

## PERSONAL NAMES AND MODES OF ADDRESS AMONG THE MBEERE

Hidetoshi KATAKAMI  
*Tokyo Metropolitan University*

**ABSTRACT** The basic principle of Mbeere naming is to name the newborn after another person, and to reflect in the name its sex, its place in the birth order, the time of marriage negotiation and generation-sets, which are two chronologically alternating sets.

Deaths and events during pregnancy exceptionally affect the basic naming principle. Successive neonatal deaths often cause parents to name the latest newborn after a thing of importance. Parents are obliged to name a baby after some memorable event that either happened to encounter.

The *njau* name is a title for men. The relationship between the adjacent generation-sets requires great respect. In-law relationships are elaborate, especially in the forms of address to the daughter-in-law.

People's names gradually increase in number. Most are given and used by those around the person, *e.g.*, the parents, relatives, friends, and neighbours. Names reflect a person's habit, character, and behaviour. Mbeere personal names are cumulative and have been maintained and endured through use in daily life.

**Key Words:** Mbeere; Central Kenya; Names and naming; Modes of address.

### INTRODUCTION

The Mbeere are one of the Northeastern Bantu-speaking peoples living in the southeastern area of Mt. Kenya on a gentle slope towards the Tana river. Their population was about 88,000 in 1989.<sup>(1)</sup> In Mbeere personal names, there is a specific situation or social relationship in which people do not call a person by his name but by various forms of address. This study provides accounts of personal names among the Mbeere of central Kenya. First topic is the naming customs, including the mechanism for reproduction of personal names based on generation-sets and how wild animals are introduced into personal names. Second topic is the various modes of address.

Over the past few decades, literatures have been devoted to the study of personal names among the peoples inhabiting the periphery of Mt. Kenya. Brokensha (1972: 81-2, 95-6) gave an account of the traditional naming customs among the Mbeere with some lists of personal names. Mwaniki (1974) recorded various traditional names of the Embu, one of the related neighbours to the Mbeere. Herzog (1971) studied the implications of Kikuyu naming customs for family planning.

The data for this article were collected during my research.<sup>(2)</sup> I recorded terms of address for every observed occasion and asked informants why a specific term was

used instead of the personal name. I have gathered such terms of address to make a systematic list. I use pseudonyms for individuals for this paper.

## MBEERE PERSONAL NAME

According to the traditional naming custom, a baby is named by a midwife at birth who, in most cases, is in an old woman in the homestead. But more and more parents name their baby since the 1960's when maternity wards became familiar. There are three basic Mbeere personal naming characteristics.

First, most people have Christian names in addition to given names. Christianity is the dominant religion among the Mbeere. But the given name is the main subject in this article because not all Mbeere have a Christian name.

Second, Mbeere personal name, as seen elsewhere in Africa, is not usually accompanied by the family name (cf. Hucks, 1937). A man would add his father's given name to his name (e.g. Mwaniki, 1974). But a woman usually bears a name of her husband if she is married, and that of her father if she is not. This depends on where she lives. This phenomenon supports Beidelman's account on Kaguru women that a "woman's social status always relates to some male" (Beidelman, 1974: 285; cf. Middleton, 1961: 41).

Third, people have full legal names, which is a set of baptismal or given names, and a middle or tribal names with a surname or tribal names of the father. Birth and death registration of all inhabitants of the Embu District was made compulsory from 1 July 1968.<sup>(3)</sup> It is necessary to use a registered name to receive any social service of health, education, or child care.

## NAMING CUSTOMS

### I. Basic Principle

The basic principle of naming is to name the newborn after another person. Especially it is important to name a baby after its grandparent. This principle is related to the fact that persons in the same and alternate generation-sets are regarded to be in the same category. Generation-sets divide the Mbeere into two categories conceptualized to reproduce each other, and prescribe one's daily behaviour. The major factors in naming a child after a grandparent are its sex, its place in the birth order, and the time of parent's marriage negotiation.

The first-born boy is named after the father's father; the second boy is named after the mother's father; the third boy is named after a paternal kin who is in his father's generation, *e.g.* his father's elder brother. But, if a baby is born before the marriage negotiation, it is named not from the side of the father but from that of the mother. The girls are named under the same arrangement as that of boys (Brokensha, 1972: 95; cf. Ueda & Ueda, 1975: 184). The parents seem to feel obliged to have enough children to name after at least both their parents (Herzog, 1971).

When a baby girl is named after her mother's mother, her father calls her not by this actual name but by the title of Muthoni, out of deep respect for his mother-in-law. Muthoni derives from *nthoni* denoting shyness and modesty (Glazier & Glazier, 1976: 215), the ideal attitude of sons-in-law towards mothers-in-law. Nowadays it is common to register a girl's name as Muthoni so that the father can simply call her this.

The person in another homestead after whom a baby is named may visit the baby's homestead with friends. This visit is called *makindi*. The participants are said to be mainly women. Mark's daughter, for instance, was born in 1983 and named after Flora, her father's elder brother's wife. In 1988 Aunt Flora asked the neighbours to accompany her to present her niece Flora with rubber shoes, a container of cooking oil, and a sheep.

There are some exceptions to the basic rule of naming given above. For instance, if a woman gives birth to a healthy baby after infertility treatment by a medicine man, the baby may be named after him. Other events during pregnancy and deaths will also strikingly affect the basic naming practices.

## II. Death

Successive deaths of babies often cause the parents to give up naming the latest baby after a person. Instead they name a baby after things that have little importance, such as *mati* (leaves), *macaki* (grass), and *kanigo* (faeces). They sometimes decide to call a baby 'nameless' (*Iriga*). According to Brokensha (1972: 82), this arises from the parents' worries over yet another death. Several studies have focused on the names related to death (*e.g.* Beattie, 1957).

A death within the homestead may also affect naming. Parents sometimes name a baby Nduma (darkness) if he is born soon after the death of any member within the homestead, who dies when the moon is under the horizon at sunset.

What happens if a child who is named after a certain person dies? If parents decide to name another newborn baby after the same person once more, a special name is added to the baby. Kariuki and Muriuki are names for men. Njoki is for women. All derive from the verb *guka* (to come). This is because such a person is thought to have returned to the homestead where he or she once failed to become a family member.

The same reasoning is applied if a baby girl is named after her married classificatory paternal aunt, who is away from the natal home Njoki is the name for such a baby. Women are not considered full members of the homestead in this society because they leave the homestead sooner or later for the purpose of marriage (Brokensha 1972). The girl's birth is, therefore, seen as a return of a woman who once left home, and she is called Njoki.

## III. Pregnancy and Wild Animals

Parents are obliged to name a baby according to the event either of them encounters a wild animal. The following are some examples:

- (a) When a husband kills a wild animal, the baby is named after it,<sup>(4)</sup>

- (b) If an animal, especially a frog or a snake, enters the house of a pregnant woman frequently, a baby is named after it,
- (c) If a pregnant woman encounters a wild animal, a baby is named after it. They are thought to be manifestations of the God,
- (d) If a wild animal attacks a pregnant woman, a baby is named after it.

I would like to emphasize how wild animals are introduced into personal names. In fact, many personal names among the Mbeere are names of wild animals. Mwaniki (1974) discussed the origin of animal names among the Embu referring to Crawford (1913). Wild animals also dominate the *njau* name that I will explain next.

### NJAU: A TITLE RESERVED FOR MEN

*Njau* is the alternative name that all men have, but not women. In other words, baby boys are given *njau* title in addition to his given name. The *njau* of Munyi, one of typical names in Mbeere, is *Njue* (rhinoceros) for instance. Sometimes a boy's *njau* is the same as his given name, but it is important to recognize the difference between the two names. A survey showed that there were eleven *njaus* (Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Njau* and the corresponding animal.

| <i>njau</i> | animal      |
|-------------|-------------|
| Ileri       | baboon      |
| Namu        | bushbuck    |
| Ndwiga      | giraffe     |
| Ngari       | leopard     |
| Njagi       | zebra       |
| Njeru       | hyena       |
| Njiru       | buffalo     |
| Njue        | rhinoceros  |
| Njuki       | bees        |
| Nthiga      | hartebeeste |
| Nyaga       | ostrich     |

All *njau* names correspond with animals in the bush (Glazier, 1972). Bush (*kithaka*) is wild uncultivated land in contrast to homestead. There is no restriction of eating the animal corresponding to one's *njau*. *Njau* is mainly used as a form of address in a certain kinship relationship, that is among in-laws. As it is not polite for parents to call the wife of their son by her personal name, she is called the daughter of so and so, with reference to her father's *njau* name.

### THE CUMULATIVE ASPECT OF PERSONAL NAMES

The older one gets the more names one accumulates. A late old man, known as Ngogotia, had five names in his life.

First, Ruturi was his given name.<sup>(5)</sup> Then, he was called Ngogotia, which referred to his extraordinary appetite. *Kugogotia* (to eat too much) was the verb this name was based on. Then, the name *Mavu* (stomach) was added on the same grounds as

Ngogotia. Mwaruvie (the man who speaks well of) was his warrior name. Participants in the initiation ceremony<sup>(6)</sup> form age groups (*nthuke*). Each member at initiation is asked the name he or she wants to be called by. These names become the warrior name and the damsel name.<sup>(7)</sup> Finally, people called him Kigaru. It was the name of a work song sung by women during threshing millet. This name was added because the old man sometimes joined in the *kigaru* song with women folks.

Thus, people's names gradually increase in number. Most names are given and called by those close around him, *e. g.*, his parents, relatives, friends, neighbours, etc. and they reflect one's habit, character, and behaviour. Although people have registered names they seem to think that the notion of one "real" name is foreign to the culture of Mbeere. Rather, the Mbeere personal names are cumulative and have been maintained and endured through use in daily life.

## MODES OF ADDRESS

One can call a person in the same generation-set and in the alternate generation-set by his or her personal name. But one is not allowed to call a person in the adjacent generation-set by his or her personal name. The English word "generation" in this sense is a loose translation of *riika* (pl. *mariika*), which is genealogical. The Mbeere conceptualize the generation as alternately appearing two sets. The alternate generation-sets are regarded as one and the same.<sup>(8)</sup>

I will try to explain *riika* some more and then how the members in the adjacent generation-sets supposedly have great respect for one another, especially the in-laws. Then, I will examine three modes of address for daughter-in-laws.

### I. The Same and Alternate Generation-Sets

The people of the exactly same generation are close and friendly. They can call one another by one's personal name. They sometimes call each other by a word or phrase which is chosen as an expression of friendliness. The relationship in the same generation-set (*e. g.*, grandparents/grandchildren) is almost as friendly. The difference in age between such a relationship is, however, so great that the younger members are expected to respect the elders. In the strict sense, therefore, the members do not always address each other carefreely, although they are conceptualized as members of one generation-set. For example, grandparents are likely to treat their grandchildren as if they were their equal, and call a grandchild in a familiar manner using a nickname of their age-mate after whom the grandchild is named. But the grandchildren often respond to grandparents not by such address terms but by kin terms, *i.e.* 'my grandfather' (*umau*) or 'my grandmother' (*cucu*). In general, it is safely to say that the relationship in the same generation-set is a relaxed one, compared with the relationship between the adjacent generations discussed in the next section.

## II. Adjacent Generation

The relationship between the adjacent generation-sets requires great respect (*gittio*). The members of the older set can call those of the younger set by their names, but the members of the younger set is expected to use the kinship terms such as father and mother.

The in-law relationship requires extreme respect. Between son- and mother-in-law, the former are required to feel *nthoni* (shyness, modesty) toward the latter. One can find physical avoidance between the two.

Avoidance between daughter- and father-in-law complicates forms of address for each other because the rule of the vililocal residence increases the chance of their contact. She can neither call him by his personal name nor his *njau*. Penina, for instance, has a son named after her father-in-law, and a daughter named after her mother-in-law. She, therefore, calls the boy Mugendi (a traveller), a nickname of her father-in-law, and the girl Kaari (a small girl).

Parents-in-law cannot also call daughters-in-law by their personal names but by various titles, as shown in the next three modes of address.

### 1. Clan Exogamy and Address to Women

As already mentioned, a woman who married into a homestead is called not by her personal name but by the title of the 'daughter of her own father' by her parents-in-law. The principle also applies to any person who is at least in the same generation-set as her father-in-law in lineage. A curious situation arises when a girl in a certain homestead is named after a female member who married into this homestead, *i.e.* a wife of any member of the homestead, except the mother of this child. The members of the homestead do not call this girl by her given name because this is a name of the woman after whom she is named. To call her by her given name is against etiquette as mentioned above. Instead, they will call this girl by another name which indirectly indicates that woman. Such a name is fixed according to the clan of the woman in question (Table 2).

**Table 2.** The address to a woman by using her natal clan name.

| clan     | address                | clan    | address      |
|----------|------------------------|---------|--------------|
| Ciina    | Wandegi, Ndegi, Muregi | Magui   | Magui, Ngira |
| Gacugu   | Gacugu                 | Mbutha  | Turi         |
| Gakaara  | Igoru                  | Mbuya   | Mbuya        |
| Gakenda  | Ndugu                  | Mugwe   | Irovo        |
| Gatiri   | Nguga, Gatiri          | Mukera  | Igoki        |
| Gekara   | Ukima                  | Muruga  | Mbucu        |
| Iguna    | Ngonyo                 | Mururi  | Mururi       |
| Ikandi   | Nginya                 | Mwendia | Mwendia      |
| Irimba   | Muthanje               | Nditi   | Nditi        |
| Iruma    | Weruma                 | Ngai    | Munyaga      |
| Kamumu   | Kamuvia                | Ngithi  | Mucuki       |
| Kamuturi | Mbura                  | Ngugi   | Ngumi        |
| Kathi    | Kathi, Kengi           | Nyonga  | Mbura        |
| Kere     | Mucogo                 | Rweru   | unknown      |
| Kiragwa  | Igoki                  | Thaara  | unknown      |

This type of address is only for women. This phenomenon is relevant to the marriage rules of clan exogamy and virilocal residence; every single woman will leave her natal home at marriage and spend the rest of life at her husband's homestead.

## 2. Locative Name

The members of a homestead may call a woman who married into it by the direction from which she came, *i.e.* the direction of her natal homestead because of the same reason described above. I call this type of address as a locative name for convenience because there is no specific term in the Mbeere language. There are two locative names: Ciaruguru (of a upper part) is used when a woman's natal homestead is located "above" (*iguru*) that of her husband, e.g. in the direction of Mt. Kenya (5,199 m).<sup>(9)</sup> She is called Weveti, the abbreviation for *wa iveti* (of a lower part), if she comes from the opposite direction of Ciaruguru.

## 3. Marriage Names

The names I denote as 'marriage names' are closely connected with the procedure in the traditional marriage negotiation. In the pre-colonial era, the negotiation was between two groups led by the father and brothers of both parties, without the prospective husband and wife. The husband's party paid several visits to the father of the bride-to-be with some gourds of honey beer until the father of the bride accepted the beer and disclosed his name to them. It was a sign of his approval of the marriage.

The father of the bride has a special name which starts with the prefix, *cia*. This prefix is followed by such items as goats, bells, and metal ornaments, most of which were war booty indicating the success of the man in raids in his warriorhood (Table 3). Such a name is used by the in-laws as a form of address to the bride, although it was originally the father's name. If she is called Ciamburi (of a goat), for instance,

**Table 3.** Marriage name.

| Marriage name | Derivation of the name                       |
|---------------|--|
| Ciamathaga    | ornament ( <i>mathaga</i> )                  |
| Ciamavunja    | many items (cloths, arrows, necklaces, etc.) |
| Ciambere      | forward                                      |
| Ciambugi      | bells ( <i>mbugi</i> )                       |
| Ciambui       | chickens                                     |
| Ciamburi      | goats ( <i>mburi</i> )                       |
| Ciamigui      | arrows ( <i>migui</i> )                      |
| Ciamiringa    | bracelets ( <i>miringa</i> )                 |
| Ciamutuguta   | spearman                                     |
| Ciamwinji     | digging                                      |
| Ciangure      | cloths                                       |
| Cianjeu       | a variety of bird ( <i>njeu</i> )            |
| Cianthuku     | bracelets ( <i>nthuku</i> )                  |
| Ciarogi       | sharp swords                                 |
| Ciaruviu      | swords ( <i>ruviu</i> )                      |
| Ciatama       | cloths                                       |
| Ciathiaka     | quivers for arrows ( <i>thika</i> )          |
| Cietumu       | spears ( <i>itumu</i> )                      |

the father of the bride returned with some goats after raiding neighbouring tribes, such as the Embu, Tharaka, and Kamba (Mwaniki, 1974: 9-10). But, if the father never joined a raid or had not been successful, the bride will not be called by the father's title.

The intertribal war was banned by the colonial government early in this century, and the generations who took part are almost gone. At the time of my research, women who had such marriage names were in old age and formed a small part of population. They were rarely called by such names because their parents-in-law had deceased. But most parents-in-law still showed respect for the woman who married into the homestead despite the disappearance of 'marriage names' by using the substitute form of address, 'the daughter of her own father.'

## CONCLUSION

I have outlined the aspects of Mbeere personal names, naming customs, and modes of address to reflect respect for different generations. First, one's given name is not always a definite manifestation of one's identity. Every person comes to choose a certain name for a person as his form of address. The Mbeere had placed little importance to writing as a technical skill until the East African Protectorate government established administration at Embu town in 1907. It seems that the Mbeere still esteem oracy, which is reflected in people's names.

Second, the importance of the outside world *kithaka* (the bush) is reflected in one's name: A baby is named after a wild animal if a parent encounters it during the baby's gestation and men's *njau* titles consist of wild animals only.

Third, a person is addressed in many and various ways depending on whether he or she is of the same generation-set of the speaker. The relationship between the adjacent generation-sets requires greater respect. Among the relations between the in-laws, the forms of address for the daughter-in-law are the most elaborate and formal in comparison to other names, reflecting the marriage rules of clan exogamy and virilocal residence.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT** This study was financed by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, Japan (Mombusho International Scientific Research Program, 'Anthropological Research on the Local Economy and Social Transformation in the Agricultural and Pastoral Spheres of Kenya,' No.06041009). Professor Shun Sato of Tsukuba University, Professor Makio Matsuzono of Tokyo Metropolitan University, Assistant Professor Makoto Oda of Seijo University, and Shinya Konaka of University of Shizuoka gave me great help and kind advice both in the field and in Japan. Professor Simiyu Wandibba, the Director of Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, helped me in carrying out my study.

The Mbeere friends in the Kiang'ombe Location of the Mbeere District provided me with much information about their life and every convenience in the study field. Especially, I am deeply indebted to my three research assistants, Mr. Nicasio Samuel Ireri, Mr. Faustino Nyagah, and Mr. Dionisio Nyaga, who helped me in my interviews and wrote down from recorded tapes. I gratefully acknowledge these persons.

## NOTES

- (1) The Mbeere occupy the Mbeere District, separated from the Embu District in 1996. Their population was 88,092, or 23.80% of the population in the former Embu District in census conducted in 1989.
- (2) Field researches were carried out from January to May, and from August to December 1995.
- (3) The Births and Deaths Registration Act.
- (4) Desiderio, for instance, shot an eagle dead with an arrow when he visited a neighbour. The baby who was born soon after was named Ithagu, a wing (of the eagle).
- (5) Nyaga was his *njau*.
- (6) In the initiation ceremony, circumcision was followed by a ceremony called *gutagarara mburi* (to jump over the goat) after the interval of the healing period. Today the latter ceased to be performed.
- (7) A damsel (*mwiritu*) is a young woman who has developed mentally and physically, and ready to get marry.
- (8) For a detailed description of generation system among the Mbeere, see Glazier (1976).
- (9) The southeastern area of Mt. Kenya where the Mbeere live has three peaks: Kiang'ombe (1,803 m), Kianjiru (1,550 m), and Kiambere (1,494 m).

## REFERENCES

- Beattie, J. 1957. Nyoro personal names. *Uganda Journal*, 21: 99-106.
- Beidelman, T. O. 1974. Kaguru names and naming. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 30: 281-93.
- Brokensha, D. W. 1972. The Mbeere of Central Kenya. In (A. Molnos, ed.) *Cultural Source Material for Population Planning in East Africa*, vol. 3: *Belief & Practices*, pp. 79-96. African Publishing House, Nairobi.
- Crawford, E.M. 1913. *By the Equator's Snowy Peaks: A Record of Medical Missionary Work and Travel in British East Africa*. Church Missionary Society, London.
- Glazier, J. 1972. *Conflict & Conciliation among the Mbeere of Central Kenya*. Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley.
- Glazier, J. 1976. Generation classes among the Mbeere of central Kenya. *Africa*, 46: 313-25.
- Glazier, J. & P. G. Glazier 1976. Ambiguity and exchange: The double dimension of Mbeere riddles. *Journal of American Folklore*, 89: 189-236.
- Herzog, J.D. 1971. Fertility and cultural values: Kikuyu naming customs and preference for four or more children. *Rural Africana*, 14: 89-96.
- Hucks, G. W. Y. 1937. Haya surnames. *Tanganika Notes and Records*, 7: 72-4.
- Middleton, J. 1961. The social significance of Lugbara personal names. *Uganda Journal*, 25: 34-42.
- Mwaniki, H.S.K. 1974. The animal and other traditional names of the Embu people. *Mila: A Biannual Newsletter of Cultural Research*, 4: 5-11.
- Ueda, H. & F. Ueda 1975. Joking relationships among the Kamba (1). *The Japanese Journal of Ethnology*, 40: 169-190.

——— Accepted *December 24, 1997*

Author's Name and Address: Hidetoshi KATAKAMI, *Graduate School of Social Sciences, Tokyo Metropolitan University, Minamiohsawa 1-1, Hachiohji-City, Tokyo 192-0397, JAPAN.*