

NICKNAMING IN CONVERSATIONAL CONTEXT AMONG THE CHEWA OF MALAWI

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In several African societies individuals have names belonging to at least one of these categories: umbilical names, lineage names, kinship names, and nicknames (Finnegan 1970:470-80; Madubuike 1976). The primary focus of this discussion is the use of nicknames as a mode of address and a form of speech within the context of the Chewa of Malawi, southern Africa, where Chichewa is the national language. In this paper, nicknaming is treated as a form of speech which reflects the ways in which speakers in a given speech community define, perceive, and manipulate their interpersonal relationships in specific situations. Further, the discussion will attempt to illustrate that nicknames as communicative behavior are intimately related to other forms of Chewa verbal behavior, such as proverbs, folk narratives, and songs.

In Chewa society, great importance is attached to the meaning of names; they are not just labels or appellations put on individuals to identify them in the community. When an individual is given a name, the naming is a speech act. The name giver does not seek information, but talks about the social relationships between characters and about their behavior pattern or physical outlook. There is, therefore, a specific name to express each pattern of behavior and personality trait. Each name is a sign or a symbol which has character and significance of its own. The use of some nicknames becomes a communicative device which is conveniently used by the speaker for the listener to recall either a proverb, a song, or a folk narrative which is related to the name. In addition, the names add color and flavor, a depth and pithiness to conversation through their connotations and metaphors (Finnegan 1970:474).

While the major concern of the discussion is nicknames, I will briefly deal with other categories of names to place the Chewa nicknaming practices within their wider cultural perspective.

The Cheŵa are a Bantu speaking people, traditionally described as descendants of the Maravi, who in the 14th century migrated to present Malaŵi from Luba-Lunda country in the present states of Zaire and Congo-Brazzaville (Nelson 1973:2). The Cheŵa constitute over fifty percent of Malaŵi's population of approximately six million. They mostly inhabit nine districts of central Malaŵi, and the material presented here was collected from four of these districts, Lilongwe, Kasungu, Dowa, and my home district of Dedza, while I was collecting folk narratives (in 1977).

The Cheŵa are matrilineal and marriage is matrilineal. There is a good deal of intermarriage with members of other ethnic groups, such as the Tumbuka in the north and the Yao or the Lomwe in the south. Nevertheless, the Cheŵa have maintained most of their sociocultural values and customs. Their kinship system puts stress on the bond between men and women within the same matrilineage. The community life encourages group cooperation and collective labor activities, so it is not uncommon for everyone to know his neighbors intimately. However, defined individual and group statuses are observed as markers and indexes of social interaction between speakers. Economically, the Cheŵa are agricultural and depend on the forces of nature for their survival.

An umbilical name (**dzina la pamchombo**) is given to a baby by his kin on the fourteenth day after birth, at a special child naming ceremony. A child may be named after a deceased paternal or maternal kinsman, or occasionally, after a living relative. Often, children are given names to commemorate significant historical events, or problems and circumstances relating to the birth of the child himself, to his parents, to his extended family, or to the whole community. For instance, my friend was called **Njala** ("Famine"), because he was born in 1949 during a drought which lingers in the memories in Malaŵians (Stegman 1951:67-69). My brother-in-law was named **Manjapamutu** ("Hands on the head"), to commemorate his father's prison treatment while he was a political detainee during Malaŵi's political emergency in 1959. My second child was named **Dalitso** ("Blessings") to express our family's gratitude for his birth because my wife had problems at his premature birth. We called our

third child **Limbani** ("Be strong or Persevere") as a call for steadfast readiness to challenge life's problems. He was born one week after the untimely death of my sister who had brought me up like her own son.

A man's last name in the Cheŵa community is a patronym, and a married woman takes an andronym. However, it is conventional for married women to be addressed by their father's lineage name. For example, a woman whose husband's name is Phiri may be addressed as **naBanda** (na- used as a female gender prefix), if **Banda** is her father's name.

Relatives by blood or by marriage are addressed by their Cheŵa kinship name: **Atate** ("father"), **Amaya** ("mother"), **Mwana** ("child" or "infant"), **Atsibweni** ("uncle"), **Nsuwani** ("cousin"), **Mlongo** ("sister"), **Mbale** ("brother"), and **Agogo** ("grandmother" or "grandfather"). Relatives by marriage address each other by such names as **Mkazi** ("wife"), **Mwamuna** ("husband"), and **Mlamu** ("brother-in-law" or "sister-in-law").

Since people usually know each other intimately, nicknames easily evolve, change and degenerate over space and time. The term nickname is here defined as "a name added to, or substituted for, or used alternately with, the proper name of a person, place or thing given by others in contempt, derision, ridicule, sportive, familiarity or affection" (Smith 1970:20). In the Cheŵa community, nicknames are usually bestowed on an individual by relatives, friends, and peers. For instance, my brother was called **Kamtedza** ("Groundnut lover") by his peers, because he was very fond of eating groundnuts. Sometimes, individuals prefer to give themselves either praise names or pejorative substitute names. My brother-in-law never admitted to misdemeanors for which he was responsible, and others were punished because of his deeds; he boasted of his cunning by calling himself **Kadyankena** ("It is someone else who has eaten it"). This name is based on the Chicheŵa proverb: "**Kadyankena mbiri ndi ya khoswe** ("Whenever someone else has eaten the food the mouse is always the villain"). In the case of my brother-in-law, he was the wrong-doer but others were blamed. Nicknames tend to disappear when there are changes in a person's status, behavior, or personality, or

when circumstances change. Some people like their nicknames and live by them. Others try in vain to shake them, proving that "the nickname is the heaviest stone that the devil can throw at a man" (Smith 1970:76).

Chichewa nicknames can be broadly divided into anatomical names, metaphorical names, and proverbial names. The first two categories will be dealt with only briefly, because strategy and intertextuality in proverbial nicknames are the major concerns of this discussion.

Anatomical nicknames are used as a cryptic summary of an individual's physical characteristics. They are employed vocatively or referentially and they have either derogatory or positive connotations depending on the specific situation. For example, a tall person is called **Chimtali**. A long-armed person is **Mtalimanja**, **Kamlomo** is "small-lipped," **Chimwendo** is "big-legged," **Kamatewe** is "bow-legged," and a limping individual with a leg infirmity is called **Tsalimwendo**. Metaphorical nicknames are appellations drawn from the fauna and flora, including birds and animals which are part of the local environment. Individuals are likened to or equated with animals in similes and metaphors. There are two types of metaphorical nicknames: praise names and derogatory names. The praise name is a record of an individual's laudable achievements and his society's assessment of him. **Mkango** ("lion") is a nickname connoting strength, might, bravery and power. **Kamkwara** ("giraffe") is a nickname for a peerless and elegant individual. **Mlamba** ("mudfish") may refer to a slippery man who can never be cornered by his enemies. Derogatory names, on the other hand, are used to admonish an individual. **Mbuzi** ("goat") is a toothless bull and an idiot who is always duped by others. The nickname **Msundu** ("sucker worm") is given to a person who is a parasite. **Nsikidzi** ("flea") is a name applied to a nagging person who cannot be gotten rid of easily. The name **Lumba** ("night-jar," "the-big-mouthed-one") is given to an individual who is a chatterbox and tends to reveal secrets. A coward is nicknamed **Khwangwala** ("crow"). He usually turns the other cheek or withdraws instead of fighting back. But people

who fail to deliver messages promptly and who forget the content of messages are also called **Khwangwala**.

The Cheŵa people's creative ability to manipulate names strategically to suit various discourse situations can best be appreciated by considering proverbial nicknames. Kenneth Burke regards verbal creative arts as "stylised answers or strategies that size up situations and name them in a way that contains an attitude to them" (1957:29). "Proverbs," according to Burke, "are strategies for dealing with situations" (1957:256). In the Cheŵa community, the name giver is the proverb performer. Instead of using a complete proverbial statement or phrase, he stylistically abbreviates or rephrases the traditional proverb or proverbial expression into a single word. Normally the word employed as a nickname is the subject or object of discourse in the proverb; and "all the overtones of meaning and allusion inherent in the proverb can be found in the name" (Finnegan 1970:473). The name giver uses proverbial nicknames to deal with situations of conflict. The nicknames name attitudes and behavior, and summarize situations.

Equal treatment of rich and poor is of great importance in Cheŵa society. A poor person who has experienced lack of sympathy from rich people is nicknamed **Aonenji**, "the poor-unlucky-one." This name is drawn from the proverb "**aonenji anapha mvuu m'mono**" ("one day, the poor-unlucky-one killed a hippo in his fish trap"). This proverb is related to a folk narrative which explains its origin. The story tells of a number of fishermen who laughed at their friend for not catching any fish, and nicknamed him **Aonenji**. One day, however, none of the fishermen caught any fish except **Aonenji**, who had trapped a hippo in his fish trap (Kumakanga 1975:21). In Cheŵa society, a hippopotamus is a delicacy. Thus the other fishermen learned the lesson that fortunate and unfortunate people should treat each other fairly. Every individual has his own lucky and unlucky days. This attitude is echoed in a beer drinking song:

Aonenji anapha mvuu m'mono
Olemera, osauka,
Tidzimwera limodzi mowa.

Ndapata lero,
Timwere limodzi mowa.
Ndasowa lero,
Timwere limodzi mowa.

The poor-unlucky-one killed a hippo in his fishing trap.
The rich and the poor
Should drink beer together.
When I am rich today,
We should drink beer together.
When I am broke today,
We should drink beer together.

While the nickname is employed to name the situation of the poor man, it is also a device for change. The rich people's behavior is disruptive, so they are asked to conform to behavior and attitudes which maintain the stability of society.

Nanthambwe ("noisy and thoughtless bird") is a name given to a stupid, talkative, noisy and undiplomatic person whose talk is pointless, and who usually falls into trouble because he reveals secrets. The name is derived from the proverb: "**kunena kwa ndithe-ndithe nanthambwe anadzitengera**" ("the bird which spoke loudest and fastest invited trouble for itself").

Chisoni ("the-kind-hearted-one") is from the proverb "**chisoni chinapha nkhwali**" ("kindness killed the partridge"), which means "kindness recoiled on the giver." This proverb is intimately related to the following folk narrative:

Once upon a time, the snake was encircled by a blazing fire. He said to himself, "I am dead." However, there was a partridge near him. He requested the partridge to ferry him across the fierce fire and bring him to a secure place. At first the partridge hesitated to help him. The snake pleaded and pleaded for sympathy. Then the partridge let the snake coil itself around her neck, and flew away to a safe place. She then asked the snake to go its way. But the snake refused and killed the partridge (Kumakanga 1975:21).

An individual who is too kind and generous is given such a nickname as a warning that the people he shows kindness to might turn against him.

This nickname is usually given to an individual after he has demonstrated a lot of kindness and the people he has been kind to have stolen from him, or have been ungrateful in one way or another.

We know that the proverb is dynamic; it has multiple meanings depending on the context. Similarly, the meaning of nicknames and the situations under which they are used are not static. The name giver creatively moulds the nickname to suit his intent within a given context. **Kali-kokha** is given to an antisocial person and it is from the proverb: "**tili tiwiri ntianthu, kalikokha nkanyama**" ("two persons make a company, one person is an animal of prey"). This nickname reinforces behavior by warning individuals in the community to cooperate in communal and collective activities. Those who never care to associate with other members of the society are warned that they will be prey to foreign invasion because no one will come to their aid. However, in some contexts the same name is given to orphaned persons with the view that they are lonely and should be given support and company. This connotation of the nicknames is applied to a lonely character who marries Dambudzo in John Gwengwe's book on Chewa traditional education, **Kukula ndi Mwambo** (1965:3-7). This name is like a proverb which a speaker employs to express an opinion. The name has strategic power to manipulate the attitude and behavior of the people in the community towards the individual. The proverb from which the name is drawn represents the wisdom and authoritative truth of the ancestors; therefore the opinion expressed through the nickname cannot be disputed.

However, bargaining and negotiation is involved in the giving or receiving of nicknames. **Sayikamkute** or **Sasiyamkute** ("one-who-does-not leave-remnants," "glutton") might be given to a ravenous son-in-law who eats up the evening meal without leaving remnants for children to eat as breakfast the following morning. He is given the name by his brothers-in-law or father-in-law while playing a game of **bawo** ("draughts") or **nsikwa** ("tops"). Once the father-in-law has defeated his son-in-law, he strategically takes advantage of the winner-loser discourse situation

and switches from a normal congratulatory conversation to a name giving event. He proverbially boasts: "**Ndakupha, sayikamkute**" ("I have defeated you, glutton"). The proverbial statement implies that the son-in-law has been nicknamed **Sayikamkute** or **Sasiyamkute**. The son-in-law attempts to remove the nickname by using a counter proverb: "**Ndakupha, kuyika mkute nkulinga utatolatola msana**" ("I have defeated you too. It is he who had snacks or a mid-day meal who can afford to leave remnants of the evening meal"). Thus he bargains with his father-in-law to revoke the nickname by using a strategic proverb. The proverb suggests that the father-in-law is in fact responsible for the man's bad behavior of not leaving remnants. The man starves all day long because his father-in-law, who is supposed to share food with him, eats snacks or a mid-day meal.

One of the human weaknesses which the Cheŵa people criticize and ridicule is laziness, especially since their livelihood is dependent on agriculture. If a son-in-law is lazy, his father-in-law never directly reminds him that he is expected to work in corn fields. Instead, he discusses the issue with the son-in-law's peers. It is they who nickname the son-in-law **Simsosa** or **Salima** ("non-tiller," "idler," "lazy-bones"). Out of disgrace and shame he tries to change his behavior, and attempts to shake off the nickname. Since the name is drawn from a proverb, he too negotiates with his peers and father-in-law through a proverbial song: **Simsosa adayamba kale kusosa** ("The non-tiller has already started tilling his corn fields"). The proverbial song is used in a beer drinking situation to persuade people to drop his opprobrious nickname. The drinking encounter is a traditionally accepted context wherein verbal performance is employed to solve interpersonal conflicts.

Generosity and hospitality are virtues which the Cheŵa community endorses and praises. This value is reflected in their proverbs and proverbial names. A person is expected to treat both his children and his children's peers equally. This expectation is expressed in the proverb "**mwana wa mnzako ngwako yemwe**" ("your neighbor's child is your own") (Milimo 1970:14). If an individual tells his children to start eating

without washing their hands first, but requests his neighbor's children to wash their hands, they will report their treatment to their parents. The parents nickname their neighbor **Sambammanja** ("Wash-your-hands") or **Kazangokudya** ("Just-start-eating"). These names are derived from the proverb "**mwana wamnzako nkasambe, wako nkazangokudya**" ("to a child of your neighbor you say, 'Go and wash your hands first,' to your own, 'Just start eating'") (Gwengwe 1973:70-71). The nickname is used to inform the individual that his treatment of his neighbor's children is bad, and calls for conformity to society's norms. The proverbial name is turned into a song which is addressed to him at community festivals and ceremonies:

**Mwana wamnzako ndi samba mmanja,
Wako ndi kazangokudya.**

You ask your neighbor's child to wash hands first
While you tell yours to eat without washing hands.

Since most festivals or ceremonies have beer drinking as one of the most important features, the song is usually sung as a beer drinking song. This proverbial nickname and proverbial song will be used until the individual's behavior improves.

This discussion has attempted to illustrate that Chichiwa nicknaming practices are used strategically to manipulate social relationships in discourse situations. Nicknames function as a means of social control. They warn individuals against the dangers of nonconformity to the norms and values of the society. They criticize and ridicule bad behavior and teach proper behavior. They advise, give orders, and make prohibitions; they sum up human life experiences and let the users of the names draw conclusions. The names are related to proverbs, folk narratives, and songs, illustrating that although folklore studies have tended to treat genres of folklore as independent entities, in reality they are not always separable.