

# Research Report

## Proverbial Names of the Baganda

African personal names traditionally serve several purposes: they may associate one with an occupation; they may identify one as associated with a particular group or clan; they may identify one with a particular locality or they may commemorate events or circumstances at the time of one's birth. They may also reflect the opinions of the name givers towards others.

These functions as well as others are found in the naming patterns of the Baganda, who live along the northern shores of Lake Victoria and in parts of Uganda. I will consider here Baganda names which are derived from or related to proverbs. Although proverbs provide the sources for many African names, they have received little serious study. There are a number of valuable sources which examine the *engero ensonge* 'proverbs' of the Baganda (e.g., Duta 1911; Nason 1936; Nsimbi 1956; 1948; Ssaalongo 1952; Ssekamwa 1995; Walser 1983), but there is presently nothing which focuses on the relationship of proverbs to personal names. Names that the Baganda give their children offer excellent examples of the potential wealth of this field.

*Mafumu* (m) 'spears' is a name which is related to the proverb "Amafumu ogabuulira eyali alwaanyenago" 'You can only reasonably talk about spears with a man who has fought with them', which is advising one to seek and respect the advice of the experienced and the elders, or to talk to people about subjects they understand. *Mukwaano* (f) 'friendship, love' is associated with the proverb "Omukwaano butiko—tebukkatirwa" 'Friendships are like mushrooms—they cannot be properly plucked out of the ground while applying force'. The names *Mugezi* (m) 'the intelligent one, the wise one' and *Awubwa* (m) 'the one that can be confounded or led astray' are related to "N'omugezi awubwa; amatu tigawulira vumbe" 'Even the very intelligent one can fail, for even the ears cannot sense smell'.

A number of names derived from Baganda proverbs are pessimistic. The names *Ziraba* (m) 'they come upon; they afflict', *Muzaale* (m) 'the one given birth to' and (as combined) *Zirabamuzaale* (m) are most often

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given to newborns who are alarmingly sick or weak, or those born during periods of pestilence or other catastrophes. They stem from the proverb “Ennaku ziraba muzaale” ‘Trials and tribulations will come upon the one that is given birth to’. The name *Nnaku* (m/f) ‘days (of sorrow or misfortune)’ is also frequently associated with this proverb. A child with a noticeable defect, one whose appearance is not aesthetically pleasing or whose behavior is annoying may be named *Nzalambi* (m) ‘bad offspring’, a name rooted in the proverb “Nzalambi ekira obugumba” ‘Bad offspring are preferable to barrenness’.

That the bearing and rearing of children can involve pain and sacrifice and children may represent a potential loss to their communities is reflected in the proverb “Ebifa abato, tebiba bitono” ‘That which dies at the hands of children is never small’. The names *Ebifa* (m/f) ‘that which dies’ and *Bato* (m/f) ‘children, the young’ are associated with it.

Children can be seen to be remarkable opposites of their parents and this possibility is found in the names *Bakidambya* (m) and *Kitagenda* (m). *Bakidambya* ‘the slovenly and despised woman’ might be given to a boy of splendid mannerisms and pleasing appearance. The name comes from the proverb “Bakidambya kye kizaala eddenzi” ‘It is the unsightly and despised woman that gives birth to a splendid boy (or heir)’. *Kitagenda* ‘the one who never leaves’ originates in the proverb “Kitagenda azaala bagenzi” ‘The one who never goes away gives birth to emigrants’.

One who recently became impoverished may send a message to neighbors and former, now departed, “friends” through naming a newly born son *Guweddeko* (m) ‘the one that has been stripped of; the one that has run out of’, which is associated with the saying “Oguweddeko entontogolo, ennyonyi ziguyita ttale” ‘After a tree loses its fruit, the birds shun it’. The name *Basiima* (f) ‘they are grateful’ has the same connotations as *Guweddeko* and comes from the proverb “Basiima bakyagaaya” ‘They display gratitude only while they are still munching at (your) food’.

*Ssebatindira* (m) and *Batindira* (m/f) ‘they erect a surrounding framework of trellis protection’ derive from the proverb “Ssebatindira kibaze” ‘People erect a surrounding framework of trellis protection

around only the tree that has ripened with fruit', implying that the namer is wealthy and is now flooded with "friends" who were nonexistent when the namer was poor.

Those harboring a more negative outlook on friends, neighbors, or even kin whom they may suspect of plotting against them may name their child *Baisi* (m) 'they are killers' from the expression "Tulya na baisi" 'We eat with killers' to display recognition and disapproval of the insincerity. On the other hand, the names *Bayita* (f) 'they pass through', *Babiri* (f) 'two people', and *Bejjukanya* (f) 'they remind one other' contain a message which values and fosters a spirit of cooperation and togetherness. These names come from the proverb "Abayita ababiri, bejjukanya" 'Those who travel together remind each other'. This is equivalent to the English proverb "two heads are better than one." (The Ugandan placename Abayita-ababiri is derived from this proverb as well.)

*Nsimbi* (m) 'money, penny' contains a message of furthering sacrifice and tolerance for those close to you, especially kin, and comes from the proverb "Nsimbi emu tennyombya, nga ow'oluganda yagitutte" 'One cent does not make me rave, just as long as the one who has taken it is a relation of mine'. *Luganda* 'language of the Baganda' is also a male name associated with this proverb and in this context means 'kinship relation'. The name *Kiyini* (m) 'hoe handle' is intended to encourage the slothful to achieve and to take pride in their work; at the same time it admonishes others to be more accepting of those who are despised or have bad reputations. The name comes from the proverb "Kiyini kibi, kijjukirwa malima" 'A bad hoe handle is remembered when the cultivation season arrives'.

The names *Gamyuka* (m) 'the eyes that redden', *Kasolo* (m) 'small animal' and *Mutezi* (m/f) 'trapper' all derive in part from the proverb "Agamyuka omutezi, ge gamyuka n'akasolo" 'The eyes of the trapper are just as subject to getting bloodshot as a result of tedium or fright as are those of the small animal being pursued', which suggests that people, and indeed all creatures, react similarly.

*Ganaafa* (m) 'the bananas that will die' and *Ssubi* (m) 'grass' relate to "Aganaafa nago gasalirwa essubi" 'Even the bananas that will not become banana beer are still catered to, starting with the harvesting of

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grass [to squeeze out their juice for brewing]'. *Baazibumbira* (m/f) 'they molded the pots for' is commonly given by optimistic and caring (or, alternatively, pessimistic) parents to an alarmingly sick infant or an infant whose siblings had died when they were very young. It is from "Baazibumbira kwaatika, ne ziramira mu kyokero" 'They molded them to crack, but it is (ironically) in the fiery furnace that the pots resiliently survive'.

The names *Lugo* (m) 'a leopard of pitiful appearance', *Lugoolugenyi* (m) 'a leopard of pitiful appearance prowling in new territory', *Mbwa* (m) 'dog' and *Ssebuwufu* (m) (from *buwufu* 'tracks') are associated with war, raiding, power, respect, royalty or majesty. These are from the related proverbs "Olugoolugenyi terumanya mbuzi mponge" 'The miserably hungry leopard prowling in new territory would neither know nor respect which goat is destined for sacrifice' and "Ssebuwufu bwa ngo tebuyitibwaamu mbwa" 'The pawprints of a leopard are dare not trodden in by a dog'.

The proverb "Omugenyi omuyite ajja avunja" 'A guest that was invited arrives with spontaneous ease, approaching noisily and uninhibited' provides a source from which the name *Mugenyi* (m) 'visitor' is partly derived. *Ssajjabi* (m) 'bad man' and *Ngabo* (m) 'shield' generally relate to the proverb "Ssajjabi liwoomera mu ngabo" 'A man of ill repute (or one of despicable or fierce appearance) looks so splendid when he is fighting hard with shield in hand'. This adage can relate to war, to the work ethic, or to reputation.

The proverb "Awujja obulamu tassa mukono" 'The one fanning (himself) with life does not lay his hand down' implies that the one who cherishes life is concerned with one's social and physical wellbeing, does exciting things and takes good care of his body. The proverb also implies that personal behavior in which one is involved passionately is evidence of one's enjoying life. The names *Wujja* (f) 'fan; the one who fans' and *Bulamu* (f) 'life; liveliness' are other names related to this proverb.

The saying "Abangi babi okulya, naye ku mirimo [~mirimu] balungi" 'A mass of people looks bad when it comes to eating food, but looks good when it comes to allotting work' shows that human relations depend in large part on circumstances and rarely are unconditional. A

number of names are derived from this proverb, including *Bangi* (m/f) 'many people'; *Babi* (m) 'the bad people'; *Kulya* (m/f) 'consuming, eating'; *Mirimo* [~*Mirimu*] (m) 'work, business'; and *Balungi* (f) 'they are good, virtuous, desirable'.

With the experience gained through age, ideally one becomes more prudent and more patient. These virtues are reflected in the adage "Emmeeme y'omukulu, esirikira bingi" 'The soul of the elder is silent over many things', associated with the names *Mmeme* [~*Mmeeme*] (f) 'the soul, the heart, the seat of emotions' and *Mukulu* (m/f) 'adult; person in charge'. Having been away for a long time, travelers may imagine that the situation at home has changed or is not as good as it was, that they will experience difficulty in readjusting to their home and that relatives and companions may be gone. These circumstances are reflected in the names *Mmeme* and *Mutambuze* [~*Mutambuzi*] (m/f) 'traveler' and linked to the adage "Emmeeme y'omutambuze, eruma madda" 'The soul of the traveler hurts over returning home'.

The proverb "Aliwaali w'alabira enjuba n'omwezi" 'The position one is in determines how one perceives the sun and the moon' suggests that one's point of view depends on one's circumstances. When circumstances change, opinions may change as well. Names associated with this proverb are *Aliwaali* (m/f) 'the position one is in'; *Njuba* (m) 'the sun' and *Mwezi* (m/f) 'the moon, moonlight'. The proverb "Abantu magoma; gavugira aliwo" 'People are (like) drums; they sound for the one who is present' is related and provides the basis for the name *Magoma* (m) 'drums, drumming (celebration)'.

Some proverbs can be interpreted in several ways. "Akutwaala ekiro, omusiima bukedde" 'The one who guides you in the night deserves your appreciation in the morning'. By leading you the guide saves you from traveling in the heat of the day. This proverb indicates that one may originally make rigorous demands (such as during youth), but ultimately they may turn out to be for your own good. The proverb may also be interpreted as meaning it is often much later that the good that was done for us is understood and appreciated. An affiliated name is *Kiro* (m/f) 'the night'.

A popular folk tale of the Baganda concerns the time when the king's soldiers came to gather people to be killed and all ran away

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except the blind Bigambo who, thinking that the soldiers could not see him since he could not see them, sat close to the road and consequently met his fate there. This tale is recalled in the proverb “Magezi g’oomu gaakisa Bigambo ku kkubo” ‘Dependence on individual wisdom resulted in Bigambo getting killed along the road’. This proverb warns against too much reliance on individual judgment, advising instead prudently to seek the guidance of others. Several names derive from this proverb, including *Magezi* (m) ‘wisdom, knowledge’; *Magezigoomu* (m) ‘the wisdom of one’; *Bigambo* (m) ‘words, matters’ and *Kkubo* (m) ‘pathway, street’.

There are proverbs that advise authority to refrain from lenience and overindulgence in the handling of important issues, otherwise those under the authority might be tempted towards disorder and rebellion. These sentiments are found in the proverb “Ekisa ekingi kitta obwami” ‘Overindulgent gestures of kindness result in the degeneration of authority’. Associated names are *Kisa* (m/f) ‘kindness, mercy’ and *Bwami* (m) ‘power, authority’.

“Akukeera enkya; bw’atakuzinga muggo, akuzinga bugenyi” ‘The one who visits you early in the morning comes either with a stick to beat you with or presents to give you’. The names *Kukeera* (m/f) ‘the act of visiting [doing] early’ and *Kukeera-enkya* [~*Kukeerenkya*] (m/f) ‘visiting [doing] early in the morning’ are both associated with this proverb.

These are only a few of the many examples of names which are not only derived from proverbs but are used to recall entire proverbs and their meanings as well. I hope these general examples will spark further research into this important but neglected area of naming.

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