The Naming Practice in Akoose: Deviation from Cultural Stereotypes

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History
The paper received on: 05/03/2014
Accepted after peer-review on: 04/05/2014
Published on: 01/06/2014

Keywords:
Bakossi Naming Practices, Cultural Stereotype, Akoose Community, Westernisation, Cultural Identity, Deviation

ABSTRACT

Bakossi names are generally inherited and are a strong bond for the cultural identity of the people. However, recent developments reveal that Bakossi names are losing their cultural values and identities which can make one to conclude that they are under threat. This is due to the fact that the so-called modern Bakossi people no longer follow the norms prescribed for naming by the traditionalists of old. The impact of the change from the traditionalists to so-called modernists, as seen in Bakossi naming practice nowadays, leads to the questioning of the Bakossi identity. Under this background, this paper looks at the function of names in constructing the Bakossi identity and especially how this is achieved following the historical and cultural background of the Bakossi naming practice. The paper demonstrates that the traditional naming practice has undergone some drastic change. It shows that the Bakossi names no longer stand for the cultural identity and succession of family members as once it was the case.

Suggested Citation:
1. Introduction

Many factors contribute to shaping people’s identities. Among these factors is the concept of naming. Naming an individual is not simply a matter of giving him/her an appellation, as names actually give people their identity. As such, names should not be treated ostensibly because they are an expression of cultural identity which is deeply imbedded in a socio-cultural context. Naming should therefore be considered as the social birth of an individual, which is why it is mostly done in the form of a ceremonial integration. The act of naming can indicate or even emphasize the family background, class, religion or education of an individual as well as the current trends in the society in which an individual lives (Dockrell et al, 1998, p. 450).

According to Edwards (2006, p. 95), the act of naming is universal but different cultures, social settings or even countries have different approaches towards naming. The naming practice and the repertoire of names differ in various historical periods and according to cultural and language areas, as well as ethnic and religious affiliation. Even the number of names given to a child is culture-specific. Generally speaking, a name can be given to a child on grounds of personal memories, general ideas of the past and wishes for the future, social ties or personal preferences, or it can indicate conventionality or a certain image. This implies that there is a broad range of orientations that can guide the selection of a name.

As far as the Bakossi people are concerned, selecting a name for a child is done systematically and follows strict traditional principles. Naming in the Bakossi society is a very important event as names constitute a strong element in the culture of this people. This explains why a typical Bakossi traditional naming is accompanied by a naming ceremony, usually seven days after the birth of a child. This practice is however slowly fading away due to the infiltration of western cultures. Nowadays, children are named immediately they are born (while at hospital) with no formal ceremony.

For purposes of easy understanding, it is important to note that a typical Bakossi child has three names. In other words, as far as the structure of Bakossi names is concerned, the names have a characteristic sequencing consisting of three parts, namely a first surname (SN1), a forename (FN) and a second surname (SN2). Schematically, this structure can be represented as SN1 + FN + SN2, although this is usually not the case in all instances (Ekanjume, 2012, p.5). The sources of the three names (SN1 + FN + SN2) of a typical Bakossi child are different. The first surname (SN1) is usually the name that Bakossi children inherit from their fathers. This is usually a child’s father’s given name. This, thus, becomes the family name for the child.

Concerning the forename (FN), this is what the Bakossi people consider as Christian names. Bakossi people have adopted both the French and English forenames due to the influence of the two languages in the Country. They also have forenames that originate from Latin. These names end in the characteristic suffixes -us and -is (Ekanjume, 2012, p. 11). Biblical names are another source of the forenames of the Bakossi children. Apparently, these names were chosen by those converted (the faithful) or in some cases proposed to them by British missionaries especially during the baptism of their children. Finally, some regular girls’ names in the English onomasticon have entered the
Bakossionomasticon in one way or the other. The forename is usually not an issue of debate in most Bakossi families.

With regards to the second surname (SN2), this is a name that comes from a family member of a child’s father or mother. If it is the first child, the naming right goes to the Father who in turn will name the child after one of his family members. Even in a situation where the first birth results in twin or triplet, all the children will be named by the father. The father can decide, at his discretion, to give his wife the right to name one of the children after one of her family members. The SN2 is thus the child’s given name.

Concerning the usage of names among the Bakossi people, it depends on such variables as age, social status, and title. These variables determine the type of name to use when addressing someone, and when to use such a name. SN1, for instance, is a child’s father’s name and can only be used by the elder people when referring to him/her. This is because the use of SN1 is considered as referring to the other in the image of his/her father. It can also be used in formal situations preceded by a title (Mr, Ms, Dr, etc.). Forenames, on the other hand, are used when there is some degree of familiarity, intimacy, or some mark of solidarity. SN2 is so personal that friends and other intimate persons, including one’s siblings, will hardly use it when addressing an individual in the Bakossi community. The usage of this name is strictly limited to elder members of a family, who use it to differentiate a child from his/her siblings. SN2 brings out the identity of an individual as a person, not as a family, as is the case with SN1.

Thus, the layout of this paper is as follows. First, I give a historical and cultural background of the naming practice within the Bakossi community. The next section is dedicated to the function of names viz a viz cultural identity. This is followed by what I consider to be changes that characterize the Bakossi naming practice. The last section presents a conclusion to the paper.

2. Historical and Cultural Background of the Bakossi Naming Practice

Names are a part of every culture and they are of enormous importance both to the people who receive the names and to those that give them. Despite the universality of names, there is a great deal of difference from one culture to another in how names are given. Among most preliterate peoples, names are determined according to very definite and specific rules. Generally, in cultures with a keen sense of ancestry, children get their names from the totems and family trees of their parents. In some cultures, names are taken from events which happen during the pregnancy of the mother or shortly after the birth of the child, and in others, names are divined through magic and incantation. Regardless of when, why, or how often it happens, the giving and receiving of a name is an event of major importance because names carry in them some aspects of a child’s culture. As Bisin and Verdier (2001, p. 298) put it, parents exert effort to pass their own cultural traits on to their children and one of the ways they do this is through the names they give to their children. Quite frequently the significance of names is emphasized by elaborate rituals that almost always have deep religious meaning.

In order to understand the specific current culture of naming and trends of the recent past within the Bakossi community, it is important to look at the historical practices of the past. The historical exploration of names can reveal several aspects of the Bakossi culture, because names mirror vital aspects of a community’s daily life, world
views, as well as social relationships within the family, extended family, and beyond. Naming results, to a certain extent, in a social placement in which parents assume a certain position in their social surroundings for themselves and for their child.

Naming within the Bakossi culture is mostly done in honor of other bearers of the name. The significance of naming in honor of someone else is a family tie that has a high value. The Bakossi people believe that naming a child, in honor of someone else in the family, is a means of integrating the newborn into the family organization and enables the family members to remain within certain "bounded" choice of names, thereby creating a specific identity. This proves that a name has a powerfully integrative purpose. This conferral of name and identity is a kind of symbolic agreement between the family and the child. By giving a name the family confirms the child's existence and acknowledges their responsibilities toward the child. The name differentiates the child from others; thereby echoing to the rest of the family that the child needs to be treated and dealt with as someone with needs and feelings different from those of other members of the family. Through the name, a child automatically becomes part of the history of the family and his or her deeds exist separate from the deeds of others.

Also, naming a child after another family member limits the number of names within a family, thereby creating an identity that can be easily recognized. In other words, a family creates its identity through a limited number of names which run across members of that family and this restriction results in a high concentration of a few names and widespread instances of identical names within the family. The Bakossi people believe that from a name others are able to identify the family from which a child comes from. This is why it is common to find someone asking another if s/he is related to X or Y, based on his or her name.

In conjunction with naming a child after members of the same family, in some regions of the Bakossi community, there were also relatively strict rules for naming within the family. These rules were guided by the 'birth order' and the sex of a child. For example, the first son, to whom the regulations tended to apply most strictly, had to be named after the paternal grandfather, the first daughter after the paternal grandmother, the second son after the maternal grandfather, the second daughter after the maternal grandmother, and so forth. In other regions, it was simply a matter of 'birth order' where the first child, irrespective of the sex, will be named after a paternal family member, the second after a maternal family member, the second after a maternal family member, and so forth.

Despite the traditional rules and methods of naming, there is a gradual shift from using stereotyped naming models nowadays. Recent developments reveal that the practice of naming children after members of the family is gradually fading away. Modern Bakossi parents now have several excuses/reasons for not naming their children after certain very obvious family members like the child's grandfather, grandmother, aunt, uncle, etc. Some of these reasons include the personalities of the individuals concerned, their relationship with a child's parent, the notion of them being alive or dead, etc. However, Bakossi parents still try to name their first sons after family members and in a case where there is no suitable family member; they would rather name the child after themselves. This is so because the Bakossi people believe in the continuity of the male line, who, to them, is an heir to the father.

3. Functions of Names Viṣ-a-Viṣ Cultural Identity

As mentioned earlier, a name gives an individual an identity. A person's name is the best and sweetest word that he or she can hear. That is why when addressing someone; the name is generally intoned in friendship, respect, or some other acknowledgment of who that person is. This shows that names are a way of establishing peoples' identities. This explains why there is contention in the way people pronounce the names of others. Most people take great care to make sure they pronounce the names of others correctly. The reason for this concern is that people generally resent the mispronunciation of their name because, to them, mispronunciation amounts to a distortion of their identity. Accidental distortions can just be annoying, but mispronunciations and distortions of a name on purpose can be considered as insults, especially if they result in unflattering puns. This annoyance or feeling of insults is because an individual considers the wrong appellation as a misrepresentation of his or her identity.

The concept of cultural identity can be used in two different ways. First, it can be employed as a reference to the collective self-awareness that a given group embodies and reflects. This is the most prevalent use of the term. As Bochner (1973, p. 27) says, "generally the cultural identity of a society is defined by its majority group, and this group is usually quite distinguishable from the minority sub-groups with whom they share the physical environment and the territory that they inhabit." With the emphasis upon the group, the concept is similar to the idea of a national or social character which describes a set of traits that members of a given community share with one another above and beyond their individual differences. Such traits almost always include a constellation of values and attitudes towards life, death, birth, family, children, god, and nature. Used in its collective sense, the concept of cultural identity includes typologies of cultural behavior, such behaviors being the appropriate and inappropriate ways of meeting basic needs and solving life's essential dilemmas. It incorporates the shared premises, values, definitions, and beliefs and the day-to-day, largely unconscious, patterning of activities.

A second, more specific use of the concept revolves around the identity of the individual in relation to his or her culture. Cultural identity, in the sense that it is a functioning aspect of individual personality, is a fundamental symbol of a person's existence.

Culture and personality are inextricably woven together in the gestalt of each person's identity. Culture, the mass of life patterns that human beings in a given society learn from their elders and pass on to the younger generation, is imprinted in the individual as a pattern of perceptions that is accepted and expected by others in a society (Hacker, 1999, p. 346). Cultural identity is the symbol of one's essential experience of oneself as it incorporates the worldview, value system, attitudes, and beliefs of a group with which such elements are shared. In its most manifest form, cultural identity takes the shape of names which both locate and differentiate the person. When an individual calls himself or herself a Mosotho, a Cameroonian, a Roman Catholic, a boy, a woman, or Paul, that person is symbolizing parts of the complex of images that are likewise recognizable by others.

4. Changes in Traditional Naming Practice in the Bakossi Community

The system of naming in honor of someone else in the Bakossi community is...
been superseded by increasing secularization and individualization. Nowadays, most Bakossi parents desire that their children be given more uncommon names, so that the child might step out from ancestral tradition and from the social surroundings as someone unique. They believe that people should be allowed the "freedom" to choose what ever name they wish to give to their children. This phenomenon of name change is not only common to the Bakossi people but runs across many other communities (Nagata, 1999, p. 315)

Bakossi parents know that names are not just labels that children carry around to distinguish them from others, but rather that names have power to the name bearer. They are aware of the fact that a name has a social significance and is part of the total identity of the bearer. They therefore try as much as they can to choose names that can not destroy their children in one way or the other. They understand that the name given to a child is considered to be his/her first gift in life, and as such try to choose names that have pleasant and beautiful meanings. To them, names are not just a means of identification, but also carry in them an energy that affects the name bearer's life in a good number of ways.

The naming practice in the Bakossi community has been affected with the advent of colonialism in Africa, which has negatively impacted on the socio-cultural ideologies that were traditionally embedded with naming practice in this region. This is supported by Watkins and Andrew (1994, p. 169) when they state that since the context of social interaction changes with immigration, names can be expected to change as well. Bakossi names have had to change with the times due to the incorporation of western cultures. The result of this is that though some Bakossi names have remained indigenous, others have been westernised or fused with western names. This changing pattern has thus led to a question of cultural identity within the Bakossi community.

Most parents nowadays want their children to be citizen of the world, become an international person with identifications and loyalties which transcend the boundaries of nationalism. Because of this, they tend to give their children western names in an effort to make them look universal or modern. Although multiculturalism is an attractive and persuasive notion, this should not come at the detriment of cultural identity because no one is culture free. No human being can hold his or herself apart from some form of cultural influence. Thus, in an effort to create a universal citizen, parents should remember to build up the cultural identities of their children. One does not need to change the name of a child into a western one for that child to become universal.

Some parents argue that there is need to bring up children whose orientation and view of the world profoundly transcends their indigenous culture giving the complex social, political, economic, and educational interactions of the world today. This is of course what each one would advocate for; giving that everyone wants individuals whose horizons extend significantly beyond their own culture. All parents want children whose essential identities are inclusive of different life patterns. The children should however not be deprived of their cultural backgrounds in the hope of building a multicultural person. The child can only successfully become multicultural if he or she masters his or her indigenous cultural identity, and embodies a core process of self-verification that is grounded in both the universality of the human condition and the diversity of cultural forms. It is only in this way that the multicultural child will be intellectually and
emotionally committed to the basic unity of all human beings while at the same time recognizing, legitimizing, accepting, and appreciating the differences that exist between people of different cultures. If a child can not appreciate his or her culture, simply because it is not handed down to him or her, he or she will not be able to function as a multicultural person.

As mentioned earlier, the symbolic name contract requires that, to some extent, the family or society recognize and provide for the needs of individuals. However, some families or societies sometimes fail to meet up with their own part of the bargain. This sometimes leads certain individuals to respond by abandoning the name and identity that they were originally given. A typical example is of a Bakossi family who claim that their grand father and his family were evil people and did not perform their duties as parents or relatives. As a result, the generation that followed, refused to name their children after any of the family members. They would rather name their children after good friends, or just give them Christian (western) names. So, their response to the evil ways of their family members was by adopting a new culture in terms of naming, that they thought would better meet their needs. As much as this sounds as a good reason to do away with the idea of naming children after evil people, there can however not be a family without some good people either living or dead.

One other influence in the change of naming children after family members is the advent of television and other modern communication networks. Parents have now began naming their children after television stars, figures from novels, opera heroes, actors and actresses, musicians, singers, athletes, and monarchs and other illustrious personalities from public life. Although a name of this kind can still be linked with individually defined wishes, the vital difference is that the meaning of the individual name is no longer connoted in a collectively recognizable way but is instead highly individualized, thereby deviating from the cultural norms and inculcating in a child a culture different from the indigenous one.

5. Conclusion

The sense of personal identity and uniqueness, that a name gives an individual, is at the heart of why names are of interest to most scholars and why they are important to individuals and to the society as a whole. In spite of their importance, though, most people know very little about names and about the effects they have on children and on individuals in everyday life. Although multiculturalism is preferred nowadays, a child can appreciate it only when he or she is grounded in his or her own culture since a multicultural person is one who embodies attributes and characteristics that prepare him or her to serve as a facilitator and catalyst for contacts between cultures. The variations and flexibility of this identity style allows a person to relate to a variety of contexts and environments without being totally encapsulated by or totally alienated from any given culture.

An increase in the deviation from circumscribed naming systems is a recent tendency in the Bakossi community and this phenomenon is due primarily to the idea of breaking off from traditional norms, and secondly in an attempt to create an international citizen of the spectrum of names based on the free and individual choice of names. The "free" choice of names has led some parents, or even families, to look at naming in terms of the names they prefer rather than in terms of traditional
naming. Hence, "preference names" have replaced "tradition names".

Another effect, conscious or unconscious, on the choice of names is the social experiences of the parents with their own names or with the bearers of other names. As discussed in this paper, some Bakossi parents refuse to name their children after certain family members because of the social experiences (usually negative) surrounding such people. The mass media, too, plays an important role, specifically as both a reactive and an influencing instance: names chosen for main characters, titles of television series, and feature films intended to reach a broad audience are already in fashion or at least popular. Changes in practices on this subject have been interpreted as one manifestation of cultural globalization, possibly endangering cultural diversity.

To sum up, this paper attempted to show that no human being can separate his or herself from some form of cultural influence. Thus, Bakossi parents should remember to build up the indigenous cultural identities of their children before trying to make them universal citizens in terms of culture. They should also know that one does not need to change the name of a child into a western one for that child to become universal. It is true that some parents see the need to bring up children whose orientation and view of the world profoundly transcends their indigenous culture, giving the complex social, political, economic, and educational interactions of the world today. It is also true that parents want children whose essential identities are inclusive of different life patterns. This does not, however, mean depriving the child from his or her indigenous cultural identity. Children should not be deprived of their cultural backgrounds in the hope of building a multicultural person. The child can only successfully become multicultural if he or she masters his or her indigenous cultural identity, and embodies a core process of self-verification that is grounded in both the universality of the human condition and the diversity of cultural forms. If a child can not appreciate his or her culture, simply because it is not handed down to him or her, he or she will not be able to function as a multicultural person.

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Works Cited:


