# LANGUAGE STUDY

## Naming in Nguni Languages: The Case of Ngoni in Northern Malawi

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### Abstract

Shakespeare once asked, 'What is in a name?' The answer to this age-old question depends on the particular culture from which the term name is framed. In Nguni and other Southern African languages, for example, a name tells a lot about the individual that it identifies the linguistic matrix from which it is drawn, and the society that ascribes to it. A name may indicate the morphological structures and phonological processes found in the language, the position of the name's bearer in society, and the collective history and life experiences of the people surrounding the individual. In this paper we will explore the morphology, semantic import, and function of first names among the Ngoni of northern Malawi, an offshoot of the Nguni that left South Africa during the Shaka wars in the 1820s. We will do this by addressing some of the questions, .e.g. How do Ngoni people name their children, how are names deployed, and how important are names in the discourse and interlocution among members of that society? What does a name tell us about social change and people's beliefs? How does the naming system among the Ngoni compare with those of the Nguni they left behind in South Africa, such as the Zulu? These are some of the questions that we will be discussing in this paper by analyzing data collected from northern Malawi and Zululand.

### Introduction

The relationship between language, social structure, and behaviour has fascinated researchers for a long time. Language is part of the culture. It is the primary means of communication (Salzmann, 2004:48), but, so too are customary acts of behaviour. Taboo, (an inhibited expression), for example, can be either behavioural (such as incest taboo) or linguistic (such as *hlonipha*, practised by Nguni speakers in Southern Africa), and the protective sanctions are much the same. Edward Sapir (1956:69) says that 'language is a guide to social reality' and that human beings are at the mercy of the language that has become the medium of expression for their society. Juri Lotman (1978) states that language is a modelling system and

that 'No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language' (1978:211-32). What was being referred to is of much debate. The suggestion is that people are prisoners of language because it determines the way they think. This view of language is apparent in the study of vocabulary and semantics. Words are taken as a label of aspects of culture, and are thus an index of the cultural world of society. If a language does not have a term for something, it may mean that thing is probably not important in that culture. On the other hand, if a language has a set of names for something then maybe that thing reflects some cultural essence of the people. Underlying a word, therefore, is its relationship with other words, and the goal of analysis is to discover vocabulary sets that carry the underlying semantic components of the language and a people's culture.

The vocabulary of a language plays an important role as a window into the universe of knowledge of its speakers and their view of the world around them. Clearly, from a relativist point of view, there is no particular language or culture that names everything or catalogues the whole compass of knowledge of the world (Nettle & Romaine, 2000:50-57). The vocabulary of names is always expanding as speakers' experiences expand. In this article we examine how names are constructed and deployed in African societies by looking at the naming practice among Nguni speakers in Southern Africa. Because of recent large human migrations predicated on the dynamics of history and global capital, the Nguni language group has developed a large Diaspora community within the subcontinent, and therefore offers a unique opportunity to map social changes associated with language expansion. We explore how name-givers lace names with linguistic codes imbued with social meaning, and how society deconstructs and manipulates such codes to retrieve the relevant semantic imports necessary for its survival and the identities of its members. We also examine how a people's change in attitude and socio-psychological behaviour can be determined from the names they give to their children.

## A brief note on the Ngoni/Nguni Diaspora

The Ngoni left South Africa around the 1820s during the Shaka wars, and trekked all the way to the shores of Lake Victoria before heading back, trying to re-trace their footsteps, and eventually settling in different East and Central African countries like Tanzania, Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The Ngoni branch that is the focus of this study eventually settled in their present locations of Mzimba and Lundazi districts in northern Malawi and eastern Zambia between 1860 and 1890. The Malawi Nguni first came into contact with Livingstonia Christian missionaries in the 1870s after their return from east Africa. James Stuart, who had been contracted from Lovedale Mission in the Eastern Cape, started the Christianization project in Malawi. Stuart brought with him a team of Zulu and Xhosa evangelists and teachers who imposed Nguni/Zulu language on northern Malawi where it became the media of instruction for almost a century; their Livingstonia Mission produced such South African luminaries as Clements Kadalie of the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU), and Elliot Kamwana of The Watch Tower Movement, not to mention David Kaunda, the

father of Kenneth Kaunda in Zambia. The Ngoni were also among those populations targeted for cheap mine labour by the South African labour recruiting agencies, and thousands have been enlisted over the years. Thus, since the advent of colonisation, there has been a constant and strong interaction between the people in South African and the Nguni Diaspora, mediated by the Christianisation project and the South African migrant labour system.

## Common origins among Ngoni and Nguni

As a result of the common origins of the Ngoni and the Zulu people, we found many similarities in names of people, places, animals, plants, items, etc., as illustrated in (**1**) below:

(**1**)

| | |
|---|---|
| *umkhaya* (plant species) | *Embangweni* (place names – place of dispute) |
| *inkomazi* (cow) | *Engwenyameni* (place name - a place of crocodiles) |
| *ububende* (culinary) | *Mahlanga* (a field after harvest) |
| *izikhezo* (utensil - spoon) | *nsundu* (colour term – brown) |
| *umuhlubulo* (side, flank) | *ingoma* (music, dance) |
| *hlobo* (season, summer time) (l) | ungwengwe (lawn grass), |
| *mnyenzane* (willow tree) | *isigude/Chigude* (place of wild bananas). |

[Note that the Ngoni language has dropped the Nguni pronominal prefix, or made it optional]. Since the introduction of Christianity and global capital in Malawi was mediated through South African Nguni languages like Zulu, the accompanying ethics and moral values implanted had a South African filter, and the naming practice might be a good way of measuring the psychological impact of this enterprise. In this study we examine the social and psychological changes in the Nguni naming practice during its importation into the northern Malawi Ngoni. This study will focus on an individual's first or given name because, under certain circumstance, such names can easily be changed (see Moyo 1996), and thus provide a better barometer for measuring changes in attitudes and moral codes. I this article we also trace the semantic and social changes that have taken place as a consequence of the scattering of the Nguni populations throughout the sub-region. The data used in the study was gathered from church and school rolls, baptismal records, census data, telephone directories, newspapers, historical documents and interviews of elders and name givers in Malawi and South Africa.

To our knowledge, there has been no study in Bantu languages to determine the specific linguistic processes that speakers employ to forge new names and interweave them with concise semantic codes that guide both the bearer and interlocutors to navigate through the intricate social landscape in which the individual is born. Previous studies of African names (Dinwiddie-Boyd, 1990; Koopman, 2002; Madubuike, 1976; Newbell, 1975; Nsimbi, 1950; Ntuli, 1992; Pettman, 1985; Raper, 1987; Suzman, 1994; Zungu, 1998, etc.) have tended to be etymological by focusing on the origin and history of names. Since linguistic codes

are embedded within the collective psychology of the community, which gives it its interpretations, we need to take the naming discourse further by attempting to account for not only their origin and history, but also uncover the material mechanism of their construction and circumstances of their social use - i.e., the rules of the 'naming game.' This study will thus fill an existing gap in our knowledge of the naming practice in African languages, and provide an insight into how the name-giver distinguishes between apparently similar linguistic forms, such as the Ngoni names of *Zondo, Zondi, Mzondi, Mzondeni, Zondwase, Zondeka, Zondiwe* and *Mzondwase*, which are all derived from the same stem /zond-/ 'hate.' The study further hopes to serve people, particularly African American students, who have expressed a desire to adopt African names for self-identity, a desire encouraged by the writer Paulette Williams change of her name to the Nguni *Ntozakhe Shange*. The task of the linguist, therefore, is to inform the name consumers about the language derivational processes that go into the naming practice so that they can make informed choices, or engage in the exercise with more knowledge. The questions we have to ask ourselves are: how are names in Nguni languages morphologically and semantically constructed, and what are the linguistic processes involved in their construction?

Of all Bantu languages, Nguni has perhaps the more elaborate and overt morphological and derivational semantic processes for naming, and therefore offers an interesting opportunity to adequately describe the morphological processes involved in the naming enterprise. In the study we draw most of our examples of personal first names from Ngoni and Zulu languages, both members of the Nguni language group of Southern Africa. There are roughly four ways in which names in both Ngoni and Zulu are constructed, depending on the semantic import that the name-giver wants to convey.

Derivation of personal names
First of all, personal names could be derived from names of items, objects, animals, etc.:
*(2)*

| | |
|---|---|
| *Chitha* (discard, desert, divorce) | *Mafu* (clouds, grieving) |
| *Vimba* (block, disgrace) | *Nyembezi* (tears) |
| *Thingo* (rainbow) | *Solola* (name of a mountain) |
| *Mathambo* (bones, species of tree with hard wood) | |

Although these names are popular and numerous among the Ngoni and their affiliates, they have only limited (semantic) value for us in this study, because they do not display the linguistic derivational morphology that we are interested in.

The other three methods of name construction involve some form of derivational affixation – a very distinctive feature of Bantu languages. In Nguni affix morphemes appear as either prefixes, as in noun class markers, or as suffixes, as in verbalizers. Stems are fully formed 'independent' words at lexical level. However, some stems can be turned into verbal stems by affixing verbal suffixes, and some verb stems in turn can be turned into names by suffixation. Therefore, there are

two types of name formation: lexical and derived. Thus in (1) *Vimba* is lexical, while as *Zondo* is derived. Some derivational affixes turn specific categories of morphemes into corresponding morphemes in another category. A morpheme can be defined as the minimal unit having meaning associated with constant form.

In Nguni, being an agglutinating language, the process of naming is done largely by the deployment of a network of affixes, harmonised by the relevant phonological rules. In the morphological processes, the noun or verbal conjugation is the main source for deriving meaning, and this poses an interesting question of how meaning can be best implicated through the linguistic process. But the morphology of names has also fundamental implications for syntax because names tend to be both words and sentences, for example: *Thembinkosi* is 'We trust in the Lord,' or *Bonangani*, 'How do you see?' 'Most of the names, however, result from the process of verbal conjugation, where derivational affixes turn specific categories of morphemes into corresponding morphemes in another category. These affixes can be as small as a single vowel:

(3) /themb + a/ □ *Themba* (trust, hope)

Typically, all verbs in Bantu languages end in a final vowel [a], and some studies treat this final vowel as a default absolute tense feature in verbs. In Nguni languages this is a common source of proper personal names. But names are also morphologically related to other grammatical categories, and in the following example the derivational process affixing [o] or [i] as a final vowel to verb stems:

(4)

| | |
|---|---|
| /vusa/ (revise)  □□*Vuso* (revival) | /hlaza/ (embarrass) □□*Hlazo* (disgrace) |
| /zonda/ (hate)  □□*Mzondi* (hater) | /thakatha/ (bewitch)□*Mthakathi* (witch) |

Derivational affixes thus change the syntactic category of the lexical morphemes to which they are attached, turning verbs into nouns, which then become another source for personal names. As indicated in the last two examples in (4), there is another process that prefixes the nominal nasal morpheme to the verb stem:

(5)

| | |
|---|---|
| *Mkhuzo* (strong disaaproval or grief) | *Mabutho* (warriors) |
| *Mbango* (dispute, rivalry, feud) | *Mthakathi* (witch, wizard) |

This nasal is part of the Bantu noun class system (Creider, 1975; Givon, 1971). Plural appeal is also indicated by either prefix –**si**, as in *Sibongile* (we are thankful), or suffix –**ni**, as in *Bongani* (be thankful). Using this process of affixation, name-givers take the verb forms with which they are familiar, and play with them in a creative way to re-create new names that convey a meaningful reflection on what the new birth means to the community.

Derivation of names from the verbalisation process

However, the overwhelming majority of names in Ngoni are derived from the process of verbalisation by which a verbalizer suffix is attached to the verb stem to indicate the state of the action denoted. The three most popular suffixes used in Nguni languages are the causative extension [-**se**], the applicative extension [-**le**], the simple passive suffix [-**we**], and passive suffix [-**ka**]. There are two

observations to be made about verbalisers. First, each verbalizer behaves uniquely and second, some verbalizers are more frequent than others. Note also that although both [-se] and [-ka] are causative extensions and are used to name or define a quality in the individual bearing the name, there is a qualitative semantic distinction between them in the way they indicate capacity or potential for something. All the four suffixations are very common in the Ngoni naming practice.

(6)

| | |
|---|---|
| *Thandeka* (be favoured) | *Lungile* (set right) |
| *Bongeka* (be thanked) | *Dingile* (be needy) |
| *Thenjiwe* (faithful) | *Dingase* (cause to need) |
| *Lindiwe* (the awaited) | *Mafunase* (the desired one) |

These suffixes not only convert the stem into different phonological and grammatical realisations, but also impart different semantic impulses of the social meaning. It is these semantic impulses that help interpret the related activity implied in the verbal extension, i.e., applicative, causative, intensive, passive, etc. The {-ka} extension, for instance, indicates a stative condition with respect to social space, as in *Bongeka* (be thanked), or *Thandeka* (the favourite one). The name with a {-le} suffix indicates a semantic element of persistence: *Hlanzekile* (purified, continuously cleansed), or *Lungile* (be righteous, consistently well behaved). The {-se} suffix indicates a cause-and-effect intensity, causing or being caused, as in the forms *Dingase* (cause to need), and *Mzondwase* (the one caused to hate). The intensification can be further reinforced by the affixation of another pronominal suffix {-yo) onto the causative one, as in *Dingiswayo* (the needy one), or *Sunduzwayo* (the one made to be pushed aside, forced out).

The plural suffix {-ni} is also used in Ngoni names as an appeal or form of command: *Bongani* (be thankful), *Kholwani* (be faithful), *Thembani* (be trusting), and *Tholani* (give birth, adopt, offer shelter). The {-ni} suffix also indicates collectivity, an appeal to a group rather than to a single individual, and should not be confused with the locative of the same form. Thus, while /mzonde/, 'hate her/him,' refers to a single addressee, in *Mzondeni* more than one addressee is referred to. Although there are several morphemes in Nguni languages that can be attached to various verbal stems to turn them into different types of words of different categories, only a few can be used in this way to form verb-based names.

The preceding discussion of the process of affixations in name construction raises several questions. For example, how do we represent these types of verbal extension suffixes in Bantu languages? The traditional and accepted view is that these suffixes are typically of the VC-shape, and that what in this study we call the final vowel suffix (FV) should not be regarded as part of the verb morpheme. On the other hand, the suffix must be represented in a way that enables us to interpret the derivation of name from verbal stems as a morpho-phonological process that is executed in accordance with the vowel harmony rules of the language – hence names like *Dingiswayo*. The implication for the latter interpretation is obvious: since this is a feature changing process the question then is can: phonological

processes perform a semantic function? Or is this the exclusive function of morphology and syntax?

Because of the agglutinating nature of Nguni morphology, monosyllabic words tend to be unstable, resulting in a constraint on monosyllabic names. Monosyllabic forms can be manipulated in size through the process of expansion, i.e., by reduplication or triplication, under specific morphological requirements. Monosyllabic stems have a tendency to replicate before they can be acceptable names in the language, hence a form such as /sho/, 'mean,' can be extended to three syllables to form the name *Shoshosho* (the stubborn one). For disyllabic forms, a name can be formed simply by reduplicating the syllables:

(7)
Verb stem:      {[ x x x] word/name ... }

/ho/ "hollow'      □*Hoho* (place name)
/swa/ "rustle sound"      □Swaswa (place name)
shoba (tail)                □ Shobashoba (restless one), also *Mashobani*
shanga (roam about) □ Shangashanga (one who roams about), also *Shangani*

Four syllables seem to be the maximum for names, and two the minimum, and hence the monosyllable form /ho/ above is extended to the minimum. In reduplication of a monosyllabic form, the first CV is targeted as a base, reduplicated, and then re-attached to the original base: This means that in monosyllabic forms with a long vowel the syllabification seems to behave like a CVCV type where the final vowel is extrametrical and therefore the final C attaches to the previous syllable, forming CVC. But in isiNgoni every word must end in a vowel, which means either adding a vowel at the end or deleting the final C. There is a maximal limit to the length of a word that a name affix or verbal extension can be attached to, and that limit is three syllables. Therefore, although the forms above can replicate endlessly, this process is limited by the phonological rules.

**Constraints on word template**
There is also a constraint on the minimum word template that is relevant to the construction of nicknames in isiNgoni. Just as a short/monosyllabic name can be extended, a long name can be reduced in order to conform to the restrictions on the word size and other morphological rules in the language. This process is best illustrated by an example of the construction of nicknames in Ngoni. As McCarthy and others have noted, truncated words are not chopped to fit by leaving off prosodic units, but 'instead starting at some designated point, the melodic elements of a word are associated with a template' (McCarthy 1986, p. 56). In Ngoni this process of truncation, is employed to form nicknames:

**(8)**

Morpheme:     [Verb stem] fi [x x x] word/name + [suffix (+ truncation)]

| Full name | Short form or nickname |
|---|---|
| *Sibongile* | *Bongi* |
| *Thandeka* | *Thandi* |
| *Thembani* | *Themba* |
| *Dingiswayo* | Dingi |

A morpheme can be defined as the minimal unit having meaning associated with constant form. Two syllables are the maximum stem size in the language to which a name can be truncated to form a 'nickname.' Therefore, forms like *Vuso* or *Chitha* are not truncated because they are already minimum foot size since the shortened name has to be bi-moraic. This is evidence of the enforcement of a foot/minimal word template that results in systematic patterns of shortening input words. This also supports a CVC syllable structure in isiNgoni, which corresponds to vocative truncation or nickname abbreviation. It should also be pointed out, however, that the nickname is not culturally accepted as a substitute for the full (or 'real') name, so that if a man is called 'Dingi,' everybody knows that his formal (or 'real') name is *Dingiswayo*, just as if a woman is called 'Thandi,' then her formal name is *Thandeka* or *Thandiwe*. This is different from English where the name Tony does not necessarily mean the person's real name is *Anthony*, *Antonio*, *Antonia*, or *Antoinette*.

Gender designation is another important aspect of name construction in Nguni languages, as there are close gender parallels constructed in names sharing the same stem:

**(9)**

**Stem:**

**/bong**-a/ (to thank, to praise, to pray)
*name derivations*:

| Male | Female |
|---|---|
| *Bongani* (be thankful - plural) | *Bongani* |
| *Mbongeni* (thank him/her) | Sibongile (let us be thankful) |
| *Siyabonga* (we are thankful) | |

| /**thand**-a/ (to love) | |
|---|---|
| *Thando* (love) | *Thando* |
| *Thandwa* (loved one) | *Thandiwe* |
| *Thandika* (loved, favourite) | *Thandeka* |

Although the definition and realisation of gender is a rather complex issue in Bantu languages generally, and outside the scope of this paper, the gender designation in a name may refer to several other features in addition to gender, such as aesthetics. Thus with the stem {**ding**-} which carries the semantic import of 'need,' only the girl child can be named *Dingase*, *Dingile*, or *Dingiwe*, while the boy child can be

named *Dingana/Dingane*, or *Dingiswayo*. The derivational process involved can be best illustrated in the following chart:

(10)

| Verb stem | Male Name | Female Name |
|---|---|---|
| -**bong**-a (thank) | Bongani | Bongani |
| | Mbongeni | Bongeka |
| | Siyabonga | Sibongile |
| -**thand**-a (love) | Thandwa | Thandiwe |
| | Thandika | Thandeka |
| -**ding**-a (need) | Dingani | Dingile |
| | Dingiswayo | Dingase |
| -**zond**-a | Zondo | Zondeka |
| | Zondi | Zondiwe |
| | Mzondi | Mzondiwe |
| | Mzondeni | Mzondwase |

As we stated earlier, some customary acts of behaviour may be given linguistic expression, and sometimes this has serious consequences for the naming practice. The Nguni practice of *Hlonipha* is one example of such customary acts: a verbal custom where a speaker cannot call the elders by their first names, nor can a daughter in-law call her father in-law by certain names. Apart from the influence of colonialism and the Christianisation project (Mphande, 2003:625); *hlonipha* has been a major catalyst for language change in Zulu and Nguni languages. One unintended consequence of this custom is that English or non-Nguni names are replacing Nguni names as a consequence of hlonipha – e.g., *Elton Dlamini*!

### The influence of Christian missions on naming practice

The advent of Christianity in Africa and its influence on the naming practice has also introduced interesting innovations into the naming practice, at least at the semantic level. Some of the newly converted Nguni Christians, or their affiliates, wanted to inter-weave their new faith into their children's names. Children were given biblical names, or named after European heroes, such as David Livingstone or John Kennedy. Old Nguni names were re-interpreted from the perspective of the new faith, or translated into their Christian equivalents, *Themba*, or *Sithembiso* became "Faith," or "Promise," respectively. The faith-based naming practice now acquired a new dimension, reflecting a profound psychological impact on the people as they struggled to adapt to their new environment. But such innovations and translations into European cultural forms sometimes had interesting results. It will be noticed that when African children are named after African heroes, they take the first name, for example, *Jomo* (for Jomo Kenyatta), *Kwame* (for Kwame Nkrumah), *Mangaliso* (for Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe), etc. But when children are named after foreign heroes, it is the surname that is usually adopted, thus

*Kennedy Mgomezulu* (for John Kennedy), or *Washington Nkosi* (for George Washington), or *Armstrong Dhlamini* (for Louis (or Neil) Armstrong), etc. This is presumably because the clan name (or surname) is perceived by African as more closely identified with the clan or group than with the individual's spirit and therefore as having less religious hold on it.

## Use of clan names in naming practice
The clan name, the name of the family unit, is used as the last name of all members of that unit (Koopman, 2002:23). Clan names, therefore, are perceived as religious and collective entities of social identity, and as more resistant to change by the individual member.

## Names as social commentary
While clan names may refer to collective and more historical experiences, first, or given, names comment on more temporary social issues and are thus more relevant in deciphering the social atmosphere at the time of the bearer's birth. Apart from indicating an individual's relationship with the physical and social environment names are also statements about religion and beliefs of the speakers and their relationship with the supernatural. Ritual, conducted during the naming ceremony, is not only a reflection of people's religious beliefs, but also brings the community together in solidarity.

It is the name that links the community; reveals the intricate relationships among members, relationships that are sometimes mentionable. A name also names the community's attitude towards the new member, and the in-house dynamics of the relationship between the father and the mother, and between them and the rest of the community. But perhaps the most dominant influence on the semantic component of the name comes from the prevailing religious atmosphere and its hold on the network of relationships. A name not only inspires the individual, it links the present to the departed by connecting their existence and relationships in the stories that the name tells, and ensures the presence of the older generation in the present one. Whenever people pronounce the name of the individual that was inherited from the past, they at the same time evoke the ancestral spirit of the one who once bore the name before the present time. Thus the name provides the medium of communication between the living and the departed, and between the natural and the supernatural. Therefore, naming of the child after the ancestors is not simply an act of commemoration, but also a moment of invocation, a way of making them present (Mphande, 2004). It is also here that the change in attitudes between the South African Nguni, such as the Zulu, and the Diaspora Nguni, such as the Ngoni of northern Malawi would be most manifest as attitudes tend to be psychological and are sometimes informed by religious beliefs. This is particularly true when we examine two areas of the Nguni belief systems: attitude towards the supernatural based on traditional Nguni belief system, and attitudes towards the supernatural based on Christianity ethics.

A name means more than the past because, through the process of naming, people are reformulating their culture with every birth, working with the language to re-

create new names from old stems. As we demonstrated earlier, names are chosen because of the desired semantic import inherent in their linguistic construction. Naming in most traditional Africa societies is not an arbitrary exercise but rather a practice that is well thought out in advance. Among the Nguni speakers in Southern Africa, for example, a name is still the bond of union between individuals, and the naming process is necessitated by the social role it performs by bringing the community together. Midwives are first to know about the birth of a child, and the grandmother is their first point of call. Thus, the grandparents are given the first opportunity to name the baby as a new member of the community, and they, in turn, can assign this honour to another relative or member of the family.

## Sanctification of naming
To sanctify the process, the name-giver is usually required to give a token, such as a chicken, to the parents of the newly born. If no token is given, the name given may be considered invalid by the grandparents, and may never be used. Sometimes one of the parents may be asked to give a name, and no token is then required, although it can still be given. But what really lies behind a name?

## Origin of names for children
Among the Yoruba, a child's name is taken from the *oriki*, a praise poem of the ancestor's deeds, worth, and place in history, and the *oriki* is the central key in the name ceremony of the Yoruba child. By extolling the deeds of the ancestors and accentuating their honour and celebrating their achievement, it reminds the next generation (who will bear the name) what societal values to emulate. A Yoruba proverb addresses parents, as name-givers, with this caution: 'consider the state of your life before you name a child' (Dinwiddie-Boyd 1990: 9; Newbell, 1975:19). Naming in Africa is a family affair, and names are a social matrix to clarify circumstances of birth, articulate clan connections and histories, describe inter-family relationships, intimate character attributes or character flaws, etc. Because they are social commentary, names can be changed to indicate contemporary socio-political situations – *Johnstone Kamau*, for example, changed his name to *Jomo Kenyatta*, to match the prevailing atmosphere of his political activism in Kenya. In fact *Jomo Kenyatta*, who took himself as a political messiah or liberator of his people, went a step further: he named his first born son as 'Peter,' with obvious biblical implications of 'On this rock I build my church!' Is the 'rock' referred to here the 'stone' in his European name, *Johnstone*?

The Akan people of Ghana name their children after the day of the week on which the person was born:
(11)
### Akan Naming System

| Day of the Week | Male Name | Female Name |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Sunday: | Kwesi/Akwasi | Akosua/Esi |
| Monday: | Kwadwo | Adwoa |
| Tuesday: | Kwabena | Abena |
| Wednesday: | Kwaku/Kweku | Akua/Kuukua |

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| Thursday: | Yaw | Yaa/Yaayaa |
| Friday: | Kofi/Fifi | Efua/Efia |
| Saturday: | Kwame | Ama |

However, the question arises: if the concept of 'days of the week' (in the sense of the Roman calendar) came with the European colonial project, what was the Akan way of measuring time and naming births before the coming of the British? But naming persons after calendar time is fairly widespread in Africa, and within the South Africa society, some groups in the Cape tended to name themselves after certain months of the year – hence: February (such as *Vernie February*), April, May, July (as in Nadine Gordimer's novel, *July's People*!), and September (such as the legendary ANC activist, *Reggie September*). Was this trend just an anecdotal seeking of identity in the disputed South African political discourse, or was it inherent in the colonial Khoisan, Malay, Bantu, or European cultures at the Cape Peninsula at the time of European penetration? Furthermore, there was also a trend at one time for the educated and Christianised Xhosa and Zulu elite to adopt biblical names, such as *Zakes Mathews, A.C Jordan*, (Peter Abrams?), etc., names that subsequently were adopted by their descendants as clan names (Mzamane, 2002, PC).

## Nguni/Ngoni names as forms of cultural expression

In Nguni societies, the name plays a central role in the forms of cultural expression, such as praise poetry, since praising is an important part of the peoples' political and literary expression. The genre of praise poetry called *izibongo* in Zulu (used in its plural form) is a political art form that refers to the form of poetic expression that defines and names an individual, and is characterised by bold imagery expressed in carefully selected language. This type of poetry 'applies to the personal set of praise names of individuals, comprising cumulative series of praises and epithets bestowed on them by their associates, from childhood onwards, interspersed with narrative passages or comments' (Mphande, 2004:71). These praises are composed and recited by professional bards, and often embody concise allusions to historical incidents and memorable achievements or characteristics connected with each family, and may amount to praise poems of considerable length and excellence. The major function of praise poetry is to conserve and transmit social consciousness, while simultaneously entertaining the audience.

## Contextualised social categories of meanings of names

Since the act of naming is the act of seeking meaning in the social environment, we are forced to go back to the original question: what exactly does an assigned name mean to the social group/family? What does it portend for the individual named or his/her future? Do names determine the future of the individual so named? Among the Nguni, women are the better informed about circumstances surrounding pregnancy and childbirth than the men, and are, therefore, the most strategically placed to impugn meaning to the child's name – i.e., was pregnancy welcomed or rejected by one of the spouses? Is the daughter in-law a welcome member of the husband's family? What is the social environment in the household in which the

child is born? Thus, the name, as vocabulary, has the most potent social meaning, and may indicate friction, harmony, or conflict at different levels of the family's social structure. Our study found that the most common traditional personal names among both the Zulu in South Africa and Ngoni in northern Malawi could be grouped according the following social categories:

(12)

**at the family level** – between husband and wife:

*Deliwe* (satisfied)

Zilani (abstain, be mournful)

*Xolela* (forgive)

*Velaphi* (where does the baby comes from?)

*Sunduzwayo* (pushed aside)

*Tholani* (fetch) find the child?)

*Delelani* (be satified)

*Mutholephi* (where did you

**within the family** - attitude toward children

*Mdhlalose* (the favourite)

*Vuso* (reviver of heritage)

*Yedwa* (the only child)

*Zanele* (it's enough children)

*Lindiwe* (the awaited one)

*Siphiwe* (gift, given)

*Mtwalo* (burden)

*Dhlange* (the unrestrained, tempestuous one)

c) **within the clan** – at village level

*Muziphansi* (many relatives dead)

*Mthakathi* (the witch)

*Phelile* (we are finished)

*Dabazakhe* (he who minds his own affairs)

*Bahleke* (let them laugh at us)

*Mzamo* (one who applies himself)

**wishes to the supernatural, interrogative**

*Lungile* (let it be right/righteous)

*Thembani* (trust in the ancestors)

*Mthembeni* (trust Him)

*Dumisani* (praise the ancestors)

*Bonangani* (How do you see?)

*Senzeni* (what have we done (wrong)?)

The names above reveal the social dynamics in Nguni society. The category of names indicating the inter-relationships between husband and wife, for example, usually refer to moments of happiness and sadness, harmony and disputes, hope and despair, connectedness and disjointedness, etc.

Tensions arising from issues of infidelity might be revealed in a name like *Velaphi* (where does the baby come from?), or *Mtholeni* (where did you find this child?). A resolved family conflict might be indicated in a name like *Xolela* (forgive), or *Delelani* (be satisfied). These social dynamics also affect the couple's attitude towards their children, and this will be indicated in the names they assign to the children. Names like *Lindiwe* (the awaited one), or *Mdhlalose* (the favourite), indicate that the parents are delighted with the child's birth, whereas *Mtwalo*

(burden) may mean that there was a difficult childbirth. Names like *Yedwa* (the only child) and *Dhlange* (the unrestrained, tempestuous one) may indicate a parent's anxiety for an only child or an uncontrollable one, while *Vuso* (reviver of heritage) may indicate the family's hope for the future of the clan, and so on. Names like *Muziphansi* (many relatives dead), *Mthakathi* (the witch), and *Balekile* (they have run away, deserted us) may refer to a higher social structure, such as a village or clan, and may be a clan's way of coping with a tragedy or catastrophe. At a more abstract level, names like *Themba* (trust, i.e., trust the ancestors to protect the child) and *Senzeni* (what have we done (wrong)?) indicate a people's relationship with the supernatural, which may also be another way of dealing with contemporary problems. Names can be switched from one category to another, depending on the prevailing social environment, and other social categories can be added to the list above.

## Similarities and omissions among Ngoni and Zulu names

We did not observe any significant differences between northern Malawi Ngoni and Zulu in the construction and semantic import of traditional, non-compounded Nguni names. By compounded names we mean names formed from two or more words, such as /themba + inkosi/ □ *Thembinkosi*, etc. Most of the traditional Nguni names are mutual to both communities, but there were a few surprises in the corpus of names we collected. One of them was the fact that neither the name *Jabulani* (be happy, celebrate), nor its variations, so popular in Zulu population in South Africa, was recorded among the Ngoni of northern Malawi. Such a name was thus not commonly found from the data collected. The other surprise was that among the Malawi Ngoni gender differentiation is not indicated through the pre-fixing of the /**no**-/ affix to the name stem, as is the case in Zulu culture – *Mzamo* versus *Nomzamo*. Are these differences, although minor, the result of language contact and change, or simply non-linguistic cultural assimilation? The situation in Malawi (for all Ngoni groups) is compounded by the fact that there is no acceptable orthography for the Ngoni language, and there is a dearth of published materials except for the *Ngoni Hymn Book* and the Zulu texts imported from South Africa during the colonial period. Among the Zulu population we observed that that the *hlonipha* culture of respect through avoidance, was one of the most important agencies of changes in the naming practice. This avoidance had led to the use or creation of new names instead of the existing ones, and this is eventually accepted and codified in the general language. This has also made women exert a great influence on the language. For example, the name *Mbongeni*, shares the stem with the word *imbongi* (praise singer). The praise poet in Zululand is now sometimes called *isinyosi* (the bumblebee)! But the most profound impact on the naming practice among the Zulu has come from Christianity. In accordance with the *hlonipha* culture of avoidance, the current king's name is *Zwelithini*, which means 'what is the world saying?' It is a well-known fact that there was nearly a full blown war between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in KwaZulu-Natal in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the king is the unifying factor in such a conflict. (Lubisi, 2002:124).

## Overall trends in naming practice

We observed three new trends in the naming practice emanating from Christian influence: re-assignment of Nguni names with Christian meaning, translation of Nguni names into European languages (particularly English), and English names with overt Christian connotations, as examples in (**13**) show. In the majority of cases we observed that the name /nkosi/ with the Christian meaning of the Lord or Jesus Christ has been added to the traditional Zulu name to form a compound name with obvious Christian connotations:

(**13**)

| Re-assigned Christian meaning | Translation into English into English Zulu | English/Christian names English |
|---|---|---|
| | Angel | |
| Themba □ *Thembinkosi* | Nhlanhla (male) Charity | *Fortune/Lucky* |
| (trust in the Lord) | | |
| *Mthembeni* | Sithembiso Sweetness | *Promise* |
| (Have confidence in Him) | | |
| Bonga □ *Bonginkosi* | Sipho Talent | *Gift* |
| (thank the Lord) | | |
| *Bekinkosi* | Nhlanhla Reminder | *Fortunate* (female) |
| (Look up to the Lord/God) | | |
| *Nkosinathi* (God is with us) | Fakazi Precious | *Witness* |
| *Sinenkosi* | Themba Goodness | *Trust* |
| (we are with God) | | |
| *Musawenkosi* | Nothemba Fairhope | *Faith* |
| (God's mercy) | | |
| *Nkosingiphile* | Nhlanzekile Confidence | *Purity* |
| (God has given me) | | |
| *Velankosi* | Sibusiso | *Blessing* |
| (it has come from God) | | |
| *Hlengiwe* | Nomsa | *Grace* |
| (the saved one) | | |
| *Mukhululi* | | |
| (the deliverer) | | |

Note that we did not include European names like Martha, Leah, James, Jacob, John, etc., which are also biblical, but which might have been adopted from some European heroes or ancestors.

The examples above show that the Zulu have been more experimental in their naming practice than northern Malawi Ngoni, particularly in incorporating Christian practice derived from their European contact. Perhaps this is not surprising because the South African Nguni, not having left their base, were confident enough to experiment with new cultural formulations without feeling the threat of losing their cultural identity. They had nothing to lose, and therefore culture did not impose the same 'laager' mentality as it did for those Diaspora Nguni in foreign and hostile lands. On the other hand, the Ngoni had spent almost a century wandering around the subcontinent, foraging for an existence in foreign territories, far away from their original homeland, with no specific base. Despite their military prowess, their culture was the only thing that saved them from certain extinction, and assured them of continued existence and identity in a sea of 'strangers.' Indeed, there must have been occasions when they felt threatened with cultural domination (if not outright expulsion) by the local populations. Therefore, as expected, Diaspora groups like the northern Malawi Ngoni were very reluctant to stray too far from their cultural path, forcing the Tumbuka, instead, to adapt to their Ngoni ways, helped greatly by their Scottish missionaries and Lovedale allies. In other words, the Ngoni became very conservative in interpreting their Nguni culture, and very reluctant to abandon their cultural forms in exchange of untested new formulations, such as *Thembinkosi*, *Fortunate*, or *Angel*. This resistance to radical cultural change is most evident in their naming practice, which looks rigid and archaic when compared to that of the Zulu.

Thus, although the manipulation of the linguistic and social materials to derive names is very similar between the Zulu and the Ngoni, the Ngoni have been resistant to adopting the Zulu type of 'modernization' and innovations in assigning Christian meaning in their naming practice, translating traditional Nguni names into their English equivalents, or adopting Christian/English names like *Angel*, as shown in (13). Instead, the northern Malawi Ngoni have tended to stick to the 'old ways' in the naming game, making their names resonate a lingering pre-Christian psychology, as can be seen from the following forms:

(14)

**Place names**

| | |
|---|---|
| Baloyi (witches/wizards) | Egucwini (place of sinners) |
| Hlambayawo (their obscenity/vulgarity) | Ekwendeni (place of in-laws) |
| Hlazo (disgrace) | Emanyaleni (a place of shameful, immoral behaviour) |
| Mphangela (large beer pot) | Emtshakatshakeni (ejected village) |
| Mzikubola (the rotten village) | Emloyeni (bewitched place) |
| Ndindase (made to lead a morally loose life) | Esigodhleni (sacred place, reserved part of the royal household) |
| Muthakathi (he/she practices witchcraft) | Enukweni (a place of sloven, dirty people) |
| Bagangile (they have been mischievous) | Eswazini (a place of misfortune) |
| Mlonyeni (the talked about one) | Ehehleni (ruins, a crumbled place) |
| Vunde (the rotten one) | Eyangeni (a place of shame and agitation) |

Thus, even place names betray the same linger of a pre-Christian psyche as do the personal names.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate that northern Malawi Ngoni and Zulu similarly manipulate the Nguni base stem to create names with the same semantic import, share similar rhetorical strategies in verbal exposition, particularly in the use of a specific morphological stem with a base semantic import around which to construct variations of lexicons with which to define individuals. But the two cultures differ in the way they have strived to integrate change in their naming systems arising from their contact with Christianity and European cultures. The Zulu used their new Christian faith to introduce innovations in naming styles and interpretation of meaning of names. On the other hand, to survive in a hostile world and create a meaningful existence, the northern Malawi Ngoni relied on familiar traditions and practices, and the naming system played a major role in the process. In other words, the Diaspora Nguni strived to retain the old names while at the same time creating new ones using the traditional Nguni styles, vocabulary, and idioms; and re-interpreted them according to the new social demands. Therefore, old Nguni exists in contemporary Ngoni culture as conceptual approaches – unique ways of doing things and making things happen – rather than as specific cultural elements.

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