

CHANGES IN THE NAMING PRACTICE OF CHILDREN BORN OUT OF MARRIAGE IN SESOTHO: IMPLICATIONS FOR CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Madira Thetso

University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

madira.thetso@wits.ac.za

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1144-1392>

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the naming practices of children born out of wedlock in Sesotho. In the past, society raised and groomed the Basotho girls to become wives and having a child outside of marriage was considered unacceptable. Pregnancy out of wedlock was deemed a shame not only to the girl's family but also to the entire community. As a result, unmarried women faced stigma and discrimination in their communities, which were portrayed by the names given to their children. The names accorded to such children were stigmatising and conveyed a negative message or attitude towards them. Considering the alarming increase in teenage pregnancy, one would expect more derogatory names in the Basotho communities. However, data collected from digital media, particularly Facebook dialogues and casual conversations, portray an observable shift in the naming practices of children born out of wedlock in recent years. Through socio-onomastic theory, this study aims to understand the variation in the naming practice of children born out of marriage, its significance and broader repercussions for Sesotho culture and society. It is observed that social changes, including the increasing education and employment opportunities for women, have impacted culture and tradition. The economic independence of Basotho women has bestowed them power and autonomy, which have earned them and their children societal recognition and respect. The observed changes reflect a broader shift in societal attitudes towards unmarried women and children born out of wedlock.

Keywords: Children born out of wedlock, naming practice, Sesotho culture, societal attitudes, socio-onomastics, stigmatisation, unmarried women

INTRODUCTION

African communities value children and consider them crucial. Children are future adults and transmitters of culture and rituals. Their presence signifies the continuity and survival of not only their families but their societies, as well. The children's upbringing requires cautious measures from infancy because anything that surrounds them shapes their adulthood. In preparing children for adulthood, boys and girls were nurtured differently, considering their social and cultural roles within societies. In Sesotho, boys were groomed to be providers for their families. They were treated strictly to strengthen them as family protectors and providers, while girls were seen as mothers and housekeepers, who would cater for all the domestic aspects of their partners and children.

A Mosotho girl child, the focus of this paper, was traditionally groomed to become a wife and was treated thus. It was unacceptable for a girl to have a child outside of marriage. The family elders would be saddened by the girl's behaviour because

she would have been cautioned. Traditionally, sex before marriage was prohibited, and Basotho girls were warned about this. From the time a girl started menstruating, she was taught how to take care of herself and her well-being. Using taboo expressions, the Basotho would teach young girls what they should do (dos), and what they should not do (don'ts) to nurture them into responsible members of society. Due to cultural sensitivities, topics related to sex were rarely discussed directly with children. Instead, they were conveyed through euphemistic expressions because sexual matters were considered taboo. Taboos refer to the cultural conventions that are orally communicated from one generation to another (Qhala and Thetso, 2014). If a girl disregarded the warning and fell pregnant, society would condemn and isolate her.

Pregnancy outside of wedlock was considered a shame not only to the girl's family but also as a source of shame to the entire community. As a result, unmarried women who became pregnant often faced stigma and discrimination in their communities. The blame would also be transferred to the child through a humiliating and stigmatising name that it carries from childhood to adulthood. The child would be sidelined and denied any position in the family. In this way, the elders retaliated for the shame and disgrace the girl would have brought to the family. Although child upbringing in Sesotho was a communal task, naming a child has always been the responsibility of family elders (Sengani, 2015), who, through their experiences, possessed a deeper understanding of the meanings behind names. The names bestowed on such children would communicate a negative attitude towards the bearers.

According to Aldrin (2017), a naming process accords the parents' linguistic resources to create social meanings. African people, as Zungu and Zulu (2018) claim, consider their situation before they name their children. African names, therefore, are meaningful and tell stories about the families and communities to which they belong. Like in other African societies, in Sesotho, names are not just given but are associated with the situations surrounding the bearers at birth. Habibi (1992) avers that the origin and meaning associated with a name reveal the attitudes and values of the selector. This, therefore, suggests that a name can perform roles other than its primary identification function. It can influence how we perceive others, ourselves and our surroundings.

During name-giving, family elders consider several factors. This follows that *Bitso lebe ke seromo*, 'A bad name is an omen'. A name can negatively affect the bearer's life; hence, the naming practice should be performed with caution. As was indicated earlier, the elders are entrusted with the responsibility of naming children because they possess the knowledge and skills of life. This explanation concurs with Uwen and Ekpang's (2023) assertion that a personal name symbolises a communication that shows family and cultural information from the name-giver and bearer. The children born out of wedlock, like other children, were named by their grandparents. In many instances, the family elders would give a child a name to express their dissatisfaction and disappointment caused by their daughter's behaviour. The name would, therefore, bear a negative connotation and show a negative attitude towards the bearer as a sign of unhappiness. However, I have noted a paradigm shift in the naming practice of the children born out of wedlock. The paper, therefore, aims to understand these changes,

their significance, and how they impact Sesotho culture and society, following the observation that names are an ideal way of exploring the societal changes. The study seeks to address the following questions:

- a. What influences the traditional naming practice for children born out of wedlock?
- b. What underpins the changes in the naming practice of children born out of wedlock?
- c. What do the changes reveal about social and cultural developments in society?

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is descriptive and thus qualitative. Ugwu and Eze (2023) define qualitative research as concerned with ideas and experiences. The data for this study was collected directly from Facebook posts and comments, as well as the native speakers' casual conversations. From Facebook, I purposely selected the groups that discuss Sesotho cultural topics and read the comments where people share their experiences about the practice of naming children born out of wedlock in Sesotho. Ditchfield and Meredith (2018) claim that Facebook is a fruitful site for research, as many people relate to one another and share information. I also listened to the native speakers' casual conversations related to the topic. Content analysis was used to detect the reasons for the shift in the practice of naming the children born out of wedlock and to examine the societal attitudes towards unmarried women.

This qualitative study is premised on the socio-onomastics theory, which, according to Ainiala and Östman (2017), examines the variety of names, including proper names. Socio-onomastics theory seeks to understand names in historical and present times because personal names can serve as indicators of social developments. It explores the challenges and cultural developments of naming practices. The theory also studies how name usage may reflect different social groups and include or exclude minorities in society. The socio-onomastics theory emphasises the significance of exploring variation in using names and the reasons some names are avoided (Ainiala and Östman, 2017). This study, aiming to understand the shift from traditional to current Sesotho naming practices for children born out of wedlock, is explained by the theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Naming practice in African societies has attracted scholarly attention for a long time. It has been approached from different perspectives by different researchers. This follows that a name is considered crucial as it identifies an individual. Researchers agree that a name is not arbitrarily chosen but purposely selected during the naming process (Guma, 2001; Letsoela, 2015). The Africans consider the situations surrounding the birth of a child before they can give it a name. While the upbringing of a child is a communal task, its naming is entrusted to the family elders because they know the family history (Guma, 2001; Sengani, 2015; Mahwasane and Tshifaro, 2019) and fully understand the meanings of names. The African names are meaningful, thus telling stories about the family and society. Names are helpful tools for disseminating any information that the family wants the community to know. The information shared can be positive or negative

and can influence the character of the name bearer. It can give the background and family concerns, thus causing discomfort to the name bearer.

In pursuit of understanding the Sesotho proverb *Bitso lebe ke seromo* 'A bad name is an omen', Possa-Mogoera (2020) investigated the Sesotho naming practice. She wanted to understand what the proverb means and the elders' interpretation of it as portrayed by the names they bestow on children. She sought to discover whether the proverb serves to caution the name givers against giving children names with negative connotations or to curse the name bearers, in this case, illegitimate children. In her study, Possa-Mogoera (2023) also explored the names given to the children born out of wedlock, as they are mostly the bearers of derogatory, humiliating and mocking names. This follows that the Basotho consider the children born out of wedlock as a humiliation to their families, thus sending messages through the names they give such children. Consequently, the name givers are aware that the names influence the character of the bearer (Possa and Khotso, 2015; Chaphole and Thetso, 2023).

The reviewed literature informs the current paper, which aims to investigate the change observed in the naming practice of children born out of wedlock. While teenage pregnancy is increasing at an alarming rate, it is observed that the names that were associated with elders' negative attitudes towards such children are disappearing. The current paper investigates what underpins the changes in the naming practice of children born out of wedlock and the implications of this change to culture and society.

Traditional naming of children born out of wedlock

The table below presents the names given to the children born out of wedlock. A name, according to Madima (2024), is chosen based on the family's belief system and experiences. Madima asserts that, in some societies like Venda, a child can change their name when they grow up if they do not like it. However, the intention to change a name is discussed with the elders to receive their blessing and avoid any bad luck that may befall the name bearer. In Sesotho, individuals identify themselves with the names from birth to adulthood. They carry the messages in all phases of their lives, as Possa-Mogoera (2020) indicates that the name-givers purposefully send messages through the names they give the children.

In traditional Basotho society, the children born out of wedlock were given names with negative connotations (Possa-Mogoera, 2023). Anyone familiar with the language would easily detect the relationship the name bearer has with the name-givers (Madima, 2024). Table 1 below demonstrates Sesotho names for the children born out of marriage.

Table 1: Sesotho names for children born out of marriage and their English translation

Name	English translation
Khoboso	Humiliation
Keiso	Demeaned
Motlakamang	Coming from whom?
Remaketse	We are sad/surprised

Name	English translation
Moramang	Whose son?
Matlakala/Makhokolotso	Trash/ rubbish
Mpotseng	Ask me
Mmakadiseng	Join me in my surprise
Mpatliseng	Help me search
Nkiseng	Take me there
Keoamang	Whose am I?
Molelekeng	Expel her
Moitlisi	One who brought herself or himself
Relebeletse	We are expecting
Mmotseng	Ask her

Looking at the names in Table 1 above, they have negative connotations. In various circumstances, the family elders distanced themselves, thus directing societal questions to the mother or the child. This can be seen in names, such as *Mmotseng* 'ask her' and *Mpotseng* 'ask me'. As for other names, the family elders expect answers from their daughter about the father of the child, hence the names, such as *Relebeletse* 'we are expecting'. Other names, including *Nkiseng* 'take me there' and *Mpatliseng* 'help me search', signify a plea from the name bearer to whoever can assist in the search for the father, while *Khoboso* 'humiliation' and *Keiso* 'the demeaned' show how the family perceives the child. While the name *Matlakala* 'rubbish' can name a surviving child after miscarriages in Sepedi (Madima, 2024), in Sesotho, it can name a child born out of marriage to show family dissatisfaction. A child can also be named *Moitlisi* 'one who brought herself/himself' to signify that he/she was not expected, or *Molelekeng* 'banish her' to show that she is not accepted in the family. One wonders if the bearers of these names are expected to be proud of their names, as Madima (2024) avers that the African names pledge pride to the bearer.

Factors that underpin the naming practice

Literature reveals that cultural norms are the factors that influence the naming of children born out of wedlock. As indicated earlier, the Basotho girls were groomed to be wives. Sex before marriage was prohibited, and a girl who would violate this prohibition was considered disrespectful and a disgrace to her family, as evidenced by a saying that *Ngwana ke seipone sa lelapa labo* 'A child reflects his/her family'. Therefore, a child's unacceptable behaviour was associated with the parents' failure to bring their children up. It was against this background that the family elders would send a message of dissatisfaction and disappointment through the name they would give to a child. They would ask the mother several humiliating questions, out of which they would establish a name for a child. Names, such as *Remaketse* 'we are shocked' or *Mmotseng* 'ask her', would show the parents' astonishment and lack of responses.

The patriarchal nature of society is another factor. In most African societies, women were the guardians of their fathers and husbands (Sudarkasa, 1986). They did not have control over their lives and resources, and they were expected to be silent and submissive. Women were domestic workers and would rely on men for everything. For instance, women could not own land, could not participate in decision-making and would live under the shadow of their husbands (married)

or fathers (unmarried). Unmarried women were treated as inferior and voiceless; hence, they looked up to their fathers, who were superior in society. As such, they could not have a say in anything that concerns them and their children.

Changes in the naming practice of children born out of wedlock

Societies are not static but change with time, and as such, various issues are affected by this change. The Basotho society is not exceptional, as there have been observable changes between the traditional and modern Basotho societies. The naming practice has also changed, as evidenced by Hasjim's (2023) declaration that societal changes can affect the naming practice in a society. Names, therefore, display a clear picture of the society in which they function.

Research shows that teenage pregnancy is increasing at an alarming rate in African societies. Amos (2013) claims that young girls do not regard their cultural values related to marriage and virginity. Based on this claim, one would expect an increase in derogatory names in Sesotho. However, we note a decline in such names, except where a child is named after someone. Recently, there has been a variation in the Basotho's perception of unmarried women and their children in the modern Basotho societies. For instance, while some families cannot accept children born out of wedlock and give them derogatory names, others appreciate and welcome such children. For the latter, the unacceptable behaviour of the girl would not be condoned, but the parents could not punish an innocent child.

Family desperation for children has also resulted in the acceptance of children born out of wedlock. In some cases, a child born out of wedlock would fill the gap in a family that has never been blessed with a child of his/her gender. As a result, such a child is considered a blessing. The names, such as *Tlhohonolofatso* 'blessing', *Lehlohonolo* 'Lucky', *Rethusitswe* 'we have been helped', *Rearabetswe* 'we have been answered', and *Refilwe* 'we are given', are given to children born out of wedlock. In other cases, unmarried women are the only children in their families. For them, giving birth to a child of any gender brings hope and happiness to their families. Similarly, the family elders appreciate and welcome such children, as evidenced by names such as *Keketso* 'addition', *Reekeditsewe* 'we have been added', *Letlotlo* 'treasure' and *Reatile* 'we have increased'.

The status and roles of women have changed significantly in modern societies. From being housekeepers, women have joined the labour force. Joining the labour force has empowered them and elevated their standing in society. Ugochi and Matthew (2024) claim that women's participation in the labour force has accorded them economic power. Unlike in traditional Basotho societies, unmarried women, literate or illiterate, are breadwinners even if they are still under the guidance of their families. Because of the high rate of unemployment, most families rely on their unmarried girls for survival, thus appreciating their efforts. As economic drivers, becoming pregnant out of wedlock does not isolate them anymore; rather, they get support from their families, and their children are taken care of.

In modern Basotho societies, females are more educated than males. Western education has empowered women because they have secured better jobs and

leadership positions. It has increased women's social status, thus affording them equal rights to their male counterparts. Education has elevated and earned them and their children societal recognition. Currently, women's voices are heard, and they contribute to decision-making. The society's perception of unmarried women has changed significantly, and their children are valued members of the families in which they are born. The children born out of wedlock are welcomed and nurtured properly, thus given names that do not exclude, isolate, or discriminate against them.

The increasing divorce rate has become a threat to the Basotho communities. Parents are now fearing for their children, thus changing attitudes towards unmarried women bearing children. Amos (2013) argues that young couples give birth before they think about marriage. Despite this, parents do not show any dissatisfaction by giving their grandchildren discriminatory and derogatory names anymore; rather, they welcome the children born out of marriage. These children are included in family heredity without hesitation. The children would live with their mothers' parents and receive support from them even if their mothers got married.

In 2024, the Inheritance Act was presented in parliament. Clause 69 of the new law was meant to grant children born out of wedlock the right to inherit a share from their biological fathers and mothers (Lesotho Times, 2024). Clause 69 of the Act was removed because of the noise from the other part of the Basotho who still believe in the customary law on inheritance. The rejection of the law, which aimed to protect the children born out of wedlock, showed varying opinions about the children born out of wedlock. While some people were delighted about the law, others were not. However, the Clause was refrained from because it was challenged. Some people feared conflicts were likely to arise because of this clause and, thus, requested its removal. On the contrary, others were happy that the children who had been sidelined and discriminated against would be accorded justice. However, the uproar about the Inheritance Act brings another perspective on the issue.

It can be noted, therefore, that a decline in derogatory names does not mean acceptance and inclusion of children born out of wedlock in family heredity. It can be that the elders are aware that the names make the community know their family concerns and disappointments (Zungu, 2016). Thus, they decide to change the naming practice to hide the family secrets. Zungu and Zulu (2018) claim that the African names expose the bearer's family dynamics to the whole world. We notice variation amongst the Basotho as evidenced by the split opinion about Clause 69 of the 2024 Inheritance Act. Some members of society are adamant that the children born out of wedlock should be afforded justice, but others still discriminate against such children and protect the children born in formal marriages. One would conclude that the decrease in derogatory and discriminatory names partly benefits the name bearers but benefits families most. The name bearers, therefore, evade the Sesotho names bestowed on them as they grow up. As it is claimed that names are meaningful and purposeful, the name-bearers feel uncomfortable carrying along their background and family concerns from childhood to adulthood. As a result, they shift from their traditional names to either Western or nicknames. It is noted that the name bearers do this

for individual identity, as this change is not approved by the elders. It is further noted that some parents are moving from names with negative meanings to protect their children from humiliation and discrimination. As mentioned earlier, parents do not condone their daughters' behaviour, but they do not want to expose their family secrets to the public through derogatory names anymore. However, with other families, the children born out of wedlock are accepted as family members and part of the family heredity. The acceptance is evidenced by such children being named after the family elders and accommodated in the family customs and rituals. The elders realise that negative names not only discriminate against the name bearers but also expose family issues to the community.

CONCLUSION

The paper examined the change in the practice of naming the children born out of wedlock in Sesotho in quest of factors that underpin the change and the implications of such change to society and tradition. The changes between traditional and modern Basotho society have affected the naming of children born out of marriage. Traditionally, sex before marriage was prohibited, and disregarding the prohibition resulted in humiliation and stigmatisation of both the unmarried woman and her child. Contrarily, in modern societies, couples give birth even before marriage, and children are no longer stigmatised through derogatory and humiliating names.

From being housekeepers to joining the labour force, women have gained economic freedom. The changing roles of the Basotho women have earned them societal recognition and respect. Currently, women giving birth to children out of wedlock do not burden their parents anymore because they can provide for their children and families. From derogatory and humiliating names to welcoming names, the children born out of wedlock are considered members of the families in which they are born. They become part of the family heredity and rituals, although there are still varying opinions regarding inheritance and allocation of property. It can be concluded that the shift in the naming practice of the children born out of wedlock indicates a change in societal attitudes towards unmarried women and their children.

Recommendation

This study recommends further research to detect the positions occupied by the children born out of wedlock and how their acceptance and inclusion into the family lineage affect the Sesotho family structure.

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