

# Aspects of Nicknames Among the Tumbuka

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Nicknames generally show closer relationships to their users' sub-culture than do more fixed parts of language. This study looks at nicknames and nickname use among the Tumbuka of southern Africa—how they are formed and how they function in Tumbuka society. More males than females have nicknames and male nicknames suggest power and dominance while female nicknames suggest conciliation and cooperation.

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## Introduction

The Tumbuka are a prominent society in the northern region of Malawi, in southern Africa. In the 1820s the Tumbuka were conquered by groups of Zulu, Xhosa, and Swazi; their language, Ngoni, was absorbed in time by Chitumbuka, the language of the Tumbuka, largely as a result of intermarriage and social contact. Chitumbuka is now the lingua franca of six different ethnic groups: Ngoni, Tonga, Tumbuka, Ngonde, Lambya and Nyakyusa.

## Background

Names are not arbitrary symbols; they are meaningful not only in an etymological sense but also in a synchronic sense, where they have important psychological and pragmatic meanings which affect and shape the character of interaction between and among people (Wierzbicka 1992, 302). In much of the African world the naming of persons is often closely linked to the local cultures. Among the Xhosa, for example, first names invariably have distinct lexical meaning. It is a common practice among parents "to embody in a name the expectation they might have for that child in [the] future" (Neethling 1994, 88). In Africa societies names are often linked to specific events within the nuclear and extended families of a clan. Nicknames in particular often show a clear relation-

ship within the naming culture or subculture. In this study I explore this relationship through the meanings and functions of nicknames among the Tumbuka.

In some cases names signify class or privilege and status within a social organization (Leslie and Skipper 1990, 273). Among the Tumbuka a status name such as *Mwamlowe*, is often given to the head or chief of the area, Mlowe, is under his jurisdiction. Chihenga is a dialect of Chitumbuka and *Mwahenga* means 'the head or chief of the Henga'. The prefix Mwa ~ Mwe, in names such as *Mwakasungula*, *Mwenelupembe*, *Mwangonde*, and *Mwenilondo*, denotes the status of the ruler and means 'owner, head of'. The names thus communicate a particular level of social relationship, especially that between the head of a clan and its members.

Nicknames are frequently descriptive and are bestowed as a reflection of individual characteristics rather than to express hopes and desires for a person.

Among the Tumbuka, nicknames are "earned" and as such they are not given to the very young; they also may be appended or used in place of one's personal name. Nicknames can be understood only by observing how they reveal situational contexts; thus, meanings of nicknames cannot be found in dictionary definitions but in their uses in everyday life.

There are differences of opinion over what should be counted as a nickname. Busse, for instance, feels that a nickname is any name which is "given to a person in addition to his or her legal names" (1983, 301), a very broad definition. Others have simply defined a nickname as an addition to a name, a byname (bynaam in Afrikaans) which means that the name is not a given name (Van Langendonck 1978, 64). Busse thinks that shortened forms of first names (especially for males), such as Bill, Dick, and Jim, and their derivatives Billy, Dicky, and Jimmy should not be considered nicknames since what they display is a heightened sense of masculinity and camaraderie, which is also evident particularly among male names in Chitumbuka, such as *Masuzgo* 'problems, trouble' > *Suzgo*, *Zwangendawa* 'news, hearsay' > *Zwange*, *Kawerenga* 'read, count' > *Kawe*, *Chatonda* 'conquer' > *Tonda*, *Chizaso* (a name given to a child who has left and returned, reincarnating a spirit) > *Chiza*, and *Chigonegone* (referring to someone who sleeps anywhere, especially because of drunkenness or promiscuity) > *Gone*.

On the other hand, the effect of shortening on female names often decreases the perceived femininity of the name, as in *Chigomezgo* ~ *Gomezga* 'trust, confidence' > *Gome*, *Wongani* 'grateful, thankful' > *Wonga*, *Tafika* 'we have arrived' > *Fika*. In Zulu this would include such names as *Busisiwe* 'we are blessed (with a child)' > *Busi*, *Nondumiso* 'praised' > *Ndu*, *Sibusiso* 'blessing' > *S'bu*, *Velaphi* 'where do you come from, child' > *Vela*, *Nomthandazo* (< *thandaza* 'pray' > *Nomthi* or in its extreme version, *Zo*. In all these names, the short forms are not as feminine as the full names. However, these shortened names also have connotations of endearment which suggest the bearers' closeness to those who call them by their short names. The importance of differentiating between first names, which have accepted abbreviated forms from those that do not, is in their pragmatic value. The use of the full name is different from the shortened form. By using unreduced names one would be making a particular statement with the pragmatic effect of indicating respect or distance between interlocutors; conversely, it conveys closeness or affection to use such short forms as *Zwange* for *Zwangendawe*, *Kawe* for *Kawerenga*, or *Chizaso* for *Chiza*.

#### Methodology

Information on nicknames was collected from 60 Tumbuka respondents by participant-observers who gathered data over a period of four months in and around Ekwendeni, a mission and trading center southwest of Mzuzu, a regional capital in northern Malawi. This is a rural and semi-urban area. Informal interviews sought information on how nicknames are acquired, who bestows them, what functions they serve, attitudes of their bearers toward their nicknames, and why particular nicknames are given. A formal questionnaire was not used because most people in the community were suspicious of any form of recording information. While the respondents are basically rural, they remain politically sensitive and are therefore generally suspicious of any researcher, whether from the government or not. They are particularly wary of government investigators because they have been interviewed many times on issues relating to the development of their communities but with little tangible evidence of government action.

The respondents included 30 males and 30 females from three age groups (young adult speakers of Chitumbuka and English, who would have attained some primary and secondary school education, from 18 to

24 years old; older speakers of Chitumbuka, perhaps with some knowledge of English and ranging in age from 25 to 49 years; and those over 50 years of age). Educational levels generally correlated with age; the younger the respondents, the higher their educational level.

Another consideration was whether the respondents were rural, semi-rural, or urban. This was important for the investigators as it guided them in determining the kind of questions to ask and the topics that would be discussed before asking about nicknames. People from urban areas would likely be more familiar with more cosmopolitan nicknames such as *Chali*, from Charlie Chaplin, whose films are hardly ever seen by those in rural areas.

The investigators were two females, one a youth and one an adult, and two males, also one youth and one adult. The different genders and ages ensured that, as much as possible, social networks were established between the researchers and respondents of roughly similar social groups since it was necessary to establish genuine social relationships in order to gain access to the nicknames, through either Chitumbuka, the vernacular, or English. Establishing cordial relationships is necessary in such studies for reliable responses (Milroy 1980; Muthwii 2000).

All four investigators knew Ekwendeni very well and since it was their home they were considered by respondents to be trustworthy, in spite of the fact that they had been away for a time attending school. The researchers mixed with respondents in as many different activities as possible, and especially at beer parties at "the mission," as it is commonly known. They also met at shops, at the market place, at the bus and minibus stop where many people mingled and chatted, and at several drinking places outlying the mission station itself. Since most respondents converged at such gathering places the researchers were able to acquaint themselves with the respondents and with their circle of friends.

The primary language of investigation was Chitumbuka. However, with semi-urbanized respondents, code switching between Chitumbuka and English was a common occurrence.

As Alford (1988) has observed, a body of anthropological studies has shown that nicknames usually differentiate or identify individuals more surely than do personal names. Especially where individuals' given names and surnames are common, nicknames may be used to identify individuals unambiguously. Alford (1988) has identified several basic

types of nicknames, including those that describe personality traits or individual behaviors; those that describe appearance or physical characteristics; and those that describe occupations.

Nicknames may influence perceptions of their users. The result of such names is that they establish or reinforce the character of their bearers and hence social attitudes toward their bearers, as with the name *Kachenjezi*, referring to someone who is clever, but in a cunning way. While some, or even all, of these representations might be inaccurate or even false, they remain, however, influential in characterizing the bearer's presumed behavior or personality; this may be especially true when it comes to gender-related stereotypes.

## Results

### Female Nicknames

As noted by de Klerk and Bosch (1996, 536), female nicknames tend to relate to qualities of gentleness, goodness, sweetness, pleasantness, endearment, and beauty of the bearer or of character generally, while male nicknames tend to connote toughness, maturity, strength, and notorious humor. Among the Tumbuka this includes such names as *NyaSkweya* (literally 'square'), which may sound meaningless, but this borrowing from English expresses something "squarish" in nature, in other words "beautiful;" hence it being a nickname for a beautiful woman. The word *square* here has connotations of loveliness of the bearer, both of physical beauty and of character. There are other examples as well. *NyaMphepo* ~ *Mphepo* literally means 'air'. If a lady is nicknamed *NyaMphepo*, this has connotations of the beauty of the air around her, giving her a general sense of pleasantness and affability.

Female nicknames may be solely descriptive. *NyaNkhamoza* is derived from *Kamoza*, which means 'one'. *NyaNkhamoza*, then, means that a woman is the only female in her family. It also connotes a sense of endearment, as she is the only one. (The prefix *Nya-* is usually found before adult female names and invariably before those of married women.) In a respectful, joking, and ironic manner a young girl, even before she passes puberty, could be called *NyaMphepo*, but this is rare.

Leslie and Skipper (1990) note that women's nicknames are less likely than men's to refer to their achieved statuses and occupations. This is true in Tumbuka society as well. Female nicknames are likely to refer to their bearers' physical or presumed social or personal qualities, as in the cited instances of *NyaMphepo*, *NyaSkweya*, and *NyaNkhamoza*.

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It bears noting that apart from the beauty and affection attributed to the women, the nicknames also express solidarity within the village sub-culture.

### Male Nicknames

Male nicknames often connote toughness, maturity, strength, and notorious humor; they also are more public than female nicknames, which are reserved for family use (de Klerk and Bosch 1996). Many of the male nicknames gathered in the course of this investigation had an element of humor, such as *Chali*, referring to Charlie Chaplin. This is a nickname that is used by family members and it is well known and used publicly. Within the family, Chali not only connotes cleverness and points up the bearer's nature and trickster behavior, it is also used as a term of endearment since the community has come to appreciate him for his clever tricks.

The nickname *Lezawawa* was bestowed on the bearer originally by family members but came to be widely used by members of the public. The name literally means 'lightning has struck' and was related to the bearer's emotional behavior, which was likened to the striking of thunder. The nickname came to be used by both family members and the public and it was appreciated by the bearer, who likely felt more respected and perhaps even more masculine because of it.

Other characteristics of nicknames and nicknaming are provided by the following examples collected in our investigation. *Mdaghanjara* means 'one who cries for food.' The nickname is used ironically, however; it is given to an industrious person who has more than adequate provisions at his home and can provide for the entire extended family. *Wabezerenge* means 'let them drink as they wish.' It assumes that the bearer is able to provide home-brewed beer to as many villagers as come to his household. *Kamgolonthi* describes the bearer's behavior and means 'stagger', as in the walk of a drunken person. This nickname was given to an elderly villager who would first thing in the morning disappear into the neighborhood for his drink while everyone would be tilling the fields. He would usually come back late in the evening. As a result he was nicknamed *Kamgolothi* because he staggered homeward in the evening. *Majighaheni* means 'bad water' and literally refers to muddy water or water containing impurities. Figuratively, it means that

water that looks still in a pool may be turbulent underneath. The person with this nickname displayed behavior of unpredictable turbulence, just as water that looks calm on the surface may be excited below. *Mchona* is a common nickname given to those who had migrated to work in countries bordering Malawi, such as Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and South Africa. *Mchona* means 'one who went away for years (but may have returned)'. It also may describe how one is regarded in the village; especially, it may suggest that the migrant has returned but is less alert and unaware of the current home situation.

One of the well-known nicknames in Ekwendeni is *Kavibeme*, which means 'go and smoke them'. The first person to be nicknamed *Kavibeme* was Muhammad Yusuf, one of the early Asian traders who established his business shortly after the Presbyterian missionaries had founded their mission station at Ekwendeni. Legend has it that Yusuf was a chain smoker and for this reason the people he traded with in his shop nicknamed him *Kavibeme*. Yusuf saw nothing wrong with the name and it came to be widely known and accepted humorously by the public, but his family still referred to him as Yusuf.

One nickname which is acquired through status is *Mkhalabweka*. Here was a group village headman, who, according to tradition, would have to be given a proper seat whenever he arrived at anyone's home; he could not be expected to sit on a stool, a log by the fireside, or least of all on the floor. This particular headman, however, was in the habit of sitting anywhere and could not stand still or wait to be offered a seat. This breach of an important social convention earned him the unflattering nickname, *Mkhalabweka* 'he who sits anywhere'. The name has now become a status title for anyone who assumes the position of a group village headman in the area and it is now more commonly used than the actual name of the person who assumes that position.

Some nicknames, especially those of women, are affectionate, even though their original meaning or reference is unflattering. Generally these nicknames are used only in family situations or among close friends. A Tumbuka man is married to an American and among his best friends he refers to her as *Tungwa*. Taken literally *Tungwa* is a clever but small and somewhat silly animal. In calling his wife *Tungwa*, he told her that it means 'darling' and she took it to mean just that. This might appear to be a demeaning nickname but the husband calls her by this

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name in an affectionate manner as a term of endearment. He, however, only calls her *Tungwa* when among people he knows well and who know its original meaning and the sense in which he is using it and will understand that he means no disrespect when he says "I'll be back shortly. I have to go and leave my *Tungwa* at home first."

Similar to nicknames reported in other societies, Tumbuka nicknames may be age-specific, with particular nicknames reserved for children which may be inappropriate or even embarrassing as they grow older. *Mdoko* 'the small one' is a nickname often given to a child, particularly to one born especially tiny. The name may well become resented as the bearer grows up. A child could also have earned the name *Mhawi* as a toddler for constantly beating on others and not wishing to share toys. Family members could therefore have given him this nickname as descriptive of his selfishness. *Mhawi* means a witch or a wizard. A similar nickname is *Chiheni*, meaning 'the bad one,' which is suppressed when its bearers grow up.

*Mtoliro* is another nickname given to some children. *Mtoliro* are the leaves of a sweet potato which are edible as a cooked vegetable. One of the grandmothers in the village nicknamed a youth *Mtoliro* because each time the boy visited her, he demanded that she cook the potato leaves which he considered a delicacy. As an adult, he found the name unpleasant and did not want to hear it.

### Conclusion

We find from our study of nicknames among the Tumbuka that more males than females had nicknames and male nicknames were used more frequently than female nicknames. Furthermore, male nicknames were found to cover a wide range of referents while female nicknames were largely confined to appearance or personality. Female nicknames tended to be positive and provided a means of bonding and cohesion within the community while male nicknames tended to indicate status and social position.

### Appendix

#### Tumbuka and Zulu Nicknames

##### Zulu Nicknames

Busisiwe > Busi. 'the blessed ones' given to parents of a female child.

Nomdumiso > Ndu. 'praise'



Nompumelero > Mpume. Refers to success of a family with the birth of a child.

Nomthandazo > Nothando, Thando, Zo. 'prayer', from thandaza 'pray'.

Sibusiso > S'bu. 'blessings'. The female equivalent is Busisiwe.

Thamsanga > Thami. for a very rare blessing.

Velaphi > Vela. Usually expressed as a question, "Where do you come from?" As a nickname it expresses wonder on the part of parents who were not prepared for a child.

Zwangendawa > Zwange. Refers to secondhand news.

#### Tumbuka Nicknames :

Chanaichi > Ichi, Chana. 'this child'. Means that a child is unusual in some respect, especially circumstances of birth or upbringing.

Chatonda > Tonda. 'the conqueror', from *tonda* 'to defeat'.

Chifipa. Dark complected.

Chigomezgo > Gomezga, Gome. 'trust, believe in'.

Chigonegone > Gone. Given to a person who sleeps anywhere, especially because of drunkenness or promiscuity.

Chiheni. 'the bad one'. Given for a variety of reasons.

Chizaso > Chiza. 'it has come again'. From the belief that the spirit of a child that died could return through the birth of another child.

Kachenjezi. One who is clever but cunning.

Kamgolonthi. For someone who staggers.

Kavibeme. For a chain smoker. Literally 'go and smoke them'.

Kawerenga > Kawe. from *kuwerenga* 'to read, count'.

Lezawawa. 'lightning has struck'.

Majighagheni. Literally referring to contaminated water, this name is given to someone of unpredictable or turbulent behavior.

Masuzgo > Suzgo. Refers to problems from within a family or from the extended family.

Mchona. Given to a migrant worker.

Mdaghanjara. 'one who cries for food'. Used ironically for someone who is industrious and has much food.

Mdoko. For a child born especially small.

Mhawi. A witch or wizard.

Mkhalabweka. Meaning someone who sits where he wishes, rather than wait to be shown the respect of being given a seat of honor.

Mtoliro. Literally the leaves of a sweet potato plant.

Muzipasi > Muzi. Refers to a village where a large number of its people have died. Literally 'a village that has been put down'.

Mwahenga. A chief or headman of the Henga people.

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Mwamlowe. A chief or headman of the community of Mlowe.

Mwangonde. A chief or headman of the Ngonde.

Mwakasungula. A chief of the Sungula.

Mwenelupembe. A chief of the Lupembe area.

Mwenilondo. A chief of the Londo.

NyaMphepo. From *Mphepo* 'air'. For a woman who is as beautiful as the air around her.

NyaMzweweranga. For a woman with many friends.

NyaNkhamoza. For a daughter among many sons.

Nyaskweya. 'square', from English. For a beautiful woman.

Tafika > Fika. 'we have arrived'. Implies that this will be the last child in a family.

Tungwa. A small, silly animal, used endearingly.

Wabezerenge. 'let them drink and have a good time'.

Wongani > Wonga. 'grateful, thankful'. Implies that parents should be grateful for a child, whether or not it was of the gender they wished.

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