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Names and Naming Practices of the Telugu in Malaysia

Thilagavathi Shanmuganathan

Universiti Malaya, MALAYSIA

Malarvizhi Sinayah

Universiti Malaya, MALAYSIA

Selvajothi Ramalingam

Universiti Malaya, MALAYSIA

Thanalachime Perumal

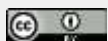
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Abstract

Names and naming practices reflect the socio-cultural background of a community. The giving of names is therefore not merely an act of labelling but represents constructs of identity that reflect the collective self-representation of a community and its worldviews. This study examines the naming practices of the Telugu in Malaysia and investigates the morphological structure and the semantic properties of Telugu names. To accomplish those research goals, survey interviews were conducted with 288 respondents in four different Malaysian states. Using descriptive statistics, a narrative analysis of the survey responses was used. Six experts in the Telugu culture were then invited for a focus group discussion. Before the results of this analysis are presented, detailed information about the Telugu and their naming traditions are provided. As will be shown here, among the Telugu, name-giving is a sacred act that is performed during a traditional naming ceremony called the *Barasala*. During this ancient oral onomastic tradition, names are passed on from one generation to the next and ancestral blessings are bestowed. As this study reveals, the structure of the patronymic names given during this ceremony reflect the religious beliefs and cultural identity of the Telugu.

Keywords: identity, Malaysia, morphology, naming ceremony, patronymy, Telugu

Background about the Telugu in Malaysia

Names and naming practices are constructs of identity that reflect not only the collective self-representation of a community, but also the cultural conceptualisations associated with a community's worldviews, socio-cultural background, and belief systems (Lu 2017; Ngubane 2013). The study of a community's naming practices can therefore reveal important information about deeply held identity constructs. Moreover, an examination of the morphological and semantic elements of a community's onomasticon can provide important insights into cultural norms (Mackenzie 2018). It is with this framework that the current investigation of Telugu names and naming practices was conducted.

The Telugu were originally Indian labourers who were brought to the Peninsula or West Malaysia states of Perak, Johor, Selangor, and Kedah during the period of British colonialism (Jain 1993). According to the Telugu Association of Malaysia, as of 2019, there were 500,000 Telugu in Malaysia, of which the majority were still concentrated in the four above-mentioned states. Thanks to a combination of exogamous marriage, the socioeconomic advantages of adopting the national language Malay, and continued discrimination by the ruling British Malaya, the Telugu had little choice but to socially accommodate and linguistically assimilate to the norms of the local dominant culture (Fakuade et al. 2018). As a result, the Telugu language was largely confined within their community. Nevertheless, the Telugu in Malaysia were able to maintain their religion. As a group, the Telugu are mostly Hindu who pray to Lord *Vishnu* as their main deity and his consort Goddess *Lakshmi*. *Vishnu* devotees belong to the *Vaishnavaites* (Neeraj 2010) and pray to several Hindu deities mentioned in the epics and *Puranas*, the ancient Hindu mythology (Sukdaven 2012).

A multilingual and multicultural nation, Malaysia is primarily comprised of the Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups. Each of these groups observes their own cultural practices in giving personal names (Cheng 2008; Lie & Bailey 2017). For instance, in the Chinese culture of Malaysia, the family name comes first and is followed by two given names. Take the name *Lee Wee Kit*. This name contains the family name or surname *Lee* as well as the individual's two given names *Wee Kit* (Milne 2019). By comparison, a traditional Malay name consists of a personal name, followed by a patronym. For this reason, most Malays do not have family names or surnames. The Malay naming system also often involves the titular prefixes *bin-* or *binti-* that are affixed to patronyms and mean 'son of' or 'daughter of,' respectively (Cheng 2008; Lim 2017; Milne 2019). These titles are also used to indicate the legitimacy of the child's birth (Lim 2017). Indian names in Malaysia are similar to Malay patronyms. Traditionally, Indian names are used to indicate an individual's caste, culture, ancestry, locality, and/or deities (Cheng 2008). Like the other groups mentioned, the Telugu community, as a sub-minority of the Indian ethnic group, also observes its own naming practices.

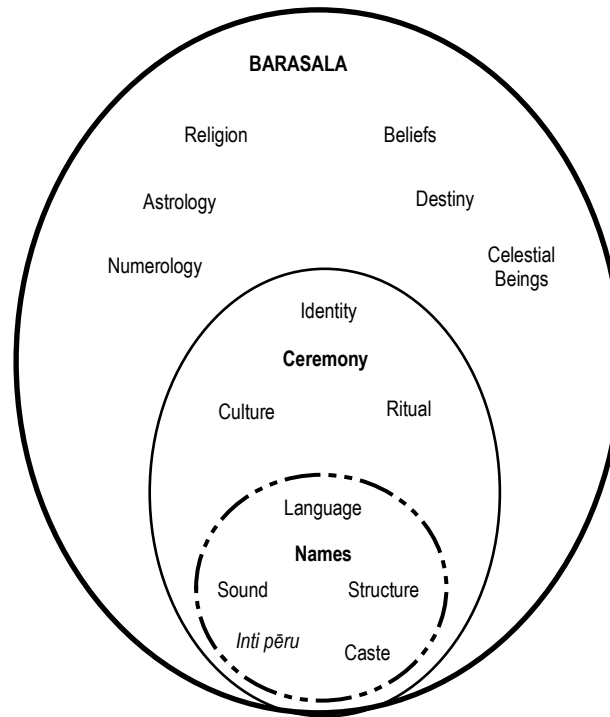
The Telugu community places great importance on birth-rituals which festively announce the arrival of a new family member. These rituals not only preserve the community conceptualisations of given names in their unique forms and meanings, they also serve as communal markers of adulthood, parenthood, paternal lineage, and the continuation of the family line. Given this importance, it may come as little surprise that members of the Telugu community frequently negotiate the shared knowledge and understanding of onomastic forms and meanings across generations. By examining the cultural context within which names are derived and negotiated, it is possible to gain insight into the cultural cognitions of the community that extend beyond the level of an individual name-giver's thought processes (Sharifian 2017; Wilson 2005). To do this, however, it is first necessary to examine the nexus between the semantic structure of personal names and the cultural schemas of the Telugu naming practices.

In the past, studies of indigenous naming have tended to focus on the implications of names and naming practices with regard to other issues. These include language planning and language shift (Florey & Bolton 1997; Makoni et al. 2007), family naming practices (Becker 2009), kinship and individuality (Finch 2008; Roopnarine & Güven 2015; Smith 1985), kinship terms and its association with power or status (Lie & Bailey 2017), and cultural attitude towards personal names (Akinaso 1981), and recently corpus-based name studies (Motschenbacher 2020). To the authors' knowledge, however, the association of name and naming practices to cultural schemas has not been as widely studied. Thus, this study aims to address this deficit by examining the Telugu naming practices and linguistic properties of Telugu names.

Background Information on Telugu Naming Practices and Names

As stated above, name-giving is considered sacred by the Telugu. Traditionally, names are given during a special ceremony called the *Barasala*. The *Barasala* plays a significant role in the realization of the Telugu patriarchal system. The *Barasala Samskara* is a ritual that involves the father selecting a name for his child that he believes will be pleasing to the *Brahma* (God or Universal Self). During another ritual, the *Medhajanana Samskara*, the father gives his blessings to his newborn. The child's name is uttered during a blessing to pray for the infant's longevity and intelligence. To explain the structure and meaning of a Telugu name, it is first necessary to present the sub-schemas embedded within the *Barasala*. These sub-schemas are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Barasala Schema and the Embedded Subschemas



In the first few days after the birth of a child, in accordance with *Vedic* Astrology, a birth chart is plotted for the infant name-bearer by coordinating the time and place of birth. This chart is used by astrologers to select the initial syllable of the child's name. Once determined, this syllable is used by the child's parents to select or construct their newborn's name (Gatrad et al. 2004). On their own, these syllables do not carry any meaning. However, the name that is based upon these syllables has significant lexico-semantic meaning. The following sections provide detailed information about the investigation used to explore these meanings as well as the structure and form of Telugu personal names given during the Barasala.

Methodology

A total of 288 respondents participated in this research. Between January 2017 and November 2018, the study participants were recruited from four different states in West Malaysia: Perak (128), Selangor (60), Johor (63), and Kedah (37). The significant numerical imbalance in the sub-samples of respondents from each state was due to two factors. Firstly, the data was collected through the snowball sampling method. Consequently, the differing respondent samples sizes varied with the number of respondents found who were willing to participate. Secondly, the Telugu population itself was found to have differing settlement patterns with varying population densities. As a group, the respondents were located in 16 different plantation estates in Perak, six estates in Johor, five in Selangor, and three in Kedah (Naidu 2006). Once the respondents were gathered, a mixed-method research design was employed. First, interviews were conducted based on a list of survey questions. All 288 respondents, whose ages ranged between 20 and 69 years, agreed to participate in the interviews. The interviews gathered demographic details about the participants and asked them to answer the following questions:

1. What is your family name?
2. Does your family name appear in any legal document?
3. Why is it necessary to know your family name?
4. Why did your parents choose your personal name?
5. What is the meaning of your name?

Questions (1) to (3) were intended to elicit information on the Telugu family names or *inti pēru*, while questions (4) and (5) gathered information about the meaning of given names in the community. All of the participants' names were verified using legal documents made available by the respondents. These documents included, for example, identification cards, birth certificates, school leaving certificates, and marriage certificates. The responses about the Telugu name system were tabulated and descriptive statistics were performed. The semantic meaning of personal names was then classified according to narrative theme.

Afterwards, to establish the socio-cultural implications of the Telugu naming practices, a focus group discussion was used. Six experts¹ in the Telugu culture were invited to Universiti Malaya on July 15, 2019, for a three-hour discussion. During this session, the experts provided insights into the cultural conceptualization of the Telugu community, their naming practices, and the meaning and structure of Telugu names.

Findings and Discussion

Telugu Naming Practices

The respondents provided a great deal of information about the *Barasala* ceremony. According to Jogammah, an expert study respondent who has conducted this ceremony for all her 21 grandchildren, the following steps are taken during this sacred naming ritual:

During the *Barasala* ceremony, rice grains are spread on a bronze dish and the father writes the chosen name on the rice grains using a stick rolled in gold wrapper, while chanting the name of the main deity. This is drawn from the traditional saying that *in every grain of rice, your name is written.*² The baby's father then whispers the selected name into the child's right ear thrice and says a prayer. The need to repeat the name three times symbolizes the three main deities in Hinduism.

She added that in the Telugu belief system, uttering a child's name during the ceremony will ensure that the child will take on the characteristics of the onomastic referent throughout their lives. This means that the Telugu believe the naming ceremony will have life-long impact on the child's destiny (Cheng 2008; Whissel 2001). The Telugu community, as followers of the Hindu faith, also believe that whatever happens, good or bad, it is an act of divine intervention (Neeraj 2010). The naming ceremony is a religious rite designed to seek the blessings of deities.

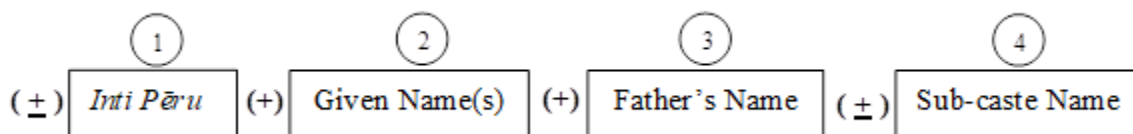
For example, our respondents revealed that in hopes of being blessed with a healthy child, would-be parents in the Telugu community may take a vow to name their child after a deity. As Jogammah explained, in such cases, the name of the child not only symbolizes the parents' gratitude towards the divine deity, it also spells out the duties and responsibilities of the parents. Chief among them is to ensure that their child lives up to the virtues of his or her name. This religious belief might well explain why 71.18% (n=205) of the respondents in this study had the name of deity as their personal name.

Besides deities, ancestors are also believed to be guardians who can protect children from evil spirits or worldly dangers. According to Adari Appanna Naidu, another expert study respondent, the *inti pēru* can be very helpful in this respect. By uttering this name during the naming ritual, the family ancestors are invoked and asked to bless the child. In hopes of receiving this familial blessing, Telugu parents may decide to give their eldest child the name of their paternal grandparents or great-grandparents. This practice also commemorates the family's patronymic lineage (Gardarsdottir 1999). In the current study, it was found that 3.47% (n=10) had inherited their grandparents' names.

The Structure of the Telugu Name Types

According to tradition, the Telugu is made up of several different name types. The sequence of these types is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Structure of Telugu Names



In the sections below, information is provided about each one of these types and further relevant findings from our study are presented.

Inti Pēru

As illustrated above in Figure 2, the first part of a personal name should contain the *inti pēru* (i.e., the house or family name). The *inti pēru* is traditionally followed by the individual's given name(s), the father's name, and finally the sub-caste name, which is optional. The *inti pēru* has an adjectival relationship to the given name and precedes the given name. According to Subramaniam, an expert study respondent who is member of the Telugu Association of Malaysia, it is nevertheless essential to know the *inti pēru* before a marriage proposal is given, since those who carry the same *inti pēru* are considered to be related and are forbidden from intermarrying. Interestingly, this name was found to be excluded from legal documents.

The absence of the *inti pēru* from the respondents' documentation is significant. Unlike the Telugu in South Africa who are often not aware of their *inti pēru* (Prabhakaran 1999), the Telugu in Malaysia still acknowledge and pass on their *inti pēru* orally to all descendants, even if there is no legal documentary proof of these names. According to Prabhakaran (1999), the Telugu believe that the *inti pēru* relates to a person's appearance and personality. Our study shows that 81.59% (n=235) of the Telugu community members mentioned their *inti pēru* during sacred rituals and other cultural events. In addition, the respondents indicated that the children in their community are socialized through oral traditions to maintain their family names. Nevertheless, 53 respondents (18.41%) in our study did not know their *inti pēru*. According to Jogammah, for example, her parents never mentioned the *inti pēru* of her family. For that reason, her family state their gotra³ for all religious and cultural purposes. According to the expert study respondent, Achaiah

Kumar, the *inti pēru* can be derived from the personal name of an illustrious predecessor or place names such as the family’s ancestral village. The *inti pēru* can also refer to a celestial deity to elicit the protective power of the spiritual being. These names can also refer to a paternal family member to memorialize the name-bearer’s ancestral line.

Given Name(s) and the Father’s Name

Telugu given names and patronyms may be chosen from a variety of lexemes which are either masculine or feminine, depending on the sex of the baby. Given names and patronyms can take on one of three different forms: a) “simple nominalised” (e.g., *Arrti, Krishnan*); b) “complex” which is made up of a dependent adjectival form and a simple nominalised form (e.g., *Balakrishnan, Krishna Kumari*); and c) “compound” which consists of either two or more simple nominalised forms, or a nominalised and a complex form (e.g., *Priya Shamini, Jeya Seelan Aanandharao*).

Out of the 288 given names gathered in this study, it was found that 146 (50.69%) were in simple nominalised forms. Simple nominalised forms consist of a single linguistic element which can be either monomorphemic or polymorphemic. The difference between the monomorphemic and polymorphemic forms is that the latter has a final morpheme as a gender suffix, as shown in Tables 1a and 1b below.

Table 1a. The Linguistic Structure of Simple Nominalised Monomorphemic Female and Male Telugu Names

Female		Male	
Artri	‘brightness’	Prakash	‘brightness’
Revathy	‘zodiac constellation’	Ramoo	‘Lord Rama’
Shanti	‘peace’	Saran	‘surrender to God’
Seetha	‘wife of Rama’	Sannasi	name of a Malaysian mountain
Selvi	‘wealth’		

Table 1b. The Linguistic Structure of Simple Nominalised Polymorphemic Female and Male Telugu Names

Female		Male	
Narayani	a Hindu goddess ← [Narayan + -i]	Narayanan	‘Lord Vishnu’ ← [Narayan + -an]
Eshwari	a Hindu goddess ← [Eshwar + -i]	Eshwaran	a Hindu God ← [Eshwar + -an]

Note: Names and semantic meanings were verified by Adari Appanna Naidu, an expert study respondent and a member of the Telugu Association of Malaysia.

Our findings concur with Britto (1986) in that we also found that the morphemes *-an* and *-am* were used as masculine suffixes. It was also found the morpheme *-lu* or *-loo* to be common in the Telugu masculine names (e.g., *Ramulu, Ramaloo*). These spelling variations in the Telugu suffixes were most likely due to the phonological differences between Telugu and English.

For Telugu feminine names, we found that the suffixes *-i* and *-a* were used, as mentioned by Britto (1986). However, in our data, the suffixes were added to the modified nominalised form to make feminine names. An example of this process is seen in the name *Prema* which is modified from *Premam* ‘love.’ Here the ellipsis of the final consonant *-m* is replaced by the feminine suffix *-a*. The elongated vowel at the end of the name *Premaa* is found in the Telugu onomasticon. However, in written English, the second vowel *-a* may be removed for the convenience of spelling. Other Telugu names that follow this construction include *Punitha* which is modified from *Punitham* ‘purity’ and *Pushpa* which is modified from *Pushpam* ‘flower.’ There are, however some exceptions to this pattern of construction, where the gender suffix is not used. These names are classified as unisex (e.g., *Jaya*).

Out of the 288 names, 105 (36.46%) of the given names were classified as “complex.” A complex name can be characterized as having two or more individual names, in which the initial component has an adjectival form. This initial component relies on the final unit.

Table 2. The Linguistic Structure of Complex Female and Male Telugu Names

Female Names		
<i>Nagananthini</i>	←	[<i>Nagam</i> ‘snake’ + <i>Nanthini</i> ‘Goddess’]
<i>Balasaraswathy</i>	←	[<i>Bala</i> ‘young’ + <i>saraswathy</i> (a deity of wisdom)]
<i>Krishna Kumari</i>	←	[<i>Krishna</i> ‘Lord Krishna’ + <i>Kumari</i> ‘female child’]
Male Names		
<i>Thivyaroooben</i>	←	[<i>Thivyam</i> ‘divinity’ + <i>rooben</i> ‘epitome’]
<i>Balakrishnan</i>	←	[<i>Bala</i> ‘young’ + <i>krishnan</i> ‘Lord Krishna’]
<i>Krishnamoorthy</i>	←	[<i>Krishna</i> ‘Lord Krishna’ + <i>moorthy</i> ‘male child’]

Note: Names and meanings were verified by the expert study respondent, Kantha Rao, President of Malaysia Telugu Foundation.

In our study, we found that Telugu initial names were composed of adjectival forms followed by nominalised given names with a gendered suffix. This finding parallels those reported by Britto (1986) on Tamil names and Prabhakaran (1999) on Telugu names. In instances where the same adjectival form appears (e.g., *Balasaraswathy* and *Balakrishnan*), the gender of the final component, in this case *Bala* 'young', determines the gender of the name. Complex names are sometimes spelled in separate units and sometimes together as one, such as the names *Krishna Kumari* and *Krishnamoorthy*, where the choice is normally arbitrary. Of the remaining names gathered in our study, 37 (12.85%) had compound forms. Selected examples of female and male compound names from our respondents are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. The Linguistic Structure of Female and Male Compound Telugu Names

Female Names		
<i>Gandhi Devi</i>	←	[<i>Gandhi</i> 'light of wisdom' + <i>Devi</i> 'goddess']
<i>Sri Devi</i>	←	[<i>Sri</i> 'supreme' + <i>Devi</i> 'goddess']
<i>Prema Sri</i>	←	[<i>Prema</i> 'love' + <i>Sri</i> 'supreme']
Male Names		
<i>Ramana Baboo</i>	←	[<i>Ramana</i> (the name of a sage) + <i>Baboo</i> (a term of endearment)]
<i>Sri Ramulu</i>	←	[<i>Sri</i> 'supreme' + <i>Ramulu</i> 'Lord Rama']
<i>Jeya Seelan Aanandharao</i>	←	[<i>Jeya</i> 'victory' + <i>Seelan</i> 'fame' + <i>Aanandha</i> 'happy' + <i>rao</i> 'sub-caste']

Note: Names and semantic meanings were verified by an expert study respondent, Ramarau Gengaraju, founder of RN Expert Management.

As stated above, the compound type of Telugu names consists of either two or more simple nominalised elements, or a combination of simple nominalised and complex elements. For example, *Gandhi* 'light of wisdom' and *Devi* 'goddess' are two nominalised names which, when added together, yield the compound form *Gandhi Devi*. The same applies to *Ramana*, the name of a sage and *Baboo*, a term of endearment. The name *Sri* 'supreme' may appear as either the initial or as final component in a given name. *Sri* in the initial position depends on the final component to determine the gender of the given name. For example, [*Sri* 'supreme' + *Devi* 'goddess'] yields a female name, while [*Sri* 'supreme' + *Ramulu* 'Lord Rama'] produces a male name. However, *Sri* in the final position produces only female names, such as *Prema Sri* [*Prema* 'love' + *Sri* 'supreme']. A compound form that consisted of three nominalised names was not found in our study, nor did we discover names composed of a combination of nominalised and complex names. The closest example we identified was *Jeya Seelan Aanandharao* [*Jeya* 'victory' + *Seelan* 'fame' + *Aanandha* 'happy' + *rao* 'sub-caste'] which is made up of two complex names. As our informant Adari Appanna Naidu explained, *Rao* is a sub-caste name. This name type is explored in the next section.

Sub-Caste Names

Traditionally, the last part of the Telugu name sequence indicates the sub-caste. However, sub-caste names were found in the legal documents of only 69 (23.95%) respondents in our study. The sub-caste name appears in a simple nominalised form in the final position of given names (see Figure 2). In our study, we found many of the most common sub-caste names in Malaysia: *Naidu* (49.28%, n=34), *Rao* (43.48%, n=30), and *Reddy* (7.24%, n=5). Selected examples of sub-caste names of male and female gathered from our respondents include the female names *Ramulammah Reddy*, *Nalayeni Rao*, and *Reetha Naidu*; and the male names *Rugan Reddy*, *Raja Rao*, and *Cinna Naidu*.

According to Adari Appanna Naidu, the names *Naidu* and *Rao* were originally sub-caste names but today are often taken as nominalised given names (e.g., *Subbarao*, *Applanaidu*). By contrast, the Telugu name *Reddy* has remained a sub-caste onomastic marker. Naidu further explained that the sub-caste names are usually included in male given names in line with the patrilineal system. This practice is to ensure that the male descendants carry on the sub-caste name through the generations. However, in our data, there were three instances of female children who also carried the sub-caste names as shown in Table 4. This inclusion served as a Telugu identity marker. In the past, the sub-caste names were an indicator of the occupation of the Telugu in their homeland. For instance, the names *Kamma*, *Kapu*, *Reddy*, and *Velama* were once held by people who were powerful landowners and cattle breeders (Keiko 2008). Today in Malaysia, these names are not dictated by a person's occupation but are considered important symbols of the Telugu identity.

The Meaning and Sources of Telugu Names

This study revealed that 92 respondents (31.94%) did not know or were not aware of the meanings of their given names. This means that the vast majority of the respondents did know where their names came from and what meaning their parents had ascribed them. Based on our focus group discussion, we found that Telugu parents use a variety of different sources when selecting a name for their children. For example, parents may utilize the names of deities or ancestors (Gardarsdottir 1999; Jayaraman 2005), historical and epic characters (Jayaraman 2005; Sharma 1969; Som 1989), rivers (Jayaraman 2005), or mountains and temples (Emeneau 1978). Other sources for children's names that have been attested include abstract terms and personal attributes such as power, purity, success, prosperity, joy, beauty, victory, greatness, piety, and devotion (Britto 1986; Kachru 1986). Given the wide variety of sources, some scholars have claimed that Telugu parents have "boundless" options when seeking a name for their child (Shijith & Sheker 2015). However, other researchers contend that the Telugu tend to select names they believe carry protective powers and will have long-term positive effects on the personality of the name-bearer (Lie & Bailey 2017; Sue & Telles 2007).

As in most cultural traditions, the Telugu have a long tradition of giving names that have meaning or a precedent (an earlier referent), and this practice is still widespread. According to one of our informants, Ramarau Gengaraju, there are also Telugu parents who prefer to create novel names⁴ that are derived from the syllables of the parents' names or syllables that have no specific referents at all. However, these choices seem to be relatively rare. For the most part, Telugu personal names are selected by parents to express particular qualities for their child. Most of these qualities are related to the Hindu religion and relate to the attributes associated with certain deities (Jayaraman 2005). Names of deities that are depicted in the Vedic texts, Puranas, and Hindu scriptures are particular favorites among Telugu parents when selecting their children's names (Dalfovo1982; Sukdaven 2012).

In the current study, 71.18% (205) of the personal names were derived from the names of deities. Out of these 205 names, 51.71% (106) were taken from the names of male deities and 48.29% (99) from female deities. Examples of these names are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Male and Female Telugu Names Derived from the Names of Hindu Deities

State	Total	Male		Female	
		Nr	%	Nr	%
Kedah	25	16	64.00	9	36.00
Perak	95	48	50.53	47	49.47
Selangor	32	19	59.37	13	40.63
Johore	53	23	43.40	30	56.60
Totals	205	106	51.71	99	48.29

Note: $t \geq 0.15$; $p < 0.05$, $p \geq 0.285$, $n = 205$, $df = 3$

This result shows that the result is not significant between the male and female deities names. Furthermore, the result of $p \geq 0.285$ between names found within the corresponding four states sampled was not significant at $p < 0.05$.

The qualities associated with the names gathered in our investigation were found to correspond with binary gender expectations. According to a respondent from Kedah, the names of male deities are associated with masculinity, power, and victory. These attributive names are preferred for male children. As explained by the respondent, for female children, the names of female deities who are associated with purity, beauty, faith, luck, and devotion are preferred. As is evident in Table 5, a preference for deities' names as given names was found in all age categories. However, the occurrence was highest among respondents aged 50 to 59 (26.83%, $n = 55$), and 60 to 69 (30.24%, $n = 62$), making a total of 57.07%. By comparison, only 9.27% ($n = 19$) of those participants in the age range of 20 to 29 had deities' names as their given names.

Table 5. Sources of Telugu Names by Frequency and Percentage

Source	Deities		Abstract Terms and Attributes		Epic Characters		Nature		Grand-parents		Placenames	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Age Group												
20-29	19	9.27	25	50.00	0	0.00	4	40.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
30-39	28	13.66	13	26.00	2	20.00	3	30.00	1	10.00	1	33.33
40-49	41	20.0	6	2.00	2	20.00	3	30.00	2	20.00	0	0.00
50-59	55	26.8	5	0.00	5	50.00	0	0	2	20.00	2	66.67
60-69	62	30.2	1	2.00	1	10.00	0	0	5	50.00	0	0.00
Totals	205		50		10		10		10		3	

Note: $p \leq 0.00$, $p < 0.05$, $df = 20$. The p-value is significantly lower than 0.05, thus indicating a pattern between age and naming categories.

The pattern between the name sources and the corresponding age groups was found to be strongly significant at the $p < 0.05$. Although deity names were most popular amongst the oldest respondents in the study, a different source was common amongst the youngest respondents. Names derived from abstract terms and attributes were the preferred source of names for participants in this age group. As shown in Table 5, 76.00% ($n = 38$) of respondents between the ages of 20 to 39 had a name that fell into this category. By comparison, only 1 respondent (2.00%) of those in the 60 to 69 age group had been given an attributive name.

Another relatively popular source of names among the Telugu was the Hindu epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata (Jayaraman 2005; Sharma 1969; Som 1989). The main characters of these two works were the preferred choice of parents. For example, from the Ramayana, the protagonist of the epic, *Rama*, is a virtuous and brave prince. *Rama's* wife, *Sita* also exhibits the virtues of loyalty and chastity. Not surprisingly, both the names *Rama* and *Sita* are popular personal names among the Malaysian Telugu. However, in our investigation, only 10 respondents had given names from the epics as shown in Table 5. Again, it was primarily respondents in the age groups 50 to 59 (50%, $n = 5$) and 60 to 69 (10%, $n = 1$) that had names from Hindu epics as their personal names. There were no respondents in the 20 to 29 age group whose names came from this source.

In the past, the Telugu also seemed to fancy names of plants and animals (Subramoniam 1955). However, today, the only nature-inspired names that remain popular are those places, plants, gems, and animals that are closely associated with revered persons or divinity. For example, according to the informant Ramarau Gengaraju, the name *Bangaram* 'gold' was popular in the past, but it is no longer a preferred name among the younger generation today. In our study, names inspired by nature were found to be the preferred choice of only ten respondents between the age groups of 20 to 49 years. There were no instances of personal names derived from nature for those in the 50 to 69 age group.

By comparison, locations of holy places are a popular source of personal names today. Especially common sources include the river-inspired names such as *Ganga*, *Yamuna*, and *Amaravathy* (Jayaraman 2005). According to our respondents, these rivers are considered to be holy and are closely related to particular deities. Temples or houses of worship are also frequently chosen as personal names (Emeneau 1978). *Vengadam*, or *Thirupathi* as it is commonly called by the locals, is the temple abode of Lord Venkateswara, an avatar of Lord Vishnu. In our study, place names were only found in the name source for three respondents: one (33.33%) was from the 30 to 39 age group; and two (66.67%) were from the 50 to 59 age group.

Finally, given names inspired by the names of family ancestors or grandparents were also a source of names for our study participants. There was also a clear age difference discovered for this name source. Of the ten respondents with this name source, 50% ($n = 5$) were made up of participants from the 60 to 69 age groups, while only one respondent (10%) was in the 30 to 39 age group. This participant had been given his grandfather's name. Taken altogether, it is clear that the Telugu in our study are strongly influenced in their name-giving practices by their Hindu faith. Even names selected from the other sources seem to be associated with religious themes, such as holy places and the main characters depicted in sacred texts.

Summary and Conclusion

Previous onomastic studies have often focused on the description of names in their own right (Akinaso 1981; Cheng 2008; Eichler et al. 1995; Whissell 2001). However, there is also a need to take into account the semantics and the function of names. The current study examined the Telugu naming practices and linguistic properties of Telugu names. They are the identity markers that demonstrate veneration for their ancestors, religion, and natural environment. Through the sacred naming practices of the *Barasala*, the Telugu show their obeisance to familial and religious protectors, while marking the beginning of a new generation of Telugu descendants. These cultural and religious values are often clearly reflected in the linguistic structure and sequencing of the names chosen.

Oral tradition was the most common method used to share information on the naming practices of the Telugu in Malaysia. Consequently, proper documentary proof was unavailable for independently investigating our participants' names. This research, therefore, had to rely on elderly respondents who provided information about the *inti pēru* and sub-caste names. The insights provided by these informants was invaluable. For example, thanks to the information gathered from our study participants, we found that in our Malaysian investigation, sub-caste names were often taken as nominalised given names and were not indicators of the caste system as practiced in Andhra Pradesh. Today, sub-caste names are considered as onomastic identity markers for the Malaysian Telugu. Potential future studies could use these and other findings presented in this article to uncover more information about the unique practices and the cognitive processes involved in the naming practices of this community. As this investigation has shown, personal names among the Telugu are powerful instruments for ensuring that their ethnic identity remains visible within their community and the society at large. Future studies could also investigate more broadly whether the naming practices have evolved with the changes in the social, cultural, and political scenario of multilingual and multicultural Malaysia. There is also a need to conduct longitudinal anthroponymic research to document the complexity of the Telugu naming system and its relationship to their religion, caste, and the patrilineal system. Clearly, there is much exciting work to be done.

Notes

¹ Achaiah Kumar Rao, President of the Telugu Association of Malaysia; Kantha Rao, President of the Malaysia Telugu Foundation; Ramarau Gengaraju, Founder of RN Expert Management; and Adari Appanna Naidu, Subramaniam, and Jogammah, who are all members of the Telugu Association of Malaysia.

² The maxim of the Indian subcontinent says, "In every grain of rice, your name is written." Rice is the staple food of Indians and is considered the symbolic grain related to the theory of karma. The Upanishads suggest that rice is the seed of all life, from conception to death. *Pinda*, a rice offering made after a death, is said to be a natural symbol for rebirth (O'Flaherty 1980).

³ *Gotra* refers to an endogamous subgroup made up of members who are considered brethren and therefore forbidden to intermarry (Bhatnagar & Agrawal 2002; Brough 2013; Kachru 1986). In general, there are two mainstream Gotra groups. The Telugu in Malaysia are mostly Hindu who pray to Lord Vishnu and belong to the Vaishnavite Gotra. The Tamils are a part of the Saivaite Gotra and pray to Lord Shiva.

⁴ Fashionable names taken from the film industry as well as onomastic coinages derived from both parents' names were also noted amongst the respondents. However, a discussion of such names would warrant a separate study and was therefore not included in the current investigation.

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Notes on Contributors

Thilagavathi Shanmuganathan holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics and is an associate professor. Her interests are discourse analysis and cultural linguistics. Her books include *Internationalisation of Higher Education in Southeast Asia* (edited with Rupert Beinhaeur, 2020) and *Empowering Persons with Disabilities in Malaysia: A Holistic and Multidisciplinary Approach* (edited with Rafidah Aga, 2021). She is also a reviewer for journals including the International Journal of Language and Culture.

Malarvizhi Sinayah is a senior lecturer at the Department of Malaysian Languages, Faculty of Languages & Linguistics, Universiti Malaya. Her research interests are sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, Tamil linguistics, as well as the teaching of Tamil language and literature.

Selvajothi Ramalingam is a senior lecturer. His main fields of interest are sociolinguistics, mother tongue education, indigenous studies, and language use in job interviews. He is a writer of secondary-level Tamil textbooks for the Malaysian Ministry of Education and an external examiner for curriculum review of the Malaysian Institute of Teacher Education for Tamil Language Degree Program.

Thanalachime Perumal is a senior lecturer. Her main fields of interest are sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, Tamil linguistics, as well as teaching Tamil language and literature. She is an editor for the Journal Valartamil managed by Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia.

Correspondence to: Associate Professor Dr. Thilagavathi Shanmuganathan, Department of English Language, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: thilasha@um.edu.my