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Ethnicity and Matriarchal Protest: A Case of Dialoguing Shona Personal Names

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This paper examines the role of Zimbabwean (Shona) women in the naming of children in the patriarchal Shona society. The corpus of two thousand Shona personal/given names under review was gathered from Zimbabwe's seven predominantly Shona-speaking provinces. The discussion closely examines fifty-two personal names. It emerges that Zimbabwean (Shona) women are innovative as they manage to devise personal names that denotatively and connotatively put across their wishes, grievances, experiences, and preferences in acceptable and non-confrontational ways. The use of value-laden, palimpsest and emblematic-dialoguing personal names is a restrained strategy that ensures tranquility in the society. As a result, the name bearers become moving emblems of the frozen experiences and hopes of their mothers who might have directly or indirectly given the resultant name. In addition, a deconstructionist theory is promulgated as one of the means to get at the deeper meanings of the given names.

Introduction

The Shona people have a patriarchal society. Firstly, Shona males wield considerable power as they are the ones who verbally initiate the courtship process. Shona women are expected to act only in allurement and then wait for the men to come to them; however, women have the power to deny certain moves. This then suggests that the two do not start on an equal footing. Secondly, the women are married into their husbands' families hence they lose their surnames. For example, my wife was called Otlina Mara and upon marriage she became Otlina Makondo (the latter is the surname of the husband). Also, children from this marriage are called by their father's surnames; for example, my two boys are named Munyaradzi Makondo, Munashe Makondo (their surname is not Mara) because, among other reasons, it is the husband who pays the bride wealth. This scenario seems to have led to the idea that the Shona society tramples on matrilineal rights.

On the positive side, though, the Shona people accord significant powers to aunts (*vanatete*) and grandmothers (*vanambuya*). The aunt is also called *babakadzi* (a

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female father) meaning she has equal or more circumstantial powers comparable to that of her brothers, especially on matters relating to marriage arrangements. Stories abound among the Shona people of women seeking out such seniors to ask for help in redressing challenges they are encountering within their marriages. In some extreme cases the marriages fall apart or an aggrieved woman ends up hanging herself in protest.

As women age beyond menopause, they are elevated to positions of *vanambuya*, partly because the Shona people associate old age with wisdom and also because over the years these older women have proven their loyalty to the family. Another reason is that grown-up children feel hesitant to have their mothers left out.

The upsurge in the late 1980s of gender-equality movements saw women from all walks of life and all parts of the world clamoring for equal rights and the abolishment of their treatment as appendages of men. Many women ventured into fields that had previously been regarded as being in male domains. As a result of women now making substantial financial contributions to their respective families, their influence has grown. This has become a challenge to traditional practices in which husbands and their immediate families would select the names to be given to babies. 'Cultured' Shona women were not expected to question the chosen name, but today it is mostly women who choose the names for their infants.

Theoretical framework

Like other communities, the Shona people have used meaningful personal names since time immemorial. As De Klerk and Bosch (1995) observe, the meaning of these names is readily available to the speakers of the concerned language. The trend, however, changed drastically in 1890 when colonization began to bring in bible-oriented and English names. On the whole, one is struck by the wealth of information, historical, descriptive, picturesque and human (Pongweni 1983) that Shona first names provide about their namers and the named.

It is within this context that this study proposes a deconstructionist theory that argues for the reduction of Shona personal names into more basic and ultimately minimal components. This allows one to have a fuller understanding of the contexts within which these names were used so that one can come up with their meanings. This is attainable if one is a first-language speaker/researcher or is well informed about the culture. Such researchers should be able to appreciate the 'complex social negotiations' (Leslie and Skipper 1990) surrounding these personal names as they are contextually used for communication (Obeng, 2001; Kimenyi, 1989). In other words, if one loses sight of the view that these names are used in a particular 'context of situation/utterance' (Palmer, 1981) and that they put forward 'expressive, social and communicative meanings' (Löbner, 2002) then one cannot successfully comprehend their meanings. As a result, the deconstructionist approach greatly aids our understanding of personal names.

Methodology

The researcher was born in Wedza, Zimbabwe, in the early 1970s. He grew up in a rural community until the time he left for Advanced Level studies in an urban setting

in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe in the southern part of Africa. The disparities he noticed in personal names that were popular in the rural and urban areas led him to an interest in the study of names. The drive became quite strong when a colleague who was doing a doctoral study in early 2000 presented a paper on war names at the University of Zimbabwe. Following this, the researcher recollected the names he still remembered and visited several rural communities carrying out structured and unstructured interviews (Corbetta, 2003). As a result, five hundred respondents were consulted from the seven predominantly Shona-speaking provinces, as the researcher is a Shona first-language speaker. The second most popular language in Zimbabwe is Ndebele, while English is the official language. In essence, the corpus under review is subjective, interpretive, and constructive. This macro-ethnographic and ethno-methodological qualitative research delves deep into the Shona culture as it offers a rich in-depth exploration of the values, beliefs, and practices of cultural groups through thick description of real people in natural settings (O'Leary, 2004: 118).

Onomastic trends

Much onomastic research has been done in Zimbabwe since 1890. Popular topics have included names pertaining to dogs (Tatira, 2004) comrades (Pongweni, 1983; Pfukwa, 2003), literary characters Kahari (1972, 1990), Christians (Chitando, 1998a, 1998b), and places, chiefs and commissioners (Roberts, 1931; Morris, 1932; Jackson, 1957, 1976, 1977). On the other hand, onomastic studies are entrenched in South Africa where we have such renowned scholars as Koopman, Neethling, Mabuza, De Klerk, and others. A review of their works and other African scholars like Kimenyi, Obeng, and Byakutaga revealed that the topic of this paper is relatively new.

The gathered data is analyzed thematically. This paper looks at names that refer to the response of the husband's family to the coming of a daughter-in-law, how she perceives the conduct of her husband, polygamous situations, and the importance of neighbors. The discussion proceeds by arguing that the woman directly or indirectly ensures that certain names are given her children so that her concerns are put across in a subtle and non-confrontational manner. The Shona culture has long expected women to be subservient, which leaves the choosing of names for their babies as one of the few available ways that women have had to express their concerns.

Call for acceptance

Among the Shona people, there have been various acceptable ways through which one could get married, all of which take into consideration one's social status and the surrounding circumstances. A man could work for his would-be wife (*kutema ugariri*) or he could formally request to be married with his would-be wife while she would still live with her parents (*kukumbira*). In some instances, the married woman might not be welcome in her new family because she would have been married through elopement (*kutizira*), which used to happen if the woman were pregnant. Or if a woman heard that another girl was having a love affair with her boyfriend, she would encourage elopement to make sure that she did not lose out. In such cases, some boys and their families would end up refusing the would-be wife or daughter-in-law

because they suspected foul play. It is within this scenario that I discuss the first group of names, which appear to be chosen by the mother so as to communicate something about the attitude and behavior of the groom's family.

It is well known that Shona parents give their children names that reflect their own situations, ideals and frustrations (Mbiti, 1975). The names *Murambiwa*, 'the denied one,' and *Muvengwa*, 'the hated one,' denote, as well as connote, that one was denied entry into the new family either by the husband or his relations. Some suggest that such names are coined by the woman's relatives as a way of freezing into everyone's memory the poor treatment that initially greeted their daughter. The name *Musekiwa*, 'the laughed-at one,' connotes that the baby's mother was a laughing stock perhaps because of her appearance, or how she ended up coming to their homestead, or because of simple jealousy. These names become monuments reminding the mother of the belittling experience she went through especially during the initial stages of her marriage. A name might suggest that the husband treated her poorly in hopes of forcing her out of the marriage. *Hatidane*, 'we hate each other,' seems to be pointing a finger at the husband as the source of all the problems perhaps because he misled the bride into thinking that they were in real love while it was only infatuation or sexual desire. Through *Muchaneta*, 'you shall tire,' the wife might be saying to the husband, 'be steady' because she does not intend to leave the marriage (Aschwaden, 1982). In a polygamous marriage, *Muchaneta* is also a way of telling the other wives that they better stop treating her poorly because such a strategy will not force her to leave the marriage.

Protest

Other personal names are protest statements directed either at the husbands, the concerned two families, or at neighbors who might be against the marriage. Personal names that appear most often under this category are *Mawoneyi*, 'what have you seen?,' *Hamutyi*, 'you are not afraid,' *Zezai* 'be afraid,' *Hamufari*, 'you are not happy,' and *Hamunamoyo*, 'you do not care.' The name *Muchaona* 'you shall see' is a threat of misfortune to come if the mother's enemies continue in their uncompromising course of action. All in all, these names are declarative statements to the effect that the aggressors do not have the right to cause problems in other people's marriages. In other words, these names question whether the woman's foes are rational and considerate of other people's feelings and decisions, while other times the names question the conduct of a husband suspected of cheating.

In polygamous families, wives may give or push for names that further their agendas. *Hamunyari*, 'you are not shy,' might be accusing a wife who came later to the marriage of having been overly forward in seducing the husband. Or it might be accusing the husband's family members of being too forward in the way they try to destabilize the marriage. Some informants pointed out that *Muchatuta*, 'you shall leave,' and *Tamai*, 'relocate,' are clearly pointing to a hoped-for outcome. The namer is hoping for the other women to walk out of the marriage. On another note, *Magarawani*, 'have you settled?' might be addressed either to the husband or to other wives who used to threaten leaving the marriage. It is acknowledging that, after all, they have remained in the marriage. *Mazogara*, 'you have settled?' asks

a similar question and is used to pose a thought-provoking question either to the husband or to fellow wives as shown by the plural/honorific prefixes. The implication is that these names are directed at concealed individuals who are interfering with the lives of the mothers who are choosing the names. However, the message is subtle enough that if someone within the namer's surroundings confronts the mother, she can deny that the questioner was the target. The names show that some Shona women are against polygamous marriages even though they are in them. To this end, these names are used to help a new mother put across her protest about the status quo.

Call for reformation

The majority of the women informants explained that they are resentful of polygamous marriages and therefore choose names for their babies that serve as a call for the reformation of the practice. Before the attainment of independence in 1980, it was difficult for women to openly speak or act against a culture predominantly believed to be supportive of polygamous marriages. Now, with the HIV and AIDS scourge, more people are beginning to think favorably of monogamous marriage arrangements. However, 'small–house' (extra-marital affairs) are on the increase due to economic distress since the late 1990s. Women informants argue that polygamy benefits males at their expense because it forces women to scramble for husbands. To this effect, the name *Uchidei*, 'what still do you want?' is a question directed at husbands who still cherish the idea of having other wives. The wife, in this case supposedly the senior one, is asking to know what is missing from their marriage so that she might provide it in her bid to safeguard a monogamous marriage. This is a polite protest against the husband's conduct within the confinements of the Shona culture. The child who bears the name becomes a moving symbol of a disturbing phase within the couple's history.

We note that some personal names are used to put across women's grievances against the conduct of their husbands. *Dzikamai*, 'be stable,' urges the husband to behave as a married mature man. A sizeable number of informants reported that a married husband who continues to befriend ladies irks them as it raises their suspicion and such behavior should be stopped forthwith if he intends to see his present marriage stand the test of time. In *Munoitei*, 'what are you doing?' the woman is asking the husband why he is cheating. The informants argued that receiving news of a cheating husband is disturbing because it degrades them within the society as it implies their failure to measure up to the husbands' expectations. Some complained that their bedroom experiences were not satisfying due to the husband's sexual failure, and then adding to this problem would be news trickling in of the existence of a 'small house.'

Also, the name *Muchadeyi*, 'what else do you want?' suggests that the couple has a relatively successful marriage, maybe with children of both sexes but reports still come to the woman that her husband is cheating. *Muchadeyi* captures her failure to comprehend exactly what she should have done to avoid this situation. *Nyarai*, 'be ashamed,' urges the husband to have a human face in his dealings. Several informants reported that they were disgusted when hearing that their husband had a girlfriend

who lived nearby or was even a long-time friend of the wife. Because of such behavior, a woman who wants to safeguard her marriage resorts to giving her child one of these names to memorialize the unwelcome development in hopes of keeping it from happening in the future. These respectful and subtly given names become beacons of the significant epochs in a couple's love adventure.

Additionally, *Zvichabuda*, 'It shall come out,' warns a husband who vehemently denies any act of infidelity that time shall prove him either blameless or guilty. The name alludes to a postponed discussion. Then, when time proves one guilty, the conciliatory stance taken is captured in *Pfidzayi*, 'please learn,' and *Kwanayi*, 'behave well.' *Pfidzayi* suggests a husband who has remained adamant in extra-marital exploits until something unfortunate happens. The name is then urging him to have learned something from such experiences. It is a reminder of that dark spot in their marriage experience, or it could be addressed to relatives who might be wishing the couple bad luck. Either way it is advising the guilty ones to desist from their previous behavior. *Kwanayi* urges the husband to behave as befits a married man who values himself and his wife and wants to keep them free from HIV or AIDS. The name is a call for reformation issued to irresponsible husbands and to relatives who treat their family members poorly. This testifies to the way personal names reflect the relationships among family members (Koopman, 1990).

Evaluation of the contemporary situation

Shona personal names often reflect the namers' negative or positive opinions (Musere and Byakutaga, 1998) towards both the child and the present situation. Informants suggest that these names point out that the marriages were under siege at the time the baby was named. The name *Musungwa*, 'a prisoner,' may reveal that the husband does not grant his wife the right to visit her relatives or to associate with members of the community. When the wife's family hears the name of the baby, they will know that the wife is being treated more or less like a prisoner with minimal rights. Other names venting the mother's frustration are *Chenhamu*, 'one born to suffer,' and *Misodzi*, which literally means 'tears' and is graphic in painting a picture of a woman who has suffered in the marriage.

Other Shona names summarizing the feelings of the wife or sometimes both parents include *Zvanyanya*, 'it is too much,' and *Pakuramunhumashokoanowanda*, 'a lot of talk goes on while a person grows up.' These names urge the concerned people to desist from divisive tendencies and to appreciate the mother for her contributions during her lifetime. *Munakandafa* is a name that alludes to the tendency of speaking well of a dead person as contrasted to how the person was spoken of during his or her lifetime. *Haparimwe*, 'no tilling shall be done,' captures the view that because of the prevailing sour relations in the marriage, it probably will not last through the rainy season. In other words, a separation or divorce is imminent. An alternate meaning is that the husband is lazy and does not engage in agricultural ventures.

Innocence

Some Shona personal names highlight the mother's innocence amidst accusations faulting her role in the marriage. For example, *Ndaiziveyi*, 'I knew nothing,' refutes

the allegation that she knowingly married a man who was already married with children and was only pretending to act responsibly. *Ndakakuda*, 'I have loved you,' and *Paidamoyo*, 'that is my heart's choice,' tells the world that the woman married of her own volition. It is refuting allegations that she was forced into the marriage, and is saying that she should not have to endure being treated as someone forced into a marriage. *Handigwi*, 'I do not fight,' shows that she is not a belligerent person but has been made to suffer at the hands of some vicious relatives. The name is indicative of an individual who cherishes tranquility but who is not enjoying it because of reasons beyond her control. In *Itaitione*, 'do while we see,' the mother is declaring her subservient role and is urging family members to continue on their course but out in the open where she can monitor their actions as a cultured Shona woman. She is making well-calculated moves to command their respect. Because of the use of 'we,' the name suggests that the husband's opinion is also being represented and so this is the couple's strategy to counter their aggressors' intentions.

Conciliatory

Some personal names point out the woman's desire to see her marriage through until death separates them. The name *Handitye*, 'I am not afraid,' shows the mother's preparedness to face whatever challenges are coming her way in her effort to keep her marriage intact. Through the names *Hazvinandaa*, 'there is no problem,' and *Hazvineihazvo*, 'it does not matter,' she demonstrates her readiness to forgive and be reconciled with those who had been bothering her. The names show that she is prepared to chart a positive future. As a result, we see a peaceful way of having the impasse redressed.

Call for unity

Names of all kinds are social documents that define one's relations to other members of the society (Evans-Pritchard, 1939). Nomenclature is also used to implore family support for the well-being of the marriage. Several women informants identified some aunts and mother-in-laws as being among the trouble causers because they are overly possessive of their sons. These older women are accused of sabotaging the newly married woman as a way of forcing her to give them space. This applies to *Yamurai*, 'help,' *Betserai*, 'please help,' and *Dananayi*, 'please help each other,' which act as extended forms of dialogue to be unpacked as needed. These pleas for family support may be coming either from the couple or the woman. Names that are an open call for assistance from significant family members include *Batanai*, 'be united,' and *Yananisayi*, 'help reconcile.' *Kudzanayi*, 'respect each other,' is a call for the family members to treat each other as they would want to see themselves treated. The subtle complaint is actually implying that the mother feels downgraded and downtrodden.

Counter

Some names reflecting censure, disapproval, and discontent (Mabuza 1997) were used to minimize social friction. These names are important as they reflect how people

think and how they see the world around them (Meiring, 1994). *Hakunavanhu*, 'there are no people,' is the woman's statement after she has evaluated how her in-laws have welcomed her. Her aunts who accompanied her to her husband's home seem to have a bearing on the preference of this name. The name captures and echoes their feeling of being treated poorly when they handed over their daughter in marriage. *Svotwai*, 'make up,' *Dzvokorai*, 'just look,' and *Pfavayi*, 'be calm,' are suggesting a course of action they should take for the interests of the whole family. The names are encouraging them to be remorseful of their negative conduct towards the marriage. The mother is therefore suggesting that they wait and see rather than excessively interfere in her marriage. Through *Hamusatimagona*, 'you have not yet succeeded,' *Mazvitadza*, 'you have failed,' *Muchaiteyi*, 'what then shall you do?' and *Mozodi*, 'what then shall you do?' she is asking them to take a new look at her determination to sustain her marriage. These names make a significant contribution to an imaginary but real discussion.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Shona personal names form an important mode of access as they are used to redress gender imbalances. We note that women and their sympathizers used these given names to counter patriarchal dominance in non-confrontational ways. The resultant names are pregnant with meanings that can best be understood through the deconstructionist theory as applied especially by first language users and also by second-language learners who are well informed about the culture. Casual observers do not see the underlying meanings that are communicated through the names. Nevertheless, these names play an important role in the relative permanence and tranquility that characterize many Shona marriages and, in turn, the Shona culture.

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