

ORAL NARRATIVES: SOCIAL CULTURAL REPOSITORY OF NAMES AND NAMING PRACTICES OF AGIKUYU IN KENYA

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1.0 Abstract

The study reported here is based on interviews in which six adult speakers of Gikuyu provided substantive data in respect to the cultural reality of the origin of names and naming patterns that are popular in the folk narratives of the members of the Gikuyu ethnic community. According to Duranti 1997:337, oral narratives represent “*all we have of our past is language but in the sense that our memories are inscribed in linguistic accounts, stories anecdotes and names*”. Leach E (1970) has further stated that “*a great deal of what humans do is concerned with issue of continuity, that is, with the finitude of our lives, symbolic reproduction of our individuality as well as our own sociability*”. Naming is a cultural ritual which is widespread among the Agikuyu community and yet has not received adequate description and analysis by social scientists and linguistic anthropologists. Oral literature and related expressions of cultural knowledge which are represent and transmit linguistics accounts and social existing symbols as critical sources of ethnic knowledge and cultural history as well as inherited creativity. If names and naming practices are not significant colonial adventurism would have not embarked on extensive naming of physical features in the African continent.

1.1 Keywords: Symbolism Social order Narratives Social construction Generalization
Cultural knowledge Social regulatory patterns Naming systems Kinships
Relational terms Sociolinguistic dynamics Conventional patterning of activities Diminutive
prefixes

1.2 The Study Background and Methodology

In this study I seek to describe and analyse universal patterns of symbolism which are represented and expressed in the naming patterns of the Gikuyu ethnic community. Mary Douglas (1966:2) points out that “*shared symbols create a unity in experience and symbolize beliefs about social order*”. The centrality of the term symbol in this study makes it imperative that I provide a working definition. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the term *symbol* as a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought. This definition clearly affirms that names represent the social cultural reality of an ethnic community. For this reason, one of the main concern of this study is to discover the extent in which narratives are repository of cultural knowledge.

In conducting my investigation, the empirically gathered names from narratives and folklore are considered to represent symbols of objects, activities, relationships, events, spatial units and rituals in context. I wish to give meaning to the associations and analogous qualities the names and naming patterns attributively represent.

The following prompting questions were used to guide the elicitation of oral information from the informants:

1. From where did you get information about the names of the female members of Agikuyu community?
2. Is there any historical basis of the naming patterns of the male member of the Agikuyu community?
3. To what extent do the names used by the Agikuyu represent the social cultural reality of the community?

Oral folk narratives that are popular in each of the two main dialectal areas were used as important sources that contain names and naming patterns from which generalizations were made. I restricted my observation and interpretation to the Southern Gikuyu Dialect (SGD) in Kiambu and the Northern Gikuyu Dialect (NGD) in both Murang'a and Nyeri while excluding the Kirinyaga and Kimathira dialects.

Two elderly informants from Ikinu in the county of Kiambu (Southern Dialect) were identified by the research assistants to provide information. In Murang'a County two elderly informants from Gatura location had interesting narratives which we recorded on tape. At Gikondi in Nyeri County, two elderly speakers of Gikuyu were interviewed. During the interview we deliberately avoided making any allusions to existing literature that has been published about the origin and naming patterns of the Agikuyu. The identification of two informants in each of the three counties which share similar economic, geographic and cultural features was deliberate since the study was planned to establish whether there are similarities and consistencies in the narratives deserving study.

As stated elsewhere the narratives from the six informants reflected a rich menu and blend of recollections of cultural activities and historical events as well as personal experiences. By using the narratives, I was able to reconstruct the semantic attributes of names and make specific generalizations in regard to social construction of the relationship of naming patterns and their function in the society.

Ethnic languages control a rich menu of indigenous knowledge, cultural meanings, practices and institutions which were passed from generation to generation through oral narratives and rituals. This paper examines the unstudied narratives and their immense implicit value of evaluative capacity and collective pattern of social order that the names and the naming patterns represent and impose among the speakers of Gikuyu. The social cultural dynamics in terms of the associative semantic attributes within the contexts of Gikuyu represent a substratum of historical cultural knowledge of extensive anthropological value. Names symbolize social contracts in which relationships and appellations are anchored. The reliance on oral narratives where writing culture had not evolved as a medium of cultural knowledge and transmission suggests that functional definitions of the terms culture and language is necessary in order to effectively provide satisfactory explanation about the social functions of names and naming patterns. Culture is defined by Tylor (1871) as "*that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*". Tylor maintains that culture comprises inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits and values. Within culture are patterns of rules, beliefs and actions that are learnt and transmitted socially through language and experiences rather than biologically during interaction. There is a strong body relation between culture and language. Language is defined in linguistics literature as a "*purely human and*

non-instinctive method of communicating emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols". E. Sapir (1921) in *Learning about Linguistics* (1974:10). This definition makes reference to the spoken form of language since written form are considered as a record of the spoken forms. Language serves as a reservoir of cultural knowledge as well as a medium of transmission. Arising from these definitions it is obvious that the interrelationship between culture and language is uncontested.

Most of the popular narratives in literature of ethnic languages which comprises folklore, myths, legends, lyrics, riddles, proverbs, figures of speech, drama, cultural dances serve as an important source of knowledge of cultural history. They represent the social life and how an ethnic community creates meaning through interaction.

Most indigenous knowledge and cultural histories has not been captured adequately in order to benefit education as a result of overly pre-occupation with western education and languages. By defining the social functions of ethnic languages, cultural knowledge is able to participate in meaningful domains of life such as drama and creation of contextually appropriate music compositions.

1.3 The Significance of Ethnic Names and Naming System

An important heritage that is culturally and socially significant is concerned with the capacity to provide authentic ethnic names to members of an ethnic community. The ethnic names that children are given after birth are not merely identity labels. Ethnic names such as Onyango, Mutinda, Wanjala, Miriti, Kiprotich, Mwangi, Ole Kamwaro and Masha Wanje e.t.c have both intrinsic value as well as cultural and linguistic attributes which colonialism and early Christian missionaries did not comprehend. Names impose ethical standards and social values in an indirect way. Therefore nobody uses names that go against shared positive values and attitudes of the society. European colonialists equated African names with obscurism, primitivity, backwardness and heathenism. The Africans who were converted and became Christians were made to abandon their indigenous names and acquire foreign ones on the assumption that foreign names are godly and holy and will endear them in the new belief system. They were uprooted from their cultural foundations as a result of becoming members of a new ideology. Yet indigenous names are meaningful to each ethnic community that uses them since they represent their lineage, system of governance, history, relationships, culture, economy, creativity and the whole matrix of socialization.

1.4 Discussion of Findings from Narratives

According to our informants there are names that show for example attributes of age-groups while others make reference to occupations such as *Murimi, Mwaniki and Mwathi*. Others represent and make reference to age-set relationships and the historic origin of Gikuyu as an ethnic community. The informants were in agreement that all Gikuyu names of females members make reference and represent the institutional origin of the ten clans of the Agikuyu. Each member of the Gikuyu community knew his identity in terms of clan relationship and identified himself either as *Mumbui* after *Wambui*, *Muithiegeni* after *Wangui* or *Waithiegeni*, *Munjiru* after *Wanjiru*, *Mugaciku* after *Wanjiku*, *Muceera* after *Waceera*, *Mugathigia* after *Gathigia* or *Wairimu*, *Mukiuru* who was also known as *Mwithaga* after *Wakiuru* or *Nyambura*, *Mungari* or *Muithekahuno* after *Wangari*, *Muithirandu* after *Wangeci* and *Muicakamuyu* after *Wamuyu*. This was confirmed by the informants who were able to individually identify their clan membership and age-set groups. Clan identity for both males and females as we shall clarify in further discussion on this area was both culturally and socially constructed and derived as intra-clan marriage was prohibited. There are

other names that were created alongside the ten clan names as referent of special qualities or characteristics such as bravery, shrewdness and occupation. Others were coined to represent the relationship of an individual with geography or location. Names like *Wacania*, *Warugongo*, *Nyagicugu*, *Waruguru*, *Waitherero* are descriptive and meaningful to speakers of Gikuyu as they made reference to geographical and spatial locations.

The names that are used by Gikuyu ethnic community in Kenya are culturally significant since they are not just identity labels. While some of the names represent kinship and lineage relationships, others represent subtle but cultural attributes of the ethnic community. Among the Agikuyu in Central Kenya, the use of highly descriptive defining names is a common feature which pervades the socio-cultural practices of the community.

During the colonial times, the use of culturally and socially relevant naming system and names was interrupted by western Christian missionaries who introduced Christian based names through adoption of Christian doctrines and religious practices. Those who accepted Christian religious practices however did not discard their ethnic names entirely. The use of ethnic names and naming system remains a socially accepted and recognized practice.

The reality of ethnic names and naming system is a product of culture and the ways in which they are actualized in the social relationship is grounded in the Gikuyu language. For it is in this language that the informational content and semantic attributes as well as historical knowledge was organized, applied and communicated. It was through the language that social rules and actions are maintained and repeated. The practice of naming was primarily driven by the customs of the Gikuyu speakers and has been institutionalized to represent family relationships. The name *Muthoni* for example, represents the female social relationship that emerges as a result of family membership that symbolizes marriage relationship.

The origin of Gikuyu names and naming system can be traced from the legendary ten daughters of *Gikuyu and Mumbi*. The social organization of Agikuyu was based on the clan system and kinship relationship which draws from the clan membership of the ten daughters.

Names define clan membership and serve as critical reference points for various social practices. They also represent specific underlying regulatory patterns which govern the behavior and actions of individuals. Knowledge of the naming system was used as an important index of clan membership and relationship. Since intra-clan marriage practices were forbidden and considered taboo, names served as critical indicators of restriction of relationships while defining the clans where marriage relationship were permitted. For example intra-clan marriages and interaction with *Eethaga* and other clans was avoided because there was a popular belief that they possessed secret mysterious powers associated with witchcraft.

1.5 The Origin of Names and Naming Patterns of Male Members

According to this study findings, the most important contexts in which the names and naming patterns within the clans were anchored were and still is the family. The family unit remains the most fundamental institution in the naming systems of Gikuyu. The members of the same family were identified with their distinct names which were used by each clan. The clan membership names for men tend to be dominant among the members of the same family in each clan. The dominating family name which was used by men is the *Ambui* clan from *Wambui* while the dominating clan name which was used by the *Aithiegeni* clan was *Wangui*. In another example, the central dominant clan name that is used by *Aicakamuyu* clan was derived from *Wamuyu*. These clan names are still popular among the elderly members of the Agikuyu. The kinship and relational names marked and denoted sex differences between the members within the clan. There are names which are distinctly for the female members and others for the male members in a clan.

Historically, the Gikuyu social structures had clearly defined distinct generational groups who were reverently identified and recognized to preside over governance and leadership roles. Administrative leadership and governance practices oscillated from one generation group to another generational group through rituals which were marked with acrimonious vendetta since the old generation after several decades of leadership was unwilling to cede the instrument of leadership to the younger generation group. Each generation group was in control of governance practices for a period of approximately thirty to forty years.

The sociolinguistic dynamics in the origin of the naming patterns and the names of the male members that are popularly used and have extensive currency among the Gikuyu ethnic community is rather habitualized and taken for granted. The rules which govern the naming patterns of the male members were accompanied and governed by rituals and social cultural processes which continually reproduced and sustained them. The naming practices may have originated from observations, experiences and generalizations. It is through observation of character, appearance and experience that some names were created. The name *Nyawira* for example represents a hard working female member of the community while the name *Mbogo* depicts a heavily built placid, cunning and inquisitive man who is protective and vindictive when alarmed or threatened. The name *Muriithi* denotes mainly a livestock herder. Understanding and interpretation of the connotative nature of the naming patterns require consideration of the cultural knowledge of the Gikuyu ethnic community which gives meaning to phenomena, events and activities.

The circumstances in which a Maasai child for example was adopted by a Gikuyu family varied enormously. Inter-ethnic interaction between Maasai and Gikuyu as a result of shared boundaries and social cultural rivalries introduced names such as *Nyokabi* for the female child and *Wokabi* for the male child. The shared boundaries between the Masaai and Gikuyu ethnic communities became a major source of cultural interaction through which ethnic rivalry and conflict generated ethnic feuds in which members of each ethnic community organized raids to acquire livestock, women and children.

Any child who was unable to trace his parents during the raids and the ensuing confusion was handed over by the warriors to a caring family and the name *Wokabi* or *Maathai* was used to identify the child. Women and children were never killed during raids and conflict since they were considered useful in the expansion of the size of the family.

The inter-ethnic relationship between Gikuyu and Maasai was a strange one and for this reason it was misrepresented and misinterpreted, according to one of the informants. When the Gikuyu young men (*aanake*) were not involved in conflict with Maasai *morans* other members of the two ethnic communities were actively engaged in trading activities. They exchanged goods such as tools, foodstuff and craft items made of beadwork and leatherwear.

During the dry season, when the Maasai livestock herders traveled long distances in search of pasture it was not uncommon for their families to engage in goods exchange for food with their neighbours. In extreme cases, especially during famine or disease outbreak, a whole family was hosted by a Gikuyu family until the livestock herders returned to their *manyatta* (homestead). The names *Mwarania*, *Kenyatta*, *Wangai*, *Njambi* and *Ndiritu* for example represent an unstudied level of socio-cultural Maasai-Gikuyu interaction which colonialism and western educated historians have misrepresented. It is within the context of cultural interaction and social structure that creativity and communication took place where names became a by product of social contact.

Names represent meanings which are concerned with wider aspects of social relations. The interpretation of both the physical and cultural environment symbolizes the shared perceptions that the ethnic community values. The common nouns *muthuuri*, (elderly family man), *maitu* (mother

of) *mwanake* (young unmarried man) and *muiritu* (young unmarried woman) denote specific cultural attributes which cannot be transferred to any other language.

The naming system and names of the male members in each clan were driven primarily by cultural practices which governed the preservation of the family as an entity within the clan. The origin of the naming patterns of the male members of Agikuyu is rather unclear. Elderly informants who provided information on the possible origin of the names of the male members of Gikuyu gave divergent views but were in agreement that names of the initial generation groups provided the catalyst in the naming system of the male members of this community

There are two social institutional groups which have influenced the names creation processes among the Gikuyu ethnic community. The first group is associated with the naming patterns according to the original traditional generation group (*riika ria kimerera*) which is believed to have evolved in the early years of the community's history which historical anthropologist estimate to be in the late 14th century (1482-1520). In this category is the current generation identified as *Irungu*. This generation inherited the instrument of leadership and governance from the restless *Mwangi* generation group. The relationship between *Mwangi* generation and the ageing *Maina* generation was acrimonious and *Mwangi* received the governance instruments from *Maina* after a protracted struggle. *Maina* inherited the leadership roles from *Iregi* generation and *Mathathi* appears to be one of the oldest generation that is popularly identified by historians. The earliest generation which the informants were able to recall is believed to have formed the original group known as *Ciira* traditional generation. Historical records identify other traditional generation groups such as *Nakinya*, *Naba*, *Mandarethi* and *Gumba* but information about them is often blurred and sketchy. The names *Irungu*, *Mwangi*, *Maina*, *Iregi*, *Ndemi*, *Mathathi* and *Ciira* are believed to represent the origin of the Gikuyu generation groups. Each of these generations had a lifespan of about 30 to 40 years.

The second category is concerned with the naming patterns according to the age-set groups who were named in relation to the period of their circumcision (*riika ria kahu*). The age-set group had a long lasting impact on the social-cultural dynamics and the naming systems of the ethnic community as this discussion explains.

A significant origin of the naming system of the male members of the Gikuyu ethnic community is probably associated with the assertive age-set groups. The age-set groups formed clusters of powerful cultural social centers of energetic youthful males (*aanake*) who coalesced as a result of having undergone through the initiation rites and circumcision ritual together. They shared experiences and ways of thinking as well as acting together while providing new semantic clusters of concepts and representation. They were recognized as effective and influential social political apparatus for furthering the interests of Agikuyu ethnic community including defending the interests of the community. It is through the circumcision ritual and associated initiation rites that young men were brought together as members of a socio-cultural group who were identified as age-sets (*mariika*). It is through the age-sets that the historical as well as shared meanings and the associated social conditions that the membership interpreted and represented both the spatial and temporal relations. Each age-set was given a name immediately after the circumcision ritual which was derived from either a major event, occurrence or phenomena that have taken place during the preparation of the circumcision ceremonies. Six elderly informants (all over 75 years of age) who were interviewed for the purpose of the study recall the '*circumcision culture*' with nostalgia as they related the cumulative experience and the celebratory achievement of attaining adulthood through this ritual and becoming members of a new age-set (*riika*). By *circumcision culture*, we mean "*the words and terms indicative of specifics of objects such as decorations, celebration and drinks, equipments, foods, activities during the one month initiation rituals accompanying feasting,*

dancing and appropriate lyrics, the roles assigned to initiates god-parents, relatives and the entire neighbourhood as well as recognition and cumulative total experiences evocative of attainment of adulthood through the circumcision ritual”.

The names which were assigned to the age-sets provided a convincing historical evidence of the cultural experiences and related activities that were significant in the bonding of social relationships. The Gikuyu proverb ‘*Riika na nyumba itiumagwo*’ translated literally means that it is impossible to disaffiliate oneself from both the membership of the age-set and the family. The name of each of the age-set was descriptive, symbolic, representational and socially relevant. The age-set group which underwent the circumcision ritual during a major famine was identified as *Kaibang’a* while the group that was initiated when there was an outbreak of a disease identified as *Mutungu* was known by that name. Those whose initiation coincided with the issue of the first identity cards were known as *Kibandi*. The earthquake was first witnessed in Kenya in 1928 and the age-group which was initiated at that time was named *Githingithia*. Many age-set names were given according to significant events and are known to have been used in the expansive central region of Kenya. Among the most popular ones whose names have gained currency are *Njoroge, Mburu, Ndumia, Ndung’u, Gichuru, Njigwa and Njaramba*. Modern users of these names may not be familiar with the origin of these names or what they represent in the history of the Agikuyu ethnic community.

The naming system of children at family level follows an established pattern in which the first born male child is named after the father’s parent. If the child is a female the name of the mother’s father is used. The third and fourth children are named after the mother’s parents. In case where male children or female children are born in succession in the family, the father’s parents are given priority in the naming patterns. A child who dies after a name has been given was associated with misfortune and other cultural family taboos. The name of the parent was used for a second time in a subsequent birth but was changed in consultation with the parent. The names that were selected were *Muriuki, Kariuki, Mucoki or Kahonoki* for the male child or *Njoki* for female child. These names are highly descriptive and representational since they denote a practice in which names symbolize social cultural attributes and belief systems. The sociolinguistics origin and inherent dynamics that informs the naming patterns and names that are used by Gikuyu ethnic community according to our informants are legitimately anchored in social cultural parameters and contexts. It is through analysis of the contexts that we can establish whether there were any attributes of conventionality in the naming patterns. In order to establish whether there is existence of cultural convention which might be linguistically expressed and realized, we identified through a schema analysis an inventory of attributive categories which were initially used to characterize the descriptive ethnic names. In this schema, conventional patterning of activities, events, situations, relations, physical and social phenomena as well as scenes which taken together “*are shared by members of a given cultural group and hence are highly suitable for research purposes*”, according to Kintsch and Van Dijk (1972:373) was used to form broad generalizations about possible connections between cultural linguistic systems as well as the attributes the names and naming patterns represented. In each of the identified category, we listed examples of names with common attributes as follows;

- a) Names which originated from intra and inter cultural interaction, assimilation, beliefs and socio-cultural practices; *Mugo, Njoki, Wambugu, Gathuma, Gaita, Wokabi, Mathaga, Maathai, Nyokabi, Wagana, Waigumo, Muriuki, Wangai, Cege, Kiragu, Wangombe, Kimotho, Kibuthu, Gicuhi, Ngotho, Gathii Murigu, Wamiti, Kahembe, Kigotho, Gaita, Gatimu and Wacuka*. *Intercultural interaction between Gikuyu and Dorobo introduced the names Nguyai, Muniu and Riunge.*

- b) Kinship relationships and social status. *Nduriri, Nyakinywa, Muthoni, Kiama, Waihura, Iregi, Watene, Gitonga, Ngatha*, in addition to the ten names of the Gikuyu clans.
- c) Names representing spatial and geographical attributes, *Wothaya, Wagura, Watetu, Mundia, Nyagicugu, Wandia, Waruguru, Waitherero, Warugongo, Kimamo, Wakarima, Wacania, Wagaki, Wagura, Matu, Waithaka, Gathima, Ndere, Wanyiri, Wahome*
- d) Symbolic names depicting governance practices; *Wachira, Wanjama, Koigi, Munene, Ngarari*.
- e) Names which were derived from faunal attributes, *Mbogo, Njogu, Ngima, Nguyo, Muriithi, Munyi, Ngatia, Wambui, Mathenge, Nyaga, Gathiru, Nderi, Ndegwa, Gathirwa, Muruthi, Huria, Hungu, Wangombe*.
- f) Names depicting occupational attributes and means of livelihood, *Mugwimi, Mwathi, Kibaki, Wangondu, Muini, Wang'ombe, Muriithi, Waciuri, Muturi, Wamugunda, Wamahiu, Wamai, Kariithi, Kimathi, Githinji, Wanguku, Wanjuki, Gicuki, Mwaniki, Muthuri, Kagiri, Kamunya, Murimi, Waigwa and Wamutitu*.
- g) Names representing behavioural attributes and appearance, *Kiromo, Kimotho, Gathondu, Kirima, Murathimi, Kariamburi, Kibico, Kimondo, Kuguru, Kiara, Njeru, Ndegwa, Kihara, Wainaina, Muthumbi, Gateru, Kiarie, Kiiru, Gacara, Gicuiru, Gitahi, Wanjohi, Waruta, Gituma, Kimemeia, Githua, Nyiha, Gacanja, Muceke, Gakunga, Nderu, Gaitho, Gakere, Njeru, Gitu, Gatu, Goko, Gathenya, Wanyinyi, Riitho and Kabaco*.
- h) Names which originated from observed routine habits, talents and activities. *Mucangi, Mwangangi, Mukora, Mwendwa, Nyawira, Ndumia, Mucemi, Mihango, Githiri, Muthigani, Mwangi, Njeri and Wanjira*.

Names which violated ethical standards and social values and positive attitudes in society such as *muici, murogi, muthini, kionje* etc were never assigned to anybody.

1.6 The Function of Diminutive Prefixes in the Naming Patterns

The creative and dynamic nature of the naming practice of Gikuyu ethnic community is demonstrated by the capacity to use specific diminutive prefixes to create new names based on the existing ones. The newly created names were premised on specific criteria in which the attributes of individuals formed the basis for symbolic interpretation of inherent characteristics in term of degrees of amount, size, quality, and value in respect to diminution. Sometimes symbolic as well as metaphorical names were created. Interpretation of observed behavior of individuals, shape and general appearance as well as body mass for example among other characteristics formed the initial catalyst in name coinage. The most commonly used diminutive prefixes are *Ga* and *Ka*. These two prefixes are popular in the name formation practices and are believed to account for the long list of newly introduced names in the language. In this discussion I only provide representative examples as follows:

Examples of names which have the diminutive prefix *Ga* are:-

| | | |
|-----------------|-------------|-----------------|
| <i>Gathoni</i> | <i>from</i> | <i>Muthoni</i> |
| <i>Gakui</i> | “ | <i>Wangui</i> |
| <i>Gacambi</i> | “ | <i>Njambi</i> |
| <i>Gacoki</i> | “ | <i>Njoki</i> |
| <i>Gatonga</i> | “ | <i>Gitonga</i> |
| <i>Gacogu</i> | “ | <i>Njogu</i> |
| <i>Gategwa</i> | “ | <i>Ndegwa</i> |
| <i>Gathinji</i> | “ | <i>Githinji</i> |
| <i>Gateru</i> | “ | <i>Nderu</i> |

The initial purpose of “*diminutive names*” was largely to signify and identify individuals in relation to the reduced or minimized attributive qualities as well as characteristics they possessed in terms of appearance and body size etc. The name *Gaceke* for example identified a female who was slim. The use of diminutive names have assumed cultural significance among the speakers of Gikuyu since the names represent and express other attributes of fondness, reverence and endearment. In the case of the diminutive female names such as *Gathoni*, *Gakui* and *Gacambi* etc the names are used at family level to express such attributes and social distance of the family members. Examples of names which were formed with the diminutive prefix *Ka* and were pervasive in the language were:

| | | |
|-----------------|------|------------------|
| <i>Kariuki</i> | from | <i>Muriuki</i> |
| <i>Kahonoki</i> | “ | <i>Muhonoki</i> |
| <i>Kariithi</i> | “ | <i>Muriithi</i> |
| <i>Kairu</i> | “ | <i>Kiiru</i> |
| <i>Kago</i> | “ | <i>Mugo</i> |
| <i>Kabugu</i> | “ | <i>Mbugu</i> |
| <i>Kagombe</i> | “ | <i>Wang’ombe</i> |
| <i>Kahembe</i> | “ | <i>Kihembe</i> |

The two diminutives prefixes *Ga* and *Ka* form a locus around which most names were generated. The use of these prefixes was not haphazardly applied to the names we have identified in our sample since the notion of diminution was not admissible in a number of attributive characteristics. Newly formed names were contextually relevant and culturally appropriate to the individuals. The name *Kangangi* for example denoted a restless wanderer. The prefix *Ka* signifies that the characteristics represented have been comparatively reduced. Similarly, the name *Kahara* which was derived from *Kihara* denoted bald-headed male. In the case of *Kahara*, the degree of baldness is less in comparison to that of *Kihara*.

Name formation process which has become habitualised met specific cultural, social and linguistic criteria since they were anchored in the grammatical structure of Gikuyu. Newly formed names were representational and they encoded the attributes of the individuals to whom they were applied. The name *Gacogu* was applied to a small man in contrast to *Njogu*. Diminution is significant in name formation because it signified the relevant symbolic relationship between an individual and the social and cultural environment.

1.7 Conclusion and Comments

The question of cultural loss in respect to the capacity to create culturally authentic names and their representational attributes within the naming system and experiences in the naming system is not a simple one. Names are a product of habituated inherited social cultural practices whose origin the speakers of language have come to identify as their own. The names of bonding relationship give family, clan and ethnic identity. The old members of the community teach their offspring the need to adhere to cultural practices in order to safeguard order in the community while communicating the shared experiences and values as well as the societal norms which need to be maintained. The use of specific conventional formulaic greeting forms to express parental bonding and respect is quite common among the speakers of northern Gikuyu dialect.

When a language losses ethnic names, it loses the capacity to serve as a cultural reservoir as well as a medium of transmission of both tangible and intangible knowledge and heritage which a community considers critical to their survival. It is through the names and naming patterns that Gikuyu speakers organize the social cultural institutions, cultural materials and phenomena into

meaningful relationship. This is what colonialism wanted to destroy by removing ethnic names, through baptism and introduction of foreign names.

Individuals were baptized and important landmarks such as mountains, lakes and valleys were given colonial names which were culturally irrelevant to the experiences of the ethnic communities around them.

Names like *Kirinyaga*, *Kianjahi* (*Kilimabogo*), *Nyandarua*, *Kiambiruiru* (Ngong) hills and *Kiringai* (*Longonot*) which the colonialists replaced were culturally significant to the speakers of Gikuyu. Yet speakers of Gikuyu interpreted the weather patterns and understood seasons on the basis of these landmarks. It is the cultural heritage that is historically associated with mountains that is lost when a language is lost.

Gikuyu is gradually losing its rich menu of vocabulary and expressions of governance practices, its literature, its songs and dances, its capacity to use language creatively in riddles, proverbs and *gicandi*, its system of greetings, praises and curses, its systems of rituals and prayers as well as traditional healthcare practices in addition to use of authentic names. It has equally witnessed degradation of cultural knowledge of bio-diversity including the lexical botanical names.

Despite marginalization there is a growing awareness among the speakers of Gikuyu that the language can play an important role in the education and economic life of its speakers. The electronic media is increasingly using the language and those who did not learn literacy skills in formal education are seeking alternative avenues to improve their proficiency. Publishers too have taken advantage of this awareness and old publications which were discarded are now available in the bookshops.

Whenever the questions of safeguarding and promotion of indigenous languages and culture are raised in academic discourse, issues of economic and practical viability of teaching the ethnic languages or undertaking research in ethnic cultures are raised. Yet answers and solutions to the economic, political, social and ideological challenges remain buried in our history and relationships which are embedded in our cultural background.

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