



Factors that Inform the Choice of Ghanaian Ntcham Personal Names

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Abstract: The Study investigates the sociocultural and linguistic factors that inform the choice of morphologically analyzable Ghanaian Ntcham personal names. Ntcham is the language of the Bassari, an ethnic group predominantly living in the northern part of Ghana. These are Ntcham's personal names, whose meanings can be accounted for morphologically because they are composed of separable meaningful morphemes. Drawing on the Item-and-Arrangement model, the study adopts a qualitative approach using data from questionnaires, school records, and native speaker intuition. The study establishes that factors such as the economic situation in the family, infertility, infant mortality, how one is treated by the family or community members, mistakes or wrong decisions in life, unsuccessful life situation and health condition in the family inform the choice of the names. The study argues that Ntcham personal names function as linguistic expressions of identity, social experience, and cultural worldview, thereby contributing to broader discussions in African anthroponomy. The study is qualitative in nature and uses both primary and secondary data. The findings of the paper enrich the already exiting literature on personal names in Ghana and in Africa in general.

Keywords: *Ntcham, Bassari, Analyzable, Morphologically, Personal Names*

1. Introduction

A personal name is a word by which an individual is distinguished from others Mairi & George (2015). Abdulganiy, Moshood, Yusuf, Muhammed, & Abdul-Rasheed (2015) argue that a personal name is a word by which an individual is identified. It is a nomenclature used in making reference to people (Kileng'a, 2020:20). Abdul-Rahim (2021) observes that a personal name is a social aspect of assigning a social status and identity to an individual. Agyekum (2006) writes that a personal name is a name by which an individual is intimately known or it is a word that confers membership to an individual (Adjah 2011). The study of personal names is referred to as anthroponomy. Anthroponomy falls under the umbrella of onomastics, the study of proper names (Algeo 1992).

Ntcham personal names come in categories and are usually given by clan heads, lineage heads and elderly male people. These categories include: clan names (*mmarinyin*), new babies' names (*mbiponyin*), brides' names (*nnimpucanyin*), and twin names (*njasiyin*). Some of Ntcham personal names do not have meaning on their own but they have referents in the clans. On the other hand, others have meaning because they are made up of detachable meaningful morphemes. The focus of this study is to investigate the factors that inform the choice of Ntcham personal names whose meanings can be accounted for morphologically.

Ntcham has two mutually intelligible dialects, (Mpiiti and Bitaapubi). Its orthography is based on Mpiiti dialect, which is regarded as the standard dialect of the language (Peace Corps Togo, 2010). Ghanaian Bassari ethnic group is bordered by the Dagombas to the west, the Konkombas to the north, the Kabre to the east and the Kotokoli to the south. Their capital, Tatale is where this study was conducted.

In African societies, personal names transcend simple labels, functioning as repositories of social critique, identity formation, and cultural wisdom. Studies in African anthroponomy indicate that names embed details on historical events, emotional conditions, and collective values. Accordingly, a holistic socio-onomastic framework—integrating language, culture, and identity—offers a robust lens for examining Ntcham naming practices.

2. Literature Review

Research has demonstrated that varied factors inform the choice of personal names. For instance, Ngozi (2019) establishes that Igbo personal names from Nigeria are drawn mainly from the situations surrounding the birth while Koopman (1986) contends that friction among the family members at the time of birth determines the choice of Zulu personal names from South Africa. In a similar study, Charwi (2019) explains that naming practice among the Datooga

people from Tanzania is based on the physical environmental factors such as terrain, rainfall and natural vegetation.

Naming babies among the Bassari from Togo depends on the order of birth and the clan of the mother (Cornevin, 1954). Sekyi-Baidoo (2024) investigates the considerations that guide the selection of Akan family names from Ghana and confirms that cognitive and cultural conceptualizations give rise to the selection of the names. Kileng'a (2020) asserts that circumstance surrounding the birth, season of birth, and manner of birth prompt the choice of personal names among the Asu people from Tanzania.

Mzaba, Malande, & Mpobela (2022) claim that circumstance surrounding the birth, state of pregnancy and the events that occur before and during the child birth determine the choice of Athu personal names from Tanzania. Anbessa & Tafesse (2019) assert that the physical appearance of the child, the circumstance accompanying the birth, time of birth, day of birth, and month of birth influence the selection of Sidaama personal names from Ethiopia while Dakubu (2000) observes that the day of birth, events in the family, and multiple birth determine the choice of personal names among Dagombas from Ghana. The current study interrogates the factors that inform the choice of Ntcham morphologically analyzable personal names from Ghana.

Existing research shows that African naming practices are influenced by both internal linguistic features and external socio-cultural influences. Certain scholars focus on morphological structures, whereas others underscore the symbolic and pragmatic roles of names in reflecting identity, resistance, and cultural perspectives. Yet, Ntcham personal names have received scant examination, especially through an integrated morphological and socio-onomastic approach, a shortfall that this study intends to remedy.

3. Theoretical Framework

Item – and – Arrangement (IA) Model was applied to get the meanings of the names based on which the factors that inform their choice were established. Hockett (1947) affirms that (IA) is used to analyze morphologically complex words. For instance, to get the meaning of the name, *Maakpa*, the name is analyzed as *M* (I) + *aa* (not) + *kpa* (have). Based on this configuration, the meaning of the name is *I don't have* and the factor that informs its choice is *the economic situation in the family*. Similarly, *Baadaa* is analyzed as *Bi* (They) + *aa* (not) + *daa* (buy). This name literally means they *don't buy* but finely translates to *they don't buy children*. Infertility determines the choice of this name.

4. Research Methodology

The study used Ntcham morphologically analyzable personal names as data. Part of the data was provided on

questionnaires by native respondents while additional data was picked from pupils' attendance registers at Tatala District Assembly Primary School. Further, the researcher as a native speaker of Ntcham, employed introspection method to collect additional names in which other two sources did not elicit. The names were selected based on their meanings and upon which the factors that inform their choice were assessed.

Discussion These results affirm that Ntcham naming conventions correspond to wider African trends, wherein names act as societal stories. Names denoting economic difficulties, for example, mirror those in Akan and Yoruba traditions. In addition, negative morphological forms reveal how language structure captures emotional and lived experiences.

5. Presentation of the Findings

The factors that inform the choice of Ntcham morphologically analyzable personal names are: the economic situation in the family, infertility, infant mortality, nature of treatment one receives from the family or community members, mistakes or wrong decisions in life, unsuccessful life situation and health condition in the family. These factors are systematically presented below.

5.1 Economic Situation in the Family

Economic situation in the family can influence the choice of personal names in the family. This factor could either indicate that the family is economically sound or economically weak. For instance, the choice of *Nkibanba* → *N* (I) + *kiban* (need) + *ba* (what): *What do I need?* is to signal that the family is wealthy. On the other hand, *Maakpa* → *M* (I) + *aa* (not) + *kpa* (have): *I don't have* is bestowed to give an evidence that the family is economically weak.

5.2 Infertility in the Family

Infertility in the family is another factor that inform the choice of Ntcham morphologically analyzable personal names. In a situation whereby a married woman fails to pick the seed of the womb for a long period of time after the marriage and finally gets one which brings joy to the family, the father of the new born baby could name the baby as *Baadaa* → *Bi* (They) + *aa* (not) + *daa* (buy): *They don't buy*. This name finely translates to *They don't buy children*. In other words, *children are not sold*. This is to indicate that if the children were to be sold at the market centers, the couple could have bought many of them.

5.3 Infant Mortality

Some of the Ntcham morphologically analyzable personal names are selected based on the infertility in the family. When the family is visited by frequent infant mortality, certain names are bestowed to the babies in the family with the hope that such names will guarantee the survival of those babies. For instance, *N-yindóò* → *N-yin* (Names) + *dóò* (finished): *Names have finished* and *Kidiidóò* → *Kidii* (Room / Lineage) + *dóò*

(finished): *Lineage is finished* are examples of the names which are chosen to indicate that the family is battling with infertility.

5.4 Manner of Treatment from the Family or Community Members

Certain names are given based on how badly or otherwise the name givers are handled in the family or community. Here, the names are selected based on the fact that the name givers are treated badly by some other family or community members. The study identifies three of such names which are: *Baalàm* → *Bi* (They) + *aa* (not) *là* (like) *m* (me): *They don't like me*, *Bimukùm* → *Bi* (They) + *mukù* (disturb) + *m* (me): *They disturb me* and *Binanḡmi* → *Bi* (They) + *nanḡ* (hate) + *mi* (me): *They hate me*.

5.5 Mistakes or Wrong Decisions in Life

Sometimes, people may knowingly or unknowingly commit certain mistakes in life and later suffer the consequences of those mistakes. Similarly, in some cases, people take certain decisions without considering the devastating effects of those decisions in the future. As a result, those people suffer the consequences of their own actions and become regretful. In the above circumstance, names such as *Mkùmba* → *M* (I) + *kù* (killed) *mba* (myself): *I killed myself* and *Mbiìmba* → *M* (I) + *biì* (destroyed) *mba* (myself): *I destroyed myself* are chosen based on the reason that the name givers feel they have harmed themselves because of their own negligence.

5.6 Unsuccessful Life Situation

Another factor that influences the choice of the Ntcham morphologically analyzable personal names is in connection with the failure in life by the name givers. Naturally, when people are not able to live up to the expectation of the society, they become disappointed. These crop of people also go through bitterness which in effect influences the kind of names they select for their children.

For example, the selection of *Mbakri* → *M* (I) + *bakri* (confuse): *I am confused* and *Icoowɔ* → *Icoo* (Disgrace) + *wɔ* (pain): *Disgrace pains* are selected based on the reason that there is no progress in the lives of those who select the names.

The name, *Bitaaalam* → *Bi* (They) + *t* (should) + *aa* (not) + *la* (tease) + *m* (me): *They should not tease me* is constructed to indicate that the name giver is suffering of shame because his life is not productive. In another instance, choosing *Maalànkumba* → *M* (I) + *aa* (not) + *làn* (will) + *ku* (kill) + *mba* (myself): *I will not kill myself* is given to confirm that the name givers are disappointed, frustrated, and not dignified because they have failed in life. These categories of name givers are despised by the community members.

5.7 Health Condition in the Family

Health condition in the family is yet another factor that determines the choice of the Ntcham morphologically analyzable personal names. For instance, to give *Nweenbiim* → *Nween* (Sickness / Illness) + *biì* (destroyed) + *m* (me): *Sickness destroyed me* is to communicate to the general public that the health situation in the family is poor. Further, *Tikɔsabinyibi* → *Ti* (We) + *kɔ* (all) + *sa* (are) + *binyibi* (humans): *We all are humans* indicates that the health condition of the family is not good.

6. Summary

Ntcham morphologically analyzable personal names are selected based on factors such as the economic situation in the family, infertility, infant mortality, nature of treatment from family or community members, mistakes or wrong decisions in life, unsuccessful life situation and health condition in the family. For instance, *Tikɔsabinyibi* (We all are humans) and *Mbakri* (I am confused) are respectively given based on the fact that the health condition in the family is poor and the name giver is not successful in life. The Table 1 below presents examples of the names, their meanings and the factors that inform their choice.

Table 1: Factors that Inform the Choice of Ntcham Morphologically Analyzable Personal Names

Factor	Name	Meaning
Economic Situation in the Family	Maakpa	I don't have.
Infant Mortality	Kidiidòò	Lineage has finished.
Manner of Treatment from Family Members	Baalàm	They don't like me.
Mistake / Wrong Decision	Mkùmba	I killed myself.
Unsuccessful Life Situation	Bitaaalam	They should not tease me.
Health Condition in the Family	Tikɔsabinyibi	We all are humans.

7. Conclusion

This research illustrates that morphologically analyzable personal names in Ntcham transcend simple linguistic tags, functioning as intricate socio-cultural artifacts that encapsulate the experiences, beliefs, and identities of Ghana's Bassari people. Employing the Item-and-

Arrangement model alongside a socio-onomastic lens, the analysis reveals that these names exhibit methodical organization and clear semantic accessibility, underscoring the interplay among morphology, semantics, and societal context. The results indicate that influences like economic difficulties,

infertility, child mortality, interpersonal bonds, personal remorse, failed endeavors, and medical issues significantly mold naming conventions. These elements are interwoven into the community's socio-cultural tapestry, affirming naming as a culturally resonant and socially adaptive practice. This resonates with wider patterns in African anthroponomy, where names act as identity signifiers, historical archives, and ideological expressions.

The research further emphasizes morphological mechanisms—such as negation, compounding, and pronominal forms—in articulating emotional and experiential truths. For example, names denoting scarcity, hardship, or regret demonstrate how linguistic forms capture intimate and collective stories. This bolsters the view that African names often operate as rhetorical instruments for societal critique and identity formation. Additionally, the work advances scholarship framing naming within linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, portraying names as both mirrors and shapers of social realities. Thus, Ntcham personal names emerge as performative acts that depict and mold the name bearer's communal identity. Moreover, subsequent research might probe the pragmatic and performative roles of Ntcham names in communication, alongside effects from modernization, religion, and globalization on customary naming. Ultimately, morphologically analyzable Ntcham personal names offer deep revelations into the nexus of language, culture, and identity. They reflect social realities linguistically while symbolizing the Bassari's shared heritage. Consequently, this research enhances studies in Ghanaian and African anthroponomy and highlights the urgency of safeguarding indigenous naming traditions as key cultural assets.

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Ethical Statement

This study adhered to established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participation was entirely voluntary. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and no personally identifiable information was disclosed in this study. The

research did not involve any form of harm, deception, or coercion, and all data were used strictly for academic purposes.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the outcomes of the study.

Author Contribution

The author solely conceived and designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript. All aspects of the research, including conceptualization, methodology, analysis, and writing, were carried out by the author.

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