Interrelatedness of the naming of children in the South African cultural context

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Abstract

The study seeks to explore the interrelatedness around the naming of children in the traditional societies of Southern Africa. Traditionally, among the Vhavenda, Vatsonga, Bapedi, Xhosa, Zulu, Swati and other various African cultures in Southern Africa, it was the duty of the grandparents to name their grandchildren. The naming was largely influenced by the events which occurred in the family. The study was conducted first to establish the interrelatedness in the naming of children among the multicultural context of traditional societies of Southern Africa, secondly to determine whether the naming has implications to the behaviour and character of the child while they grow. Senior citizens who are knowledgeable were interviewed on what were considered in the naming process and what are the cultural values that are attached to this process. Data was collected using semi structured interviews and analysed thematically. Afrocentric theory was utilised as the basis for the research findings. The research findings were of paramount importance around some of the individual names among different cultures and the implications of the behaviour of a child when he grows. The paper recommends the reimagining of the spirituality around some individuals names and the naming process, the revival of the traditional naming process is meant for cultural heritage preservation.

Introduction

Culturally is a norm among the traditional communities for the grandparents to name their grandchildren. It is believed that there are spirituality factors which are attached to the naming process of a child in the family, and it was applied to all the children who are born in the family.

Uchenna (2011) in Manyara, B Cetal. (2015) asserts that in African culture, names are given to children because of the value and dignity that the children brought in that family. He further associates the naming of a child as a process of recognizing a child as a structure of cells rather than looking into the child as an individual who will travel looking for personality and identity. A name builds character in a person therefore it is true that as one grows in some certain stages of life, they would like to mould their identity.

In Africa, there are thousands of ethnic cultural groups and every single one has its own language and its cultural practices. Within those various other cultures there are values systems which are observed and maintained as a way of everyday life. This complex background of other various cultural value systems make’s the naming processes a bit difficult however I will attempt to sum up the procedures in few paragraphs below. It is a practice that a few months before a child is born, the grandparents of the unborn child come up with few names and share them with family members. An appropriate name will be chosen from different names based on the events which occurred during the pregnancy process. When these names are given, grandparents bear in mind their relationships with the immediate and/or extended family and the community.
Through these names an outsider can easily detect the kind of relationship the family members have with each other. If there are constant misunderstanding within the family, these will be reflected in the names given to the children born around or during the time of such event (Ngidi, 2012).

Having or bearing a name in the African culture is the most important thing and it is believed that if one does not have a proper name with historical bearing, then they do not have an identity and so it is necessary for every individual to have an African name. African names are customarily in the language of the bearer. The meaning of these names also influences the character of a person and mould the owner’s journey in search of their identity and vocation.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical Framework**

The study was found upon the critical theory to attain its findings. The critical theory is a philosophical approach to culture and especially to literature that considers the social, historical, and ideological forces and structures which produce and constrain it. Critical theory is a social theory oriented towards critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory oriented only to understanding and/or explaining it.

Critical theories aim to dig beneath the surface of social life and uncover the assumptions that keep us from the understanding of how the world works (Crossman in (Baehr, 2019)). However, the traditional societies of Southern Africa on naming processes have deep philosophical meaning that is attached and that is also significant to our culture and traditions as Africans.

According to Chucks-Orji (1971) and Suzman (1994), it has been reported that among a number of African societies much emphasis can be interlinked to the names which will be given to individuals upon birth. Jayaraman (2005) stipulates the notion that the importance placed upon a certain name will play a very important role even in defining the kind of person whom an individual will grow up to be as he or she progresses in life. Therefore, from such a viewpoint it is noted that names also play a pivotal role in enabling the shaping and moulding of behaviours of children as they grow up in an African set-up (Crossman,2011).

Culture and linguistic phenomenon are both customs in African naming (Mohomed 1972). The attached meaning to names by indigenous African people, is very important when it comes to defining the term ‘personhood’; the belief is that a given name does not only identify a person, but it also determines the type that an individual will become. The character of the bearer influences the way they give names. There is a saying that alludes to the impact of names on character in particular “Bitso lebe ke seromo” truly signifying ‘an awful name is dismal’(Dibakoana,2017). A few names that are given to people are impacted by chronicled occasions, feelings, faction and family relationship relations and encounters. Ashton (2018) has noticed that among Africans names are from time to time picked aimlessly and typically review a grandfather or other imperative connection. Here and there they become a reminder of an important, unusual event and/or personage. The researcher agrees with the above-named authors on the facts that personhood is defined by the meaning of the name and that names are a commemoration of the aforesaid events. According to Neething (2004) in African societies some names may be given to children as a way of showing their parents’ heroics during their youthful days.

The use of such names might be serving as a reminder to the children of what their parents may have achieved in their entire lifetime. In assessing the above-mentioned function of traditional names in African context it is evident that names are also used to signify or to celebrate great achievements which someone may have had in their lives. Therefore, names can be used as a way of strengthening and/or as a source of encouragement for one to keep on doing good work in his or her life. As such it can be assumed that names play a significant denotative and connotative.

**The significance of naming around the world**

According to Uche (2011) cultures in the Western world do not have any rules or circumstances surrounding how they name their children. On the contrary the Chinese place a huge emphasis, and they are known for commonly putting lots of thought into naming their children thereby striving for something individualistic or peculiar as well as meaningful since there are only about one hundred official surnames (family names) shared by most of the China’s population which is just over 1.3 billion. Ngidi (2012) discusses that when parents give their children names, they look at their relationships with the immediate or extended family and the community at large, which is in a way true because grandparents mostly consider the situation that occurred around them before naming their grandchildren.

When a child is given a name, it is aimed at bringing together a lifetime assertions and/or a social contract with the community, as Africans believe that a person is part of the entire community instead of the western belief system of individuality. On the other side, by having an African name affirms the person's presence and also recognizing the obligations towards the name-carrier. The name will single out the child from others, along these lines the general public will recognise the child with his and/or her name and treat or manage the child equally as a human being who should be treated in terms of the international legal instruments which ensures the rights of persons. Through the name, the individual turns out to be a piece of the historical backdrop of the general public, and as a result of the name, his or her deeds will exist independently from the deeds of others. On the auxiliary capacity of names (Dundes,1983).
Methodology

This study used qualitative approach to conduct research which generally allowed the researcher to have contact with respondents in their natural setting in order to answer questions related to the research topic. According to Sanders (1999:45) qualitative researchers mostly get the chance to observe the participant and also conduct formal and informal interviews in order to expand their understanding of what goes on in the setting from the views of those participating in the study.

The researcher used the qualitative method to identify the human behaviour and experiences of their beliefs and emotions and personal values. Qualitative approach leads the researcher into the field to be in contact with the respondents in their characteristic setting in order to answer questions identified with the topic under discussion. According to Leedy (1993:192), “if the data is verbal, the research design is qualitative.” He adds that qualitative design is concerned with human beings, interpersonal relationships, personal values, meanings, beliefs.

Discussion of the findings

The findings of this research were thus thematized based on the research questions and the prominent issues that emerged through the collection of data. The research could not be well understood without first understanding the African traditional naming process. As such, the authors had to engage the knowledge holders in order to explain and illustrate the context and processes for better comprehension.

Different knowledge holders were engaged and because of their intercultural experiences they had multicultural experiences with regard to the naming of children in other various cultures. It was in that nature that because of their living experiences during the apartheid period which resulted in the promulgation of the Group Areas Act No.41 of 1950. The researcher asked a participant who is a senior citizen and a grandparent on the processes which should be followed during the naming of children in the family, and she responded as follows:

**Respondent A:**

In what way do African elders respect the cultural values by naming a child after his/her ancestors?

As a senior citizen and a grandparent the answer is as follows: when a baby is born in the family it is the duty of both grandparents and/or the elderly aunts to name a child. Children should be named in two different contexts: the family experiences and the family belief system. With regard to the family experiences the elderly in the family observed the lifestyle and the behaviour of the parents on how they interact in their daily lives. They look at their relationship as husband and wife and also their relationships with other members of the family.

The way how the mother interacts and conduct herself with the in-laws and the extended family members that visit the family will determine the name of her new born baby.

In case where both the father and the mother of the child conducts themselves in an unbecoming manner, in Tshivenda a baby can be named “Litshani” simply translated means leave. The meaning thereof means that they should desist from treating one another in an unbecoming manner. The other context discussed with the participants is the family belief system. This is believed by the family as the a traditional custom that should be followed as a cure to a suspected sickness in a baby. The elderly members of the family believe that if a baby is crying constantly during the night, refusing to be breastfed there exist the intervention of the ancestors wherein certain rituals should be performed in order to appease the ancestors which at the end of it all the child will began to live a normal life and not to cry constantly.

A name makes up a person who will belong to the community. The one who gives the child a name also expresses their feelings through the child’s name. It is believed that at some point the name might bring bad luck to the child or even good luck. The name bearer mostly looks up to their names and in some instances will leave in terms of the dictates of the name.

What if a child is given an African name but still has no sense of belonging?

**Respondent 1:** “If a child behaves or even looks different from all members of the family and does not have similar characteristics with the ancestor, he/she is named after the then elders of the family. The family will consult with a traditional healer in order to ascertain if the child belongs or does not belong to the family. In the circumstances, it will mean that the mother of the child has committed adultery.

Humans are neither perfect nor entirely clever but through the imperfections of life people make mistakes and the challenge will be how they deal with that mistake is what will determine the future of the person. When a woman commit adultery on her husband and lies about the pregnancy the results do not only affect the marriage, but it will also affect the child because he/she would be named under a wrong surname or even given names that they were not supposed to be given to him/her which may bring bad luck to a child as they grow older.

In what way do African elders respect the cultural values by naming a child after his/her ancestors?

**Respondent A:** “The ancestors are regarded as the sole mediators in this world and the spiritual realm. We grew up knowing that if the ancestors are not appeased things cannot go well. It is not everyone who is allowed or who can communicate with the ancestors.
There is a specific person in a family who communicates with the ancestors such as an uncle or aunt. They play a significant role in African cultures and are easily accessed by people who have those powers of accessing them.

A person who dies and become an ancestor is a person who, when they were still alive, they were honoured and well respected, an ancestor resurrects through a child who is likely to cry for a name of a particular ancestor and same will be known after the family has consulted a traditional healer and that child will be given a name of the ancestor.

As clearly indicated in the introduction above, in African culture a process of naming a child is and remains the competency of their grandparents.

A name Mihloti, in Jaques, (1982), is a Tsonga name which simply translated means, “tears”. This name is given to both male and female children by their grandparent’s. A child will be given such a name especially after a death case in the family where everyone was crying as the result of death. When a child is born during that period would have brought the much-needed joy where it is believed that his/her birth will wipe away their tears.

It is common cause, that children have no choice when it comes to their names since same is given to them during their minority age however when they grow up and goes through the initiation process, they are allowed to change their names in case where they do not like them. In case a child likes a name, they are also allowed to keep it. In some instances, some children will act according to the name which was given to them by ensuring that they maintain stability in their family whilst others may live a different lifestyle which will bring misery to their parents.

A name Azwimpheleli, is a Venda name which simply translated means “things never end”. This name can be given to both male and female children. The name signifies the pain which a family went through during numerous miscarriages which a woman went through hence a name Azwimpheleli, which will be given to a child after a successful pregnancy. That said, it is common cause that when a child grows up may decide to change and/or keep the name. In some instances, a child will leave up to a name by ensuring that the family does not complain about his and/or her behaviour and brings relief while some children will act like a pain at the back wherein grandparents will always remark and state that their problems in the family will never end as the result of the bad behaviour displayed by the child. These always reminds grandparents of the struggles their daughter in law went through. In instances where a child wants to change a name same can be done in consultation with the elders and a new name will then be accepted and that child will be addressed by a new name.

Matlakala, is a Sepedi name which simply translated means, “rubbish”. The name is given to both male and female children and in the circumstances will be given to a child who has survived wherein the majority of children died during their minority age. When a family is faced with a situation where infant’s dies, it is therefore believed to be the works of witchcraft. A name such as Matlakala “Rubbish” will be used as a sign of dissatisfaction against those who are suspected to be behind the death of the children in the family. This type of a name is used as a sign that they do not care anymore whether such a child lives or not because there are used to the death of infants within a family. As indicated in the introduction above, the names of the children are given by elders in the Sepedi culture as well. That said, it also applies in this case as well that children do not have a choice when it comes to the names which are given to them however, they do have a choice after they have undergone the initiation process to change their name. In some instances, certain children will leave as rubbish by being unproductive and giving their families endless problems. In some cases, it turns out that such children bring relief in their families by improving the standard of living and lead the family to prosperity.

Nyakallo, is a Sesotho name which simply translated means “Joy”. The name is normally given to the first-born female children in the family which resembles happiness because a child was born. Likewise, even Basotho believes that children should be named by the elders in the family as opposed to the foreign Western cultures where children are named by their parents. Nyakallo in Sesotho means the birth of a child who has brought joy in the family. Normally other children do live up to the name wherein they bring the much-needed joy in the family. This name has similarities with the names in other ethnic cultural groups in the country. It is customary that in case where a child does not want the name same can be discussed with the elders in order to agree to the changes.

It is important that as Africans we should appreciate our indigenous names as opposed to the so-called English and/or Christian names. It has been observed that children are changing their indigenous names in favour of the Western and/or English names which in the main has no history and meaning. It remains to be understood why an African child will choose to have a European name instead of the African indigenous name. Clearly there is a problem since Europeans do not name their children with African names. This in my view is colonization of special kind.

A name Mphoyamodimo is a Setswana name which simply translated means “Gift from God”. Even the Tswana believes that names are given to the children by the elders in the family. That said, this name is given to a child normally after a woman went through difficulty in getting pregnant hence a name Mphoyamodimo or Gift from God and/or keeping in memory of those people who have since passed on. In short, a child may be called Mpho in Setswana or Gift in English. Normally parents have no control on how their children should behave but it is common cause that all in sundry would like their children to be successful and behave well, in some cases children named as such behaves well and also like their names. As clearly indicated above the African indigenous names bears the meaning which encourages children to behave in an acceptable manner compared to the Western names which has no meaning. During the majority age children are allowed to change their names after consultation with the elders to the names of their choices.
Grandparents normally encourage children to keep to the African indigenous names especially those whom their ancestors had as a sign of acknowledgement and respect of those who has since passed on.

A name Ntombikayise is a Swati name which means “a baby girl loved by her father”. Likewise, in isiswati they also believe in the custom that a child should be named by the elders in their family. The name Ntombikayise is given to a baby girl after the grandmother has made an observation that the father loves the child. In some instances, the child is likely to keep the name especially if it is not associated with an unbecoming behaviour and liked by all family members. Some children will similarly keep the name on the basis that it was given to them by their grandparents. In the circumstances, others will elect to change their name irrespective of the fact that they were given such a name by the elders.

Some children are able to live up to the name and make success thereof. IsiSwati, like any other African ethnic cultural groups conducts rituals to inform the ancestors about the changes of a name to a new name in order to enable the spirits of those who passed on to communicate with the child. Many parents will be happy to see their children succeed in life as opposed to them creating havoc in the community.

Nochudi, is a Ndebele name which simply translated means “Lucky and/or Fortune”. The name is given to a child by the male elders within the family. A name Nochudi is given to a child with a belief that a child will bring fortunes in the family which had trouble.

Interestingly, the name can also be given to both male and female children however in terms of the Ndebele culture a name which has been given to a child by the elders cannot be changed unless if there are compelling reasons why it should be changed. I am advised that such a name can only be changed if the reasons are such that it gives a child bad luck however same should be confirmed by a traditional healer. It is clear that every child who is born in the family is expected to shower in new good things within the family. The name Nochudi is likely to be kept because it reflects wealth and normally children who are named as such may become wealthy and may be happy to keep such a name. In case they do not like the name in terms of the Ndebele culture they are stuck with it for life because it cannot be changed for any reason.

Khayalethu, is a Xhosa name which simply translated it means “our home”. The Xhosa people also use the same understanding that the elders in the family are the one who names children. The name signifies the importance of the arrival of a child to an extent that by virtue of his birth he is given an authority that the homestead belongs to him. In normal circumstances, this name is given to a male child because is the male child who will remain in that particular homestead whereas a female child will marry and leave the homestead hence the name cannot be given to a female child. It is said that the name will be given to a child who was born during a family feud and/or during the apartheid period where people were moved from one place to the other and as a form of protest they named their children after such events. It is common cause that some children will embrace such a name because it was influenced by the circumstances during his birth and may live to be a leader whilst others may be tempted to change it to a new name however same will be done in consultation with the elders.

A name Muziwayne, is an IsiZulu name which simply translated it means “His house”. The name is given to a male child who is born amongst girls as a signal that the homestead belongs to him since the ladies will marry and leave to stay in their homes with their husband. Muzi is a short name for Muziwayne which resemble that he will be left to lead the family. Accordingly, in terms of the Zulu culture the elders who also give names to the children in the family. Likewise, some children live up to the name by showing leadership and getting involved in family matters. It is highly unlikely that such a name can easily be changed because it was influenced by the family circumstances.

In case where a child wants to change such a name consultation should be done with elders wherein even ancestors will have to be informed by conducting a ritual. It is known and accepted that the only male child in the family will inherit the wealth and the problems of the family and therefore such a person should be able to navigate through difficulties since some matters cannot be discussed with women but safe to state that it can only be discussed with male family members especially in the case of Muziwayne who the only male was born in between females.

African people and their ancestors have a “magical” bond so by following the cultural rules one may along these lines reason that the naming procedure is these days open to any individual independent of his family standing. Notwithstanding, the Vhavenda customary naming traditions maintains that the most qualified individuals to assume the responsibility of name giving are the elderly, particularly the immediate grandparents. Herbert (1992) affirms this perspective when he says that the huge heft of names are given by family names since the provincial rulers were not worried that the utilization of “outside names” would impede the advancement of African dialects and their separate speakers. In all actuality, the utilization of a dialect in naming upgrades the status of that specific dialect.

In such manner, Herbert (1992: 5) says that underlying youth names are commonly given a brief timeframe after birth, with the name typically picked by the mother despite the fact that “will be chosen by a group of the father and especially his sister”. The name would serve for a specific period. In any case, it is said that the relatives would then be given the duty to give the child a name that would be utilized. Regardless of carrying the obligation of naming children, the relatives would at last permit the leader of the family, in particular, the father and his sister to settle on the name of the child. There is little proof to demonstrate the correct period that the relatives more often than not spend in settling a name for a newly born recently child. In a few sections of the world, the child’s name is picked before the introduction of the child while in others; it is given immediately after birth. As per the sources, a newly born
child may be given a name which could fill in as an original name or maternity home name/forename/adolescence name for a specific period, to be specific Abuti (derived from the Afrikaans “boetie” or brother). A maternity home name is given to another child, the child be known of that name from birth until death. It is fascinating to take note that amid the pioneer and evangelist periods it was the grandparents who had the final say on the naming of their grandchildren. Nonetheless, there is a solid understanding that women played a pivotal role in the naming of their grandchildren with the helping hand from their husband.

The above attestation implies that woman was considered as name-providers. Men in general were regarded as the providers of wisdom in different families to an extent that their employment in the Reef at the time limited their involvement in the naming process. Women therefore accepted the part of name givers.

**Taboos that are attached to the ignorance of the naming process.**

During the pre-colonial era there were some spiritual belief systems that were attached to the disloyalty of the parents with regard to the naming process. If the parents intentionally rename the child without consulting the elders, the elders of the family will issue summons that was served by the elders of the family as a form of protest. Likewise, after the deliberation about the name which has been changed without consent of the elders both parents of the child will be found guilty and will be required to pay a fine in a form of a goat which will be slaughtered and eaten by elders who were part of the deliberation. The researcher further asked from the respondent as to what really happen to the child who is renamed by parents. The respondent said that there are some of the children who turn to be affected by certain diseases and/or children become victims of social ills that will trouble the family and also the community at large. In case where a child becomes ill as the result of the name changing the traditional healer will be summoned in order to provide answers and ultimately some rituals will be conducted in order to appease the ancestors.

The researcher had discovered that there are some taboos that befell the family if they intentionally refuse to accept the child’s name.

**Conclusion**

Review of literature in the study clearly shows that the naming of children in Africa is not just an act of giving a name to a child but a belief system which should be adhered to and practised by all in society since it is and remains our way of life. Much focus is placed on the naming of children in African societies and hence it is that we have witnessed that African names carry with them some denotative and connotative aspects which may be hidden or very open to the populace. Naming processes in African contexts differ because some cultures in African societies use names to communicate to the dead in various ways and this has for example been seen where we find children being dedicated to vhandzinu or the spiritual mediums or ancestors who are assumed to be taking up the role of intermediaries between God and the living human beings.

From the review of literature, it has been observed that there are a lot of factors which come into play in determining how a person will be called. More than the examination and understanding of names as the cultural and social production of self and the individual, this study is set to bring together another element in the traditional importance of names meaning that the chronological surroundings in which the identification method in Africa is entrenched. Culture is never a stagnant process. Transformations comes from in and out and when joined together give rise to a new combination which is consistently revealed in the day to day lives of human beings and in how they recognize themselves over the involved procedures in naming. A traditionally well-informed social analysis viewpoint will enrich the study of titles plus the naming of places in Africa (Dibakoana,2017).

One may along these lines reason that the naming procedure is these days open to any individual independent of his family standing. Notwithstanding, the African traditional societies’ customary naming traditions strength that regard the most qualified individuals for the naming process are the elderly individuals, particularly the fatherly and maternal grandparents. Herbert (1992) affirmed this perspective when saying that the huge heft of names are given by family names since the provincial rulers were not worried that the utilization of “outside names” would impede the advancement of African dialects and their separate speakers. In all actuality, the utilization of a dialect in naming upgrades the status of that specific dialect.

It is therefore recommended that those with authority to give names to their grandchildren should at all material times adhere to their customs and traditions in order to instil pride to their grandchildren. This process will preserve the African culture and tradition which in the main is under attack and threat of being obsolete. An African name reveals the history of the family and draws a roadmap of the future. African names guarantee pride to the African children and ensure that they adhere to the norms of the African value systems of belong to the community instead of promoting individuality. As Africans we should appreciate to be Africans and be proud of our customs, culture and traditions. It is time that we should embrace to do things in the Afrocentric way instead of been Eurocentric which takes our culture no further.

It is unacceptable for Africans to name their children the so-called Christians and/or English names, it is our duty to ensure that we name our children indigenous African names as we were not forced by the colonial systems to name our children the so called Christian names. The study recommends that Africans governments should introduce African programs wherein they will promote the utilisation of African names as opposed to the so called Christian names which continues to undermine the existence of our indigenous knowledge system.
This study will remind the African custodians of culture in this present age the significance of naming their children and future generations utilizing African indigenous names keeping in mind the end goal of connecting with their African roots. Future analysts can likewise utilize this investigation as their reference.

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