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Basotho Naming Systems and Practices: A Sociolinguistic-Onomastics Approach

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Naming is an important act because a name is a marker of identity. Therefore, naming systems and practices in African societies are driven by different socio-cultural factors. For this reason, language and culture influence the choice of names given to children. Naming system among Basotho follows certain processes which reflect their belief systems and cultural heritage among other things. Thus, through names, Basotho portray certain meanings and experiences. This study explores Basotho naming systems, practices and the meanings attached to the names they give. Sociolinguistic onomastics approach is used to explore the meanings of Basotho names. This is a qualitative study, premised on sociolinguistic-onomastics approach aiming to examine Basotho naming systems and practices. Data was collected purposely from national examination results and telephone directories from Lesotho. The findings of the study suggest that Basotho names have the following features: names that describe physical features of the child, politically connected names, names reflecting birth circumstances, and Sothoised Western names.

Introduction

African societies have similar processes and practices in their naming systems which are influenced by different socio-cultural factors as a marker of identity. As such, language and culture have a great influence on name giving. Naming system among Basotho follows certain processes which reflect their belief systems and cultural heritage among other things. It is important to note that among Basotho, like in most African societies, name giving is a carefully selected activity. Basotho believe that '*Lebitso lebe ke seromo'*, translated 'a bad name is ominous. According to Leshota and Sefotho (2020, p.4) "what this proverb reveals about the African world view in general and that of the Basotho in particular is that a name is more than just a societal identifier". Likewise, Afam Ebeogu (1993, p.133) observes that "in the traditional Igbo society, the choice of a name for a child, a prospective title initiate, a new bride etc., is a very careful exercise which may indeed require some deviation!". This is supported by an Igbo proverb *AEji aha abagbu mmadu*: one's fate can be ruined by the kind of name given to the person at birth.

The current exercise seems justified as it is envisaged that through this study, the analysis of Basotho names will gain insight into cultural dynamics surrounding their naming system. The focus of this discussion is on the general understanding of Basotho naming systems, practices and the meanings attached to these names. In what follows, naming among Basotho will be discussed.

Naming Among Basotho

Children in many African societies have meaningful names. Although their study was on sociocultural aspects of dog names, as spelt out by Babane and Chauke (2017) "…names are loaded with meaning" (p.59). This is because name-giving in African culture reflects the sociocultural circumstances of each ethnic group (Chauke, 2005). However, it is important to comment

that names are not static- but evolve over time, often losing their referential meanings and becoming more label like. Naming practices and names have changed drastically due to different external forces both on language and language development. Herbert (1997) is concerned that there has been changes in both traditional names and naming practices under the impact of the many significant changes in social organizations and the culture of everyday life. Naming systems also change with societal transformations as people move from rural to urban environments and their social framework is transformed. Herbert (1997, p. 4) further stipulates that "cultural values are, of course, not static. They respond to internal and external pressure over time. Traditional values may be modified or replaced by new one." The changes in the Basotho naming system and customs have been affected by factors such as education, Christianity and changes in family structures, which among others have led to several households with single mothers. It should come to the reader's attention that this study is not interested in unpacking the changes in the naming system, however, this phenomenon will be explained later in the analysis of names. In naming their children, Basotho portray different experiences, expectations, realities, circumstances at the time of birth as well as culture, norms and values. Herbert (1995) observes that in Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana and many other cultures, name givers traditionally chose personal names that pointed at a range of people and circumstances that were relevant to the time of the child's birth. This practice still holds even today as it will be revealed in the analysis sector. Mohome (1972) indicates that the naming system among Basotho reflects their fears and hopes which are usually reflected in their social forms and language. Thus Mohome (1972, p.171) further explains that they "attach great significance to the meaning of names". This study therefore aims to explore the meanings attached to the names among Basotho by evaluating their naming systems and practices.

Another important aspect worth mentioning is that Basotho name children after people with good behaviour or high social standing. Ntsane (1987) explains that the rationale behind this practice is to avoid naming a child after someone who is always in trouble in case the child acquires the behaviour. It is important therefore to name the child after someone who is well regarded in the society. Furthermore, Basotho naming tradition makes it common knowledge that certain names are given to children born under certain circumstances and conditions. These include birth circumstances such as situations where the family is hoping for peace and harmony in through the birth of the child. On one hand, Chapole (2006) explains that name *Khotso* (peace), is given to a child with and expectation that he will bring peace in the family. On the other hand, he further explains that the name *Thabo* (happiness) is bestowed on the boy child with an expectation that "he will be the embodiment of happiness within the family" (Chapole, 2006, p.9). Another marker of name giving is guided by situations such as a child conceived out of wedlock. Lesitsi (1990) echoes the same sentiments by indicating that there is a difference between the names of children born out of wedlock and those whose mothers cheated on their husband. As mentioned earlier, changes in Basotho naming system have seen a drastic decline in the names of this nature. Zulu and Makoae (2017) perceive that a number of single parents has increased as "there is a feeling that it is becoming a norm to have "fatherless children" (p.31). Having discussed the basis of the naming system among Basotho, I will discuss the theoretical framework guiding this study in the following section.

Theoretical Framework

This study is framed within sociolinguistic-onomastics framework. Sociolinguistics is a field that studies the use of language in context. Sociolinguistics is defined by Hudson (1996) as the study of language in relation to society. Onomastics is the study of proper names. Cuddon (2012) defines onomastics as the study of names and naming practices, looking particularly at the patterns and principles employed in selecting the names. It focuses on the origin of names, how they are used, and the meanings attached to them. In applying this principle, the focus of this study is on the naming systems and practices among Basotho as well as the meanings attached to the names they give. A combination of sociolinguistics and onomastics is deemed relevant for this study as it is interested in exploring the names (onomastics) and the cultural circumstances (sociolinguistics) surrounding those names. Thus, sociolinguistic onomastics is a combination of two frameworks within language analysis and names, namely sociolinguistics and onomastics. The following section will discuss and justify the methodology employed in this study.

Methodology

The current study is grounded within qualitative framework. It is an exploratory study on Basotho naming system, their philosophical base, cultural practices and beliefs involved in name giving. Mokala (2020, p.79) justifies that qualitative inquiry is deemed necessary for the current study as the focus is to "describe, understand and interpret" the meanings attached to the names given to people in Sesotho. The study employs document analysis technique to collect data. The use of document analysis is considered relevant for this paper as the names were collected from telephone directories and national examinations results in Lesotho. The rationale behind this collection and analysis was to interpret the meanings attached to

the names to gain understanding of Basotho naming system. From Corbin and Strauss's (2008) view, I was further interested in developing empirical knowledge from the names analysed. The reason for evaluating these documents was to understand their content and "illuminate deeper meanings which could be revealed by their style and coverage" (de Vos et al, 2011, p.377). It should be noted that these documents were not initially intended to be reviewed for research. However, I used them as my research tool as they have a collection of names, which is my area of interest for this paper. These names could not be studied through other methods such as observations or interviewing, thus, this method is deemed more relevant for this research. One of the advantages of using these documents is that I found them easily accessible and non-biased as all the activities I took in this research did not affect them in anyway. Furthermore, I did not have to contact anyone to have access to them as de Vos et al (2011, p. 382) concur that "one of the basic advantages of document study is the fact that it is the only method in which the researcher does not need to make personal contact with the respondents." Having deliberated and justified research methodology, in what follows, I focus on related studies on names, their relevance to the current study and how this paper fills the gap identified.

Literature Review and Related Studies

Several studies have been conducted on names from different fields ranging from sociology, anthropology, sociolinguistics and linguistics. In the subsequent section, I will briefly discuss previous studies and identify the gap the current study intends to fill.

Possa and Khotso (2015) conducted a study on naming of Basotho medicinal plants, looking at the semantic connection to their remedies. In this study, the focus was on the meaning of medicinal plants from the onomastic point of view. The researchers define the names of medicinal plants of Basotho as those plants which are used for healing purposes to cure certain diseases (Possa and Khotso, 2015). The study is relevant in the current context as it focused on what the medicinal plants mean, looking at the cultural insights and meaning names attached to these medicinal plants. Like the current paper, the study employed sociolinguistic- onomastic view. This theoretical base is used in the present study to understand the history, culture and philosophy of Basotho in names given to children at birth. Possa and Khotso (2015) however used this theoretical base to unravel the same issues but focusing on Basotho medicinal plants. Nonetheless, the paper did not address issues of proper names given to people. It is against this backdrop that the current paper aims to fill this gap. The conclusions drawn from this paper indicate that "the naming of Basotho medicinal plants is semantically connected to the remedy they are believed to prevent" (Possa & Khotso, 2015, p.137).

In his paper entitled "Grief naming amongst Tsonga: An onomastic approach", Babane (2017) investigated the socio-linguistic practices regarding grief naming amongst Vaxhonga. In the study, the researcher observed that "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-giver" (Babane, 2017, p. 47). The study revealed that grief names are given to children with the purpose of sending messages such as grieving the loss of a loved one, to demonstrate anger, frustration or sorrow by the parents or the experience a family went through such as several deaths of infants "leaving them sad and shocked" (p. 51). The study further exposed that grief names have a deep-rooted meaning to both the name-giver and the name-bearer. Thus, the study concluded that naming practices of grief names helps the family to find closure through the name given to a child (Babane, 2017). The study is relevant for this paper as like the current study, it employed sociolinguistic-onomastics theoretical framework in analysing grief names in Xitsonga. The researcher used a qualitative research approach; however, data was generated through observations and interviews while the current study employed document analysis in generating data. The current study therefore aims to fill the gap that the study on grief names has left as it focused on Xitsonga names while this study focuses on naming systems and processes in Sesotho.

Herbert (1994) carried out a study entitled "The sociolinguistics of personal names: two South African case study." The focus of the study was on the relationship between personal naming and sociocultural processes. The researcher conducted a comparative study to identify differences in the acts of naming between Northern Sotho, Tswana and a Tsonga community. The study further investigated the relationship between name types and name givers as well as between ethnic identity and language. It was a cross-cultural study which looked at the naming practices in different African language groups in Southern Africa. The findings of the study suggested that girls are more likely to bear emotion-related names than boys. "Boys on the other hand, are more likely recipients of names commemorating family members or acknowledging roles within the family" (Herbert, 1994, p.3). On one hand, the study is relevant to the current study as it made an analysis of personal names from a sociolinguistics point of view. On the other hand, it differs from the current study since in this study I am looking at Basotho personal names from a sociolinguistic-onomastics point of view. Herbert's study also differs from the current research as it is

a comparative study from different African languages, whereas the focus of the current study is on one ethnic group: Basotho. The section below will deliberate the analysis of the naming systems and practices among Basotho.

Discussions and Analysis

Naming systems and processes amongst Basotho

Names reflecting Western culture and Christianity

Name	Meaning
Mmasontaha	Born on a Sunday
Mmakerasemese	Born on Christmas day
Mmanwebejara	Born on New Year's Day
Mmapaseka	Born during Easter holidays

Names that fall under this category could be said to be those names that denote Western doctrines and philosophical belief systems. Babane (2017) concurs that these are the names referring to traditional religious holidays within the Western traditions. A child is given this name based on the time or day on which he was born. This includes names given to children born on a Sunday, on Christmas day, new year or Easter holidays to name a few. Herbert (1997) maintains that Christian names were never fully integrated within African societies since they lack meaning which is one of the essential criteria on naming in African societies. "European names are just arbitrary labels- they actually have no meaning at all' (Herbert, 1997, p.6). In responding to this dilemma, Basotho have resorted to giving their children two names, one a family name, and the other a Christian name. Recently Basotho have also come to see Christian names as enslaving, especially English names in this regard. Thus, they have changed by giving their children two Sesotho names. Herbert (1997, p.5) questions this practice "…many parents, though they eschew European names, still bestow two personal names upon their offspring- both African and one designated by the parents as a 'school name". This means that as much as they reject the notion of Christian names, the practice is still hanging in them giving two names to their children. Herbert (1997, p. 6) further strengthens this argument "… colonial names are rejected, but a pattern introduced by contact (first name + middle name + surname) persists." It is not the interest of this paper to dwell on this topic, it is brought forward as an example of some of the patterns and systems Basotho employ in naming their children. In his study, Babane (2017) observes the same trend and explains that there has been a shift in Xitsonga culture as people resort to using Christian names instead of Xitsonga grief names. Babane (2017, p.47) notes that "this is one of the Western encroachments into Xitsonga culture, which cannot be avoided" (p.47). In the next subsection I present *Sothoised* names.

Sothoised names

Name	English name
Majoro	Major
Tjotje	George
Josefa	Joseph
Paulose	Paul
Benetiki	Benedict

Names that fall under this category are the foreign names whose pronunciation and orthography have been adjusted to suit that one of Sesotho native speakers. *Sothoised* names can therefore be defined as those names which are foreign to Basotho because they have been borrowed from other languages such as French, English or Afrikaans. Their pronunciation and orthography have been adjusted to suit those of the local speakers. Maimane and Mathonsi (2017) conducted a study on *Sothoised* names in which they evaluated different processes that have been employed in changing them. In the study, the researchers noted that in changing the pronunciation and orthography of these names to fit the target language, linguistic discrepancies occur. It is not the focus of this study however to go into details of how the sounds have changed. Maimane and Mathonsi (2017) further posit that when the speakers experience problems in pronouncing the names, monolingual Sesotho native speakers in this instance apply consonant harmony rules among others, for them to be able to pronounce the

names. These names, therefore, are still in their original form, without any meaning to Basotho, just that they have been adjusted for pronunciation and writing purposes. Modern names will be explained in the following section.

Modern names

Name	Meaning
Bohlokwa	Important
Oratile	He has loved/ his will
Omphile	He has given
Tlhonolofatso	Blessed/ Blessing
Letlotlo	Treasure

The names that fall under this category could be classified as contemporary as they are those names which have been selected by the parents with an influence from their educational backgrounds, especially the mother. Letsoela (2015) is of the opinion that often than not, Basotho allocate name giving to the elders. At times parents feel that the name given to their child is not favourable to them and they decide to give a different one. It is important to take into consideration that in situations where the parents are not happy with the name given to their children, they may resort to giving their child a second name, which may end up being the name the child goes by. It is worth mentioning that names that fall in this category are associated with God. In his analysis on the politics of personal names in South Africa, Herbert (1997) points out that although this kind of names may not be explicitly referring to God, name givers usually mention God in their explanation of why they chose a certain name. "These names relate to state (emotional and religious) rather than events surrounding the time of birth," (Herbert, 1997, p. 8). I will present names marking different events and circumstances in the next section.

Names marking events and circumstances

Names categorised here include among others those given to children born out of wedlock, names denoting different experiences such as death in the family, or those born after several miscarriages to name a few. In what follows, these names will be discussed in detail.

Names given to children born out of wedlock

Name	Meaning
Moramang	Whose son
Molahluwa	The deserted
Mohanuwa	The denied
Nkganuwa	I am denied
Ditaba	News
Nkgopoleng	Remember me

These names are usually given to children whose mothers are not married, and the family is angry and frustrated of their birth. Mokhathi- Mbhele (2016) observes that such names reveal hatred with other people, regardless of whether they are related or not. "The awarder displays anger with other relatives and counters in relation to the baby's birth" (Mokhathi-Mbhele, 2016, p. 126). Worth noting is that these names do not only reflect resentment, anger and frustration to the child, they are also an indication of the mother's behaviour who had a child out of wedlock. In explaining the meaning of *Moramang* (whose son), Mokhathi-Mbhele (2016) maintains that this name would be an initiating information. "This sensitive issue reflects a pain that can destroy the life of the 'victim speaker' and even cause psychological breakdown if coercion is used to disclose its contents. The expression may, at times be uttered with a stern face, rough tone, a shaky screechy voice and even be accompanied and completed by tears" (Mokhathi-Mbhele, 2020, p. 97). It is important to note that Basotho take marriage as a great achievement and a sense of respect. For this reason, a woman who falls pregnant and have a child out of wedlock is frowned upon. This claim is confirmed by Mokhathi-Mbhele (2016) who further notes that the name giver expresses bitter feeling towards the mother by giving the negative name to the child. "The name remains a permanently inscribed message to the parent, family and everyone who comes across this name. It is a permanent marker of the awarder's feelings about matters around this birth" (p.29).

- Another important point worth mentioning is that there have been significant changes in the family structure. The conventional man headed family structures have seen a change with the rise of divorce rates, a rise in several unmarried women among African societies and high death rates. This has resulted in a rise of single parent households. For this reason, there has been a change in attitudes towards children born out of wedlock. Unlike before when children were given names that reflect anger and resentment, children are now given names that reflect positive attitude since they are even considered as a gift from God. Chauke (2005) in Babane (2017) agree that "naming practices have changed rapidly. It is predicted that traditional name giving will continue to decrease" (p.47). The illustrations of these names have been discussed under the category of modern names.

Names denoting different experiences

Name	Meaning
Tsietsi	Tragedy
Matlakala	Rubbish
Bothata	Problem
Tlala	Hunger

The names that fall in this category are given to children born during hard times such as famine, war or tragedy of any sort. Olatunji, Issah, Noah, Muhammed and Sulaiman (2015) agree with this view that sometimes a criterion for giving a name in many African societies is the circumstances under which a child was born. Their birth therefore will be a constant reminder of the events. These names are usually allocated to those children who were born at a time when certain critical events affected either the child, the family or the society at large. The rationale behind giving this name could be that naming a child after a historic event may serve as a psychological and social reminder of the event for those who affected by it.

Names given when there is death in the family

Name	Meaning
Tahleho	Loss
Lefu (boy) *Mmalefu* (girl)	Death (mother of death)
Matshediso	Condolences
Retshedisitswe	We are comforted
Motshedisi	The comforter

It is worthy to explain that names that fall under this category are given to children who are born during the time the family is experiencing death, loss or any kind of tragedy, either at the time of birth or when the woman was pregnant. Babane (2017) concurs that during pregnancy or at birth a lot can happen and can be used to name a child "like things such as death to one of the family members or a relative" (p.49).

Names given to children born after several miscarriages

Name	Meaning
Ntja	Dog
Manyala	Shit
Matlakala	Rubbish
Nthofeela	Thing
Mohatla/ Mosele	Tail

Some names may be given to a child following several miscarriages or still born babies. Olatunji et al (2015) say that "it is important to note that, the reason why these names are common in African societies is because it is a great general belief infant mortality is caused by spiritual factors, not medical factors" (p.84). In such instances, Basotho give a child an undesired name like *Nthofeela, Ntja, Manyala, Matlakala* or *Mohatla.* These names depict the message that "with this name, the parents are grieving, saying that even this child will be buried like the others before them" (Babane, 2017, p. 50). Worth

noting is that the message here is not to give up or expect the child to die like the ones that came before him, but to be sarcastic as the "parents are very angry and frustrated because of the many previous deaths of their children" (Babane, 2017, p.50). Having explained names relating to different events and circumstances, I will elaborate on names marking political events in the subsequent section.

Political events

Name	Meaning
Boipuso	Independence
Puso	Governance
Sephetho	Election results
Tokoloho	Freedom
Dikgetho	Elections

Herbert (1997) defines a political name as "any name referring or alluding to political events, orientations and personalities" (p.10-11). It should be explained that names allocated from this view are usually associated with political events such as when a country gained independence, when the results of elections are announced or when the country goes for elections among other things. In their study on changes in Northern Sotho and personal Tswana naming patterns, Herbert and Bogatsu (1990) note that boys bear political names than girls. Their study further revealed that girls are likely to bear emotionally related names while boys' names tend to reflect events and ideas commemorating a family member. However, it is not the interest of this study to evaluate which sex is allocated what kind of names. Herbert (1997) however cautions that some names may look political but may have a different meaning depending on the intention of the name giver. For example, the name *Tokoloho* (freedom) may refer to "freedom from accusations of my in-laws" release me from a difficult birth, a desire that the child will provide the mother with independence from her in-laws, and the like" (p.11). Names that describe the physical characteristics of the child are discussed below.

Names that describe the physical characteristics of the child

Name	Meaning
Mahlo	Eyes
Setona	Denoting big eyes
Molelle	The tall one
Tshehla	Light complexion
Tshwana/ Setshwana	The dark one

At times name givers are driven by the physical features of a child in allocating a name. This usually happens in cases where the physical features are extra-ordinary, like a child having big eyes, ears, the dark or light complexion to name but a few. In his study on an exploration of prerequisite Shona naming factors, Makondo (2010) observes the same trend in the Shona community "the size of a child at birth was noted when personal names were given" (p. 164). Having discussed and explained different naming systems and practices among Basotho, the next section draws conclusions and recommendations based on the finding of this paper.

Conclusion
The aim of this study was to examine Basotho naming systems and practices. Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that names are an important aspect in every nation, and they warrant further attention by linguists. The analysis of Basotho naming system is deemed important for one to understand their cultural practices and reality. From the foregoing arguments, further research on practices and processes underlying name giving system is recommended. It is worth noting that it was necessary to unpack the understanding of cultural meanings attached to Basotho names as they help in understanding the cultural dynamics that influence contemporary Basotho nation. This study therefore recommends that Basotho names, both old and contemporary, should be preserved as they are a true reflection of the cultural dynamics, experiences and a sound component of Basotho cultural heritage. The results also provide basis for further research on the naming systems in African societies and how changes in family structures have impacted on the changes in naming systems.

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