes beyond mere naming but also breathes creativity and novelty. The paper has also observed that circumstances do not just come and go but can also be etched in memory as names. These names may have been borne by one original bearer but can have subsequent bearers who can also identify themselves with the circumstance that called for the bestowal in the first place.

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