

The Sociopragmatic analysis of circumstantial Mbere names

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Résumé

Cette contribution traite de l'onomastique des noms mbere. Elle analyse les noms mbere liés aux circonstances de naissance selon l'approche socio-pragmatique. Il résulte de cette étude que neuf (9) circonstances entourent et justifient le système d'attribution des noms chez les Mbere. Il s'agit de l'ordre de naissance des enfants, le lieu de naissance, les conflits familiaux et la paix, les circonstances et contextes de mort, la santé et les conditions sociales, la fertilité des femmes, les jours de naissance, les noms liés au climat et événements naturels, et les noms liés aux événements sociaux.

Mots clés : socio-pragmatique, Mbere, noms liés aux circonstances, sociolinguistique, onomastique

Abstract

This paper deals with Mbere onomastics. It provides an analysis of Mbere naming system with a particular reference to circumstantial names. It comes out from discussions that nine (9) circumstances account for Mbere naming system. These circumstances imply order of birth names, place of birth names, family conflicts and peace names, death situation names, health and social conditions, woman fertility or sterility names, days of birth names, names related to weather at birth, social events names.

Keywords: socio-pragmatics, Mbere, circumstantial names, sociolinguistique, onomastique

Introduction

This study is devoted to the names that are given from the circumstances surrounding a child's birth among Mbere people. Agyekum (2006:219) defined circumstantial names as: "*names based on the circumstances surrounding the birth of a child*". The majority of traditional African societies use the circumstances of a child's birth to name the child. Working on the naming dynamics in some African societies, A. Olatunji et al (2015:82) assert that:

Sometimes, the conditions or circumstances of birth determine the name of an infant. This is a common criterion for giving a name in many African societies(...)For example, among the Zulu of South Africa, a child born when it is raining is called Nomvula (Mother of rain); the one born during an intense sun is named Nomalanga (Mother of sun).

In other words, "*the situation of birth imposes certain names to a child*" (Taiwo Ehineni 2019:75). Mbere people do alike. Because a name must have a connection with the personality and the child life. Blum (1997:364)

commenting on circumstantial names says: *“these names are viewed as governing the child’s fate in some ways; they are harmonized with the time and often place of the child’s birth”*. This piece of research work raises the following question on the different circumstances which surround Mbere naming system. include: order of birth names, place of birth names, family conflicts and peace names, death situations names, health and social conditions, woman fertility or sterility names, days of birth names, names related to climatic atmosphere at birth, social event names.

I. Mbere cultural aspects

In this part, some elements of mbere culture are point out. Okoueke (2020: 243-272) numbered five elements for mbere culture which are: language, oral tradition, measurement of time, dances and music, religion and belief.

Language is the element of expression of Mbere culture. It is the element through which this ethnic group is identified. With reference to Guthrie and Guy Ndouli works, Mbere langue is calssied in B61 zone in Mbede group. It belongs to the family of Niger-Congo languages.

Orale tradition is common all Black Africa communities. The Mbere oral tradition includes: song (louomo), proverb (ngana), and tale (Kayi). The song among the Mbere serves in all situations of existence such as birth, death, marriage, hunting, medical rituals. The song values and criticizes behaviors. Mbere songs can be classified in three categories: sacred songsn educational songs and entertainment songs. The Proverb on the other hand, provides advice in general way. The proverb is therefore a didactic tool which allows to warn, to promise, to advice, to invite to wisdom. The tale is a narrative based on the facts of society and which often ends with a moral lesson. Among the Mbere, the tale is told at night around a fire, by moonlight. It brings the children together around the elders. This is how the Mbere passon their knowledge from generation to genaration.

Time among Mbere is measured in years seasons, moons and days. The year (Ovou) is made up of four seasons: the great dry season (Osebe), the great rainy season(Letsama), the short dry season (Kwélé), the short season of rains (Kwélé a yoo). The week (dimasi) has only four days: Okila, Odouka, Tsono,Okondzo.

Dances and music are referred to as Oseha in Mbere. The two elements are inseparable. In Mbere music, there are:

-String instruments like: Sandzi, Ngali, Ngbala, Lengora, Atsoki;

-Wind instruments like: Evourya, Awassi, Ntsiemi e Ngnama;

-Percussion instruments like: Ngomo, Ombele, Okongo, Ambiena, Ongongo Ndzahi.

There are several types of dances in Mbere country:

-Ndzobi it is a dance performed during the Ndzobi initiation rite. It is also performed during a funeral ceremùony linked to the death of an initiate in Ndzobi.

-Lengueke is a dance for entertainment. It brings together young people, adults and old people. It is performed during weedings, mouring or simply at the end of the week doe recreation.

-Onkera is a dance linked to the birth of twins. It is performed so that neither of the twins die. The instruments of Onkera dance are Ngbala and Kengue (kind of bells).

-Ngouata is also a recreative dance as Lengueke. It is performed by young girls and young boys after the evening meal.

-Lembonga: is a sportive dance performed only by young men. It’s a footwork dance.

As far as religion and belief are concerned, the mbere are animists. Christianity was introduced in Mbere land during the arrival of the white men. So, Mberebelieve in God, in the sacred, in fetishes and in Witchcraft.

-God is designated by the term Ndjyami in Mbere. The Mbere do not give him human or animal form. For them God is a spirit whose form is unknown.

-Sacred: Mbere believe in the word of spirits and gods. The sacred among the Mbere is made up of initiatory societies and secret societies such as:

1. Ngo “the leopard”: is a initiatory society bringing together the heads of clans, lineages and villages. In this connection Okoueke (Op. cit.249) affirms:

Le Ngo est né de la volonté de donner une force magique aux chefferies locales en particulier et au système institutionnel Mbere, en général. Il s’agit pour les membres qui constituent l’élite dirigeante d’assurer leurs fonctions essentielles, de respecter les règles établies et d’accepter l’application des décisions et des sanctions. Cela va de leur crédibilité, car cela nécessite une rigueur et un professionnalisme sans failles.

This society comprises three categories of members. The Anga-ngo (they are the decisions-makers); the Mvandé (they are responsibe for organizing all the rituals and initiators of new members) and, the Antara-ngo (they are responsible for recruitment of future members of the brotherhood.

2. Lessombo is a female initiatory society. This organization allows young girls to find educational elements necessary to be an accomplished woman. It originates from the myth of the woman who would have cut the umbilical cord and circumsed her first son with her index finger, thus showing the power of women over men. Lessombo is a school of life that allows the young initiated girl to integrate into the society

3. Ongala is an initiatory society reserved for men whose purpose is to celebrate a cult intended to protect the twins. It is a little closer to the Onkera dance. Ongala also played an ecological role whose goal was the regulation of the ecosystem by imposing codes not to be transgressed.

4. The Nkula is a secret society whose goal is to fight against witchcraft.

5. The Mbele is a secret society whose role is to maintain social cohesion. Those admitted to the Mbele are indeed the actors of magico-religious system such as: the soothsayers; the healers and the designers of evil objects. Fetishes according to Mbere are an embodiment of the spiritual forces found in nature, mountains, plants, animals, trees and rivers. It is made so that the spiritual forces dwell inside. For the Mbere, fetishes make it possible to cause or stop rain; to make animals appear or disappear in the forest or fishes in the river; to create and send a bad spell or to protect from a mystic attack and to become invisible.

Witchcraft: Mbere sorcerers do not operate outside the family, they often act in groups; in association. Prestige, power, domination and the mystical taste of human blood are all the reasons that motivate some Mbere people to become sorcerer.

II. Typology of Mbere circumstantial names

This sub-section deals with the typology of Mbere circumstantial names which are: order of birth names, place of birth names, family conflicts and peace names, death situation names, health and social conditions, woman fertility or sterility names, days of birth names, names related to climatic atmosphere at birth, social event names.

2.1 Order of birth names

This section discusses names that pertain to the order of birth. This kind of names can also be called positional names. The reason is that it informs about the rank or the position of a child in a family. We have identified some names among the Mbere which attest this birth circumstance which can generate a name. These names are listed in the table below:

Table 1: Order of birth names

Mbere names	French transcription	Gloss
Ontubimwɔ	Ontubimwo	The piercer of the womb
Mvuo	Mvouo	The first born of the twins
Mpea	Mpera	The second born of the twins
Ngolabɔ	Ngolabo	After twins
Mbisa Akera	Mbissa	After the twins
Ndziila	Ndzila	After twins
Lembisa	Lembissa	The last born
ɔKwɔmɔ	Okwomo	Born alone

Ontubimwɔ means: “he who pierces the belly”. In this context, the belly of a woman who has never given birth is considered as a closed space. This is how the first child to come out is considered to be the one who opens the womb. This simply designates the first born.

In Mbere culture as in many other African cultures, the first child to emerge from a twin pregnancy is the eldest. As a matter of fact *Mvuo* means “the first born twin”.

Mpea is given to the second twin to emerge from the mother’s womb. He is the youngest twin.

Ngolabɔ means “after them”, the pronoun ‘them’ is put for twins. Normally, it should be *Ngolo akera* “after twins”, this structure being long, Mbere people prefer to shorten the name by replacing akera “twins” by “them”. It is the same with the name *Mbisa Akera* “after twins”. It also designates a child born after twins. In French transcription, you will certainly come across this name in a short form: *Mbisa*.

Ndziila is a male given to children born after twins. This is similar to Bomitaba’s name *Mpikola* and to Téké’s name *Mfiira*

Lembisa is attributed to the last born of a family regardless of gender.

ɔkwɔmɔ, like *Lembisa*, ɔkwɔmɔ is also the name for the last born.

Some of our informants assert that basically the name *Ngolabɔ* was only given to females and *Mbisa* to males. The reasons were purely aesthetic. For them, *Ngolabɔ* sounds more feminine and *Mbisa* has a masculine resonance.

But nowadays, there is no distinction of gender on the bearers. The difference between Ngolabo, Mbisa and Ndila is then the following: basically Ngolabo is a female born after twins, and Mbisa and Ndila are names for males born after twins. Today among the Mbere, the gender is not taken into account while parents name a child born after twins. Female can be called Mbisa or Ndzila. It is even possible to found a person named Ndzila or Mbisa who is not born after twins. This is due to the fact that actually a father's names is often given to children as family name.

2.2 Places of birth names

In this section, the names studied are those which relate to the place of birth. Our informants affirmed that the Mbere believe that a child is able to communicate his name by choosing themselves the place of birth. They believe that the child chooses a place that suits their personality, character, and destiny.

Table 2: Place of birth names

Mbere names	French transcription	Gloss
Adzamaa	Adzama	That river
Okuma	Okouma	A big tree
ɔkeli	Okeli	Small river
Tsekwona	Tsekona	In the farm
Ngodia	Ngodia	Owner of Odzia

Adzamaa is attributed to a man born near a river. When people were asking about where the child's mother gave birth, other people responded: at that river. This answer was then use as the child's name.

Okuma is a name of big tree. According to the story, the labor surprised a woman as she returned from the farm. Other women tried to bring her back to the village, but she gave birth beneath a big tree called Okouma in the forest near a river. This is the reason why this name was given to the baby.

ɔkeli means "little river". This name is given to children born near rivers. People named *ɔkeli* are generally peaceful because for the Mbere, in the same way, the water of the river flows, this is how the Okeli let the problems pass to advocate peace.

Tsekwona is attributed to children born in farms. *Tsa ekwona* means "in the farms".

Ngodia, the story around the name *Ngodia* tells us that a pregnant woman was travelling to another village. She had labor at a village named *Odzia*, where she was a foreigner. She gave birth to her child at that village and the child was called Ngodia "*the owner of Odzia*" because the child's soul likes *Odzia*.

2.3 Familial conflicts and peace names

This section deals with names resulting from births during a time of conflict or reconciliation within a family. The Mbere naming process attests this circumstance as hereafter illustrated

Table 3: Familial conflicts and peace names

Mbere names	French transcription	Gloss
Bɛlebona?	Belebona	Are you able?
Eboewa	Ebokewa	Friendship is finished
Lemiyɛmirɛ	Lemiyemiké	We agree
ɔtɔɔawa	Otokawa	Conflict is finished
Nyala	Gnala	disperse
Akélémaaya	Akélamaya	Are still coming

Belebona? is given to a child born during a family conflict. The parents declare that they will come out of the conflict with their head held high. As a result, the parents exhibit their strength by asking their opponent if they can defeat them.

Eboewa implies a birth that occurs when the members of a family come into conflict over a given problem.

Lemiyɛmirɛ expresses of a climate peace following a trouble period within a family. As the saying goes: "*after the rain comes the good weather*".

ɔtɔɔawa is similar to the previous one.

Gnala is given as name to a child whose birth caused problems within the family. This can happen in the case where the mother chains the birth of girls without giving birth to a boy.

Akélémaaya is assigned to a child born when problems arise one after another.

This category of names established a similarity between The Mbere of Congo and the Ewondo of Cameroon. Ewondo people also have names that relate to familial conflict. They have a name like *Bitomo*, for a girl born in period of conflict. (Jacques Fédry 2009:85).

2.4 Death situation names

This part presents names that relate to situations that concern death.

Table 4: Death situations names

Mbere names	French transcription	Gloss
Tsiédzila	Tsiédzila	The earth is waiting
Lékulédzila	Lékulédzila	Death is waiting
Nkumukalé	Nkumukalé	The owner is not
ɔyerepi	Oyéképi	You have to go quietly
Okaama	Okama	He who has lost
ɔvèmakima	Ovémakima	The benefit of others
Oki:si	Okissi	He who has missed
Okaami	Okami	He who does not have
Mbelobomi	Mbelobomi	The fault of the killer
Tsiraatswo	Tsikatsuo	The last for cemeteries
Lekulekani	Lekulekani	The death of the chief

Tsiédzila, *Lékulédzila*, show the same reality that every being is going to die one day because the earth and death are waiting for us. This is to mean that death is something natural.

Nkumukalé is generally attributed to children who are born orphans. The child may be born while his father died or the child's mother dies shortly after childbirth.

ɔyerepi, the Mbere are used to looking for the reasons behind the death of a family member by consulting the fortune tellers. When the consultations reveal that the death of this member is a natural death and that no one is involved; no one is at the origin of this death, the living persons ask the dead person to go away in peace, not to come back to cause problems for those who remained alive. This is due to the fact that the Mbere believe that people who die having conflicts with other people can come back to settle scores.

Okaama is given to a child whose mother dies shortly after childbirth. The basic name is *okaamangoho* 'he who has lost the mother'

Okaami is given to child children who lose their parents after birth.

Oki:si is attributed in the context of a death within the family or a society. A child born after or during a death in the family considered to be the one who has failed to meet that family deceased member. He is said to have come late.

Mbelobomi is a complaint against the sorcerer responsible for a death in the family. This name is similar to the Embosi name *onbesi la olo* can 'the sorcerer fault'

Tsiraatswo is related to the experience of parents. When the child's parents have lost family members successively and in a short time, they see themselves as the next to go to grave to join the previous ones.

With regard to this category of names, certain societies go further in naming by giving names of reincarnation. This is the case of Luvale people of Zambia among which:

A death within the homeland may also affect naming. Parents sometimes name a baby Kahilu "the one who has come back", from the verb *ku-hiluka* "to come back", if the child is born soon after the death of any member within the homestead. (Sylvester Mutunda 2017:78).

This shows how similar is naming practices is similar in African societies. In this case, both Mbere and Luvale use death to name a child.

2.5 Wealth and socialcondition names

This section is concerned with the names that relate to the conditions of wealth of the child and the wealth condition of the parents. As well as social conditions of parents. By social conditions, I mean the financial situation of the parents and their relationship with the other members of the society.

Table 5: Wealth and social condition names

Mbéré names	French Transcription	Gloss
Babiesa	Babiessa	They destroyed
Oyoro	Oyoko	Poverty
Okélé?	Okélé	Is he/she still alive?
Vuluatumi	Voulatoumi	Many dislike
Bongɔ̃ɔ̃uara	Bongonouara	Much money
Ampasi	Ampassi	Suffrances

Babiesa expresses a complaint. Within a family, or even within a community, when a child is born with a malformation or a serious health problem; it is given such a name.

Ampasi is assigned to a child who comes into the world while the parents are going through difficult times. By this name, parents express their hardship experience.

Oyoro comes in the context of poverty. This poverty is not only financial, but it can also be social. The financially poor parents can call their child Oyoro. And the parents who are alone, who no longer have family members are also considered poor, they can also give the name Oyoro to his child.

Okél is given to a sick baby at birth. The story relates at daybreak; the women go to the farm thinking that when they return they will find the baby dead because of his poor state of health. In the evening, when they return from farms, they ask questions to know if the sick baby is still alive. And those who didn't go to the farm answer *Okéle* meaning that the baby is alive.

Vuluatumi is related to the nature of the relations that the parents have with other members of their family or other members of the society. If parents feel unloved by their loved one, they can express it by giving this name to one of their children.

Bongɔ̃ɔ̃uar has two interpretations. In the first case, it is given to a child whose parents are financially rich within the society. The second case is that of the wish the parents make in favour of their child so that they will become rich in the future. This is similar to the Embosi name *mwana dea*

2.6 Woman fertility or sterility names

In this category, we show the names that are taken from situations in which a woman has difficulty to give birth or situations in which a woman is fertile.

Table 6: Woman fertility or sterility names

Mbere names	French transcription	Gloss
Onguomabora	Okomba	The sterile has given birth
Ayimovu	Ayimovou	He or she comes seasonally
Anyiogna	Akonja	Given by mercy
Ayindeme	Ayindémé	He or she came himself
Kaamakalé	Kamakalé	There is no need
Ovukalira	Ovoulaka	The season has changed

Onguomabora

This is a name given to a child who is born from a woman who does not give birth before. When that woman becomes pregnant, after several years of sterility, this name can be attributed to the child.

Ayimovu is given to children that come seasonally, that is to say, if a woman gives birth to her first child and then she does not give birth again after a long time, the next child she will give birth to will be an *Ayimovu*.

Ayindeme is given to an unwanted child. This is often in the case of a woman who is fertile enough but cannot control births to space the period of birth between her children. If this woman is at a poor home, society looks down on her. She is accused of giving birth to children that her husband and her cannot take care. Because of this situation, some women resort to abortion and others just give the name *ayideme* to mean that it is the child who came all alone although she did not want to have a child at that period.

Kaamakalé is given to an unwanted child in case of unwanted pregnancy.

Ovulukalira is given when to a child whose mother was unable to give birth. Once she gives birth, people say: the season has changed, meaning that, the situation of that woman has changed.

2.7 Days of birth names

This section deals names that pertain to the days⁷ of birth of a child.

Table 7: Days of birth names

Mbere names	French transcription	Gloss
Okila	Okila	First day of the week
Odoua, Otsoua	Odouka	Second day of the week
Tsonɔ	Tsono	Third day of the week
ɔkɔndzɔ	Okondzo	Fourth day of the week

Okila is the first day of the week. It corresponds to Monday. It is a working day when people are free to go about their business. A child born on that day can be named Okila. This correspond to Ambosi names *Okia* giving rise to names like *Ikia* or *Mikia*.

Odoua corresponds to Tuesday. It is the second day of the week; it is also a working day *Odoua* can be used as the name of a child born on the second day. Similarly in Embosi, there is the name *Adoua*

Tsonɔ is the third day. It corresponds to Wednesday. There also no prohibition concerning the occupation of the population. In Ambosi culture, this gives rise to names likes *Tsono*, *Atsono* or *Itsono*.

ɔkɔndzɔ corresponds to the last day of the week according to the Mbere calendar. It is a non-working day. No inhabitant has the right to go and do any occupation outside the village for fear of encountering evil spirits. Moreover, children born on this day are sometimes seen as the reincarnation of deceased ancestors. In Embosi, there is the Name *Akondzo*.

With the exception of Okila, the rest of the days correspond to the calendar of mbochi group of the Republic of Congo. It is not only in Congo that naming can be given from the days of the weeks, other African societies do alike. As stated by Crymore Penruza (2021:65):

In “West African countries like Ghana, Cameroon and Nigeria, days of the week or market are used as personal names. In Xhosa, we have Nogcawe, and in Zulu, we found Nomasonto, all given to girl child, meaning ‘born on Sunday’.

2.8 Names related to the weather at birth

In this sub-section, I deal with the names that pertain to the weather at a child's birth.

Table 8: Names related to the weather at birth

Mbere names	French transcription	Gloss
ɔpɛpɛ	Opépé	Wind
Mvula	Mvoula	Rain
Muandza	Mouandza	A thunder
Tsu:mbé	Tsoukoumbé	A Bad day
Amouandza	Amounadza	The thunders

Opépé can be assigned to child born on a stormy day. According to the Mbere belief, the climate can translate the behavior that the newborn will have.

Mvula can be given as name to a child who was born while it is raining. The rain is considered as a blessing to water the seeds, a child named *Mvula* is considered blessed. This name is similar to Luvalé of Zambia system as elaborated by Sylvester Mutunda (2017:78): “among the Luvalé, a child born when it is raining is called *Vula* (rain) and if birth of the child occurs during rainy season, the child will be called *Mulombwe* or *Mungole* (persistent rain).”

Mwandza, Amwandza can be given as a name to a child born on a rainy day accompanied by thunders. They consider thunder as the divine wrath that falls on those who misbehave in society. A *Mouandza* child is therefore the one who is called upon to make severe judgments.

Tsu:mbé is synonymous with bad weather. This name can be assigned to a child born on a day of bad weather.

⁷ The Mbere calendar has only four (04) days that's why this category provides four names corresponded to the four days of the week. Cf F. Okoueke (2020: 242) for the Mbere calendar.

2.9 Social event names

In this category, I present the names that relate to some social events.

Table 9: Social event names

Mbere names	Transcription	Gloss
angɔmɔ	Angomo	The drums
Ndziemi	Ndziemi	singer

Angomɔ is given by referring to social events. Through these events, there are events that cause dance parties such as marriage, the burial of the dead; the enthronement of new customary chiefs. If the labor starts while the mother is assisting to a dance party, this name can be given. It implies that the baby in the womb has heard the sound of the drums and he wants to be born to dance.

Ndziemi is also linked to dance parties. *Ndziemi* is none other than the one who sings.

Conclusion

This paper dealt with the study of Mbere circumstantial names. The circumstances surrounding a name in Mbere community include nine categories of names notably the order of birth, the place of birth, the family conflicts and peace, the death situations, the health and social conditions, the woman fertility or sterility, the days of birth, the names related to weather at birth, and the social events. What this piece of research work highlights is that Mbere naming system is akin to other African culture naming system. Zawawi (1993: xii) asserts that “*personal names provide an important component of African cultural identities*”. Analyzing Ghanaian names, Akpebu Adjah (2011:4) writes: “*Ghanaian personal names, as sources of information, provide substantial insight about the circumstances surrounding an individual's conception and birth.*”

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