

# Aesthetic of naming: Potential psycho-sociological effects of some forenames in use among Zimbabweans

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## Abstract

*Naming aesthetics in Zimbabwe as in the rest of African cosmology have always been incident-based and this trend somewhat persists. The aesthetic of naming is a parent or guardian's prerogative and expresses that individual/s wishes, joys, fears and attitudes but may not necessarily consider the named's future perceptions or feelings engendered by the particular name that identifies them. Various studies have established general naming practices in Zimbabwe and offer many reasons to account for name types. For example, some Shona names are thought repositories of human experience while others are regarded as argument by proxy. Whereas most previous studies on onomastic practices in Zimbabwe have tended to focus on name etymologies and name meanings, the present paper seeks to assess the potential psycho-sociological effects of some significantly negative forenames encountered in school registers and on university graduation lists. A name may not have much statistical significance but when anyone human being carries it, the name becomes sufficiently important as is illustrated in the present discussion on the potential effects of just two common Zimbabwean names, 'Mistake and Murambiwa'.*

## Naming practices among Zimbabweans

Onomastic studies from the pre-1980 era were propelled by such scholars as Roberts (1931), Morris (1932), Hunt (1952), Kahari (1972), Majubane (1975), and Jackson (1975). These scholars considered numerous categories such as bird names, place names, dog names, names of chiefs, and those of district commissioners as well as nicknames (Mutema & Njanji, 2013). Mutema and Njanji (2013) also explicate the post-1980 academic researches on names and some of them are briefly captured here to illustrate the scholarly gap that exists in this field in Zimbabwe. Pfukwa (2008 and 2010) analyse female nom de guerres specifically and guerrilla war names in general, respectively. Both studies conclude that the various names adopted during the Second Chimurenga in Zimbabwe (1966-1979) were intended to protect the individual guerrilla's identity and ensure the safety of their families from enemy forces. Alternatively, Makoni, Makoni and Mashiri (2007) provide empirical evidence to show the implications that naming has for language planning, ideologies of language and language shift and conclude that the promotion of indigenous languages has enabled the indigenes to better articulate their cultural beliefs while the promotion of English has popularised the use of non-standard varieties of English in naming practices.

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Mashiri, Chabata and Chitando's (2013) analysis of Christian names finds a link between Zimbabwe's political independence and naming practices evident in postcolonial nomenclature. Somewhat differently Charamba and Zivenge (2011), argue that Christian naming practices are an imperial arm of cultural genocide and thus appear to confirm Frantz Fanon's theories of the psychological oppression of the colonised (Ponniiah, 2012).

Mutema and Njanji (*ibid.*) rightly posit that the process of naming serves to communicate family issues, community, national and international problems and also serve as protests from which notions of dominance and power are negotiated at the expense of the children who carry the names. In turn such children may further protest and counter name their own offspring. Thus naming in the African milieu provides outlets for frustrations, joys, sorrows, complaints and is therefore social commentary. However, the psycho-sociological effects of naming rest on the fact that the word (name) is a significant observable mark identifying an entity in people's minds. Indeed as Mutema and Njanji (2013: 254) observe:

[T]he unfortunate part about ... names is that once you has been given a name there is nothing you can do about it and anyone conversant in the language used can tell its meaning.

As detailed later, change of forenames, although provided for in the Zimbabwean Constitution within the frameworks for the protection of minors against all forms of abuse, however, the constitution does not specify embarrassing names as emotional abuse. Similarly on Zimbabwean forenames, Njanji and Muromo (2013) posit that some names may be embarrassing for the bearer because they do not share the namer's experience and may feel a need to change such a name. However, there is no published study specifically normed on the potential effects of loaded anglicised and indigenous name types. Thus the psycho-sociological impacts of anglicised and indigenous names in Zimbabwe remain an unremarked concern. In the absence of focus on concrete realities of the psycho-sociological results of certain name types, Zimbabwean scholars may unwittingly have silenced this aspect of naming because the ideation and meaning of some names is tantamount to emotional abuse of the so named.

### **Parameters of forename choices in other countries**

In Africa naming aesthetics tend to vary widely even within the same country because of the multiplicity of languages and cultures on this continent. Ideally African naming practices underscore a profound appreciation of the value of the human person, that is, the baby is considered a person in search of an identity and a vocation (Uchenna Uzo, 2011). Further arguing the point, Uchenna Uzo observes that for an African, a name does not only represent a person's identity but a name is also regarded as a promise, a vocation and a list of expectations. ([jandyongenesi.blogspot.com/2011/01/African-namingpractices.html](http://jandyongenesi.blogspot.com/2011/01/African-namingpractices.html)) Parents and those around the child naturally reinforce the message behind a child's given name especially if a child does not behave according to expectation. Thus naming ought to represent an opportunity for parents to positively influence the lives of their children and in the process influence their own lives too. However, this is not always so with some given names if one considers the case in point of the two self-reflexive Zimbabwean names, Mistake and Murambiwa. These baby names maybe thought abusive and show no respect for the child and its future through naming. In that way such names may fail to ensure personal dignity that needs to be respected and protected from the moment of the child's conception.

In some Western countries baby forenames were generally patronymic and drawn from church sources, a trend that spilled into colonised territories such as Zimbabwe. The changes in naming practices that have occurred in more recent times are used to illustrate the legal parameters that operate in some countries. Naming law in general

restricts the names that parents can legally give their children so as to protect the child from being given an offensive or embarrassing name. Many countries around the world have laws that govern the meaning of a name. Unlike in Zimbabwe where a name such as “Pazvarwamunhumashokoanowanda” (Where a person has been born, many words are said), or “Pafamunhumashokoanowanda” (Where someone has died, many words are spoken) is not limited in any way, China even limits the script and number of characters in which a name can be written ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naming-Law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naming-Law)). In Germany for example, gender neutral names are not allowed by law, a critically different linguistic situation from Zimbabwe where indigenous languages are on the whole, gender neutral. Similarly, names of products or those deemed to affect a child negatively are forbidden. In Denmark odd names that may suit parents’ fancy may be legally rejected if they are thought likely to embarrass the child in future.

(<http://mentalfloss.com/article/25034/8-countries-fascinating-baby-naming-laws>). The approach is usually to try to talk the parents out of some really embarrassing names, names that would be a major inconvenience in future. Parents can indeed saddle their children with “bad names”, perhaps as an expression of the parent’s freedom of speech. Cox (2005) points out how some parents, in the mistaken belief of giving uniqueness and to differentiate a child, may give obscenely offensive names as has been noted in Danish registry applications for child birth documents. In such cases the child may be made a ward of the court so that he/she can change the name she hated. We are also told how in Italy, names thought ridiculous and shameful may be legally barred, while Hungarian parents are offered approved lists from which to choose baby names. Similar lists are also on offer for Portuguese parents, although in that country, lists of names that are not approved of are also available (<http://mentalfloss.com/article/25034/8-countries-fascinating-baby-naming-laws>). For Swedes, first names are not approved if they can cause offense or can be supposed to cause discomfort to the one using it, or names which for some obvious reason are not suitable as first names. In Sweden the given name controversy was highlighted through the case of a child named Brfxxccxxmnpcccclllmmnprxvclmnckssqlbb11116” [pronounced *albin*]. The child’s parents fought and lost the injunction to exercise this naming right (*The Mirror*, May, 30, 1996). While in New Zealand names are prohibited if they might cause offence to a reasonable person, among other prohibitions, in the United States of America naming prohibitions are largely absent ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naming\\_Law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naming_Law)). Thus naming practices in different parts of the world tend to consider the effects of a given name on the named, unlike in Zimbabwe.

It appears in Zimbabwe there are no legal *a priori* constraints on choice of forenames. If one is to go by names observed in official school registers and university graduation lists, clearly a parent or guardian can freely name his/her child. Some of these names are not in the interest of the child, particularly if combined with certain family names; they may create rather unfortunate sequences. An imaginary child named Manyara (You have been Shamed) Manyarara (sic) or Mistake Mambara (loosely translates to [Mistake ‘The Stubborn One’] or Last Tapererwa\* [Last ‘We are at our wits’ end or We are clueless’] is patently burdened. Although such name combinations may be unfortunate and expose a child to mockery, they are perfectly permissible in Zimbabwe.

### **Naming as emotional abuse of the named**

The four categories of child abuse are: neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse or psychological abuse. Emotional abuse further splinters into such acts as name-calling, bullying, tormenting, ridiculing, humiliating, ignoring or isolating a victim from a group (Children’s Music Academy Child Protection Policy and Procedures, 2011). A child’s name is in constant use, therefore a commentary and in some cases, a constant reminder of what

\*Used with the adult student’s permission given 12/16/2014

may be unfortunate circumstances surrounding the particular child's birth. In this respect, a name may constitute persistent emotional ill-treatment of a child and consequently affect the behavioural development of such a child. From official lists exemplifying authentic Zimbabwean forenames, (the sources remain anonymous to protect the subjects' integrity), the following were picked out for their seeming naming of some strong feelings likely to have surrounded the named person's birth. These are:

Anyway, Anywhere, Doubt, Forget, Hatred, Jealous, Last, Maida-ani [Whom Did You Want?], Maybe, Mistake, Murambiwa [The Rejected One], Never, Obvious, Pretence, Takesure, and Talkmore.

For illustrative purposes only, two names "Mistake" and "Murambiwa" were deliberately selected for their meaningfulness and negativity as identifying labels for individuals, children for that matter. Gender specificity is not a concern in ChiShona naming. Consequently, a child named "Mistake" or "Murambiwa" [The Rejected One] by his/her own birth mother or another close relative may be a boy or a girl. The person may carry an emotional scar, until perhaps he/she is able to select a name for him- or herself, that is, to vigorously reject a given name.

Indigenous socialisation of children in Zimbabwe hardly encourages them to question parental or the elders' decisions (Bourdillon, 1982), perhaps even in such serious matters as the choice of one's name. In this instance, a child is left without protection from all types of harm and abuse. The child's right to equal protection involves giving a child a name that values and engenders respect for the child. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991) cautions that when adults or organisations make decisions which affect children, they must always think first about what would be best for the child. This is patently a salient concern in the naming practices evident in Zimbabwean onomastics but a largely ignored one.

Some names easily constitute emotional abuse of the named. They may be names that produce psychological and social defects because they can be understood as some form of harsh criticism of the named child's birth and the particular circumstances associated with the event. Such names may also fail to promote a secure and loyal relationship with the parent or the others around. When names portray a lack of affection or parental discord, the effects on a child may be far-reaching. The two names, Mistake and Murambiwa typically meet the naming role of a parent but such naming can be orientated towards fulfilling parental needs and goals yet concurrently objectify children as tools for expressing others' feelings and attitudes. Through certain names children can be emotionally abused by teachers and other adults and child bullies as these tend to be in positions of power over the unfortunately named children (Doyle, 1997). Such names may not give the named a sense of being cherished if they have to bear a name that draws mockery or other negative responses. Thus a name may fail to give a child dignity and rights to emotional well-being. Similarly, a name can also express a parent's negative attitude towards a child although this may be a result of the parent's own abuse as a child or as an adult (Iwaneic & Herbert, 1999). In this way names like Mistake or Murambiwa constitute emotional abuse and mistreatment of a child by telling the child that they are unloved, inadequate and worthless in themselves except as objects to meet the emotional needs of another person, father mother or any relative, to express their attitudes, feelings or frustrations, as observed by CISV International (2013). One can imagine the anguish and psychological distress caused a child by the daily roll call in school, for example.

Children resulting from unintended pregnancies are more likely to be abused through naming, according to Eisenberg and Brown (1995). This is particularly so because unintended pregnancies are more likely to be associated with abusive and probably non-

consensual or socially sanctioned relationships, hence names like Mistake or Murambiwa. Unmarried pregnant girls are often rejected and ostracised by their families, friends and communities. Yet such pregnancies may sometimes be due to sexual assault, rape or even incest. The trauma of the conception as does the actual birth circumstances can cause negative naming of a baby by the victim. This fact further harnesses the abortion controversy although this is outside the parameters of the present discussion. In such instances the causes of psychological abuse resulting from naming seem deep-rooted anger, frustration and an intolerable sense of physical and emotional inadequacy on the parent's part or anyone else, as the name giver. The parent may also feel that they have been treated unjustly and use the child's name to express their dissatisfaction with the prevailing situation.

Additionally the naming of a child may be understood as shifting the blame onto others for one's own mistakes. The naming act in such a case becomes the making of excuses for one's behaviour or shortcomings. The sociologist Georges Menahem (1994) found correlation between inequalities in illness and suffering with a family history of lasting affective problems. Among such problems experienced in childhood, this scholar lists lack of affection; parental discord; and prolonged absence of a parent. These problems all seem to find resonance in names like Mistake or Murambiwa.

Thus emotional abuse can be heaped on a child, unwittingly perhaps, but there all the same. From a psycho-sociological point of view, Zimbabwe does not appear to have a range of what are acceptable forenames, names that are tolerable *vis á vis* some that may be downright offensive. The "offending parents" may unconsciously cause negative comparisons between the negatively named Mistake and Murambiwa and other "loved" children, an idea also confirmed by Eisenberg and Brown (1995). These are justifiable reasons for rejecting a given name.

### **Rejecting a given name**

Some of the more offensive names can be abusive, scandalise, confuse or even injure personal sensibilities. Sherrod and Rayback (2008) confirm that children with odd names tend to get worse grades and also that such children get a lot of abuse at school. Although the two scholars note that such students may embrace their names when they are older, such a child's cognitive development and performance during the formative years can be badly impacted upon by his/her name. From this perspective, someone must step in to stop bizarre names as they seem to have far-reaching effects on the named. However, this kind of concern is not taken cognisance of in Zimbabwean law. There has been little formal debate on challenges to a namer's wishes against a child's right to live with a given name that is uncomfortable and even emotionally upsetting, as this does not augur well for future relations between them. While naming for the named is a largely uncontrollable life event that could cause stress in individuals who may not be able to protect themselves, such a person may find it difficult to exercise familial loyalty towards their namer(s). Such a person may live in a permanent state of psychological distress (Gwandure, 2007).

Different people may react differently to a name. Some anglicised and some ChiShona "talking names", a label engineered by Njanji and Muromo (2013), may be uncomfortable for the bearer. Constitutionally in Zimbabwe children are entitled to adequate protection against all forms of abuse by the courts, in particular by the High Court as it is a child's upper guardian. The same court however, has never been known to protect a minor against such emotional abuse as might be inherent in a given name. Thus although a child has a constitutional right to a forename(s) and a family name, the embodiment of such rights are not clearly spelt out. Similarly, the Justice for Children Trust, an initiative designed to offer free legal services to disadvantaged children in Zimbabwe, especially on the registration of

births, is silent on naming that may be negative (Kadzikano, 2007). The process of changing forenames is legally possible but not particularly easy. Another child rights group, Childline Zimbabwe, undertakes advocacy activities such as awareness-raising over child rights and protection of children in life-threatening circumstances. Although the group actively guards against the four principal forms of abuse a child might suffer, they do not seem to consider negative naming as emotional abuse of the named child.

Ordinarily Zimbabwean law will cede change of a name in favour of a child's mother as the natural guardian of a minor. However, women as the usual namers of children in the first instance do not take up this right on behalf of their minor children. Perhaps they may not feel any pressing need or obligation to change a child's forename. According to the Zimbabwe Registrar General's Department (2012) policy on change of first names, three conditions must be met. These are:

- A statutory fee of USD 7.00 is paid for normal processing;
- A statutory fee of USD 12.00 is paid for urgent processing; and
- Documentary evidence should be produced to substantiate any changes to be made. (<http://www.rg.gov.zw/services/birth>)

The obvious block to exercising this right is likely to be the requirement of documented evidence. Names such as Mistake or Murambiwa seem to express very strong feelings of rejection. Even if the two parties were to reconcile, rescinding on a child's name is quite unlikely and such a development may not result in documentable evidence to support change of a child's forename. Arguably the change may require re-effecting should the same emotional challenges recur. On the other hand, mothers will go to a lot of trouble and expense to alter surnames as these have strong legal implications. Records must just be accurate for processing important documents such as birth certificates for admission into the school system, national identity documents, passports and visas and so on.

### **Naming as alternative venting out of potentially destructive feelings**

Antenatal and postnatal forms of depression are facts of life some women have to live through. The former often leads to the latter and both conditions do not respect a woman's age, creed, or colour. While the mother may not be physically sick, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, negative thoughts, a perceived meaninglessness of life and anxiety are some of the symptoms that may predispose a woman to both antenatal and postnatal depression, leading to a woman giving a child a "bad name" or to infanticide (Watson, 2013). Whether the conditions are a result of stress and worry brought on by the pregnancy (planned or unplanned); an abusive relationship (including rape); or untenable economic or family situations, a bad name is still preferable to infanticide. Legally in Zimbabwe, infanticide within the first six months of the child's birth although criminally prosecutable, takes account of the mother's state of mind, in itself an acknowledgement of birth trauma some women undergo. ([tsime.uz.ac.zw/.../Y3JpbWluYWxfbGF3X2NvZGhmaWNhdGlvbblahbm](http://tsime.uz.ac.zw/.../Y3JpbWluYWxfbGF3X2NvZGhmaWNhdGlvbblahbm))

While the psychological impact of a bad name on a child is regrettable, infanticide is that much worse as it is often an intentional act. The proviso that when the act occurs "... at a time when the balance of her [the woman] mind is disturbed as a result of giving birth to the child, the woman is liable to imprisonment not exceeding five years" is a welcome reprieve for such women but rather difficult to prove. Whereas a bad name "speaks for itself" to its victim and to those around them, however such names visit little psycho-sociological effects on the one who gives the name.

Rule (1987) sets out the conditions likely to lead a woman to infanticide in Zimbabwe as: fear of abandonment by a woman's parents who would lose out on the woman's

bride price; stigma of rape and rejection by one's family; and pregnancies resulting from premarital sex or from illicit affairs. The parallel comparison between "bad names" and infanticide is premised on the psychological harm as defence for both acts. However, the former carries very little active social condemnation, yet its effects can be life-long and devastating for the named person just as infanticide is total annihilation of an innocent life, the object of parental hate, not love. O'Meara (in Rule, *ibid.*) contends that if a woman is rejected by her family and the father of her child, has no job, has nowhere to go, these sorts of things crowd in on her and often force her to kill her baby. Her crime, according to Watson (Rule, *ibid.*), can be a crime of self-defence, not an act of gross wanton cruelty but a woman fighting for survival. If infanticide is such an act of desperation, then some of the very negative names such as Mistake and Murambiwa are a much safer outlet for a mother's feelings but perhaps an immeasurably hurtful burden too for the named.

On the other hand, names are a subset of language, a tool for preserving one's culture. Thus instituting laws prohibiting certain name types may function to suppress Zimbabwean naming traditions. Yet in the best interests of minors, discouraging, rather than totally prohibiting "talking names" is a better proposition for preserving parental naming rights and pre-empting potentially psycho-sociologically negative effects on the named.

### **Conclusion**

The paper dealt with negative naming inherent in such names as Mistake and Murambiwa and showed that such names can be potentially harmful to the child from a psycho-sociological perspective. Unlike in some Western countries but not necessarily a bad thing, Zimbabwe has no laws governing forenames with the result that a child can practically be named anything. A namer's state of mind may cause a child to be officially named negatively but the namer's state of mind is not grounds for official rejection of unsavoury or even offensive names. As a mark of the individual's democratic right to freedom of speech, the negative forenames given children are in conflict with a child's right of freedom from emotional abuse as might occur through such names as Mistake and Murambiwa. The findings in this paper seem to suggest the need for a norm nuanced study of the psycho-sociological effects of some rather negative Zimbabwean name types in the hope that such findings can build a case favourable to intervention against the continued emotional abuse that some children have to live with through their legitimate given names.

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