

# Personal Names in Lunda Cultural Milieu

**Sylvester Mutunda**

*University of Arizona, USA*

## ABSTRACT

The topic of names has drawn the attention of several intellectual and critics including philosophers of language, ethnographers, anthropologists, linguists and ordinary people, each with their own ideas and theories about names. . This paper provides an interpretive analysis of traditional Lunda personal names, their meanings and the circumstances under which a child is given the name. The issue I wish to bring to light is that names of persons in Lunda cultural milieu are not mere linguistic means of establishing people's identity but a mirror of the culture of the Lunda speaking people of Zambia. In other words, like many other Zambia and African cultures, Lunda name givers traditionally choose personal names that reflect their culture. This paper is a contribution to the study of the Lunda anthroponomy. Lunda names, particularly personal names, have not received systematic attention from Africanists to date. The data for this paper included interviews with Lunda natives, my knowledge, experience and introspection. I also consulted books on personal names written by African and Africanist scholars such as crane, Madubuike, Stewart, Zawawi, Tembo, among others.

**Key words:** Lunda culture, Lunda Ndembu, names, Zambian cultures

## INTRODUCTION

The topic of names has drawn the attention of philosophers of language, ethnographers, anthropologists, linguists and ordinary people, each with their own ideas and theories about names. According to one widely held view, that of Nonsense theorists (Searle 1967), unlike common names, a personal name has no meaning (Mill, 1961); it is merely a tag, a pointer-outer which in itself has next to no meaning (Adamic 1942, p. 72). Markey (1982, p. 138) also states that "while names have references, they lack sense." In that perspective, the Zambian name like Luwi only "points to" a specific individual "Luwi" and nothing more. According to this theory, personal names, therefore, are just arbitrary words, more the same as words such as "drive", "home", and "tree" respectively. These assumptions, as Bing (1993, 119) observes, reflect Westerners' world view and do not apply to all cultures.

Indeed, in Africa, a name is viewed as a message that the name-giver conveys to society through the bearer of that name. A name is like a document where one can read the history of the individual or the family in time and space. According to Zawawi (1998, p. xii), "personal names provide an important component of African cultural identities." He further argues that "besides having psychological roles in establishing a person's identity, names convey, to those who know their origin and meaning, the social and cultural experiences of the people who have created them. . . Above all, names depict how members of a community regard themselves" (1993, p. 1). In other words, names reflect values,

traditions, and events in people's lives. Names are therefore meaningful words containing historical context. This explains why children's names are chosen with much consideration.

The objective of the present study is not to dwell on the denotative and connotative aspects of names but on what is relevant to the Lunda-speaking people in regards to the meaning of names, their naming practices, and factors governing the choice of names. The paper asserts that Lunda personal names are not mere arbitrary labels but they are meaning-bearing and based on social cultural contexts. The current paper is a contribution to the study of African anthroponomy, particularly the Lunda anthroponomy which has not been explored by onomastic scholars so far.

In this article, many types of names such as surnames or family names, religious names, nicknames and honorifics did not receive my attention; this will be the focus of the next paper. I also avoided detail explanations of grammatical, morphological, and functional aspects of names. This is regarded as a task beyond the scope of an introductory study such as this. The English translations provided are glosses and should be handled with utmost care. Perhaps the usefulness of this article lies in the fact that it presents a *status quaestionis* and provides raw data which can be useful to scholars who are interested in detailed and structured study of Lunda nomenclature.

The data for this paper included my knowledge, experience and introspection, based on being a Lunda native; my speaking and writing knowledge of Lunda and other related languages and cultures. I also made use of the very limited works on the Lunda language and culture. In addition, I consulted books on personal names written by African and Africanist scholars such as crane (1982), Madubuike (1994), Stewart (1996), Zawawi (1998), Tembo (2006) among others.

## THE LUNDA PEOPLE AT A GLANCE

Lunda is one of the major language groupings in Zambia (Kashoki, 1978). It is spoken by the people called Lunda, also known as Lunda-Ndembu of the Northwestern province of the country. According to historical records, the Lunda are descendents of seventeenth century emigrants from the Mwata Yamvo dynasty in the Southwestern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (McCulloch 1951; Turner 1963; Brelsford 1965; Pritchett 2001). The Lunda are historically related to the Chokwe, Luvale and Luchazi.

As reported by Turner (1963), the Lunda practice matrilineal descent combined with virilocal marriage. They live in small, mobile villages mainly because of hunting and shifting cultivation. Their staple crop is cassava (*makamba*) and Millet (*masangu* or *kachayi*) which is grown mostly for brewing. Other crops include maize, rice, pumpkins, sweet-potatoes, castor oil plants and a variety of garden crops.

One of the Lunda traditional economic activities is hunting, the quintessential male activity done mostly in the dry season. I should point out here that hunting involves more than merely tracking game; "hunting parties also spend time fishing, setting traps for birds and mammals, gathering insects, and other wild fruits; collecting bamboo, reeds, bark fibers, thatching grass, and other construction materials; and securing medicinal plants" (Pritchett 2001, pp. 180-181). I should, however, point out that male hunting has declined under modern conditions. Beside subsistence agriculture and hunting, the Lunda also keep some cattle, chicken and goats.

There are two most important rites that every Lunda man or woman experiences in his or her life, these are *mukanda*, the boys' circumcision ritual and *nkang'a*, the girls' puberty ritual. As James Pritchett (2001) observes, the objective of these ceremonies is to turn boys into men and girls into women. The basic framework of *mukanda* is composed of separation (circumcision), transition (seclusion while the boys heal and receive training from men), and reincorporation of the initiates *atundanji* (sing. *kandanji*), into the village community, where they are received joyously as newly born and real men (Mutunda 2008).

The girls' initiation ritual differs in many respects from that of the boys. As documented by James Pritchett (2001), while boys are initiated in groups in the bush, girls are initiated individually in the village. Whereas boys are subjected to hard labor and harsh discipline, girls are pampered, sung to, and relieved from doing most daily chores. Boys are circumcised, but girls do not undergo clitoridectomy like other tribes in West Africa. The determining factor to hold *nkang'a* is the first reported menstrual period by the girl to her grandmother. The purpose of the ritual is not to enact any physical change in the girl but, in most part, to give her a period of time in seclusion to reflect on her newly acquired capacity to reproduce. Just as *mukanda* for boys, *nkang'a* goes through three distinct stages. There is a ceremony of ritual removal from secular life, *kwingija*; seclusion, *kukunka*; and a ceremony of reintegration, *kwidisha*.

## LUNDA BABY NAMING

Naming is a universal cultural practice. In every society in the world, people are given names. But how the names are bestowed, the practices and rituals involved and interpretations attached to the names vary from society to society and from one culture to another. For instance, among the Chewa and Nsenga of Zambia, the name is bestowed upon the child after its umbilical cord has fallen (Tembo, 2006). According to Moyo (1996), in the Ngoni and Tumbuka cultures of Zambia as well, the father and grandfather of the husband are the sole name-givers. Madubuike (1994) observes that among the Ibo of Nigeria, naming a child is a big ceremonial event involving the immediate family and some villagers. But in the Amharic speech community of Ethiopia, naming a child is not ceremonial rather a private task of a family. A child is given its name mostly after birth; that is because name givers should know the sex of the newly born child and bestow a name accordingly that agrees in gender (Leyew 2003).

In the traditional Lunda culture, name givers are the child's parents; usually the father, but the mother, grandparents, uncles, aunts may also name the child. Once a child is given a name, it will continue permanently and is used freely in interaction. However, if it happens that the child cries in habitually, this is an indication that the name is inadequate to satisfy some demand of its existence. The spirits indicates through this crying that the name must be changed and another selected. This stems from Lunda's belief in reincarnation.

According to Pritchett (2001, p. 287), Lunda's world view has traditionally evolved around the notion that the living, the dead, and those yet to be born, are all linked like an unbroken chain. The spirits of the ancestors, *akishi* (sing. *mukishi*), are always among the living in their day-to-day life. They are present at daily communal meals, assist women through the difficult process of childbirth, help settle disputes, protect and guide men when they are hunting in the forest. They also make their displeasure known by inducing illness in those who breach the moral code or break promises. Therefore, as Pritchett (2001, 85) observes, to discover the name the child wishes, the one that reflects the person the child is already born to be, parents will greet the baby in words and songs, using a variety of different names;

the one that mostly makes the baby smile or soothes the agitated state is assumed to be the “right” one. Sometimes the name is changed if a child becomes seriously sick. In that case, the *chimbanda* (traditional doctor) who treats the sick child selects the new name, because it is believed that misfortune is connected with the previous name.

In a number of instances a child’s name may be determined without either parent having any choice. For instance if a woman has difficult labor, a diviner, *katapu*, is consulted; s/he may indicate that a certain ancestor is interfering with the birth; if the spirit is successfully appeased and the child is born, it will take the name of the ancestral spirit – *mukishi* – which affected the birth; the child could be named *Kamwandi* (the spirit for dreams) if it is a girl or *kayongu* (spirit of madness) for a boy-child.

## SELECTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF PERSONAL NAMES

In his study on African naming practices, Stewart (1996, p. 3) observes that “while Western names are generally chosen for their aesthetic values, African names are selected taking addition factors into consideration.” These may include beliefs and world view, ethical and social values, events or circumstances at the birth of the child, place of birth, period of birth, and manners of birth. The following are some factors governing the selection of names among the Lunda.

### Naming a child after its kinsmen

To name a child after its kinsmen, especially after its grandparents is important and has several sociological functions. Among others, it serves to link two alternate generations – that of the grandparents and that of the grandchildren. It serves to perpetuate the names of ancestors and it brings the grandparents and grandchildren socially closer to one another. As Mohome (1972) has observed in Sotho culture, “when a grandparent shares the name with a grandchild, the relationship between them becomes even closer.” For the Lunda, this closeness allows for jokes that seem sometimes obscene to a person who is unfamiliar with the culture. For example, a grandson (*mwijikulu*) may say to his grandmother: *ngodami diwahishi, nidinakuinza lelu nawufuku* (lit. “my wife get ready, I am coming tonight”). Here the grandson is jokingly telling his virtual wife to be prepared for sex. The Lunda refer to this joking relationship that exists between grandparents and grandchildren as *wusensi*.

Naming a child after its grandparents also stems from the belief that the child so-named will automatically inherit the virtues of its grandparents. Another factor is ancestor-worship. In a society where ancestral spirits are not only revered but are also believed to have influence on their living descendants, one way of honoring and sometimes helping welcome them is by naming children after them.

### Naming children after events

Many Lunda names refer to, or are derived from events, pleasant or unpleasant, that coincide with the birth of children. These may relate to the place of birth, period or time of birth, manner of birth, etc. According to Blum (1997, p. 364), “these names are viewed as governing the child’s fate in some ways; they should harmonize with the time and often place of birth.” The following are instances in which event or circumstantial names are chosen:

Like most African communities, the traditional Lunda society depends on agriculture for their livelihood, and rain is, accordingly one of the most pleasant events. Thus, children born on a rainy day or at the beginning of rainy season may be called *muzowa* ("rainy day") or *musanvu* ("early rainy season").

The period of birth may also relate to social economic atmosphere of the time, particularly those that pertain to status of the parents and family. A child born during prosperity such as good harvest will be called *kamanyi* ("prosperity from hard work and application"). On the other hand, a child born amid poverty, suffering or during hard times, famine, war, and loneliness, may have one of the following names: *makabi* "suffering", *mpwila* "thirst", *kankawendi* "alone, lonely".

A death within the homeland may also affect naming. Parents sometimes name a baby *Kamfunti* "the one who has come back", from the verb *kufunta* "to come back", if he or she is born soon after the death of any member within the homestead. This is because such a person is thought to have returned to the homestead where he or she once lived as a family member. This name may also be give to a child born at the time when the father or mother is dead. It should be mentioned that this name may sometimes be given to a child born when the father is absent form home to witness its birth, or to the remaining twin after one has passed away.

Some names are bestowed based on events at or around the time of a child's birth. Thus, a child is named *Sampweji* or *Nyampweji* "streams of tears" for a boy and a girl respectively, if the child's birth is concomitant with the death of a family member. If it happens that the deceased member died with hand holding the chin, this is an indication that the person died with sorrow; probably s/he was bewitched or was not taken care off while alive. In this case, a child born after the death of this family member will be named *Wafwakanengu*, meaning "one who died with sorrow".

### Names expressing gratitude

Like in most African societies, child-bearing is highly valued among the Lunda. Thus, a woman who gives birth to a live child after an exceptionally difficult delivery or simply after a long period of barrenness will show her gratitude to God or the ancestral spirits by bestowing on her child, regardless of the gender, the following name: *Luwi lwa nzambi* "God's mercy" or simply *Luwi* "mercy, kindness".

If it should happen that a woman experiences fertility-related complications such as miscarriages, she will be treated with rituals aimed at enhancing fertility. Once such a woman becomes pregnant, she will be taken to a secluded house known as *chipangu*, where she, in her white clothes, dedicates herself for some months to an ancestral spirit. While at the *chipangu*, the expectant mother is given medicine – *yitumbu* – that the spirit has revealed to her in her dreams. Once the baby is born, it will be named *Chipangu*, regardless of the sex. Such names are honorifics meant to show respect and appreciation to the ancestral spirit that has helped the mother have the baby.

### Names connected with manner of birth

Manner of birth may relate to the sequence by which the mother has given birth; more specifically the order in which children come. Thus, the first-born will be called *Wedi*, from the verb *idika* "emerge", the second-born is called *chilondawedi* "the one who follows the first", and the last born child is named *kabinda* from *binda* "to enclose doorway with posts." Another aspect of manner of birth is the situation when twins come into the scene. According Musere (1998, p. 7), Africans' reactions to the birth of twins

vary from culture to culture. In some cultures, such births are treated as bad omen or as mysterious occurrences, while in others they are viewed as symbols of good will from God or the ancestors. In the Lunda tradition society, twins, *ampasa* (sing. *mpasa*) are not viewed with disfavor, rather they are regarded as miraculous gift from the ancestors; they are welcome and cherished. The birth of twins indicates that the ancestral spirits are happy and proud about such parents. Fixed names are given to the twins; they are called *Mbuyi* (first born twin) and *Kapa* (second born twin) respectively. The child who comes immediately after the twins is called *chijika* from the verb *jika* “shut” or “stop up”. In case another child is born after *chijika*, it will be called *chikomba* “cleansing.” This reflects the Lunda belief that such a child has the power of purifying the womb. While the birth of twins causes excitement, it is also a source of concern. Custom dictates that everything must be done in twofold, for it is believed that if this is not done, one of the twins may die. The cause of concern always stems from the belief that twins are delicate and therefore frail. To ensure their survival, great precautionary and protective measures are taken. For instance, the mother receives special care by being given plenty of food in order to maximize her lactic capacity. Rituals and taboos are elaborate. For example, every time the first moon appears, obscene songs and dances are performed for the twins and white clay powder or cassava meal is smeared on their foreheads. One taboo imposed upon the parents is to ensure that there is peace and tranquility in the household, for it is believed that if the parents argue and fight one of the twins or even both of them may die.

As there are special names for twin children, there are also specific bynames for the parents of twins. A mother of twins among the Lunda becomes *Nyampasa*, which literally translates “mother of twins”, and the father becomes *Sampasa* “father of twins”. If the couple happens to have another set of twins, they will maintain their previous bynames. As Thipa (1984, p. 95) notes, such names reflect both politeness and parental status. Their use with respect to parents is regarded as a polite form of address in as far as it reckons with their enhanced status in the community.

A name may as well be bestowed according to physical characteristics of the child at birth. Thus, the child who comes out of its mother’s womb with its legs first is *Kasela*, while the one who comes out with hands first is *Kalomba* (from *lomba* “to ask for or to beg”). If a child comes out with its umbilical cord around the neck s/he will be named *Mujinga* (from *jinga* “to roll up, curl, twist”), while the one born in a caul is *Chikuta*.

### Insinuating and proverbial names

There are names couched in forms of innuendoes to depict a situation that occurred during pregnancy or childbirth. They may depict the sour and bitter relationship that exists between parents and other neighbors or relatives, or between co-wives, in case of a polygamous marriage, where each wife competes with the other(s) to have the most children because she wants to prove to her co-wives that she is their husband’s favorite. Thus, when a woman who remained childless for a long time has a child, she will name it *Nsonyi* “shame”. This name is a message that the enemies - all those who used to mock the mother for not having children – are shamed because their expectations have misfired. This name is also meant to brag about her achievement. In another instance, if there have been serious differences and fights in the family; as commentary on what occurred, a baby will be named *Chilumbu* “adversary.”



## NAMES ACQUIRED LATER IN LIFE

During a life time, and beside the given name, a Lunda man or woman may acquire several names. The most common of such names are teknonyms. These titles, taken by parents on the birth of their first child, are used by both men and women. For instance, upon the birth of the first child and regardless of its gender, a woman becomes *Nyakalumbu* or *mama ya kalumbu* “the mother of Kalumbu” and her husband is *Sakalumbu* or *tata ya kalumbu* “father of Kalumbu”. This kind of address has a unifying role in that, it helps the couple to be identified publicly in terms of the child they share. It also puts the husband and his wife on an equal level as they are addressed as the mother or the father of so and so, respectively.

It should be noted that in the family, if it happens that the couple does not have children yet, the husband and his wife will address each other using kinship terms, the husband would address his wife as *a-mama* “mother” and the wife would call her husband *a-tata* “father”. The reason for this is that, when a man and a woman leave their respective parents and decide to live together as a couple, one automatically becomes the “second parents” of the other. It may happen that a couple is barren. In this case, they are addressed teknonymously using the name of one of their kin’s children. This practice is a collective measure taken by the community in order to compensate sterility and to make the person feel integrated in the community.

Although teknonymous address is reciprocally used by the husband and his wife, it should be noted that when the couple is being discussed with someone else, the husband and wife refer to each other as *mukwetala dami* or *mweni kwami* “the owner of my house”. This suggests that for the Lunda, marriage depends on the relations of solidarity and intimacy (Mutunda 2006). This is the concept of “power sharing” by which agents, in this case husband and wife, organize and incorporate power in their relationship (Keating 1998, p. 12).

One other practice worth mentioning is that, though teknonymous address is primarily used by spouses among themselves, it is also extended to non-kin members. For instance, a young man will address his father's friend as *a-tata ya Nowa* “father of Noah. This can be explained by the fact that the Lunda believe that the respect and obedience given to one's parents or senior kin should be extended to non-kin members.

## AVOIDING PERSONAL NAMES

Personal names are reciprocally used among friends, close associates and members of the same peer or age group. On the other hand, the non-reciprocal use of personal names is determined by age and institutionalized status like kinship. In this pattern, an older person addresses a younger person by personal name, but the latter dares not reply to the former in the same way. The Lunda consider as disrespectful, rude, and grossly insolent to address an older person by name. Such an act at times evokes a curse or an uncharitable remark about speaker's own family: *a-nvuuli jeyi eluka kulela anyana wanyi* “your parents do not know how to raise or teach children”, in other words “you are a spoiled child”. The relationship between in-laws, *akawuku*, requires extreme respect. Between son- and mother-in-law, the former is required to feel *nsonyi* (shyness, modesty) toward the latter. One can find physical avoidance between the two. They must avoid seeing each other, and if it is necessary to converse, it must be done out of sight, or with gaze averted. For instance, a son-in-law, upon seeing his mother-in-law approaching on the road, may run into the wood rather than cross her path. Both husband and wife must also avoid pronouncing the names of the parents-in-law. Avoidance of seeing

each other applies only between in-laws of opposite sex. However, avoidance between in-laws of the same sex may be done away with. For example, a son-in-law may drink beer and other refreshments with his father-in-law, but they cannot share regular meals. Avoidance of name, whether of the husband and wife or of the parents-in-law must be maintained. A woman is not supposed to address or refer to her son-in-law by his name, and vice versa. The same applies to a man and his daughter-in-law. Before a man begets a child, his mother-in-law addresses him or refers to him by the kin term *atata* ("father"), while she is addressed and referred to as *amama* ("mother") by him. By the time he has a child she will address him by the teknonymy *atata ya* "father of so and so," for example, *atata ya kayombu* ("father of Kayombu"). A daughter-in-law also does not address or refer to her father or mother-in-law by name, but calls them "father" and "mother" respectively. The kin terms *taawenu* ("father-in-law") and *maawenu* ("mother-in-law") are also commonly used by daughters-in-law to refer to their in-laws. Sons-in-law too address their in-laws as "father" and "mother" respectively, and refer to them by using the kin terms *taawenu* ("father-in-law") and *maawenu* ("mother-in-law"). According to Lunda custom, a man is supposed to address or refer to his son-in-law by kin terms *atata* "father" or by teknonymy "father of so and so" and not by name. Likewise, he addresses or refers to his daughter-in-law as *amama* "mother" or *amama ya* "mother of so and so." Name avoidance also applies to the couple. Husband and wife address each other by the teknonyms "mother of so and so" and "father of so and so."

## FOREIGN ADOPTED NAMES

Like most African societies (Crane 1982), the Lunda have experienced some changes in names. This has come as a result of many different factors among them Christianity, colonialism, the global media, and intermarriages. With the extensive missionary activities and conversion of Africans to Western religion, sometimes under duress, non-indigenous elements were introduced into the Lunda nomenclature. Many of these baptismal names were borrowed from the Old and New Testament or the calendar of saints. Some of the biblical names are *Petulu* (from Peter), *Mateyu* (from Mathew), *Nowa* (deriving from Noah), *Mose* (from Moses) etc. A few foreign borrowed names underwent phonological changes; these are names like *fweneti* (from French "fenêtre" = window), *fwalanga* (from French "Franc"), among many others.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this somewhat sketchy presentation, I have indicated that among the Lunda, personal names are the foundation of one's identity. Their meanings and circumstances in which they are chosen suggest that they are not mere linguistic phenomenon or arbitrary labels without any meaning whatsoever. Rather, they convey the social and cultural existence of the Lunda people. Names are rarely given to children randomly but rather are carefully chosen by parents and relatives so as to reflect and reveal the social circumstances in which the baby is born. Therefore, socio-cultural factors play a major role in the selection and bestowal of personal names.



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