

## **Narratives of Identity and Choice of Surname among the Luyia<sup>1</sup> Community**

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### **Abstract**

The Luyia culture is predominantly patriarchal, where children belong to the father. Traditionally, naming is predominantly done by the fathers, who give surname(s) to the children, symbolic of the family’s identity and/or the clan. This identity not only offers the child protection, but also, rights of access to the family’s wealth especially land which is traditionally inherited by the male child. This system of naming also ensures generational continuity. However, factors such as colonization and the concomitant introduction of Christianity, changing gender roles, identity, and mobility have introduced changes to the traditional naming practices. The introduction of Christian names, and preference for gender neutral names accommodate changing gender roles, and they help navigate identity challenges within the community. Some of these changes are not common within the married circles. This paper examines how women engage with the aftermath of marriage and divorce, and how they are able to re-negotiate their identity through naming using the Critical Diversity Literacy theory (CDL). However, within this identity and social belonging, social divisions and various forms of inequalities exist among these women who are viewed to be on the extreme (“out of marriage”) and who are then forced to negotiate for belonging within the community through naming. We found in this study that Luyia women who are either separated, divorced, widowed, successfully assert some independence and empowerment.

### **Keywords**

naming, relationality, gender, Luyia patriarchy, Critical Diversity Literacy

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<sup>1</sup> Luyia in this paper refers to the Bukusu sub-group of the larger Luyia group. Including Bukusu, there are altogether seventeen sub-groups making up the Luyia.

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## Introduction

As a social custom within the African cultural context, naming is viewed as a straightforward process with name allocations based on factors such as the sex of the child at birth, family ties, seasons, time in history, specific incidents and events, days of the week, time of the day, location of the mother at birth, circumstances of the mother during pregnancy and at birth, community special events such as circumcision, funerals, etc. This is partially illustrated in table 1 below.

**Table 1. Luyia/Bukusu Community Naming Traditions<sup>4</sup>**

Factor under consideration	Name (female)	Meaning
Location	Nangila	Born on the road (engila-road)
Time of day (dawn, morning, afternoon, evening, night)	Nabwile	Born late in the night
Season of the year	Nafula	Born during the rainy season (efula – rain)
Special foods harvesting	Namaemba	Born at millet harvesting (kamaemba – millet)
Family composition	Nasio	Girl born among boys
Clan name	Namuki	Girl born in the Bamuki clan
After death of parents	Namulekhwa	State of being left/orphaned
State of condition of the child relative to siblings	Khakasa	Girl with fair skin; beautiful
Location of birth	Namukuru	Born in the verandah
Community special events	Namwenya	Born during circumcision when kimienya ‘songs’ are sang
Economic activity	Nekesa	Born at harvest (kesa-harvest)
Contemporary activities	Namalwa	Born when there is beer (merry making -kamalwa)

Traditionally, a child was given several names (on the basis of factors outlined in the table), one name was prominent – the name that they were called all the time. This is similar to the

<sup>4</sup> We only cite female names here. However, male counterparts exist but not for every category that is stated. Explanations to these exemptions require further research. Names with male counterparts as shown in Table 1 are:

<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>
Nangila	Wangila
Nafula	Wafula
Namaemba	Khaemba
Nekesa	Wekesa
Namalwa	Wamalwa

present-day first name. But when further identification or ‘belongingness’ was needed, the father’s name was added – because the Luyia are patrilineal and they are also patriarchal. In this sense, the Luyia traditionally used a patronym naming system. When adding the father’s name (the surname), the word ‘khwa’ (son of) was (and still is) used to denote the relationship between a father and their child. Thus, Wafula khwa Khaemba means Wafula son of Khaemba. ‘Owa/wa’ (of) is also used to denote the relationship between a child and his parent (including mother). Thus, Nangila wa Khaemba means Nangila (daughter) of Khaemba and Masinde wa Makinia means Masinde (son) of Makinia. When a girl gets married, the word ‘mukha’ is used to denote her relationship to her husband. Thus, Nangila mukha Wafula means Nangila wife of Wafula. In the unfortunate event that her husband Wafula dies, ‘ngwa’ – a word that denotes her widowhood is added. Thus, Nangila ngwa Wafula means Nangila widow of Wafula. Interestingly, there are no corresponding words/affixes that denote ‘husband of’ and ‘widower of’. Perhaps this underscores the patriarchal nature of the Luyia, where it is crucially important to always explicitly name the relationship of a woman to her husband. Regarding Bukuku patrilineal (and patriarchy) nature, Majore makes the claim that “...women are present only as child-bearers and as an indication of status” (Marjie-Okyere 2015:37).

Amongst the Luyia, a child can be given two or more names on the basis factors such as those listed to in the table 1. However, the most significant name is the name that the father gives the child. This name takes precedence and it is highly recognized. As already mentioned, the Luyia community is predominantly patriarchal and men pride not only in having male children who are seen as heirs within the family, but also, the ceremony of assigning names which bear the identity and clan origin of the family is highly recognized. Female children also take on the family name, with other names of relations from the father’s family, such as mother or grandmother to the father. Then additional names from the mother’s family may also be added. Though family names are specifically seen as bearing the identity which carries the history of the family, inherently, they also carry some meaning which is associated with various factors. These factors, (list not exhaustive) include: accomplishments, lifestyle, symbolizing a time in history, a season, specific incidents from individual political, career ambitions or cultural, day of delivery and expression of the kind of person among other factors. This makes naming in this community a fluid process rather than being static. While giving a name to a son, a father invites whoever he is naming the son after for a short ceremony, if the individual is alive. This person will hold the baby in his hands and call him out by the family name while mentioning other attributes that accompany the name. The child is also called to be and carry any good traits the name may carry. Though negative traits are rejected and not called out, some individuals believe that such traits would never leave the child as long as he bears the name. And the only way to deal with such is to do away with the name or stop calling the child by that name. This has led to changes in naming for those who strongly hold this view. Female children are automatically expected to carry the family’s name which can either be that of the father or the grandfather. But they get married, they also take one their husband’s name: they become ‘mukha’ (wife of) (for example Nangila mukha Wafula ‘Nangila wife of Wafula’).

Despite the continued use of these factors in naming, other non-traditional factors have introduced changes to naming. Factors such as colonization, Christianity and education

have led to the introduction of Christian names, first names, official surnames, gender role changes, identity changes and social mobility. In the contemporary Luyia society, as in many parts of Kenya, a child is expected to have at least three names: the first name (usually a Christian name), a middle name (usually what used to be the Luyia first name), and a surname (the father's name). To accommodate changing gender roles, preference for gender neutral names is becoming common. But divorce adds another layer of complexity to the situation.

Divorce, which is caused by factors such as barrenness, deviation from practice of cultural norms, inappropriate behavior, neglect etc. is an aberration among the Luyia. A divorced woman is looked down upon and even ostracized. This is due to the high value placed on marriage. Marriage is highly valued. Because of the risk of or the reality of ostracism, divorced women are forced to negotiate and construct a new identity for themselves through naming, e.g. by dropping the husbands name, and for the children by also dropping the surname and replacing it with a new name that offers an option for a new identity.

This paper presents and discusses results of the research that was carried out in Bungoma County regarding women's lived experiences after divorce and how they negotiate and reconstruct a new identity for themselves and their children. Our thinking was that after divorce, it would be unlikely for the women to retain identities that kept intact ties to their divorces husbands. As will be shown and discussed later in the paper, we found that Luyia women do indeed reconstruct a new identity by dropping their husband's surnames when they divorce. They do this in order to reclaim their power.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: section 1 is the literature review, section 2 is a brief description of theoretical framework, section 3 is the methodology, section 4 discusses the expression of patriarchal organization of Luyia culture in traditional name allocation, section 5 discusses the shaping effect of colonization and its impact on traditional systems of naming, section 6 is the analysis of names given to girls through the gender lens, and section 7 is the concluding discussion.

## **1. Literature Review**

Most of the available literature on names and naming practices in African cultures discuss meanings of names, factors upon which naming is based, names as personal and societal identity markers and naming changes associated with Christianity. However, they do not discuss how women drop their husband's name to reclaim their independence after divorce.

For instance, Nkamigbo (2019) examines personal names among the Igbo. The study discusses sociocultural relevance of personal names and also discusses the typology of Igbo names including family names, kinship names, circumstantial names, occupational names, market day names, metaphoric names, and honorifics and title names, etc. The Igbo names, according to Nkamigbo are lexical items that have meaning. They express circumstances of birth, physical features of the baby at birth, sex of the baby, family hierarchy, day of delivery, etc. The author finds that there is an ongoing change in the naming practices of the Igbo people due to modernity and religious influences.

In another study of personal names and naming among the Igbo people, Dioka, B.O, Iwunna, P.U, and Alison, J.O (2015) find that all personal Igbo names have meaning. Names that children were given express desires of family members, and their prayers and wishes. Christianity according to these authors disrupted the practice of giving Igbo children traditional names by rejecting them as barbaric names not suitable to be first names and/or baptismal names.

Agyekum (2006), in his study of Akan Personal names observes that the difference between African names and names from Western societies is predictability. Whereas people in Western societies take their fathers' last names (which is predictable), African names are generally not predictable. This is because a name is assigned only after the child is born and the conditions or circumstances surrounding the birth are considered. The name that a child is given in African cultures for the most part depend on the circumstances under which the child is born. These conditions cannot usually be predicted accurately, hence a child's name cannot be predicted.

Fakuade Gbenga, Friday-Otun, and Adeosun (2019) examine names and naming among the Yoruba. They discuss the typology of Yoruba names, factors considered in naming such as circumstances surrounding the birth, etc. Based on their research, they agree with Akinola 2014 who they quote as making the observation that Yoruba names are profound, meaningful, powerful, and at times prophetic. Also discussed are changes in naming that have resulted from religious (Islamic and Christian) influence such the decline in the use Yoruba names as first names.

Didena, M.D (2021) examines names and naming practices among the Dawro people of Ethiopia. Like other researchers of African personal names, he found that social-cultural contexts and the economic circumstances at the time birth determine the personal names that the children are given. Other names that the children were given reflect the Dawro belief system, their understanding of their environment, and their wishes for their children. However, there are names that not necessarily meaningful, but are given to children just for alliteration.

A few works about the Luyia, who our present study is about, exist. Marjie-Okyere, S. (2015) discusses personal names, place names, and names of objects among the Bukusu people who are a sub-group of the Luyia. Although she discusses factors for choice of names and meanings of Bukusu personal names such circumstances surrounding birth, her main focus in the paper is the morphological structure of Bukusu names (personal names, place names, and names of objects).

Makila, F. E. (1978) also briefly discusses names and naming among the Bukusu. He reports that at birth, Bukusu children are named based on the weather, seasons or events at the time of birth or after grandparents or famous people.

Another work on Bukusu names and naming practices is Wasike, A. (2023). In the work, Wasike discusses changing naming practices among the Bukusu. He observes that Christian and Western (Euro-American) names that were non-existent before the arrival of Christian missionaries in the mid-19th century in Kenya, now dominate as first names. Bukusu names are now only used as middle names and last names (surnames).

All the works that we have reviewed here, contribute a great deal to our understanding of African names, meanings of names, naming practices and changes that have taken place since the introduction of Islam and Christianity. In this regard, they nicely complement part of our work in this paper. However, none of the works reviewed here discuss the use of names by women to reclaim their independence, power and freedom after divorce. This is a gap that our research set out to fill.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This work is guided by the Critical Diversity Literacy theory (CDL). CDL is “an informed analytical orientation that enables a person to ‘read’ prevailing social relations as one would a text, recognizing the ways in which possibilities are being opened up or closed down for those differently positioned within the unfolding dynamics of specific social contexts” (Steyn, 2015: 381). Steyn (2015) summarizes it as a set of practices or conceptual tools which allow one to think critically about complex social issues such as identity, power and differences. This concept was developed to analyze power and privilege related to multiple forms of differences. Using the Critical Diversity Literacy (as described by Steyn, 2015), we examine how women engage with the aftermath of marriage and divorce, and how they are able to identify with the community for inclusion through naming. The community here is the context within which this study is viewed. The assumption is that a strong belonging within the community exists with these women. However, within this identity and social belonging, social divisions and various forms of inequalities exist among these women who are viewed to be on the extreme (“out of marriage”) and who are then forced to negotiate for belonging within the community through naming.

## **3. Methodology**

Our research was conducted in Kimilili and Webuye sub-counties in Bungoma County between December 2023 and May 2024.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews with select women belonging to the Luyia community who are divorced and/or separated or have been in a marriage before. 10 women aged between 25 and 60 years were interviewed and 1 focused discussion group (FGD) was held. The first 3 women were selected on the basis of our prior knowledge about their marital status while the rest of the women were referred to us by the first 3 through snowballing. In this sense, our sampling was deliberate and strategic; purposive and non-random. The reason for this is that the women we were interested in are unique and are difficult to find. The value of these unique cases lie in their information wealth and the importance in enabling us to gain a deeper understanding of identity through naming. In this study, we assume that identities and the meanings attached to names in the after-marriage context are (re)constructed at the individual level as well as the community level.

Before being interviewed, we explained to the women what our research is about and gave them a chance ask any questions that they had. When they had understood the research and no further questions, we asked them to give consent for participating in our research by signing the consent form.

No fixed set of questions were drawn for the in-depth interviews. Examples of questions that we asked in the interviews include the following: 1. Is your current surname the same as the surname you had when you were married? 2. Why did you no longer use your ex-husband’s name? (3). Why isn’t ex-husband’s name the surname of your children? (4) What are the social-cultural consequences of your choice to drop your husband’s name? (5) How do you deal with or navigate the arising social-cultural challenges? Based on the responses elicited, we probed further for specific details using different ways of probing, for example, the echo probe, and tell-me-more probe.

In-depth interviews were later followed up by the focus group discussion (FGD). The FGD helped in the understanding of the community perspectives towards the naming patterns. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. In this paper, data from the research is presented in the form of narratives. It is transcribed, translated, coded, thematically and linguistically analyzed. To maintain the anonymity of the women, and for ease of reference, we have used pseudo names.

Conceptually, identity has been defined to refer to parts of a ‘self’, composed of the meanings that persons have attached to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Adopting this definition of identity, collected discourses are analyzed on how identity is constructed and negotiated through the choice of names that these women bear and/or take on, showing how they can negotiate their identity for inclusion into various contexts namely, social-economic, political, and educational spaces.

#### **4. The expression of the patriarchal organization of Luyia culture in traditional name allocation**

Traditionally, the Luyia culture is patriarchal, laying emphasis on the domination of men. The Luyia community has a systematic way of naming their children which defines the family name (for enhancement of future generations), historical, socio-cultural functions, meanings and identity. Other communities in Kenya do a similar thing, for example the Nandi.<sup>5</sup> Because the Luyia community is predominantly patriarchal, naming of children mostly takes the paternal ancestral names for various reasons. First, for cultural and generational continuity. Secondly, for protection from evil by their ancestors. It is also believed that an individual re-births himself or herself through naming. Most men take pride in rebirthing themselves and/or their fathers. In line with this, parents would name their children after their own parents or heroes associated with the family lineage or within

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<sup>5</sup> The Nandi community has a unique naming system that defines personal and cultural identity (Tarus, R. M. et al. 2024)

the community. In all these, one thing is evident, that naming using paternal ancestral names dominates. Children take on the surnames of the fathers.

Children must carry the names of their fathers as surnames, providing the primary identification and association of the child. For instance, a surname like Wamalwa has the bearer identifying with the Wamalwa family, whose clan<sup>6</sup> is easily identified. Luyia clans are associated with migration. This enables families to easily trace their roots. To a large extent, this has worked to the benefit of many in a nation that has experienced violence during elections, or ethnic related wars, which often results in internal displacement. Individuals are forced during such times to re-position by either finding their original homes or negotiating identities that fit the new societies. Thus, names become crucial when searching back migratory routes or identifying with communities for safety and survival. Additionally, family networks have played a critical role in providing social support during such times.

Luyia migration to their current resident location in Western Kenya dates as far back as the second half of the fifteenth century (Were, 1967), with immigrants from Eastern and Western Uganda. They trace their ancestry mainly to other Bantu and non-Bantu groups such as the Kalenjin, Luo and Maasai. It is believed that the Luyia migration was triggered by several factors but mainly by search for land. Land among the Luyia people is heavily valued, not only for economic reasons, but also for social and religious inclinations. They have a strong attachment to their ancestral land which culturally is inherited and is rarely sold to strangers. The ancestral belongs to family only and bears the name of the family. It is for this reason that most people in this community turned down offers of buying large farms in the settlement schemes previously owned by the white farmers<sup>7</sup>. In an interview, a traditional Bukusu circumciser said he had to return back home to his grandfather's land. He said<sup>8</sup>,

Khwaba tongaren abele bakaba kamasiamba, akamaloba lakini nembolelea papa ndi khwalekha kumukunda wa kuka. 1965 nekhwicha ano, kuka kaaba kakaba bulime babana bewe barano ne bulime burama. Bwarama kokesia ali bwo mwichukhulu wase. Menyile ano sikila kuka kaloma ali menya ano paka nga okhasikhe. kuka kakhebela ano. Ne bana base bosu bengila ano, mala bakhamenye ano.

*We were in Tongaren, where settlement land was being subdivided. So I told my dad that we should return to the land where grandfather was. We returned in 1965, and my grandfather who had divided his land among his five sons, had some left over. Asked who the leftover land was for, he pointed at me saying it was for his grandson, who would care for him till death. My grandfather circumcised me in this home. I stay here*

<sup>6</sup> Among the Luyia, each clan has its own unique traditional history, mainly associated with migration history (externally and internally), family landmarks, and family networks of interaction which extent over a wide geographic area. The total number of clans in Luyia is debatable though it is approximated to be slightly above 100.

<sup>7</sup> Naanyu, et al. 2024. Environmental Ethics: Perspectives from Kenya (forthcoming)

<sup>8</sup> Data from the *Changing Life Project- African Identities, Moralities and Wellbeing* (AIM-WELL Project), hosted by the ACC- Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya, Grant funded by the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence, Bayreuth, September 2020.

*because my grandfather said so. My children will also be circumcised here and will stay here.*

Ancestral land bears the name of either the family or the clan. It is this land that is inherited and later shared by family members, traditionally, the men only who bear the family name. Excluded are those who do not bear the family name. Females who carry family names are also excluded, because culturally they are not allowed to inherit land. However, in an effort to deal with issues of gender inequalities, recently the Kenya constitution on family wealth inheritance was changed to include the girl child (Kenya Constitution, 2010). Men in some cultures, Luyia included, have resented this constitutional provision, and have resorted to violence against women as a way of creating fear in them. However, there has been positive progress over the past few years. The women have strongly risen to oppose the violence as they fight for inclusivity in accordance with the law.

Deviating from giving a surname to a child at birth is viewed as a rebellion of some sort, not only by the family but also, by the community at large. School going children with unidentified surnames have to constantly navigate identity challenges<sup>9</sup>. This is because the use of surnames possesses a sense of tradition, pride and honor within the community. This emanates from marriage being regarded with a high esteem in this community. Conflict cases during classroom sessions have been recorded where teachers have demanded to know surnames of students who do not carry such names. This has generated debates on the use of surnames, has become a human rights issue, heavily criticized by gender proponents.

As pointed out earlier, women are required to take their husband’s surname when they get married. However, a trend where married women opt not to take on their husband’s name as it would normally be expected, is slowly gaining root.

We have already observed that men in the Luyia community determine the surname name to be given to the child. This will either be the father’s name or the grandfather’s name or both. For instance, “Wafula” who also carries his father’s name “Wakoli” will opt to name his son “Wafula” or “Wakoli” or both “Wafula Wakoli.” The selection of the surname is mostly determined by the association, pride or honor it carries as stated before. The male children who are seen as enhancing future generations of the family are preferred over females. One of the major causes why marriages have challenges has been traced to women not having male children, leading to cases of infidelity and/or separations. Even though there is a leeway for the woman to suggest the first names, children are mostly identified by the surnames. And in most cases, one will find a father calling and maintaining the surname(s) given to the children for use within the home, while the mother may resort to using the alternative names given.

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<sup>9</sup> Forming an identity within the African context was a straightforward process where an individual simply assumed and fitted into the culturally prescribed roles of the parents and grandparents had also adopted and identified with such (Kisémbé and Abuya, 2024, forthcoming), shaped by ethnic and cultural affiliations. However, due to mobility, intercultural marriages, changing gender roles, this is not so today. There is that obligation to align with new cultures and adjust to fit in new societies and/or changing times.

Neli, a participant who is divorced, gave her children Swahili names instead of Luyia names. One her children is called “Baraka Amani,” with “Amani” serving as the surname. When asked why her children bear Swahili names mostly symbolizing adjectives and nouns such as “Amani” for Peace, “Baraka” for Blessing, “Nehema” for Grace, she said:

*I do not want to ever associate my children with their father’s surname. They will struggle with identity issues because they have minimal and/or no association with the family. Why carry a name that presupposes some form of association that one does not have access to? What are the benefits? I would rather give them a name that is associated with a neutral figure they can access or no figure at all in the event that in future there is need for affiliation as a form of negotiating for their identity.*

In conformity with the Kenyan law, a child’s birth certificate bears two names, with the second name serving as the surname. Under circumstances where the mother is no longer with the father, the surname given to the child will either be the mother’s or a neutral name is assigned, one that describes the circumstances under which the child is born. Nandako is a participant who gave her child her own name to serve as surname. For example, her child is called “Barasa Khaoma,” the first name being “Barasa” and the surname “Khaoma.” Khaoma is her (Nandako’s) first name. In support for this, Nandako, who is a single mother, said:

*I bear the burden of raising my son, and so on his birth certificate, his surname is my first name.*

Probing further on whether this would be problematic in future for her, she remarked:

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*Don’t we have matriarchal societies in Kenya? I would rather he be counted among them than have someone come not only to claim him but also, for his savings because of a name. This also helps not to identify him by his father’s family, but rather that of his mother.*

Another participant, Nakhabi, who is an estranged wife from a polygamous marriage cited various reasons for using neutral bible-oriented names for her children. Being in a polygamous marriage in itself attracts a lot of challenges, she says:

*Other women are always hunting down other children from co-wives. There is a lot of jealousy, witch hunting, unnecessary competition and insecurity especially if you are a second wife life myself. So everything you do, revolves around protecting your children.*

Nakhabi went on to narrate how she had to forcefully re-name her children against her husband’s wishes – a decision that cost her, her marriage. Renaming was for identification. She said:

*If we the wives had male children for instance, they all had the same surname(s). To avoid confusion and cases of mistaken identities when referencing, I was forced to re-name my sons. For instance, there was a case of misconduct, and during referencing,*

*the family surname was used. We the co-wives were all accusing each other's sons. It took some time before we realized whose son was the culprit.*

Renaming for new identifications and dealing with cases of mistaken identities seem to be the reason for re-naming as well as a proposal for future naming. She expressed satisfaction with the biblical and neutral naming for she says “*It offers some level of protection.*” Protection is interpreted here to mean access to certain rights.

There is clear evidence of transformation in the naming from the use of surnames to the use of biblical terminology as names. This is done for various reasons ranging from protection, to acquiring a new identity and belonging. However, it ultimately raises problem of cultural belonging. Identity is fluid and is pegged on a number of factors that enable individuals to negotiate under different circumstances for the ultimate goal of belonging. How does the use of surnames that are not patriarchally related impact on culture? What are the causal factors? This is discussed next under the shaping effects of colonization.

#### **4.1. The shaping effect of colonization and its impact on traditional systems of naming**

Colonization brought about major changes in the sectors of religion (introduction of Christianity) and education. Traditionally, Luyia religion featured Wele ‘God’ and spirits that were worshipped especially during funeral ceremonies. Religious activities were performed related to appeasing Wele and the spirits. However, the dawn of Christianity, brought about religious conversion that birthed Luyia Christians. The embracing of Christianity had a rippling effect on the naming system. Christianity and tradition became two different cultures with each laying emphasis on belief systems, that were in conflict. One of the areas that some Luyia Christians embraced strongly was in the area of naming. Simuli, a participant in this study, when talking about taking on surnames with biblical origin says;

*When I learned the word of God that names are inherent in the nature of the person, and that an individual carries along all the characteristics of the person he/she is named after, I not only changed my name but also those of my children.*

Simuli went on to explain how she struggled to have children in her marriage, believing that the grandmother she was named after, lived through her and causing her to go through similar challenges. She said,

*I listened to my pastor speak about naming and how we ought to be careful on the names we call our children. That each time a name is called, it is like calling the spirit behind that name. Then he went on to explain how names we have inherited from our parents/grandparents could trigger misfortunes. I personally recall asking my father to share with me the character of my grandmother I was named after. He told me that she suffered a series of miscarriages and ended up having one child. And that is exactly what I also went through. This was an eye opener though I got scared. So I quickly embarked on finding out the character of my estranged husband's father who my son was named after. To my shock, I was told a behavior that almost matched that of my son's, with not good negative traits such as drunkenness. I had to take a decision,*

*dropped my son's name and gave him a new name, "Shalom" meaning the 'peace of God.' Am not the only who has done this. Most of us. After all Jabez in the bible also had his name changed from 'pain' to something good.*

Naming also transformed among the Christians because it was believed that once the connotation of a given name reflected negative attributes, there was need to change and acquire a name that carried positive attributes. This affected the naming among the Luyia. Over and above the paternal association, the surnames also carry some meaning. For example, a person's name calls to mind who the person is, what they have accomplished and how they have lived their life. Names also may symbolize a time in history, a season, specific incidents from individual political, career ambitions or cultural. For example, an individual for the purpose of political ambitions, refuses to take and identify with the father's surname or heritage because of seeking for a political career in another land with a different culture. There was a case of a man born along the coastal region and the dad being a native of the same region, gave him his surname. The mother was from the Western part of Kenya. This individual, desiring to vie for a member of parliament in western Kenya, had to change his name to that of his maternal grandfather in order to identify with the community. But he maintained his coastal region name for job security. A name could also be an expression of the kind of person he/she is, was or is to become. For example, the name "Asava" meaning to be prayerful is now a surname in some families. Prayerfulness is a positive attribute. Names also symbolize an extension of self or self – revelation. Other meanings would reflect on the day a child is born. For example, Saturday, believed to be a day of good tidings would have surnames such as Nyongesa, while Monday's commonly known for community meetings 'baraza' would have surnames such as "Barasa."

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Names with negative meanings are shunned by the Christians who have been sensitized not to take on such names for fear of going through misfortunes. This also includes names of relations who had negative character traits such as drunkenness, murder, barrenness, thieving, stinginess, inability to marry, and many other forms of unacceptable community behavior.

We cite examples of such surnames in the table below:

**Table 2. Negatively connoted names**

Name	Meaning representation	Explanation
Makokha	Birth circumstances	A boy child born following a series of premature child deaths
Mukhalamwandu	Birth circumstances	A widower who sires a boy child with a sister in law
Namulekhwa	Birth circumstances	A girl child birthed by a widow and another man

#### **4.2. Analysis of names given to girls versus boys through the gender lens**

Gender in naming among the Luyia community is not excluded. Inequalities resulting from gender and which are reflected in naming are quite vast. Women have lower status

than men, but the extent of the gap between the sexes varies across cultures and time. Despite the fact that the Luyia people identify themselves as one group, they have different cultures emanating from clan identities. Within this community for example, women do not inherit property. When family land is inherited by the male child, the female child is given nothing. It is assumed that the female child will get married at some point, and so assigning property to her would benefit the marital family. For future generations to benefit from the family, only male children who remain at home inherit family property and pass it on. Unfortunately, for the girl child, should there be an untimely death of the husband, inheriting her husband's property will not be possible because in her marital home she is seen as a stranger. This shows how women are disadvantaged in absolute terms relative to men in terms of access to family property, exposure and even education. Traditionally, educating the girl child was seen as beneficial to her parents and siblings. The thinking was that educating her would only benefit her marital family. The women also do not have a final say on the use of their own earnings or other household decisions. Neither do they have a say in naming and/or being named after. Traditional gender norms remain strongly entrenched in the culture.

#### ***a. Names given to girls through the lens of gender***

A girl child born to a widow and another man is named “Namulekhwa,” literally meaning ‘*that who has been left.*’ One first impression, this might be read as a deliberate gender mechanism of keeping women powerless by presenting the state of a woman as fragile, vulnerable, and in a society where she receives nothing from the family, and being abandoned. However, there is a male counterpart to this name. A boy child born to a widow and another man is named “Walekhwa.” This doesn't mean that names and naming practices among the Luyia do not contain unfairness to women. An example in naming among that Luyia that discriminates against women and presents them wholly dependent on their husbands which we saw in the introduction is the use the prefix ‘ngwa’ in reference to a widow, and also the word widow. “Nekesa ngwa Mang'eni” means Nekesa widow of Mang'eni. This seems to emphasize the fact that the woman is still attached to her husband even though he is deceased. It is telling that there is no prefix that means ‘widower of’ to refer to a man whose wife has died. Similarly, there is no word that means widower. “Namulekhwa is also used to refer to a widow. But to our knowledge, there is no word that means widower.

Gender based unfairness and biases extend beyond names and naming practices. Gender norms which include values, traditions and practices that influence and shape a woman's respective role in marriage, responsibilities and relationships violate her rights in some cases.

In the event that children pick up deviant behavior in society, justifications are derived from the misfortune of having been raised without a father, and the mother unfortunately has to take responsibility. The results of this inequality show a personal image of helplessness, weakness of the female gender.

### ***b. Names given to boys through the lens of gender***

The male masculinity is also evidenced in naming. The name “Wanyonyi” which makes reference to some ‘*type of weed*’ that chocks plants to destruction, is assigned to males. There is no female equivalent name. “Namasaka” referring to ‘bitter herbs’ is assigned to males with no female counterpart. Does this imply that men are associated with bitterness and chocking, or is it a way to ensure equity, fairness to compensate for historical and social disadvantages?

Cases where names refer to destructive insects that can be harvested and eaten have both male and female forms. Is this a way of striving for equity? See examples in the table below:

Male name	Female name	Meaning	Association
Wasike	Nasike	Locusts	Crop destructive insects
Wakhungu	Nakhungu	Army worm	Crop destructive insects

### ***c. Concluding Discussion***

It is clear from our research that naming practices are gradually changing among the Luyia. There have been changes in naming practices in other African cultures as noted in the literature review, but the empowerment and identity directed change that we found in this study is different. While change in other African cultures that have been studied involve taking of and preference for Christian and Western first names, the change that we found here is the change in surnames. In major part, due to the influence Christianity and modernity, women who are divorced drop their ex-husbands’ name, and they also opt not to give their children their father’s name as surname. This way, they assert their independence and empowerment.

A surprising finding that we did not anticipate at the beginning of our study is polygamy as reason and motivation for surname change. Our research participant, Nandako, felt strongly the need to change her children’s surname because she did not want her children to be mistaken for her co-wives’ children. Mistaken identity in polygamous families is real, and the risks can be high especially where deviance and criminal activity are involved. This is a risk that she was not ready to take. It is admirable how she and other women in our study stood up not just for themselves but for their children as well.

The role of Christianity and modernity in women empowerment is clear, and it is safe to conclude that the number of women who opt to exercise their independence and/or empowerment through naming and other means is only going to increase. It is actually likely to grow faster as more women receive an education and become aware of the enacted gender equity inheritance law.

However, gender inequality and unfairness are still embedded in Luyia naming practices. Our research has barely touched on the use of gender specific prefixes and on what appears to be attempts by the language and culture to balance out its thinking about gender. Further

research in this regard is warranted. Further research could also identify more women who have asserted their independence and empowerment. This would complement our findings in this study.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the changing naming practices among the Luyia community which is a predominantly patriarchal society. Naming within this community is highly upheld for purposes of identity, enhancing generations as well as passing on family inheritance. Despite children receiving other names, surnames are more significant. Male children bear family surnames inherited from their fathers and/or grandfathers. Female children are equally expected to carry the family name as the surname. However, colonization, Christianity and modernity have led to changing gender roles, identity re-negotiation, and Christian names. There is preference for gender neutral names to accommodate changing gender roles, as well as to help navigate identity challenges within the community. This is common among critically diverse women, namely, separated, divorced, and widowed, who have to navigate their identity through naming to be able to assert their independence.

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