

Tradition and Change in Imbonggu Names and Naming Practices

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INTRODUCTION¹

The Imbonggu live in the mountainous interior of the island of New Guinea in the newly independent nation of Papua New Guinea. They are subsistence farmers whose staple crop is the sweet potato. Pigs are raised as a measure of wealth as well as a source of food. In spite of various missions' efforts marriages remains polygynous, and men still practice sorcery against their enemies. Australian pacification patrols during the colonial period almost completely halted tribal warfare, although since independence there has been something of a resurgence of fighting in the area. Men acquire prestige through large public gifts of shells and pigs, often several hundred pigs at one time.²

This paper describes the variety of Imbonggu names, some of the reasons leading to the selection of names, the use of names and aliases, the changing of names, and changes in Imbonngu naming practice subsequent to the arrival of European (Australian) colonial administration and mission groups in the Imbonggu tribal area.

CHILDBIRTH AND THE FIRST NAME

While both men and women look forward to the birth of children,

¹The data presented in this discussion were obtained during the period from May 1975 until August 1977. During that time I conducted anthropological research in the Imbonggu area of the Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea. I wish to thank the National Science Foundation for generous financial support. I am also deeply indebted to Yoke, Tope, Lyawa, George Taie, Mone, Mopune, and all my other friends who instructed me concerning the significance of Imbonggu personal names. I am also indebted to Randall Bolig, Geoffrey Cowper, and Anne Cowper for their companionship and logistical support which facilitated my research.

²The above ethnographic description is necessarily brief. The discussion of the Imbonggu area, the arrival of Australian colonial administrators, warfare, sorcery, marriage, and wealth ex-

the period of pregnancy is a dangerous one for them as well as for their unborn. During this time the woman should not go outside at night where she might risk a chance encounter with hostile ghosts, spirits or sorcerers. This risks are heightened during pregnancy as revenge against a man or woman is often accomplished by directing aggression against the unborn or the newly born. Other everyday taboos are generally observed more stringently during the period of pregnancy. For example, offerings of food from strangers must be declined and the names of evil spirits or angry ghosts must not be uttered lest they be attracted to the house of the parents where they may harm the fetus or newborn child.

At birth the new mother is aided by women who are experienced in the delivery of babies. The father does not participate. In fact, the dangers to the father are so great that elaborate precautions must be taken to guarantee that he does not come into contact with the umbilical cord or the afterbirth. The placenta and the umbilical cord are buried away from the house in a location where it is unlikely that men will come into contact with them. Men are informed of the hiding place to further protect them against chance contact with the polluting material.

During pregnancy the parents do not discuss and select a name to be given their child immediately at birth. For the first few months after birth every child is referred to and addressed as *wambiri*, a term which means child or infant. As the child matures physically and gains in strength he gradually becomes aware of the people surrounding him and increasingly reacts to them as individuals. It is at this time, generally at about six to eight months of age when the child "knows people," that the first individual personal name is selected and bestowed by the father.

TABOOS AND THE SELECTION OF PERSONAL NAMES

There are no formal or legal rules governing the selection of a child's name by the new father. There are, however, some very general social taboos surrounding the selection of a name. The most prominent prohibition is that against using the names of deceased ancestors in the

change are mentioned due to the association of these matters with naming practices. For a more detailed description of Imbonggu culture, see Wormsley, William E., *Imbonggu Culture and Change*. Unpublished Ph.d dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, 1978. (Available through University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan.)

male line. To utter the names of such deceased individuals is to risk attracting the attention of their ghosts, who from time to time may be antagonistic for one reason or another. In addition, it is considered disrespectful to utter the names of recently deceased relatives. This same unwillingness to utter the names of deceased individuals also plays a major role in the changing of personal names, of which more is written below.

In addition, there is a specific prohibition against the use of personal names between affines, particularly between brothers-in-law. The name of one's brother-in-law should not be applied to one's son, and indeed seldom is. In fact, an individual should not name his son after the brother-in-law of any living relatives, although this policy is seldom observed in the cases of more distant relatives. This prohibition generally obtains most strongly in those situations in which closely related affines find it necessary to address one another on a regular basis. However, in principle the taboo against the use of the name is extended beyond affines. For example, should a man have or acquire a brother-in-law named *Abe*, then he must not name his son *Abe*. In addition, none of his relatives should name their sons *Abe*. Furthermore, the individual must select or create new names by which to address all those individuals known to him as *Abe* at the time he acquired the brother-in-law named *Abe*. And finally, this individual and his newly acquired brother-in-law *Abe* must create aliases by which to address one another. These aliases should then be used rather than their original names by the relatives of both men. In practice this taboo is often violated except in the presence of persons who are aware of the proper etiquette demanded by an individual's specific affinal ties. Further, the taboo on the usage of names between brother-in-law applies in those cases where two individuals are discussing the brother-in-law of a third party to their conversation. To use the proper personal name of a man's brother-in-law when talking to the former is a breach of basic courtesy, but is unlikely to create any serious difficulty beyond occasionally acute embarrassment. In general terms this particular taboo serves more to produce name changes than to limit the initial selection of names.³

The use of certain names becomes taboo during the actual performance of various ritual activities but this taboo is felt more conspicuously

³The use of aliases between brothers-in-law as it occurs among the Kewa, western neighbors of the Imbonggu, is described in Franklin, Karl, "Names and Aliases in Kewa," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 78:76-81.

in the area of addressing individuals known by those names than it is in the area of actually prohibiting the selection of those names for children's personal names.⁴ Thus with the exceptions of the names of one's deceased relatives and one's affines (particularly brothers-in-law) there are no strong limitations placed on what appears to be an inexhaustible range and supply of personal names.

The choice of name is generally made by the father from the general varieties described below. However, should the father be exceptionally slow to apply his choice of name he may find himself in the situation where a name popularly used by others to refer to the child gains such wide acceptance that it holds throughout the child's life.

VARIETIES OF IMBONGGU PERSONAL NAMES

The classification of Imbonggu names is a seemingly impossible task. The varieties of names described below should not be viewed as comprising a complete taxonomy, but as a rather rudimentary attempt at categorization. It must also be emphasized that Imbonggu themselves make no such attempt to classify names. In general there is not even a basic classification of names according to gender in Imbonggu. Even names which might appear to be strictly feminine in actual fact do not have any gender. For example, *Kepambo* is a name frequently given to girls as a means of commemorating the gift of a large number of shell ornaments from one man (or group of men) to another. *Kepambo* is a compound of *kepa*, meaning to give, and *ambo*, meaning woman or girl or female. Young boys named to commemorate such an exchange of shells are named simply *Kepa*. In all instances where the origin and meaning of *Kepambo* as a name were described by those

⁴Descriptions of naming among the Mendi in Ryan, D'Arcy, "Names and Naming in Mendi," *Oceania* 29:109-116 and among the Kewa (Franklin, *op. cit.*) suggest that in these societies, both of which border on Imbonggu territory, there is a general prohibition with regard to selection of names associated with ritual activities. Ryan suggests that a range of names is taboo while a particular cult activity is being performed (p. 112). The cult, known as Timp, is actually a continuous series of more or less unique ritual activities which come and go in succession. The taboo on names is arbitrary and temporary, being lifted at the termination of a particular cult activity. Franklin reports the presence of a similar cult complex among the Kewa (p. 80). The Kewa name for the cult is Ribu (phonetically, trimbu) which Franklin determines is a cognate of the word Timp in Mendi. In fact, Franklin reports the movement of the cult into Kewa from Mendi. It appears that these cults continued on into the Imbonggu area to the east of Kewa in the past, although such cult activities are no longer common today, and thus have little or no effect on names in Imbonggu. For this reason ritual activities are not given the prominence in this discussion of the Imbonggu that they have received in the discussions of the Mendi and Kewa cited above.

men bestowing the name of their daughters the description of *Kepambo* was identical to that of *Kepa*. No reference was made to the sex of the child as a factor in the name selection. Many girls are in fact named *Kepa*, without the attached suffix *-ambo*. Franklin reports an apparently similar usage of suffixes among Kewa.⁵ Franklin writes, "The suffixes "-nyu" or "-me" may be optionally added to any female name." He cites the Kewa name Rami which he indicates means to stink. As it happened, there were a number of Kewa women living in the Imbonggu area. One of those women from Kewa was named in her language Ramenye, which she explained refers to stinking flesh. The reason she had been so named was that a man had died shortly before she was born, and his publicly displayed corpse had begun to decompose by the time of her birth. There was no reference to gender in her explanation of the meaning of the name, even upon persistent questioning. It appears that the addition of the suffix *-ambo* in Imbonggu is similar to the Kewa suffixes described above, and does not necessarily designate gender thereby creating a category of female names and by implication a category of male names. Rather, it merely serves to recognize an already obvious biological fact: the person bearing the name is a female. It is certainly true that in general those names ending in *-ambo* belong to women. However, only a small percentage of women's names end with the suffix. Further not all names ending in the suffix belong to women. There were several instances of men bearing names ending with the suffix *-ambo*. In most cases it happened that there were no women with the same name, and thus no confusion as to the sex and identity of those individuals. This rather lengthy discussion of gender, particularly relating to the suffix *-ambo* may be a case of splitting hairs, and the question of whether *Kepambo* is or is not a genderless name may ultimately reflect a non-Imbonggu perspective and may have little or no relevance to the understanding and appreciation of Imbonggu naming practices. To argue that Imbonggu names by design suggest gender would be to attribute to them a quality which the Imbonggu themselves do not appear to recognize.

As noted above, the following classification is one observer's attempt at categorizing Imbonggu names, and does not represent any conscious indigenous taxonomy:

1. Names derived from individual qualities or characteristics
2. Names derived from elements of the local physical environment
3. Names derived from aspects of the local social environment

⁵Franklin, p. 78.

4. Names derived from temporal or areal associations with the birth of a child
5. Names derived from current events of perceived significance
6. Names reflection a specific goal or purpose of some individual
7. Names bestowed as the result of some inexplicable association or phenomenon
8. Names invented (without precedent) by the person bestowing the name
9. Names borrowed from languages other than Imbonggu (especially English); included here are names produced by the pidginization of such borrowed names.

These categories of names are discussed below along with descriptions of specific names as illustrations. The purpose of the description of meanings of particular names is solely to provide illustration of the taxonomic categories, and not to reveal information felt to be the property of the bearer of a name. With the latter consideration in mind certain names have been substituted and others altered phonetically to protect informant identities. Such substitutions are of no importance in terms of the subject matter of this paper, and will be apparent only to those few people fortunate enough to possess some degrees of familiarity with the Imbonggu language. Such substituted and altered names have been included in this discussion because their meanings provide particularly good illustrations of name categories.

1. Names may be derived from the personal characteristics of the child, the child's father, or others close to the child. Some examples:
 - a. *Mopune*: beautiful young girl.
 - b. *Tendako*: one. His father was the only survivor to remain in Pangia (a nearby tribal area) after the other survivors of tribal fighting had returned to their homes.
 - c. *Natil*: nothing. This man was described as being without common sense (from 'long long' in Neo-Melanesian Pidgin).
 - d. *Tomambo*: poison. Her father was always accused of killing people by sorcery and poisoning (from *tomo* meaning poison and the optional suffix *-ambo* meaning woman or female).
 - e. *Wenio*: not true. Her father was often accused of sorcery but has always argued the charges to be false.
 - f. *Mindiliambo*: pain. Her father was always sick and suffering and was confined to his bed when she was born (from *mindil* meaning pain and the optional suffix *-ambo*).
 - g. *Globeke*: to hide. Her mother eloped with a man and gave birth to Globeke while still away from her parents, who

had not yet seen their granddaughter.

2. Names may also be derived from elements of the local physical environment, as for example:

- a. *Wakea*: the leaf of a ginger-like plant.
- b. *Koya*: a variety of pandanus nut tree.
- c. *Yapia*: a variety of cordylike leaf.

3. Names may also be derived from the current state of affairs in the social or cultural environment. This state of affairs may apply to a specific individual or to an entire group.

- a. *Bembo*: spread around. His father's kinsmen were forced to flee after losing a tribal war, and remained in several different locations for some time after the fighting had stopped.
- b. *Kolambo*: wailing. She was born following tribal fighting in which many men had been killed. Custom demands that women wail their grief publicly for some time afterward. That public grieving was still evident at the time of her birth.
- c. *Garu*: finished. All the men of his father's clan were beaten and killed or run off their land in fighting. They left their homeland and feared they would never again function as a powerful close-knit kin group.
- d. *Andio*: back there. He was born in the village to which his father had fled as a refugee from tribal fighting. He was born back there after his father had returned to his land to build a new house and make a new start.
- e. *Natil*: nothing. Her father had collected one shell object from the bride price paid when his brother's daughter was married. The brother subsequently took the shell back again. Therefore, her father will give no shell to his brother when *Natil* marries.⁶
- f. *Mase*: bitter. His father was angry at having received nothing in return for his contributions to the bride prices which allowed various nephews to marry.

4. Names are also frequently derived from some temporal or areal association with the birth of a child, as for example:

⁶It is customary among the Imbonggu for a marriage to be accompanied by an exchange of wealth between the two families involved. Most of the wealth appears to go to the bride's family. That wealth is then distributed among the bride's kinsmen to be reciprocated at a later date. This is a pattern which is common throughout the highlands of New Guinea. See Glass, Robert M. and M. J. Meggitt (Editors), *Pigs, Pearshells and Women*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

- a. *Nasinolo*: national. She was born on National Day (a national holiday in Papua New Guinea) in 1972.
 - b. *Mayambo*: possum. While her mother was pregnant with her, some men from the village went to Mt. Ialibu where they caught two possums (*mayo*) which they gave to the pregnant woman.
 - c. *Napile*: Nebilyer. When she was born her father was visiting men living near the Nebilyer River, approximately twenty miles distant, to arrange a large ceremonial exchange of shell objects.
5. Probably the most interesting category of names is that related to the occurrence of events of some significance contemporaneous with a birth. These names function to commemorate a wide range of events including tribal wars, land disputes, sorcery accusations, ceremonial gift giving, and the arrival of the Australian colonial administration. Examples of such names include the following:
- a. *Kepambo*: to give. She was born at the time when her father was engaged in a large ceremonial prestation of shell valuables.
 - b. *Pumbo*: I go. His father wished to construct a house on a plot of land the ownership of which was disputed. The other claimant forced *Pumbo*'s father to vacate the site.
 - c. *Ope*: to point. His father was an honest man but was continually accused by others of committing sorcery. At the time of birth his father was again being accused of such activities.
 - d. *Kepogo*: to cut up. Prior to birth, his father had nearly reached agreement with another claimant over a specific tract of disputed land. This pact was then sabotaged ("cut up") by outsiders, and the dispute was resumed.
 - e. *Yoke*. So named because just prior to his birth his tribesmen had killed a prominent enemy of the same name in tribal fighting.
 - f. *Kiapo*: kiap. He was named shortly after the arrival of Australian government officers (known as "kiaps" to highlanders) in the area.
6. Another category of names is that related to the application of a name to formally announce one's specific goal or intention.
- a. *Glimbo*: to get (in the sense of to recover). His father lost a court decision concerning ownership of a disputed tract of land. His father believed the decision was unjust, and vowed to get his land back one day.

- b. *Pilimbo*: to discover. His father's brother was the victim of poisoning. The identity of the killer is unknown, but his father has vowed to discover the poisoner.
7. Names are occasionally bestowed as the result of some inexplicable chance association. Often for no apparent reason the father's attention is drawn to a particular feature of the local terrain, fauna or flora with the result that the name of that feature or association is applied to the child.
- a. *Undinio*. She was named for a type of grass which grows near the summit of nearby Mt. Ialibu.
 - b. *Kabame*. She was named for a variety of moss which covers a wide area of Mt. Ialibu approximately half-way from the village to the summit of the mountain.
8. Occasionally new names are simply invented by the father without reference to any other category of names.
- a. *Konenio*. The name has no meaning. Her father created the name because he liked the sound of *Kanonia*, the name of an elder sister. *Kanonia* means to be found out; the name was used because her father's brother had been poisoned, and her father vowed the poisoner's identity would be found out.
 - b. *Debini*. Her name was created by her father after he listened to a country western singer named Skeeter Davis during a radio broadcast.
9. More and more names are being borrowed from languages and cultural traditions other than Imbonngu. English words and Christian names figure prominently in this process of borrowing and pidginization, as the following examples suggest:
- a. *Iote*. The name is a transformation of the English Joseph.
 - b. *Rusi*. The name is a transformation of Ruth.
 - c. *Bilio*. A derivative of the English nickname Bill.
 - d. *Kote*. This name is derived from the English word "court," and is a direct result of the imposition of Australian legal procedures and institutions.

One further note seems appropriate with regard to this final category of names. The names in this category frequently cut across the other eight categories, as for instance the name *Kote* which is both a borrowing and pidginization of an English word and a commemorating of the introduction of Australian legal institutions.

CHANGING OF NAMES

Names are not conceived as permanent and they are frequently changed for a variety of reasons. It often occurs that an individual develops a rather unique personality or rare ability as he or she matures. Often one's personal name is altered to reflect such a development or acquired ability.

In addition Imbonggu men frequently obtain wives from enemy groups, often from distant places. This is a pattern common to most if not all highland New Guinea peoples.⁷ With the wife will likely come brothers-in-law whose names are taboo, thus resulting in the creation of aliases or new names to be used by the new relatives. An alias may be derived from a personal quality or trait of the individual, or it may be derived from the individual's actual personal name. In this latter case, for example, the new name or alias is often either a form of pun or extension of the original name. A similar practice has been reported among the neighboring Kewa people to the west of the Imbonggu.⁸

RECENT CHANGES IN NAMING PRACTICES

With the arrival of the Australian colonial administration new variables were introduced into the Imbonggu naming system. First, a new pool of personal names became available and has steadily become incorporated into the traditional system.

New names resulting from colonial contact include the following few examples: *Kote* (from English "court"), *Mone* (from English "money"), *Rusi* (from English "Ruth"), *Iote* (from English "Joseph"), and *Kiapo* (from Neo-Melanesian pidgin 'kiap' used to designate a category of Australian governmental officials).

These new names were frequently assumed by individuals as replacements for their Imbonggu names which ultimately fell into disuse and out of memory.

The adoption of new names was not the only result of colonial contact, however. In addition to names, the basic naming practices came to be altered. The Australian government established as one of its goals the compiling of a complete and accurate national census of the population. The census was modeled after the Australian census format. One of the basic assumptions of the proposed census was that

⁷Brown, Paula, "Enemies and Affines," *Ethnology* 3:335-356. See also Glass and Meggit, *op. cit.*

⁸Franklin, *op. cit.*

individuals' fathers' names were somehow as important to Papua New Guineans (and Imbonggu) as to Australians. The assumption was incorrect. Nevertheless, father's name became one of the required bits of information to be entered for each individual recorded by the census. There were a number of important results of this census format; some were merely confusing, while others became institutionalized components of contemporary Imbonggu naming.

In the first place, but of little real importance in this discussion, names were regularly recorded inaccurately in many cases, particularly where an individual's father was recently dead. This was due to the prohibition against uttering the names of deceased relatives. These recording errors provide additional difficulty for the anthropologist in an area of the world where genealogical depth is notoriously shallow in the first place. The errors did little, however, to actually alter naming practices.

The inclusion of father's name in the census has had some effect on naming practices in Imbonggu. People came to feel that if anything was as important to Australians as one's father's name appeared to be, then indeed it should be important to the Imbonggu as well. As a result, people increasingly have taken up the practice of adding their fathers' names to their own so as to produce a sort of surname. Thus *Tope*, son of *Yoke*, becomes *Tope Yoke*; and *Louis*, son of *Tope*, becomes *Louis Tope* rather than *Louis Tope Yoke* or *Louis Yoke*. Whereas the Australian application of surnames serves to identify one with a patriline, the Imbonggu application of surnames is a unique adaptation to a situation in which a surname is felt to be important and desirable but not at the expense of one's individuality. In terms of everyday affairs people continue to be called by their own individual given names.⁹

The pattern of using two names rather than one has come to be rather popular in certain situations, however. In those cases where individuals have been named by their fathers, or renamed themselves, through the application of introduced non-Imbonggu names it has become fashionable to adopt a second name in the manner of the

⁹The Australian-style census has had little effect on Imbonggu social thought other than in the creation of some changes in naming practices as noted. See Chowning, Ann, "Cognatic Kin Groups Among the Molima of Fergusson Island, *Ethnology* 1:92-101, for the report of a quite different situation among the Molima, who live on Fergusson Island off the eastern tip of New Guinea. Kinship in Molima prior to Australian contact was matrilineal. However, subsequent to the Australian census with its apparent emphasis on relationship to the father (rather than to mother or mother's brother) there appears to have developed in Molima a shift to patrilineal kinship ideology.

expatriate Australians. The second name is adopted according to one of two basic principles. First, if the non-Imbonggu (European or English) name is the first name given to a child, then the second name is generally that of the father. Second, if the non-Imbonggu name is given to an individual already in possession of an Imbonggu name, then the second name is most often the previously used Imbonggu name. These two principles are in no sense rules which are obligatory, however, as witnessed by the case of *Kupini*, daughter of *Temane*. When *Kupini* attended a local grade school she chose to be called Cynthia (pronounced *Tsinthia* in Imbonggu). On a number of occasions she informed me of her desire to be known as *Tsinthia Temane*. On a number of other occasions she informed me that her name was *Tsinthia Kupini*. She explained that both were correct, and that either could be used in any situation.

SUMMARY

The Imbonggu of the New Guinea highlands select names for themselves and their children from what appears to be a limitless range of possibilities. A general taxonomy of names includes names derived from elements of the local physical environment, aspects of the local social environment, temporal or areal associations, events of historical significance, goals or purposes, inexplicable associations, invention (names never used before), and borrowing from non-Imbonggu languages (especially English) including the pidginization of such borrowed names. Names may be (and frequently are) altered in response to taboo, changing individual preferences, or transpiring events. The introduction of certain non-Imbonggu names, especially those associated with Christianity, has begun to alter the traditional selection and application of names, as for example the now frequent adoption of two names by those Imbonggu bearing such introduced names. The compilation of a national census also contributed to the changing of naming practices among the Imbonggu, who now frequently attach their fathers' names to their own so as to produce a form of surname. In spite of these two latter cases, Imbonggu names and naming practices continue to be uniquely Imbonggu.

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