

# Cultural and Religious Determinism Associated with Naming Among the Vatsonga People

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## Abstract

The art and science of naming (also known as onomastics) is a broad area that cannot be confined within a locus of single definition. It transcends naming specifics to ordinary and daily naming trends. Traditionally, naming among the Vatsonga is jealously guarded and passed on from one generation to another. The paper firstly outlines different perspectives in naming among the Vatsonga people; that is cultural and religious determinism. Secondly; it reveals that name(s) plays a great role in determining the life of the bearer. It also observes that cultural and religious beliefs operate antagonistically; applying one reverses the efforts of the other. In other words the recently used belief supersedes the former. This means that there is raging warfare between these beliefs. Religious beliefs encompass Christianity and Indigenous religion (worshipping of ancestral spirits) while cultural beliefs harbour the natural values, morals and taboos revolving naming. Interestingly, there is no dual application of these beliefs when it comes to naming among Vatsonga as the paper puts clear. The argument rests on the notion that name(s) shapes one's behaviour, personality, job career, profession and even the social status as promulgated by cultural and religious beliefs.

**Keywords**— Naming, culture, religion, determinism, status, Vatsonga

## I. Introduction

A name is word or set of words by which a person or thing is known, addressed or referred to. The bestowal of names by men started long ago after creation, God ordained Adam to give a name to every living creature which was created on earth. Genesis 2 verse 20 “and Adam gave names to all cattle’ and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; ...” The undisputable feature around naming is its perpetuality and posterity in nature. Although naming is an ancient model but it is still living and being passed from generation to generation; thus, naming is a significant role in human life. Surely, names are mostly used for identification purposes; however, meanings embedded in names give more narration about the bearer or name giver's expectations, beliefs and even status. The central points of this paper are found in meanings of names than names themselves.

Naming among the Vatsonga people is not randomly done, but is premised on past, current and future significant events expected to take place immediately after the birth of a child. Chauke (2015) concurs with this assertion when he notes that “the Vatsonga as people have a tendency to enshrine any event that is considered memorable in a name”. Hence, names relay particular information whether historical, current and expected events to be realised in a family or society at large.

That said; this draws from nominative determinism theory, meaning “name-driven outcome”. The theory was propounded by a new scientist journalist John Hoyland in 1994. According to alliance.org.au:

Nominative determinism is the theory that people are more likely to pursue careers that have some connection to their names. (Conversly, names particularly suited to their

owners are known as aptronyms.) The late New Scientist journalist John Hoyland coined the term ‘nominative determinism’ in late 1994, and the popular journal ran a weekly column on it from then onwards.

Different researchers studied on names of professionals and the results revealed that names influence one’s life and the paper unveils them. After finding that names more likely suit one’s career, Jung ended up asking a question “Are these whimsicalities of chance or they are meaningful coincidences?” (Jung 1952). The paper argues that one’s behaviour, personality, self-image and job career are not “meaningful coincidences” but they are determined by one’s name; that is the meaning of one’s name determine the life of the bearer.

## II. Various Perspectives on Naming

Vatsonga ethnic group have two main perspectives determining their naming pattern which are: cultural and religious. Vatsonga cultural beliefs on naming are hinged on *circumstances around birth, behaviour of pregnant women, the father’s culturally- vested power as a name giver, the paternal aunt as a name giver, visitors as name givers, midwives as name givers, names given at initiation school, naming upon marriage etc.* Religious beliefs on naming in Vatsonga pin point; Christianity and Traditional.

Vatsonga as other Africans believe that names are bestowed following the incidents happened just before or just after the baby’s birth. If, for instance, the baby is born while the family is facing some challenges; the child is likely to be bestowed a name which is associated to those challenges, such as: *Khombo* “disaster”, *Nhlomulo* “calamity”. The baby who is born after an incident which left the family grateful; probably the child will be given a name closely related to jubilation. For example; the baby may be named *Ntsako* “happiness”, *Tsakani* “be grateful” or any name linked to joy. Basing our argument on Nominative Determinism theory that proposes that, names influence the future behaviour of the name bearers irrespective of its negativity or positivity. The name bearers are

believed to be prone to disasters and hardships or blessed and happiness throughout their lives.

Apart from that, Vatsonga give names according to the behaviour of the mother during her pregnancy. Generally; unintentionally, women change their behaviour during pregnancy and it ultimately necessitates Vatsonga to purposely study them in order to get names for the new born babies. Junod (1912) in Chauke (2015:307) expatiates: “... Vatsonga may associate themselves with the circumstances surrounding the birth of the child. The experts in pregnancy matters always observe the pregnant woman. They study whatever she does, such as her eating habits, her reaction to questions ... If the woman does not behave herself according to the norms and values of the society, the elderly women may give the child names such as *Swicele* (quarrels), *Rivengo* (hatred), *Mona* (rudeness) ... If the woman, however, behaves according to norms and values of the society, the child may be named: *Tintswalo* (mercy), *Munene* (goodness) ...” This also serves as a reminder for them relating the behaviour of the child and the mothers’. They usually say “*we gave her this name because her mother was rude when she was pregnant; this is why she is rude too.*” Consequently, the name bearer’s personality will be influenced by the meaning of the name; given that a positive name is bestowed, the child is likely to behave according to the meaning of the name.

Vatsonga also strongly believe that naming is the sole responsibility of the head of the family (father); if it can happen that the child is born in the absence of the father they wait for him to come back. No one is in a position to perform the father’s responsibilities (a superior member in the family) save for the father figure(s) on exceptional cases such as prolonged absenteeism of the father or incapacitation due to sickness or stricken in age. Seldom, mothers can be given responsibility by the head of the family to bestow names.

One other member in the Vatsonga family who is considered as a name giver is the paternal aunt. She only performs this duty after she has been granted permission and the name(s) approved by the head of the family (father) to

name all girl children in the family. Also, she is the one responsible in delivering life orientation and traditional rite lessons at initiation school. Mushwana and Chauke (2015:442) concur with this by stating that this aunt is the very same person who will be called to perform traditional rites when the child goes for initiation school. No matter how her negative life is, due to her negative name (aunt), she continually ascribe it to one of the girls; as a result the same challenges she is facing in life are recurred and replicated from one child to another; since every girl is an aunt to someone in the family.

It is also important to mention that in Vatsonga culture there is a belief that one must attend initiation school (ngoma) at a certain age as a manner of upholding traditional rite. Successfully completing this traditional rite, the graduates are honorary given names (commemorative names) on the bases: one name one graduate, such as *Hlengani*, *Lisimati*, *Lisenga*, *Khazamula* and the list is endless. Some of these names are determined by different circumstances, for instance; it is a common practice that a boy from royal family is the first person to be circumcised as a result he is given a name insinuating that he is the first person to ignite the dawn of the event in that particular group. The first circumcised boy is given the name *Xithhavangoma* (the first initiate) and the last is given *Xisalandzhako* (the last initiate). *Xirilele* (the one who cried), this name is given to the boy who attends the initiation school before attaining the required age and without the parents or guardians' approval. Normally, such boys connive with elderly boys who will be attending the initiation school to secretly go together. Mushwana and Chauke (2015:444) confirm that this is a symbolic name given to a boy who forces his way to a circumcision school without the prior consent of his parents or elders. Girls also get commemorative names at their initiation school (tikhomba), the names include; *Muhlava*, *Njhakeni*, *Tsatsawani* and some. Prerogative in choosing commemorative names is enjoyed by boys the counterparts girls' commemorative names are determined by the aunts.

Moreover, in Vatsonga culture, if the baby is born in the presents of a visitor, the visitor may be requested to name the baby; this also demands the father's consent. Mostly the visitor bestows his or her name if the baby is of the same sex with her or him. Such name givers often pay visits to this family with some presents for the child. The visits are normally done on birth days or Christmas days or other special days observed by that community. Such an action is believed that it strengthens the name given. Mushwana and Chauke (2015:442) assert that a traveller or visitor may be given the opportunity to name a newly born child. Nominative Determinism can be confirmed in these types of names given by visitors; whereby the child's personality is likely to be totally different from other siblings. The child's life mirrors the life of a visitor in terms of behaviour, professionalism and other.

Midwives in Vatsonga culture sometimes give (after they have consented with the father of the child) names to the new born babies. Negative and positive names are found in this trend of naming. Usually naming on this trend is determined by the behaviour of the mother during birth; the circumstances inspire the midwives to bestow names to the child. If, for instance, the mother was adamant and could not take heed to the instructions given, the baby can be called *Mona* (rudeness), *Vulolo* (laziness), *Yingisani* (listen), and otherwise the baby can be called *Tintswalo* (kind), *Khesani* (be thankful), *Tsakani* (be happy) and other positive names. Nominative Determinism as the influence of anthroponyms on one's behaviour will be proven in these names; some of the children will behave according to the meaning of their names.

The other important belief to note is that, upon marriage women are obliged to change their names and be called by their biological father's name or husband's name. For instance, if the father's woman is *Salani*, the woman will be called *N'wa-Salani* or called by her husband's name *Manana Chauke* (Mrs Chauke) or *Nsati wa Chauke* (Chauke's wife). These names are only used by the community; that is, they are not documented anywhere. However, the community uses them more often than the

registry where original names are documented; hence, the dictates of the former supersede the latter.

Apart from cultural determinism on naming, Vatsonga also give names according to their religious beliefs. Vatsonga are solidly bonded onto two types of religious beliefs: Traditional and Christianity; of which the embracing of one is tantamount to shunning of another. Dual religious beliefs brew troubles hence they need to stick to one. In these religious circles abandoning of one belief in favour of another is called repentance to the receiving end and to losing (giving) end is called backsliding. Ancestral spirits through intercession of spirit mediums sometimes dictates ancestral name to be given to Tsonga people. The demands by the ancestral spirits to have them manifested in a child's life as spirit medium is believed to be demonstrated by that particular child either through superstitious illness, credulous crying and or visions of the ancestors until the child is given the right name. Chauke (2015:309) concurs with this confirmation when he avers that ancestral names are names which people believe link their present lives to their ancestors. Such names are given when the child, it is believed, cries for the name. The name is usually determined by the throwing of divining bones. It is allegedly that the discovery and bestowal of the right name restores the child's health.

Some of the ancestral names are *Nyakwavi* (the one who take care of ancestors), *Ngatimuni* (what kind of blood), *Mudala* (the old man) and many others. According to the research by Jung (1972) on professionals' names, it is proven that names influence one's job career, pinning our arguments to this research we can say that these ancestral names make the name bearers to behave according to the given names; *Nyakwavi* will become an ancestors' care taker, he or she will not have a better profession than taking care of ancestors. Apart from that, the child can be taken to the world of mermaids by water or whirlwinds. It has been noted that coming from that world the person will be totally changed and the spirits in that world ascribe a new name to him or her. There is a segment of Vatsonga which does not believe in ancestral spirits but in

Christ. Upon conversion; they change negative names and bestow positive names as it is believed that negative names are associated with evil spirits. Names like, *Vusiwana* (poverty), *Telakufa* (born to die) can be changed and given new names which are positive, for instance, *Khongelani* (pray), *Hlayisani* (protect) *Pfumelani* (believe) the list is endless.

In Christianity, names are bestowed on baptism; biblical names are given at this practice, either the first name was negative or positive it is changed for a biblical name; for example, John, Esther, Joseph, Martha, Mary, Peter inter alia. Christians believe that the biblical names change their personalities and behave to the tune of biblical characters. Vatsonga who believe in Christianity change cultural names in favour of biblical to match what the angel did to Abram and Sarai. When the angel first appeared to Abram and Sarai he changed their names giving them Abraham and Sarah meaning father and mother of many nations respectively (Genesis chapter 17 verse 5 and verse 15). Their new names denoted who they were, in the same interpretation some of Vatsonga Christians get new names depicting of their new Christian life.

### III. Various experiences which lead to naming at birth

Life is characterised by ups and downs. There are episodes of happiness, healthy and living in abundance; perilous time of sadness, sickness, deaths and poverty lie ahead and inevitably visit people in their lives. In a bid to keep memories of the situation encountered in life, Vatsonga preserve their history in names. Therefore, the situation around birth, usually enunciate the name of the child. If the child is born while the parents are facing some challenges be it of drought, may be the mother was sick during her pregnancy. Some of the names will be explaining the family's background during the baby's birth; most of these names are negative names. If the family was abundantly blessed, the names will be positive revealing happiness of the family. Thus, in Tsonga culture there are negative and positive names which are given to their children. Nominative Determinism is seen

exposed in these different names especially in the children's behaviour then later their job careers. However, they are not all children whose personalities are affected by their names, sometimes their personalities are opposite to the meaning of their names. The following names are examples of names which are given after experiencing different circumstances at or around birth.

#### *Hluphekani* (suffer)

The name can be given to a child may be after the mother was very ill during pregnancy, or if the child is born with a certain disability which makes the family to suffer as they will be trying to nurture the baby. According to Nominative Determinism theory, the name bearer's future may be influenced by the name meaning, that is, his or her personality or behaviour, and even the job career will follow suit. *Hluphekani* may not enjoy his or her life; the name bearer may always face challenges in life.

#### *Xanisani* (persecute)

This name can be bestowed in response to some marital challenges encountered by the father and mother. The name giver's intention is to be reminded of the events which occurred before or during birth. Hinging our argument on Hedrick's research (2013) who argues that, "your name is a crucial factor in developing your sense of self, and thus helps propel you forward on various paths of life and career ..." it is likely that *Xanisani* will develop a sense of self according to her name. Possibly, the child will be pain on other people's lives. Since behaviour matures as somebody grows up; her character may cause highest levels of criminality such as murder, robbery, drug dealer. All these suffice the term persecute. Such a person is likely to be a threat to her family members, society and global community at large.

#### *Vusiwana* (poverty)

This name can be given to a child born to a family living in severe poverty. Chauke (2015: 310) asserts that the name giver may also give a child this name in a failure of the head of the family to properly look after his family. This

may be caused by a variety of reasons ...” Linking this name with Nominative Determinism theory which asserts that; one's name may shape one's behaviour or one's job career, *Vusiwana* may live a poverty stricken life; she may not achieve any job, thus leading to miserable poverty.

#### *Rifumuni* (what kind of death)

A child born following some death fatalities in a family can be bestowed *Rifumuni*. Bestowing this name, may be done as a way of protecting the child from being bewitched by the members in the society. However, the name bearer may die a tragic death. Concurring with Nominative Determinism; asserting the name fits because people, possibly subconsciously, made themselves fit. Thus, names appropriately suit the name bearer's behaviour, way of living and profession unknowingly.

#### *Ntsako* (happiness)

Normally, when a child is born while the family is living in abundance; the child can be named *Ntsako* (happiness). The name giver will be revealing that the family is living in wealth, therefore, there is happiness. Since some names can be affected by Nominative Determinism, *Ntsako*, the name bearer's behaviour and profession is likely to be influenced by the meaning of the name. *Ntsako* may live a blissful life. Butler and Butler (2016:54) expatiate that Nominative Determinism occurs when a person's name reflects what that person does or is ...

#### *Tintswalo* (mercy)

The name can be given to a child whose mother was kind during pregnancy. The name giver will be calling for an endless kindness to the mother. Through some observations and Nominative Determinism theory's confirmation; the name bearer may be affected by his or her name and become generous. Linking to this point of view, *Xihlamariso* a South African writer proves that names has to do with someone's behaviour by averring that "when I was born back in the 70s, and I was named *Xihlamariso*, back then my name was super unique Tsonga name, and in all honesty, no one had that name as I was growing

up. So, big ups to my parents for my awesome unique Tsonga name ... I love it as it encompasses all that I am. I am extraordinary which is what my name mean. Some chooses to say it means a miracle, which is true, because I am truly one! According to his experience, Xihlamariso is ascertain that he is an amazing like his name. This makes one to conclude that his name shaped his personhood. The famous Zimbabwean Gospel singer Mathias Mhere in his song *Nhamo yekuzvipa* (self propelled poverty) released in July 2018, believes that meaning of human names moulds the bearer's life, when he asserts that “*mumwe achitumidza mwanawake 'Tambudzai' unoita kudada nayo nhamo yekuzvipa*” (one bestows his or her child the name 'persecute' one is proud of self imposed poverty). Mhere concurs with Nominative Determinism theory and the researcher's understanding and observations that; names affect one's behaviour, personality, choice of living, job career and physical appearance.

#### IV. Marriage Names

Culturally, in Vatsonga it is a common practice that, upon marriage a woman's name changes, her famous is buried in men's name(s) either her husband or biological father. Married women are called by either their biological father's name or their husband's name. If the former is used, the following prefix is applicable “*N'wa-*” or alternatively “*Mhani N'wa-*”. For clarification purposes, let us consider the following case scenario. Mr Hasani from Chikombedzi had a daughter whose name is *Tsakani*. Upon reaching the age of accountability *Tsakani* got married to Chauke. As *Tsakani* is now married, her former name in line with the Tsonga culture is no longer used to identify her instead her blood father's name takes place: *N'wa-Hasani* or *Mhani N'wa-Hasani* will be her new name for the rest of her marriage life though an additional name of her first child's name can interchangeably be used to identify her. Due to adoption of English culture which uses Mrs His Name to identify a married woman, Vatsonga also call married woman “*Manana*” in place of Mrs. Using the

case above and in respect to English culture *Tsakani's* name would be identified as “*Manana Chauke*”. Pongweni (1983) coincides with this by showing the change of identity by the bride, “when she comes over to the bridegroom's family, she assumes an identity peculiar to the Shona bride: she becomes ‘*mukadzi wokwa nhingi*’, the wife of family X’. Pongweni's view perfectly fits in Tsonga culture. Thus, she (a married woman) is no longer identified by her name or surname but she adopts a new identity.

#### V. Post Marriage Naming

Considering that the couple has separated perhaps because of death or divorce and then she goes back to her original parents, upon arrival she is given a derogatory name “*xivuyya*” literally meaning the one who has forsaken her marriage. Alter (2013) asserts that names play a significant role in determining key aspects of an individual's job, profession or even his character. Concurring with Alter's assertion; the name “*xivuyya*” might make the lady to lose her confidence, self-respect and there is high probability of such woman indulging in promiscuity. The researcher's observation reveals that the end result of “*xivuyya*” is becoming a child-bearing machine in most cases with irresponsible fathers. The root cause is the insulting name “*xivuyya*”. On the contrary, her former husband's original name is still maintained, hence, his dignity and status is not at risk because of name changing. To draw attention to this, Gordon (2019) asserts that name-calling is one of the most damaging and painful types of bullying. It leaves victims with negative messages about who they are buried into their memories. As a result, some married women are forced to remain in marriage (in fear of this derogatory name *Xivuyya*) when divorce is due and it is being the only answer to the marital problems they encounter and this cause them to live miserable and bitter lives full of stress, fear, depression and other conditions.

## VI. CONCLUSION

It is noted that, Vatsonga as ethnic group have various perspectives which determine their naming. The paper tried to lay out Vatsonga cultural beliefs in naming which consist of, circumstances around birth, behaviour of pregnant women, the father as a name giver, the paternal aunt as a name giver among others. Religious beliefs which include Christianity and Traditional beliefs are also considered. To a larger extent, meaningful names mould, shape and determine one's behaviour, job career, profession and even physical appearance as demonstrated by Nominative Determinism theory. Nonetheless, one cannot rule out the fact that names are viewed by others as mere tags used to denote objects or people and have no significant attributes in determining one's behaviour and life in general. Researches reveal out that not all with bad names have their lives underpinned in the life devastating meanings of their names. Some people are living in abundance of wealth, health and happiness irrespective of how bad their names are and the vice versa is equally true.

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