The Socio-Linguistic Implications of Personal Names in Mokpe

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Crossref

Abstract

Purpose: Most of our Cameroonian national languages are demographically and socio-culturally pressured by the English language. The national languages which were previously used in elementary education and religious activities currently do not have any place in any official domain and thus are limited to home and other few immediate domains. Due to this unequal coexistence of the languages, many national languages are considered endangered, calling for efforts from stakeholders to prevent the death of such a precious cultural heritage. In this line of understanding, the objective of this study was to investigate the semantic aspects, naming criteria, and typology of Mopke personal names. It is a contribution to such initiatives like the Bakweri Language and Literacy committee which aims at documenting the Bakweri language in every possible area and means.

Methodology: To achieve our objective, data was collected through participant observation, in-depth interview and self-intuition to investigate personal names of the Bakweri also called the Mokpe people of the South West Region of Cameroon, considering naming as an important aspect of the society.

Findings: As regards the theoretical framework, we looked at Mopke names within the purview of linguistic anthropology considering names as not being arbitrary labels but socio-cultural tags that have socio-cultural functions and meanings. In order to analyse and discuss the patterns observed in the data, the Thematic Analysis technique used to present the typology of the names including family names, circumstantial names, theophorous names and flora and fauna names. The paper further examined the changing nature of Mokpe naming system and practice as dictated by cultural contact mainly with Christian/ western culture.

Recommendations: The study wraps up with a recommendation for further investigation on issues surrounding naming practices and strategic measures to prevent this important African cultural resource.

Keywords: *Mopke (Bakweri), Sociolinguistics, Personal Names*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Abdulganiy, O., Moshood, I., Yusuf N., Muhammed, A.Y., & Abdul-Rasheed, S. (2015) note that a name is a word or a group of words by which an individual person, place or thing is identified. It is the nomenclature used in making reference to all things; tangible or intangible, living or non-living, concrete or abstract, liquid or solid. The study of personal names and naming system is referred to as anthroponomy, a field which is related to genealogy, sociology and anthropology. Under the umbrella of onomastics, a field dealing with the study of proper names, anthroponomy investigates names in their forms, meanings and use aspects (Agyekum, 2006). In human sociocultural contexts, naming is done in order to differentiate, to recognize and finally to know.

The topic of names is a multidisciplinary one that has occupied the attention of philosophers of language, anthropologists, linguists and ordinary people. Personal names can best be analyzed by a combination of both philosophical and anthropological notions. Societies attach much importance to names and their naming practices. This goes without saying that the knowledge about names gives insight into culture, philosophy, thought, environment, religion and language of particular societies. In the same line of argument, symbolic nature of traditional names and their interpretation depicts religious beliefs of a given society and their interaction with foreign cultures. In this line of understanding, the objective of this paper was to investigate the semantic aspects, naming criteria, and typology in Mopke personal names.

Linguistic Classification/ Geographical Location

Linguistic Classification

According to Grimes (1967), updated in Maho (2003), Gordon (2005), Mokpe, Bamboko and Wovia are Bantu languages. They are Narrow Bantu and they form the languages of the Duala (A20) group. Following the numerical classification. However, contrary to this view and in line with the findings of Moka 1999, and Mapeh 2001, this study considers Mokpe, Bamboko and Wovia as dialects of the Bakweri langauge.

Geographical and Administrative Location

Bakweri is spoken in all the four subdivisions in Fako Division. The Bakweris occupy the Western, Central and Eastern slopes of Mount Fako. The following linguistic communities make up the Bakweri language area.

a) Wovia

According to Eberhard et al. (2019), the Wovia speakers are about 600 and are found a few kilometres West of Limbe. They occupy two villages, Wovia and Botaland (Molondi), along the coast. Before, they used to occupy the pirated islands off the Limbe Coast. Synonyms of Wovia are, Ewota, Bota, Bubia and Bobea.

b) Bomboko

The Bomboko speakers are found in Limbe 1, Limbe 2, West Coast, Mbonge and Muyuka. They occupy 45 villages (One in Limbe1 subdivision, 12 in Limbe 2, 6 in the West Coast, 19 in Mbonge and 8 in Muyuka and 8 in Muyuka) and number about 36000 speakers. The synonyms of Bamboko are Wumboko Bomboko and Mboko (Bamboko Language Committee).

c) Mopke

With a total population of over 35000, the Mopkes occupy about 85 villages in Fako division (Mutia, 2005). This figure is not far from what Lewis (2009) revealed as the total population of those who speak Mopke.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This paper takes the aspect of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics based on the theory that there is a strong interface between people's language and their cultural practices. In this presupposition, the premise is that language is not only used as a cultural resource and practice, but it is also envisioned as a powerful tool used to view and understand the worldview and philosophy of a particular society. Agyekum, (2006) stresses that language can be used as a microscopic lens to view and understand the social practices and dayto-day activities of a society. People's language, culture and thought are intimately interwoven. In this linguistic anthropological intimacy, language is considered as a social tool with the power to evoke realities beyond the literal linguistic content of what is uttered. According to Duranti (1997) language is a set of symbolic resources connecting the social fabric and the individual representation of actual or possible worlds; a cultural practice and verbal activities that link and fit verbal activities to the real world. Presumably, this is also true of Bakweri personal names.

Since there is a very close connection between the world, which is reality and the word, which is language, linguistic signs are therefore representations of not only words but also to a greater extent the world. In the study, Mokpe names are the linguistic signs, while their sociocultural interpretations represent the real world. Since language and sociocultural practices are dynamic, the Mopke people and their naming system are eventually affected by this dynamism. As a manifestation and description of the complexity and diversity of way of life and practices, people's language is itself manifested in various ways. Such ways include their naming systems (the focus of this paper), marriage, family, kinship, political aspects, economic issues, occupational aspects, health systems, religious beliefs and practices, law, funeral activities, etc. Languages also depict issues of power, status, gender, policy, language contact and persuasion. Linguistic anthropology may also be used to explain how language allows for and creates differentiations between groups, individuals and identities (Duranti, 1997). This is the case in sociocultural contexts specificity in the general theoretical frame of anthropology.

Though naming is considered as a universal cultural practice where every society in the world gives names as tags to its people, it is also specific because how the names are given, the practices and rituals involved and the interpretations attached to the names differ from society to society and from one culture to another. This goes without saying that amid the fact that every society may have their unique naming system, societies with closely related cultures ought to have closely related naming practices. Thus being a Cameroonian national language, Mopke, may share some naming system practices with other Cameroonian linguistic communities though uniqueness among them may still prevail.

This study was conducted within the premise of the principle of indexicality and specificity of sociocultural contexts. With the principle of indexicality, language is used as a tool through which people's socio-cultural world is constantly described, evaluated and reproduced (Wardhaugh, 2006). The Bakweri naming system is an aspect of cultural indexicality in which personal names are connected to some aspects of the sociocultural contexts of the society. Indexicality, therefore, is applicable in Bakweri names since they have sociocultural interpretation by referring to personal, temporal, spatial and social

deixis. The names have personal deixis because there is often a person 'grandfather/ mother' whom a child is named after.

In most African societies, one can always point to an elderly person, related biologically or distantly, in the society whether dead or alive whose name a younger child bears. Some Bakweri names carry temporal deixis in the sense that they may indicate the timing of the birth. For instance, the name "Efufa"for a child born during the rainy season. There are also spatial names referring to localities within the Bakweri community where a child was born. Social deixis on the other hand refers to the social entities (social status, clan, power and rank) of the referent. For instance, "Effange" for a child name after a worrior. Some names clearly depict that the bearer comes from the royal family or from a particular clan. For example, "Etuli" for a child born to a royal family. This paper therefore, seeks to document the social aspects of Mopke (also called Bakweri) personal names, as a contribution to such initiatives like the Bakweri Language and Literacy committee which is committed to documenting the Bakweri language in every possible area and means in order to preserve this very important aspect of cultural heritage.

Empirical Review

Names refer to purely referential and specific elements of human experience. That is, individuals or collective entities, which they designate or denote (Rey 1995). In some philosophical and linguistic viewpoints, names have been characterized logically in the absence of social contexts. Such perspectives consider names as arbitrary labels only that refer to certain signified entries, where the signifier and the signified may not share certain intrinsic qualities. This idea is true when we consider situations where people who bear the same name behave differently. In every culture, names have sociocultural contexts that identify the bearers. To backup this supposition, Agyekum (2006) quotes Akan maxim; nsɛmmɔnentinayɛkyɛɛ din meaning 'it is because of criminal acts that names were shared'.

This is to say that every person in this world has a name that solely identifies and marks him/her from all other peoples in the world. Algeo (1992, p. 728) aptly points out that "People are almost invariably named. Indeed, a human being without a name would be socially and psychologically less than a fully man." In Saussure's notion, the name is the sign and the denotatum is the signified; simply meaning that, the name is a label that refers to a person. Surprisingly, in some Bakweri communities, by default, people who bear the same family name are supposed to be related genetically and so behave alike; this situation disputes the arbitrariness of names.

Obviously proper names refer very specifically (but without describing) to the person who has that name. In this standpoint characterization of names is constant with Saussure's characterization of linguistic signs as arbitrarily connected to their referent (Agyekum, 2006). However, should this assertion be true, then names would have no functional correlation with culture (Rymes, 1996). Inversely, this averment is not exclusively true and thus, not the focus of this paper because the focus here is on cultural significance of Bakweri names.

The paper asserts that names of this community are not arbitrary but are based on socio-cultural and ethnopragmatic contexts.Various scholars in anthroponomy agree that names have attributes and are attached to referents. This is exactly what pertains in most African cultures where the social and cultural context analyses of personal names strongly reveal the power of names to emphasize social relationships. Personal names are iconic representations of complex social variables that indexicalise and relate to the name and the person. They include sex, hierarchy in birth, circumstances surrounding the birth, timing of the birth, the person's structure, power, status, etc.

According to Rymes (1996), the events involved in the naming ceremony and the choice of names given to children have traceable links to the referent, meaning that proper names are both "synchronically and diachronically motivated." In African norms, circumstances and social contexts during the birth of a child are fundamental for parents to give a name X instead of Y. The circumstantial context will be first and foremost gender, then the socioeconomic situation of the parents and the time of birth and their social links with other people down history, among other factors. These are all aspects of the synchronymy.

The names then carries this name and since names have social meanings, people expect the bearer to live by it or make positive amends to that name. The varied meanings represent the diachronic aspects of the name. In this respect, it is gainsaying that the meaning of one's proper name evolves through a life history imbued with a lot of transformations and may be intimately linked with the "identity concerns" of an individual or society (Goodenough 1965, p. 265, Rymes 1996, p. 238). It is also true that with time and evolving sociocultural standings, some individuals may be tempted to modify their names or even to take new names at the expense of the old ones so as to satisfy their self.

According to Akinnaso (1980), the fundamental reason for naming in human society is to provide a symbolic base for social interaction through a formal means of individual identification. Similarly, Mondende (2009) notes that the naming process inan African society is to pass a message or information from the name-giver to the entire family and the community at large. According to De Pina-Cabral, (2008) the 'naming processes carry with them social implications concerning what a person is and how he or she should be placed in the world'. In other words, naming in African society is to a great extent determined by sociocultural, environmental, circumstantial and ethno-pragmatic contexts (Agyekum, 2006). For example, among the Basotho of South Africa, a child is commonly named after a relative.

Hence, names are used to immortalize the ancestors; it is also believed that naming children after ancestors would ensure the inheritance of the social virtues of their grandparents. Also, the Basotho believed that a child is a gift of badimo (ancestors) and thus, a child should be named after a known ancestor as a form of appreciation for a life well spent by the ancestor (Setiloane, 1976). Naming practices among the Basotho people of South Africa also serve religious, political and social functions (Monnig, 1967).Accordingly, people expect the name to live the qualities denoted by a given name because of the inherent power of words ascertained in names to reflect the lives of people either positively or negatively. For example, the Asu expect a child named after a dignitary or a chief to behave properly so that nobody makes derogatory remarks about the name in attempt to denigrate it. Such children are also advised to behave well so as to avoid tarnishing their names. This may conclusively mean that names are meant to shape the children's upbringing, behaviour and socialization.

Names in the Mokpe community often designate the characteristics of the named, at least at the time of birth. No wonder why people may occasionally modify their names or acquire new names and bynames based on their personal achievements. Names can therefore be clearly understood when placed in sociocultural context. Since names are not arbitrary as some may perceive, analysis of proper names should concentrate more on the functional theory bearing the society and culture in mind. Thus, names can be best understood and interpreted under the sociocultural context, meaning that people who know the language and culture of the people are able to interpret such peoples' names accordingly. This paper is a contribution to linguistic anthropology and to the study of African anthroponomy and the general theory of onomasiology championed by scholars like Asante (1995), Suzman (1994) and Obeng (2001) among others. The paper is also written with an assumption that "most African societies have similar naming practices that correspond to each other in some ways (Agyekum, 2006).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This section explains the methodology that guided the study. It presents such items like participants, instruments used to collect data, data collection procedures and data analysis.

Participants

The nature of the investigation and the instrument used influenced the size and demographics of the participants in volved. During interview sessions, thirty participants aged 65+ and native Mopkespeakers were involved. These elders were judgmentally selected with the assumption that they possess valuable cultural information including meanings of names some of which are not even used today. Ten participants were selected from each of the three variants of Mokpe mentioned in this study. Obviously, participant observation made use of more participants as the researcher participated in various activities across the three mentioned varieties.

Instruments

Data collection in this investigation focused not only on enlisting the names but essentially on the meanings of the names as used in the Mokpe community. Data collection exercise was done in Wovia, Bamboko and Mevio, all located in the South West Region of Cameroon. The selection of the villages based on the assumption that cultural practices in these areas are not contaminated by cultural contact impact. Participant observation, in-depth interview and self-intuition were used in the process of data gathering.

The interview guide comprised of open-ended items focusing on identifying traditional names, their meanings and naming criteria. Participant observation was possible and was efficiently conducted since the researcher is a native speaker of the participants' language. Being a native speaker of Bakweri, the researcher used his intuition about names and their meanings in this community. It was also easy to associate with people in their daily activities, rituals, interactions and events to get the needed information in its naturalness.

Data Collection Procedures

In this investigation, interviews were conducted basing on open ended guiding questions so as to elicit naturalistic data from as much free conversation as possible. The interviews involved 20 informants arranged into groups basing on three villages mentioned before. On the other hand, participant observation was used to observe and note down sociocultural behaviour in context with the researcher behaving like a member of the studied community. The researcher easily and effectively participated in various socio-economic, cultural and traditional activities of the people involved in this project as she is a member of the speech community, born and raised up in the area till secondary school level and has had constant interactions with the people since then. Observations were therefore done without spending much time to establish rapport with the respondents.

Data Analysis

In managing the data, thematic analysis technique flexible data analysis plan that qualitative researchers use to generate themes from interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2013)- was applied, which involved grouping the names into various categories basing on meanings and projected connotation as well as naming criteria. Accordingly, the findings are presented in subsequent sections in descriptions and explanations. The presentation and discussion based on the typology of names in the Mokpe community encompassing family names, circumstantial names, etc.

Analysis and Discussion

There is a consensus among anthropological writers that naming practice is generally a valued culture among African people (Mohome, 1992; Yusuf, Olatunji, &Issah, 2014), thus, given names are so relevant that some on their socio-cultural characteristics cannot be well understood except one peeps into the dynamic nature of their naming. This study has reveals that nature of naming in Africa is bore out in the fact that a name given to a child or an adult (for example nickname) is often determined by different factors ranging from belief in individual spirit, belief in reincarnation, environment, social class, lineage system, ethnic affiliation, gender, day of the week, day of the month, time of the year, conditions of parents at birth, conditions of child at birth and circumstances surrounding the birth, historical events, family occupation, family deity, family name and economic situation, to mention but few. It is in this line of reasoning that the findings are presented.

Typology of Mokpe Names

This sub-section presents the typology of personal names in the Mokpe speech community. It is an empirical and sociocultural descriptive study of names that exist in this community. Considering both purely traditional and contemporary names, the description gives the translations and the ethnographic background of the names. This section also exemplifies the impact of western culture, in the umbrella of religion and modernity in the naming system and practices. A highlight is also made on the implications of the naming practices, especially in gender relations.

Family Names

In most African communities, family names are clan names given to children by their fathers, traditionally after discussion with the grand parents of the new born. However, nowadays, the mother of the child is also involved in the discussion. Among the Bakweri people today, a family name is a reference to the child's grandmother/ grandfather or any other important person. Example 1 illustrates family names specifically indicating a clan from which they name descends.

Example 1: Bakweri Family Names

Name	Meaning	Apellation
Effange	Worrior	Descends of a worrior
Molua	Leader	Descends of a leader
Mosunge	Hunter	Descends of a hunter

Though most Bantu languages are not grammatically gendered, most societies are patriarchy in nature, a social relation system that favors men at the expense of women. This is evidently visible in Mokpe family names where only male newborns can acquire clan names as first name; female newborns will use clan names as surnames only. Generally, family names are derived from the patrilineal clans of the fathers, hence used as social tags to indicate not only personal but also in most cases group identity.

Circumstantial Names

There are certain names which are given based on the circumstances surrounding the birth of a child. These may relate to the places of birth, period of time, festivals or sacred days, manner of birth, etc. Sometimes the circumstances are not directly related to the newborn but rather to an ancestral figure; grandfather or grandmother. In the Mopke community, these names can be grouped into four for a better understanding: (a) anthro-toponyms, (b) temporonyms, (c) manner of birth, and (d) death prevention and survival names.

Anthro-Toponyms

In this study anthro-toponyms are personal names that pertain to the place of birth of the child. The place may even refer to the farm or along the way when the woman was travelling to another place. It is also possible to use the names of physical features or other geographical areas near the birth place as names for children.

Example2: Anthro-toponyms in Mokpe

Name	Meaning	Appellation
Maliwa	River	Male child born near a river
Meombe	Path	Male child born on the way
Mafany	Junction	Male child born at a junction
Mokaze	Inspirer	Male child who lifts up people's spirit
Kotto	Fence	Male child born near a fence
Wolowa	Toilet	Male child born near the toilet

Temporonym

The term temporonym is used for names that relate to the period of birth. In the Mopkecommunity, there are no traditional birthday names. Therefore, what is often denoted is the timing of the birth. In some instances, the names may also depict seasons during which the birth occurs. Just like in the case of anthro-toponyms, newborns may be given temporonyms not necessarily because of the timing of their birth but because it is a tribute to their grandparents. Some temporonyms are given to mark or remember a notable event in the family or clan. This kind of periodic names are very important not only to the name but imperatively to the entire community as they point back to crucial historical and cultural phenomena of the society. The events may denote happiness (various celebrations), sadness (war, famine, etc.) or even suffering. Example 3 exemplifies a few temporonyms in the Bakweri community.

Example3: Mokpe Temporonyms

Name	Meaning	Appellation
Njuma	Fight	Child Born During War
Eyole	Peace	Child Born at the End of a War
Malingo	Happiness	Child Born in A Festive Season
Effeti	Excess	Child Born in the Season of Harvest
Findi	Charcoal	Child Born in the Season of Charcoal
Maija	Blood	Child Born in the Season of Bloodshed

Manner of birth is another category of circumstantial names in the Mopkecommunity denoting situation surrounding the whole birth processes. Such conditions may be joyous, challenging, frustrating or surprising. The presence of this subcategory of personal names in Mokpeexplains a belief among the people that whatever happens during the birth process has a meaning, either to the parents or destine of the newborn. A few names of this sub-category are exemplified in 4 below.

Example 4: Mokpe Names Denoting Situations Surrounding Birth Processes

Name	Meaning	Appellation
Meende	Leg	Child who comes out of the womb with the legs
Lito	Ear	Child named after someone who listens patiently
Kulu	Tortoise	Child named after a cunning person
Ndolo	Love	Child named after a loving person
Misoli	Tears	Child born with difficulty

Flora and Fauna; and Physical Structure Names

Certain personal names in Mopke are derived from flora and fauna. In most cases, it is their physical structures and their behavior that are compared. Such names are usually given to a new born by referring back to the behavior of an ancestral figure with anticipation that the child inherits not only the name but will also take with him/her the behavior of their respective grandparents. Example 6 exemplifies animal names that can be occasionally given to newborns. There are few individuals with flora names that can be cited in the Mopke community today. This is probably because of cultural contact with most people now preferring western/ Christian names at the expense of traditional ones.

Example 5: **Flora and Fauna; and Physical Structure Names**

Name	Meaning
Njoh	Tiger
Njoku	Elephant
Loka	Rabbit
Ngomba	Porcupine
Inoni	Bird
Ewule	Grass
Mokoko	Tree
Eyali	Leaf
Yumu	Tree Storm

Theophoros Names

In the Mopke community, just like in many other cultures, there is a belief that what happens in the society is dictated and controlled by a personality outside the horizons of human beings. In many African societies this could be a traditional spiritual leader believed by all members of the society. A good example could be taken from Akan, a West African society in which there is a belief that if a mother suffers constant child mortality, it is the child's mother in the underworld that does not want the child to stay in the living world. To combat such an unfortunate situation, the parents give the child a weird name. They believe that if the name is unattractive, the other mother in the underworld will not like to accept the child over there and this would make the child stay.

However, due to contact with western Christian culture, things are different in a handful of African culture where this personality is now referred to as God. In this case, newborns are given names which glorify, praise or give thanks to the said God. This is the case with the Mokpe community, as exemplified hereunder.

Example 6: Theophoros Names in Mopke

Name	Meaning
Nalowa	With God
Eyole	Peace
Lifita	Hope
Meombo	Victory
Enjema	Gracious
Ewelisane	Patience
Monyengi	Joy

4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study is an aspect of linguistic anthropology and is based on the assumption that there is a strong connection between people's language and their cultural practices. The emphasis is on how language is used as cultural resources and practices; and how it is viewed as a powerful tool used to view and understand the worldview and philosophy of a particular society. Thus, this goes without saying that language is used as a microscopic lens to view and understand the social practices and day-to-day activities of a given society. The Mopke personal naming system and practice, just like in other cultures, is a marker of the people's belief, ideology, religion, culture, philosophy and thought. The names are best understood and analysed when one has insight into the ethno-pragmatics, sociocultural norms, the language and culture of the Mopke people. The names are therefore not only an aspect of linguistic relativity but also refer to elements of the Mopke human experience and ways of life in a philosophical sense.

Also, this paper lays emphasis on the fact that names are not mere arbitrary and meaningless labels but rather have indexical relationship to socio-cultural meanings and functions, places, time, people and events. Traditionally, the Mopke people believe that there is some inherent power and linkage in names, and expect the names to reflect and indexicalise the lives and behavior of people either positively or negatively. This is the case especially when the name refers back to an earlier ancestral figure. An individual's name is of concern not to themselves but to the whole society, for the individual performs and participates in the society.

Accordingly, the Mopke typology of names indicates various contexts such as family, circumstantial, manner of birth, flora and fauna, markers of notable events and theophoros names, resulting from cultural contact. It is also worth noting that every potential Mopke person has at least two of these names: one's own name plus a family (or rather an ancestral) name. It is also possible for a person to accumulate some other names especially baptismal (mostly Christian) names as he or she grows up in the society. The Mopke naming practices have also revealed the patriarchy socio-cultural system emphasizing male dominance at the expense of female. Only Mokpe men for instance can acquire family names as personal names while women use family names only as surnames.

Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that Mokpe personal names are an important area of the Mopke culture that should not be ignored in any sociolinguistic and anthropological study. It is also clear that naming system is a multidisciplinary area of study for scholars in sociology, history, religion, anthropology, linguistics, ethnography and philosophy. It is therefore revealed to the respective scholars that a lot can still be investigated about personal names in the Mopke community. Areas such as the place of names in social

relation and traditional religion, historical view point of traditional names, etc. may be investigated further. The paper has also revealed that traditional naming system is threatened by modern naming patterns as the modern generation prefers Christian or Western names at the expense of Mopke traditional names. This calls for strategic measures to be taken to prevent the disappearance of this important cultural aspect. Programmes that aim at raising people's awareness about the importance of their culture are to be organized. More documentation on this and other cultural aspects of the society is another crucial strategy for preserving the cultural dimensions of the people.

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