

Grief Naming Amongst Vatsonga: An Onomastic Approach

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses the Xitsonga names bestowed on children as a way of grieving. It provides an onomastic analysis of grief names, which are used to express anger and frustrations. The culture, tradition and rituals of expressing grief differ from culture to culture. Name giving can take different forms depending on the circumstances in which the child is born. The study of naming falls under onomastics, which among others consists of personal names, place names, geographical names and grief names. The study is qualitative in nature. Two research techniques, namely interviews and observations were used for data collection. The study shows that nowadays Vatsonga no longer give their children grief names as was customary.

INTRODUCTION

The branch of semantics that deals with the scientific study of names is called onomastics. According to Burchfield (1982:72), “*the scientific study of names as names, that is, of human habit of naming things, is the science of onomastics.*” This field of study can be subdivided into two main types, namely general and literary onomastics. General onomastics deals with names in general and grief names, which are the main focus of this paper falls under this category. There is a significant relationship among grief names, death-prevention names, death names and mourning names and all these concepts will be used interchangeably in this paper. This paper employed a sociolinguistic-onomastic theoretical base as its theoretical framework. Possa and Khotso (2015: 37) support the idea of using interdisciplinary theory because onomastics is a theory that allows the use of other theories for this study. Recent years have seen decreasing interest in grief naming among some Vatsonga communities. A shift has moved more to Christian names than grief names. On this note, Mbiti (1969: 228) is of the view that “*Christianity in its return to Africa is the main course of all the elements of this world revolution*”. This is one of the Western encroachments into Vatsonga culture, which cannot be completely avoided. However, there are still a handful of people who are maintaining this rich traditional naming practice. Although not referring to grief naming, Chauke (2005: 9) is of the view that the study of naming practices is important since it brings Vatsonga people closer to reclaiming their lost

pride by discouraging the use of Western names that are not meaningful to them. According to Cobuild Student’s Dictionary (2005: 548), “*Naming is the act of giving a name or a label to a person or a thing through which a person or a thing can be easily identified.*” In this paper the significance of naming will be revealed to go beyond the mere labeling in identifying a particular individual.

Grief refers to a response to loss of someone that has passed on. Although grief mainly focuses on emotional response to a loss, there are also physical and psychological dimensions involved. In fact, it should be noted that not all losses are death related. In many African cultures, a child’s name is not merely given, but must bear significance to specific events that lead to its choice. Furthermore, every grief name has a specific and unique meaning attached to it, which may fulfil and signify different functions regarding both the name-bearer and the name-givers. The data presented and analysed in this paper will contribute substantially towards the new body of knowledge of Xitsonga onomastic studies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the sociolinguistic-onomastic practices regarding grief naming amongst Vatsonga.

Literature Review

Many scholars have contributed extensively in the field of onomastics. The review of liter-

ature by some of these scholars was done to help the researcher in pinpointing gaps to be covered in this field. For this to be achieved, the study needs to demonstrate a “systematic, explicit and reproductive method for identifying, evaluating and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded knowledge produced by researchers, scholars and practitioners” (Fisk 2009: 13). In other words, in surveying literature the researcher is seeking the knowledge about the known and the unknown on the topic of interest.

Nkuna’s (1999) research focuses on the manner in which gender plays a role in the naming practices amongst Vatsonga. The study revealed that it is important for the Vatsonga name-givers to consider the gender of a child before bestowing a name to them. Her analysis indicates clear choice of names according to and depending on gender while she simultaneously highlights the recent tendency to use names that suit both sexes. Such names include *Mihloti*, *Ntsako* and *Dlayani*.

In his unpublished thesis entitled, *Aspects of Naming in Xitsonga*, Chauke (2005) analyses the naming practices by Vatsonga. In his study, the main focus is on personal names, place names and nicknames. The study found that names amongst Vatsonga are not just given, but have a specific meaning to both the name-giver and the name-bearer. Although Chauke has discussed some of the grief names such as *Nyamayavo* and *Telakufa*, more detail could be given on these names.

Babane and Chauke (2015) in their paper entitled, *An Analysis of Factors Involved in Nick-naming of Some Soccer Players in South Africa*, investigated the role of the meaning behind the nicknames of some soccer players in the country. The study revealed that nicknames for some soccer players are bestowed based on among others things, behaviour traits, physical character and music. All the names discussed in this paper reflected the symbolism in their meaning replacing the real names of these soccer stars.

Obeng’s (1998) study investigates the death-prevention names for an Akan child of Ghana. The study revealed that structurally these names are different from other Akan names. In this study, Obeng found that death-prevention names among the Akan society are given to a child, ‘*if a couple has lost many children at birth or shortly thereafter...*’ (1998: 165). According to Obeng, the reason behind giving these names is the perception that they have the ability to

assure the name-bearer’s survival. The study concluded by indicating that death-prevention names are significant as they indirectly address whoever was involved in the unnatural death of the children.

The works of the above scholars differ from the present paper in that their studies focus on the cultural practices of personal names and nicknames in general. On the other hand, Obeng discusses Akan death-prevention names. However, this paper focuses on grief naming that is closely related to death-prevention names amongst Vatsonga. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to close the gap left by the above studies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The nature of this study dictates that the researcher uses the qualitative approach. Creswell (1994: 2) defines this approach as, “...*an enquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting.*” In this approach the researcher decided to use interviews and observation techniques to collect the data. The idea of using more than one method is supported by Babbie (1992: 6) who maintains, “*The best study is one that uses more than one research method, taking advantage of their different strengths.*”

For the purposes of this study the interview method is very important because it is “often the primary source of data during a qualitative research approach” (Hoberg 1999: 48). Data was collected through unstructured interviews by speaking directly to the participants with the aim of obtaining direct information relevant to the study. The participants comprised 10 individuals bearing the names discussed in this paper. The researcher audio-recorded all the interviews with the consent from the participants. Since the recordings were in Xitsonga, transcribing and later translation into English was done by the interviewers. Observations were made involving different people bearing grief names.

RESULTS

The results of this investigation show that it was a common practice among the Vatsonga people that a child was given a grief name that

has a specific meaning, usually related to something that happened, either when the mother was pregnant or the family experiencing some tragedy. Thus, Christian religious affiliation has less significance compared to Xitsonga customs and traditions when it came to naming a child. This naming practice is gradually fading away since nowadays people increasingly prefer to use Western or Christian names than grief names. Therefore, in the near future, the cultural practice of grief naming will probably cease to exist among the Vatsonga community.

DISCUSSION

Grief is natural and could be regarded as an appropriate way of responding to a loss. When people lose their loved ones mainly through death, they grieve as a consequence of pain. There are many ways of showing grief among, which is giving a grief name to a child. There are different types of naming amongst the Vatsonga. There are politically inspired names, initiation names, ancestral names, Christian names, grief names and many more. For the purposes of this paper, only grief names will be discussed. This study found that these grief names are given to children with a specific aim to convey a particular message. Mills (1995: 103-104) concurs by saying that “*names are a culture’s way of fixing what is actually in a universe of overwhelming, chaotic sensations, all pregnant with a multitude of possible meaning.*” The names discussed below bear different meanings depending on the circumstances under which the child was born.

Mihloti (Tears)

Mihloti is a symbolic name, which may be given to both boys and girls and could be literally translated to mean tears. During the mother’s pregnancy or birth time, many things could happen, which may be used to name a newborn child, like things such as death to one of the family members or a relative. In many African societies such as Vatsonga, people show their grief through tears as a useful step in the coping and healing process. The family may give a child a name *Mihloti* as a way of grieving a loss of their loved ones.

This name is given as a result of a loss of a member of the family that might have coincided

with the mother’s pregnancy or the birth of the child. One respondent indicated that she was given this name because her mother passed on during the time of her birth. In fact, the mother had complications during the delivery process but the child survived. This type of naming is most welcome as it affords the family the opportunity to always remember the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child.

Miyelani (Keep Silent)

By giving the child this name, the name-giver is making a special command to the family to ‘keep silent’ and wipe their tears. The name *Miyelani* is derived from the verb *miyela* (keep quiet). *Miyelani* is a name, which can be bestowed regardless of the sex of the name bearer who was born during the time when the family was mourning the loss of a relative. A child is so named to comfort the mourners who were in sorrow during his or her birth.

In giving this name to a newborn baby, the name-giver has the reason to believe that the sorrow the family is going through will one day vanish. Chauke (2005: 83) hints by saying that the name “*signifies the end of the period of agony and that his/her birth will bring lasting peace and happiness...*” Participant three alluded that her name was given to her because the day she was born, two members of her family had died in a car accident. The name was therefore given in order to sooth the family members.

Nyamayavo (Their Meat)

Nyamayavo is one of the death-prevention names that may be given to a child to demonstrate anger, sorrow and frustration by the parents. This name may be given to a child who was born after the death of many children from the same parents and therein lies the ingenuity. Junod (1938: 54) avers that “*when a mother has lost many children, if another is born, a name which is often chosen to protect the child against witches, such as Nyamayavo, which means “Their Flesh”, is given.*” The following remarks by Participant four supports the views above “*we have had many children before but not a single one of them survived and we decided to name this one Nyamayavo because we thought even he will die*”. By giving a child this name, the couple is in a way preventing death to

the child by informing the witches that their evil deeds are known but shunned. According to African culture and philosophy, death generally is not a natural phenomenon but as a result of witchcraft. Malegapuru (1999: 16) shares a related sentiment by asserting that the lives of Africans centre on belief systems. Vatsonga people are no exception. Although people are aware that no one is exempt from death, there is still a very strong belief that whenever death occurs in the family, something evil has caused the death.

Telakufa (Coming to Die)

The name, which is literally translated to mean “coming to die” is an undeviating pessimistic sigh pitying the newly born child’s plight of anticipated and eminent death. This comes from calculated and rationally drawn conclusions of past experiences. It decisively connotes the parental state of helplessness before a fierce film of spirit-haunting circumstances that might have cost a considerable number of unwarranted death instances in the concerned family. Unlike the name *Dlayani*, *Telakufa* is neither ironic nor defensive but directly hints bare at the fact at stake, that is, the untimely, though expected gloomy incident of the born child’s passing on.

More so, the name indicates the premeditated fate of the infant that is magically irrevocable. This can be a result of the many failed parental efforts to do away with the venting spirits until they have succumbed to this helpless level of defeat. In a sense this denotes the unusual gap that exists between the born child and the rest of the people’s normal life expectance. The parents are well aware of the existence of death and the fact that anyone can die at any given time but they have gone on to mark the strange happenings that underline the family’s alarming death occurrences.

The name goes on to depict the certainty of the child’s premeditated death. Death in the family is no longer a supposition but a certainty within a demarcated period of any newly born child. The internal knowledge of this incidental happening is what parents think and meditate upon loudly in the name *Telakufa*, as a sign of announcing to the world their pestilential condition affecting the family.

Masirheni (Graveside)

Sometimes naming a child such as *Masirheni* could be a reflection of the circumstances

observed during the birth of this child. The name *Masirheni* literally means graveside. It is interesting to note that the child born during the time when the family is preparing a grave for another family member is likely to be given this name. According to the participants, a newly born baby might be given a name *Masirheni* because the family has buried many children before. With this name the parents are grieving saying that even this child will be buried like the others before them.

According to Obeng (1998: 177), while discussing an Akan name, *Sieamono*, which is closely related to *Masirheni* he says, “By giving this name, the parents are telling the child that no time will be wasted in its burial should it show any sign of dying because the gravedigger has already been given the order to proceed with the burial”. This shows the name *Masirheni* is bestowed to a child whose parents are very angry and frustrated because of the many previous deaths of their children.

Rifumuni (What Kind of Death?)

The name *Rifumuni* could be literally translated to mean ‘what kind of death?’ Generally, family members give this name to a child after there has been an uncertain and unexplained death in the family. This is supported by Nkondo (1973: 71) who avers, “Such a name is given to a born [child] after a sudden death in the family, particularly if the circumstances of the death are not fully understood”. Sometimes this death occurs soon after others have passed on and mostly important members of the family.

The name-giver is suspicious about the ambiguous loss of their loved ones through what is believed to be unnatural death. This causes friction within members of the family and their neighbors and preventing them to move on with their lives. Participants are of the view that giving a child a name such as *Rifumuni* is a useful step in the coping and healing process of grieving and also trying to put a curse on death or whoever for robbing the family of their members. It was observed that this grief could be seen in their faces, as their emotions were always high.

Dlayani (Kill Him)

Dlayani is one of the grief names in Xitsonga, which stems from the verb “*ku dlaya*”, which means to kill. The name reflects an elevated lev-

el of Xitsonga nomenclature in which naming can be used to indirectly pass some message that cannot be deciphered from the literal interpretation of the given name. Literally, death is an ominous occasion that no single human being can bear, and instructing any one to kill one's child is more than dramatic and extraordinarily larger than life. It is an act that can hinder the evil intentions of the culprits, and compel them to pose and ponder over the strange generosity of a parent giving away their child to witch mongers.

However, this act of verbal irony is not uncommon among the traditional Vatsonga. When a child misbehaves, a parent may take it upon himself to indirectly warn the child by suggesting an otherwise unfamiliar advice. This is done purposely and evokes intimately deep-seated anger from the one giving the warning. For example, a parent who does not want their child to go swimming may simply say, '*go, there is no problem*', when in reality they are deeply and immensely hurt and angry. Deeply and perceptively they are suffering utter detestation and anger. However, this should be communicated in such a diplomatic way that the warned child gets the message.

The name *Dlayani* can be inspired by quite a number of problem issues horning the family in question. The name bestowing family might have been afflicted by witches for a number of years so that the parents may end up losing hope as to whether they can ever have a child that will grow to maturity before passing on. If a child is obtained after a prolonged series of deaths in the family such a grief name can be given as a way of telling the enemies that their plots and actions have been noted. This way of telling them is some kind of *bembele* (Xitsonga term for indirect verbal warning), and in some, if not most instances, the culprits revoke their spells, feeling guilt that they have been discovered and the named child may therefore be spared. Mapindani (2010: 22) concurs by indicating that:

Vito ra Dlayani ri thyiwa hi mutswari loyi a talaka ku veleka n'wana a file kumbe ku veleka a karhi a hanya kambe a hatla a hundza emisaveni a ha ri lontsongo. Eka xiyimo xo fana ni lexi mutswari u va a hlundzukile a nga ha tshembi leswaku a nga ha veleka n'wana loyi a nga ta n'wi vona a hanya hi malembe a nga hundzangi emisaveni. Hi vito ra Dlayani u va a

kombisa leswaku vavengi va yena lava n'wi dlayelaka vana wa va tiva.

(The name *Dlayani* is given by a grieved parent who usually experiences stillbirths or death of infants. In such an instance, a parent would be so grieved that she no longer has any hope of bearing children whom she would wait to see them grow to adulthood/maturity. By giving this name to a child suggests that the parent is well aware of her enemies.)

Khombomuni (What Kind of a Misfortune)

Morphologically, *Khombomuni* is a compound name consisting of the noun *khombo* (danger/misfortune) and the verb *muni* (what kind). This grief name literally means 'what kind of misfortune'. Thus, this name could be bestowed to a child who might have been born when there was a funeral in the family. Usually, this name is given to a child after the family has experienced several sudden and unexpected deaths leaving them sad and very shocked. Participant five attested that the name *Khombomuni* was given to her because she was born in the family where there was a generational curse where people die of car accidents every year. By giving the child this name, the family is trying to alert whoever is responsible for these accidents that they are aware that the deaths are not natural. It furthermore reflects all the unhappiness that the family has gone through for several years. Generally, the name serves to remind all family members of the tragedies that they have gone through for a long time.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to discuss the grief names used amongst Vatsonga. Naming a new born child a grief name helps acknowledge the significance of the deaths of the loved ones in one's life. Through this study it could be concluded that naming practices of grief names is done to find closure through the naming of a child. This paper has also shown that giving a child a grief name is an indication that the deeds of the witches and their evil spirits are known and strongly condemned. It could furthermore be concluded that grief naming should not be regarded as an ordinary practice provided for the sake of convenience but serves a meaningful role to both the name-giver and the name-bearer.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that Vatsonga people should resuscitate their customs and traditions of giving grief names to their children. These names enable the family to lament their loved ones who may have died during the birth of the name-bearer. This paper further recommends that although there is a tendency of hybrid culture where Vatsonga draw on both their culture and Western culture, adherence to the indigenous culture of grief naming is desirable.

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