

The Sukuma Naming System: Exploring the cultural Meaning of Names and Their Reflection of Social Realities Among the Sukuma Community in Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examines the naming system of the Sukuma people, emphasizing how personal names embody social realities and cultural significances. The study is directed by two objectives: (i) to analyze Sukuma names from linguistic and semantic viewpoints, and (ii) to investigate the cultural values that underpin them. The research employs a qualitative ethnolinguistic methodology and contextualizes Sukuma naming within the wider Bantu naming conventions, referencing recent studies from the Mwanza and Simiyu regions. Primary data were obtained using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Interviews offered comprehensive personal narratives regarding naming practices, whilst focus group discussions facilitated collective contemplation and comparison of experiences. The analysis of traditional songs, proverbs, and historical records enhanced the data. The findings indicate that names are typically influenced by factors including the child's gender, birth order, birth conditions, parental experiences, and notable sociocultural events. The data were transcribed and thematically processed to discern repeating patterns in linguistic structures, semantic interpretations, and societal significances. Sukuma names frequently demonstrate linguistic processes like affixation, inflection, derivation, and compounding. Names serve as social indicators that encapsulate memory, beliefs, lineage, and spiritual qualities, transcending their language structure. The research indicates evolving naming conventions, especially among younger demographics, who are progressively amalgamating Sukuma, Swahili, and English names as a reaction to globalization. The findings indicate that Sukuma personal names function as cultural symbols and linguistic artifacts that represent both continuity and adaptation within the society.

Keywords: *Naming System; Social Reality; Societal Functions, Cultural Symbolism; Semantic Meaning*

INTRODUCTION

The Sukuma naming system has been at the centre of a cultural debate in recent years: should Swahili and English names take precedence over traditional Sukuma names? This topic touches on more general discussions like linguistic assimilation, cultural identity, and the effects of globalization on Tanzanian culture. Tanzanian language policy positions Swahili and international languages like English, French and Chinese as the only

permissible languages in public and commercial domains, and ethnic languages like Sukuma are excluded, even from local signage and personal expressions (Shevchenko, 2023; Wizara ya Elimu na Utamaduni, 1999). (Shigini & Mapunda, 2023; Simon, 2023). This shift is seen by some as enculturation or cultural erosion, while others regard it as a necessary adaptation in a globalizing world.

At the same time, academic studies reveal intentional, moral naming practices in Sukuma communities: names are structured through particular morphological processes like compounding and infixation and reflect birth circumstances, parental experiences, seasons, ecological conditions, and significant events (Mabilika, 2025; Shigini & Mapunda, 2023). The naming systems serve as vital expressions of cultural continuity and collective memory. The tension arises when younger generations substitute meaningful Sukuma names (e.g., Būyegi, Lūbango, Muhoja) for equivalents in English or Swahili, like Neema, Baraka, or Hope. Modernists see this as a reflection of identity negotiation in the fields of education and the economy, while traditionalists see it as a symbolic departure from ancestral ethos.

This study examined how naming systems are changing due to conflicting forces, such as modern identity formation and cultural preservation (Batibo, 2023; Tummala-Narra, 2016). In order to understand what names imply in Sukuma culture and why keeping or dropping them is important in the current social environment, this study looked into linguistic-semantic frameworks, ingrained cultural values, and the role of names as social narratives. Social semiotic theory was used as the guiding framework, showing how names as symbols of identity are interpreted as a meaning-making resource. The study described naming as a semiotic choice to create meaning, to show cultural reflections, power dynamics and creation of identity in the Sukuma culture. The meaning of the name is what is implied by the people in their minds in a given social context, since the meaning is not confined to the word or a symbol alone; it resides in the mind.

This study identifies various gaps in the discourse around African and Sukuma naming customs. Primarily, numerous studies focus on either linguistic structure or cultural symbols, failing to critically analyze how naming practices are negotiated in modern contexts influenced by education, state language policy, and globalization. Furthermore, there is a paucity of empirical focus on how individuals understand the loss, retention, or substitution of Sukuma names across successful generations. Finally, there is an absence of cohesive linguistic-semantic and ethnographic study that considers names as evolving social narratives. The study was based on two objectives: the linguistic and semantic analysis of Sukuma names and the exploration of the underlying cultural values.

Sukuma Language

The Sukuma language, one of the Bantu languages, is spoken by the Sukuma people in northern Tanzania, in the regions around Lake Victoria such as Mwanza, Simiyu, Shinyanga and Geita, including Kigoma, Rukwa and Singida. The people who speak Sukuma are called Bhasukuma, denoting the “Northern people”. The Sukuma are traditionally semi-sedentary agro-pastoralists, raising cattle and cultivating crops such as maize, rice, and cotton (Bukurura, 1995; Malcolm, 2018). Mabilika (2025) adds that 12%, which ranges to 5,500,000 people in Tanzania, speak Sukuma as their mother tongue. The

Sukuma language consists of four dialects, including Kīya, which means East, Ng'weli, which means West, Dakama, which means South and Sukuma, which means Northern.

Literature Review

Foundations of Sukuma Naming Systems

The Sukuma naming system, firmly embedded in the culture of Tanzania's Sukuma people, presents a rich site for anthropological and linguistic study (Shigini & Mapunda, 2023). Research aims to reveal the complex meanings in names and how they reflect community realities. Early work focused on documenting name-types and structure. More recent studies show that Sukuma personal names encode factors such as the child's sex, circumstances of birth, birth order and manner, place and time of birth, parents' experiences, and significant seasonal, local, national, or global events (Shigini & Mapunda, 2023; Simon, 2023).

Social Semiotic Theory as an Analytical Framework.

Social semiotic theory, as advanced by Halliday, Halliday (1978), describes a reasonable analytical framework for examining the Sukuma naming system since it takes the language as the meaning-making resource in the given society. Language as the social semiotic is one of the pillars which use the persons' names as the signs to encode collective cultural experiences. The names in the Sukuma contexts reflect birth circumstance, social events, parental experience, community values, manner of birth and the sex of the newborn.

Another tenet is the meaning as the system of choice where Sukuma parents have the cultural pool of semiotic options that are shaped by social norms, beliefs, and historical trends, showing lived experience, social relationships and the coherence of cultural narratives. Context of situation is the consequent pillar to which meanings are tied to specific social conditions under which names are reinterpreted based on globalization and cultural dynamisms due to global cultural proxemics and interactions (Chaudhari & Dasaradhi, 2019; Halliday, 1978).

Corresponding Naming Practices.

For comparison, among the Yorùbá, names similarly reference childbirth conditions (e.g. twins, breech delivery, delay, physical traits), familial or social situations, and emotional or historical meanings (Oyěwùmí & Girma, 2023; Sanni et al., 2021). In Japanese and Balinese cultures, names can indicate birth order, natural phenomena at the time of birth, gender, caste, or parental expectations. Japanese names often reflect family hopes and are influenced by cultural trends and globalization (Mori-Kolbe, 2020; Pradhana, 2021). In Machame-Chagga of Tanzania, names were given based on semantic content and also based on the circumstances during the child's birth (Lusekelo & Muro, 2018). Similarly, the Kuria of Mara region in Tanzania have the ancestral lineage of naming a child based on the situation prevailing at birth, including day of the week, season, social events, traumatic or celebratory events, and features of the newborn such as sex (Charwi, 2024).

Indigenous Knowledge and Socio-cultural Contexts.

Studying how language, culture, and social life interact is made easier by the Sukuma population, Tanzania's biggest ethnic group. Particularly in the areas of leadership, health,

religion, environmental management, and numeracy, it preserves strong indigenous knowledge systems (Gregory et al., 2024). These traditions are actively preserved and passed down through generations, supporting community welfare and cultural continuity. Research by scholars like Mapunda and Shigini (2024), Simon (2023), and Shigini (2023) have examined the etymological origins of Sukuma names, revealing their connections to the Sukuma language, proverbs, and historical events. They have identified that names in a Sukuma community are a deliberate process based on a child's sex, birth circumstance, parental experience, timing and significant events. Etymology and linguistic structures use infixation plus noun or verb and employ inflection, derivation and compounding to understand their meanings and cultural contexts.

The names often carry multiple layers of meaning, reflecting the parents' hopes, the family's history, and the prevailing social conditions at the time of the child's birth. The study of names also provides a window into the Sukuma worldview, including their beliefs about the spiritual realm, the importance of family lineage, and the role of individuals within the community.

Globalization and Naming Transformation.

It seems that the impact of globalization and modernization on traditional values like naming systems is an area of growing interest. It shapes both personal and collective identities, resulting in cultural displacement and assimilation in an interconnected world (Elhalafawy, 2022). According to Wang (2019), Globalization is a process of interaction and integration among people, businesses, institutions, and governments of different countries in many aspects surrounding human lives across the globe. One of the identified experiences for the change of names is migration from the place of origin to a new place for settlement, whether willingly or by force. To adopt the new environment, the re-naming process may influence acculturation while aiming to align with a new or host community (Tummala-Narra, 2016). The second is the entrance of Christianity and colonialism, for example, the Christian missionaries who entered some parts of Nigeria in 1846 assumed the African names were satanic and barbaric, thus they called Africans to change their names to suit Hebrews/Europeans (Clasberry, 2012; Elhalafawy, 2022). Many Christian names express words with semantic content, for example, *Daniel* 'God is my judge', *Aikael* 'thank you God', and *Ndumiakunde*, 'the Lord tends to love' (Lusekelo & Muro, 2018).

How local societies respond to the influence and pressure of globalization is similar to how colonized societies respond to the role of imperialism (Elhalafawy, 2022). Globalization processes challenge the previous behaviour of people's lives and their communities, as the result new identity because the previous identity feels threatened by the emergence of a new society. Similarly, the influence of Swahili and English names, along with the adoption of Western cultural practices in contemporary society, presents a challenge to the preservation of the Sukuma naming system.

Policy on Cultural Preservation

The Tanzanian government's policies on cultural preservation, as outlined in *Wizara ya Elimu na Utamaduni* (1999), play a crucial role in supporting and promoting

indigenous languages and cultural practices, including naming traditions. However, the practices of promoting indigenous languages are not officially permissible in the public domains, like in public meetings, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc.

Gaps and Contemporary Directions.

The gap in the existing literature lies in the need for more contemporary studies that analyze the dynamic changes within the Sukuma naming system in the context of globalization and the evolving social landscape of Tanzania. Specifically, there is a need for research that examines how the meanings of names are being reinterpreted and adapted by younger generations, and how these changes reflect the shifting social realities of the Sukuma community. This study aims to address this gap by providing an up-to-date analysis of the Sukuma naming system, incorporating both historical perspectives and contemporary observations.

METHOD

Participants and Materials

The qualitative approach was suitable due to its focus on meaning, interpretation, lived experience, and social context surrounding names rather than numerical measurements (Lim, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). The design allowed the researcher to capture participants regarding how names function as a career of identity, cultural memory and social narratives. The ethnographic approach enabled the researchers to investigate naming practices within their natural cultural settings, observing how names are created, interpreted, and used within the Sukuma society. Ethnography is fascinated by examining cultural traditions due to its interest in understanding the social phenomena of the community members.

The study purposively selected 30 participants from Sukuma-speaking communities located in Mwanza and Simiyu regions in northwestern Tanzania. From the stated regions, the participants were drawn from Bujora ward in Kisesa and Somanda ward consecutively, the areas known for the strong Sukuma cultural presence. The participants represented different social groups, including elders who are the custodians of traditional knowledge and cultural practices, traditional leaders who are responsible for maintaining cultural authority, parents, and youths. Elders and traditional leaders provided deep cultural knowledge, parents who are directly involved in naming children in the contemporary context, and youths whose naming choices reflect modern influences. Cultural environments such as community centres, selected homes, and during traditional naming ceremonies were given much consideration. The diversity of the participants enabled the study to capture both traditional and contemporary naming perspectives in the Sukuma society. Culturally meaningful locations like community centres, selected homes, and traditional naming ceremonies were used to conduct the study.

Data Collection Technique, Instruments and Data Analysis

The study relied on qualitative multiple data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews that provided flexibility among participants to elaborate on their experiences. Focus group discussions (FGDs) facilitated collective reflection among the participants to enable the comparison of naming traditions across generations, like

traditional naming practices, change in naming patterns, and the influence of religion, globalization and education on names. Document and cultural texts analysis, like traditional songs, proverbs, oral narratives, and historical accounts referencing names. The mentioned sources provided additional cultural context and supported the interpretation of names as cultural symbols embedded in social memory. Observation was done in the traditional naming ceremonies, which allowed direct insights into the cultural processes involved in naming children. All interviews and discussions were audio recorded with participants' consent, and detailed field notes were taken to capture contextual observation. The collected data were transcribed and later translated into English.

The researchers coded the data by identifying recurrent ideas, meanings and patterns related to naming practices. The codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting linguistic and cultural dimensions of names. Thematic analysis was employed, integrating linguistics, semantics, and cultural analysis. Linguistic analysis was examined using the morphology and phonology of name focusing on elements like roots, prefixes, suffixes, and gender markers. Semantically, the analysis is based on denotative (literal) and connotative (symbolic) meanings representing birth circumstance, family experience, historical events and cultural beliefs. The researchers also used social-cultural interpretation to examine how naming practices reflect communal values, ancestral beliefs, and identity formation. Triangulation across data sources enhanced credibility and reliability of findings through comparison of information obtained from interviews, focus group discussions, observation and cultural documents to validate interpretations and reduce bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the relevant institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Cultural sensitivity was observed, especially when discussing sacred or ancestral naming systems. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any point without penalty.

Limitations

The basic limitations originate from the nature of the research itself, which is qualitative and ethnographic. Data collection relies heavily on fieldwork, interviews, and potentially participant observation within the Sukuma community in Tanzania. This presents several challenges. Firstly, access to the community and establishing rapport with participants can be difficult, requiring time, cultural sensitivity, and potentially language proficiency in Sukuma or Swahili (Turgo, 2012; Turhan & Bernard, 2020). Secondly, the research relies on the accuracy and reliability of the data gathered through interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). This can be affected by factors such as recall bias, social desirability bias, and the researcher's interpretations (Bell et al., 2019; Coughlin, 1990; Van Der Maas et al., 2021).

The research's qualitative nature also limited the generalizability of findings. The study's scope is confined to specific Sukuma communities, making it difficult to extrapolate conclusions to other ethnic groups across the country (Hadley, 2005). Furthermore, the

analysis of cultural meanings is inherently subjective, requiring careful interpretation of linguistic and social contexts.

The study was conducted in two main regions of northwestern Tanzania, Mwanza and Simiyu, where a rich tapestry of communities' history, culture and natural heritage is found, like the Bujora museum in Kisesa, Mwanza. A field-based ethnolinguistic approach was used to capture real-life naming systems in community contexts. The researcher collaborated with local cultural institutions and Sukuma elders who are native speakers with rich knowledge of Sukuma traditions to identify the people's names with their clear interpretations according to the context of situations. Research activities were set up in community centers and selected homes, where interviews and discussions could be comfortably and respectfully held.

The environment was structured to encourage open and reflective communication. Interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out in Sukuma and Swahili, depending on the participants' preference. Traditional naming ceremonies were also observed where possible, to gain practical insights into naming processes and cultural expressions. Each session was audio-recorded (with consent), and observational notes were taken to supplement verbal data. Names mentioned during interactions were systematically categorized according to linguistic form, meaning, and contextual background. Key cultural materials such as songs, proverbs, and oral narratives were gathered and digitized for analysis. This setup enabled the researcher to collect data from natural, socially meaningful environments, ensuring cultural authenticity and interpretive depth consistent with the study's objectives.

Measurement Procedures

To ensure accurate and consistent measurement of linguistic and cultural attributes, data were collected through guided instruments developed specifically for this research. Semi-structured interview guides focused on questions such as: *What is the meaning of your name? Who named you and why? And what do certain names signify in your community?* These questions measured the semantic structure, naming motivations, and sociocultural values linked to personal names.

Focus group discussions employed thematic prompts like "Naming and family identity" or "Traditional vs. modern naming", designed to elicit communal perspectives and generational comparisons. Each name mentioned was recorded, transcribed phonetically, and then analyzed morphologically (e.g., roots, prefixes, and suffixes) and semantically (literal and symbolic meanings).

In parallel, a content analysis checklist was used for cultural texts like songs and folktales, coding instances where names were used metaphorically or representatively. Triangulation using multiple methods and sources helped to validate the meanings and interpretations derived from the names. Each data set was classified under themes aligned with the objectives: linguistic form, cultural value, and experiential function. This standardized yet flexible procedure ensured meaningful interpretation and reduced bias in the naming, data collection and evaluation.

RESULTS

The analysis of over 150 Sukuma personal names revealed that naming practices operate simultaneously as linguistic constructions, cultural sign systems, records of lived experience, and sites of intergenerational negotiation. Five major themes emerged from the data: first, morphological and gendered structuring of names, second, birth circumstances and existential meanings, third, ancestral belief systems and cosmology, fourth, names as historical and biographical archives, and fifth, intergenerational shifts in naming practices.

Morphological and Gendered Structuring of Names.

Sukuma names often follow agglutinative patterns, with most names composed of a root word and one or more affixes that modify the meaning. They demonstrate a fascinating interplay of gender marking through prefixes often reflecting a common root in some names, for example, Mlekwa (male) and Ndekwa (female) share the root '-ekwa', with 'M-' indicating masculine and 'N-' (or 'n-') indicating feminine. Also, Mageme (male) and Ngemelo (female) are both rooted in '-geme', where 'Ma-' is a prefix for males and 'N-' is a prefix for females, while '-lo' is the suffix for females. Similarly, Ng'habī (male) and Habī (female) are derived from '-habī', where Ng'-' signifies male and the absence of the prefix 'Ng'-' entails female. This pattern extends to Mayala (male) and Nyanzala (female) names, like Mayala (male) and Nyanzala (female), both stemming from '-ala' with the prefix 'Ma-' for males and 'Nya-' for females. These prefixes are not merely arbitrary but often carry historical or grammatical significance in the Sukuma language.

The linguistic structure highlights a common Sukuma naming convention where gender differences in some names are achieved through specific morphemes attached to a shared lexical core. The semantic structures often relate to circumstances of birth, desired qualities, or ancestral connections. For example, Mageme and Ngemelo imply that the previous child/children died at the infant stage; it is time for the parents to try again, to get another child. Mayala and Nyanzala entail an incidence to one who was born during hunger, while Mlekwa and Ndekwa conflate one of the parents passed away or divorced when the child was an infant. Similarly, Ng'habī and Habī mean the passing away of the parent (s) soon after birth.

Birth Circumstances and Existential Meanings.

Sukuma naming reflects lineage, circumstances of birth, and ancestral connection. Names like Nzoka (the snake), Ndūtū (green snake), Sato/Ndelema (python) are names given to entail snake-worshipping progenitor or ancestor. Also, Lūkūba (male), meaning thunder, entails the lineage with the spirit of thunder. Magūlūmangū/Kashinje (he presented feet first at birth), Mabula (male), Kabula (female) (rainy season), Shija (male/female) born after twins illustrate these values. Others are like Būjikū (night birth), Kulwa (male/female), first twin, Dotto (male/female) (second twin), Tangi (the firstborn), Gīchiba (the lastborn), Būngūlwa (one expelled from the chieftdom), Lūbatūla (removing someone from the chieftdom), Masolwa (one who was found and adopted), Gītulá (running away because of the rumours of war) are names given to children due to circumstances that occurred at birth. Muhangwa (he who was prophesied to be born), Mhīgī (charms - there was no child until the parents decided to use charm), Kamulī (male), 'the light, one who cleanses the family of the twins', Ntiga (male) 'a tree that thrives in both the rainy and dry

seasons' are names with ancestral connection based on their birth. Many names reflected values such as resilience, humility, divine intervention, and community pride.

Ancestral Belief Systems and Cosmology.

Names functioned as cultural records, mirroring societal challenges, historical events, and personal stories. R₃ *"Newborns were given names that reflected the experiences and circumstances within their social context."* For example, Malimi (male)/Limi (female) 'born during the daytime or born during the dry season', Nyelele (male) born during the Nyerere regime, Būlūgū (male) denotes war/fighting, commonly used among children born during times of social struggle or cultural records. Similarly, Ngeme/Mageme (male/female), Ngemelo (female), Masalū (male/female), Mahūnja (male), Gūdahwa (female), the mentioned names entail the survivors, who were assigned to children who followed previous infant deaths.

R₉, 12, 13 and 17 stated that *"The names like Māhūmā (floods experience), Nzigī (locust outbreak), Gītulā (running away because of the rumours of war), Matondo (the young locust during the locust outbreak), Shigela (born during the Maasai invasion in the Sukuma land), reflect historical events. On the other hand, names like Mang'welela (the one who drinks much alcohol), Mabina (one who likes traditional dances), Nkwabi (the husband has just arrived from the search for wealth, then the child is born), Lūhinda (to gazette the land in the chiefdom), Shabo/Sabho (the richness), reflect personal stories.*

Based on the quotation above, names were often updated or changed throughout one's life to reflect new achievements or societal roles, showing that naming was an evolving narrative rather than a fixed label.

Names as Historical and Biographical Archives.

Sukuma names were often used in proverbs, songs, and ceremonies, reinforcing their communal and spiritual significance. Names are not merely identifiers, but convey deep cultural meaning, acting as a form of communication and a record of community experience. Consider the examples below:

Table 1. Names as Historical and Biographical Archives

Name (s)	Historical and Biographical Archives
1. Lwanga	R ₇ <i>"The name Lwanga symbolizes that a child was born during a period of millet beer celebration and implies success and prosperity for the newborn".</i> The stated notion was associated with expressing a wish for success, whether directed toward oneself or toward the broader community.
2. Maseko	Denotes a child was born during a time of laughter or joy, reflecting a positive family or community event.
3. Makīngū	One who was born at dawn, reflecting the successful beginning of the family/community.
4. Magīna, Muhangwa, Halawa, Sayī, Masayī	May refer to a child whose birth is associated with a traditional doctor (nfumu), highlighting the role of healers in the community.

5. Lizezaga or Mpyalimi	Indicates that a child was born after a period of hardship or famine, serving as a reminder of resilience in the family and community at large.
6. Mabula/Mbula/Kabula	One who was born during the rainy season emphasizing the importance of rain for crops and life in the community. Farming season.
7. Mayīla/Kayīla/Nzīla	Many paths/small path/ a path, indicating the child was born during a journey or symbolizing a new direction for the family.
8. Mashimba/Shimba	Lions/Lion bestow the quality of strength, bravery, and leadership skills often associated with the community leader or ancestors.
9. Mihayo	R ₂₃ <i>"A child whose birth is linked to a significant speech or discussion reflecting the value of communication in the family/community". 'Mihayo' denotes issues or discussions centered on a particular contention or matter of concern.</i>
10. Ndīmi	The herder reflects the community's strong connection to cattle herding and agricultural practices in the local context.
11. Ngolo, Nkwimba, Nkamba, Nima, Nshola, Minza, Ng'wasi, Nkwaya, Nsiya	The names denote the queen of the land. The one who makes the chief stand still and brings the descendants who could continue dominating the land. Behind every great man, there is a woman. In other words, she owns the land.

These results affirm that Sukuma naming traditions are not only linguistic practices but are embedded in cultural systems of meaning, memory, and identity.

Intergenerational Shifts in Naming Practices.

The study noted there is a gradual shift in naming systems among younger generations. While traditional names remained valued among elders, many parents now blend Sukuma and Swahili or even English names. This trend suggests a dynamic negotiation between cultural preservation and modern identity formation. For example, names like Moshi, Pili, Tatu, Juma, Jumanne, Tano, and Hamis are names reflecting that the child was named after one of the days of the week in Kiswahili. On the other hand, instead of Būyegi Sukuma, 'one who brings joy', they are named ('Neema'(Swahili), or 'Grace' (English)). Lūbango (male) (Sukuma), means blessings are named Baraka (Swahili), or 'Blessings' (English)), Muhoja (Sukuma), 'one who brings hope' shifted to (Tumaini, Swahili) or Hope (English), Lūbīngo (Sukuma), 'the beginning month of the year, January' is changed to Kiswahili/English (January) following modernization's demands. This evolution highlights the impacts of globalization and religious conversion on naming systems among the Sukuma people that lead to enculturation and loss of natural identity.

DISCUSSION

Sukuma personal names function as multidimensional symbols that reflect linguistic structure, cultural values, and lived experiences within the Sukuma community. The findings of this study revealed consistent morphological and syntactic patterns that align with broader Bantu linguistic norms. Specifically, Sukuma names frequently employ affixation and root-based word formations that convey nuanced semantic meanings. For instance, paired gendered names such as Mageme (male) versus Ngemelo (female), Mayala (male) versus Nyanzala (female), Mlekwa (male) versus Ndekwa (female), and Ng'habī (male) versus Habī (female) illustrate how phonological variation and morphological modification encode gender distinctions and social meanings. These patterns demonstrate that Sukuma naming practices are not arbitrary but systematically structured within the language.

Since the language functions as a resource for meaning-making in society, the linguistic structure of personal names reflects broader cultural and social realities. As explained by Halliday in the theory of Social Semiotic Theory, language operates as a system of social signs through which communities encode identity, relationships, and values (Halliday, 1978). Although some have argued that personal names merely serve as labels for identification, in South Korea, Brazil and Germany they link between a person's name and his or her identity, gender-related identity, where names stand for the person (object) and trigger association with that person (Aldrin, 2025; Watzlawik et al., 2012). On the other hand, the linguistic and semantic complexity observed in Sukuma names suggests complex realities like circumstances at birth, time and place of birth, manner and order of birth, and parents' behaviours, among others (Shigini, 2023; Simon, 2023). Their structured morphological patterns and culturally embedded meanings demonstrate that they function as symbolic representations of social identity rather than simple nominative markers.

Culturally, the prominence of names linked to ancestors, spirit beliefs and life events confirms Malinowski's functionalist view that language is tied to cultural needs and rituals. Malinowski's functionalism holds that every cultural element, including language, serves to satisfy human needs, both basic (like communication) and derived (such as social cohesion or spiritual meaning) (Desjeux, 2017; Malinowski, 2014). Also, similarly, R₂₃ contented that *"in certain circumstances, a child may be required to bear the name of an ancestor; otherwise, the newborn might be affected by a malevolent spirit believed to be associated with the family lineage"*. The emphasis was anchored on the notion that the meaning of words and names can only be fully understood in their cultural and situational context, a concept known as *"situational context"* (Averyushkin & Kanel, 2023; Malinowski, 2014). The frequent referencing of birth circumstances, such as time, hardship, or celebration, demonstrates how names encapsulate existential moments and transmit cultural knowledge across generations. This is consistent with African onomastic traditions, where naming is both personal and communal.

Personal names function as important reflections of community history and familial experiences. Studies on Basotho naming practices in South Africa show that a name is not merely a label but a representation of a person's being and destiny within a socio-cultural interpretation of historical events (Guma, 2001; Krembit, 2024). Similarly, in Sukuma culture, names such as Būlūgū and Masanja do more than identify individuals; they narrate

family histories and capture particular social circumstances surrounding a child's birth. Guma (2001) further notes that some names may even originate from non-relatives, reflecting significant regional or international events experienced by the community. This demonstrates that naming practices serve as symbolic mechanisms through which societies document and transmit collective experiences. Therefore, personal names operate as linguistic artefacts that preserve social memory and shared cultural values across generations among Sukuma people.

The generational shift in naming preferences reflects a growing tension between cultural preservation and modern influences. Evidence from contemporary Sukuma communities shows that while elders tend to prefer traditional Sukuma names, many younger parents increasingly adopt hybrid, Swahili, or foreign names for their children. This shift is often associated with factors such as globalization, formal education, urbanization, and religious conversion, all of which reshape cultural practices and linguistic choices (Clasberry, 2012; Elhalafawy, 2022). These changes indicate that naming functions as a site of cultural negotiation where individuals balance the desire for modern identity with the need to maintain cultural heritage.

Consequently, naming practices mirror broader sociolinguistic processes, including language shift and transformations in identity. However, despite this apparent shift, traditional naming practices remain resilient, particularly in ceremonial contexts such as initiation and marriage rituals and political rallies, for example, **R₂₂**, *"in 2016, during his visit to Bariadi, the late fourth President of Tanzania, John Pombe Magufuli, was ceremonially given the title Chief Masanja, a name symbolizing a leader capable of uniting people and governing all parts of the country"*. In such contexts, traditional names retain symbolic authority by reaffirming ancestral connections and legitimizing social roles.

Limitations such as translation loss and participant hesitance in discussing sacred meanings did pose challenges. Yet, triangulating data sources helped maintain credibility. Future studies could explore naming systems among diaspora communities or compare Sukuma naming with other Bantu traditions for broader insights. Generally, this study contributes to the understanding of names as not only identifiers but also as vessels of cultural transmission, linguistic heritage, and societal commentary.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study examined the linguistic structures, semantic meanings, and cultural values embedded in Sukuma personal names within the context of globalization and sociolinguistic change. The findings show that Sukuma names are systematically structured through morphological patterns and carry deep meanings related to birth circumstances, ancestral beliefs, historical events, and family experiences. Names function not only as identifiers but also as cultural symbols that preserve collective memory and community identity. However, the study also identified a generational shift in naming practices, where younger parents increasingly adopt Swahili or English names due to education, religion, and globalization. Theoretically, the findings support social semiotic perspectives that view language as a meaning-making resource embedded in social contexts. Practically, the study highlights the importance of preserving indigenous naming traditions as part of cultural heritage and linguistic diversity. Future research should explore Sukuma naming practices

among diaspora communities, conduct comparative studies with other Bantu groups, and examine how digital culture and urbanization influence contemporary naming systems.

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