

## **GENDER IDENTITY THROUGH THE EKEGUSII NAMING SYSTEM**

**Zipporah Kwamboka OTISO**

**University of Nairobi**

This paper analyses Ekegusii names and how they relate to gender identity. It shows how the naming system is basically based on the premise that a male is socialized to ‘gather wealth’, hence the term *omosacha* (‘man/husband’), while a female is socialized to ‘take care of (the wealth)’, hence the term *omokungu* (‘woman/wife’). The names that are analysed in this study show the different crafts and activities, such as blacksmiths and herbal dispensers, which males engaged in traditionally in an effort to gather wealth. With the arrival of the colonizers and missionaries in the in Gusii land (in Kenya), the Abagusii people devised “modern” ways of wealth gathering and ended up with names relating to education, white collar jobs and money. The study also shows that males bear a number of borrowed names, while women bear only one such name. Some of the names given to the females describe their physical features, characteristics and ornamentation, while others portray them as the carriers of the community’s migration history. Both the males and the females bear names derived from different types of crops and clothes, although the former bear more of them than the latter. Finally, there are cross-gender names borne by both the males and the females, although not in the same proportions. The paper concludes that the assignment of gender-specific names is not arbitrary, as names socially define maleness and femaleness, besides constraining gender behaviour.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Fearon (1999: 3) suggests that people can talk about their identity at a social or personal level depending on a nation, ethnic group, religious practices, age, political beliefs or gender. The present study focuses on

gender identity as represented in the Ekegusii<sup>1</sup> culture naming system. Cerulo (1997: 387) considers gender identity as an “[...] interactional accomplishment which is continually negotiated via linguistic exchange and performance,” while Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2010: 158) view gender identity as a sum of the expectations that people hold concerning “femaleness” and “maleness”. These views depict gender as a phenomenon which does not happen naturally but is an achievement that results from some form of socialization. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015: 313) indeed note that “gender [...]is culturally constructed.” As an illustration of the views held by these writers on what gender is, the Ekegusii terms *omosacha* and *omokungu*, or ‘man/husband’ and ‘woman/wife’, respectively do not just refer to masculine and feminine entities, but also show the roles of men and women in society. The noun *omosacha* is derived from the verb *gosacha*, (‘to look for/ gather wealth’), while the noun *omokungu* is derived from the verb *gokunga*, (‘to take care of’ wealth) (Otiso 2016). A man who does not work hard to get wealth to take care of his family is not considered as having attained the definition of “maleness”, while a woman who does not take good care of her husband’s wealth is not considered as having attained “femaleness”. The duty of ‘looking for wealth’ is usually perceived to be carried out away from the homestead while that of ‘taking care of’ (the wealth) centres around or near the homestead. Two proverbs from the Gusii community will suffice to sum up the roles and perceptions of men and women. These are: (a) *Omosacha asache n’omokungu akunge* (Let the man/husband look for wealth and let the wife/woman take care of the wealth), and (b) *Abamura na abaisiko na abaiseke n’abanyomba* (Boys are of the outside while girls are of the house) (Otiso 2016). The ‘of the outside’ versus ‘of

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<sup>1</sup>The term *Ekegusii* can refer either to the language or to the culture. In this paper it will be used to refer to language, and for reasons of clarity, it will be postmodified by *culture* where it will be used to refer to the latter. For its part, the term *Abagusii* refers to the people, while *Gusii* refers to their community and their land.

the house' view contrast to the location of the duties of men and those of women.

Some literature has suggested that proper names are arbitrary. Montashery (2013: 4) for example writes the following:

Proper names for both men and women [...] are arbitrary in that there isn't any relationship between the name and the characteristics of personality of the person [...] Nick names [...] are non-arbitrary in that there is a constructed similarity and relationship between the person and the name.

However, some other literature clearly says the opposite, arguing that names suggest femaleness and maleness from the cultural perspective of the society concerned. As Cameron (1990: 12) puts it "...names are a culture's way of fixing what will actually count as reality in a universe of overwhelming, chaotic sensations, all pregnant with a multitude of possible meanings." Cameron's observation presumes that names will usually shape reality. For their part, Ting-Toomy and Chung (2007: 158) suggest that the names that are given to males and females are not meant to "fill in a person's intentions but they reflect particular histories and practices that have been enacted over time". This observation implies that naming systems are usually culture-specific since particular societies may have specific pasts, experiences, and expectations. In the particular case of Gusii society, the naming of children is based on a number of factors among which the physical environment in which a child is born, the unique behaviour of the mother during pregnancy, historical happenings, natural phenomena, the visitors who may have been present at the time of birth and the circumstances that surround the birth of the baby. For instance, children who are born after the death of several siblings will be named after wild animals and other ritualistic practices that accompanied their birth. A name such as *Nyanchera*, which translates to a footpath, represents the ritual of temporarily "abandoning" such a child on a footpath. This was done to ward off the evil spirits, presumed

to have been responsible for the deaths of the other siblings. Children are also named after heroes and the physical and behavioural attributes of the child. Most importantly, children are named after dead people, be they relatives, friends, neighbours or heroes.

The focus of this paper is the names that are related to gender identity. They fall into the following categories (a) names that reflect the community's history, particularly migration to their present homeland, (b) those that relate to physical attributes, (c) those that describe dress type, (d) those derived from types of food and crops (e) those related to wealth-gathering, (f) those related to culture-contact and (g) cross-gender names.

## 2. THE ABAGUSII'S NAMING SYSTEM

### 2.1 Female identity in the Abagusii's migration-related names

There are four female names that show the migration of the Abagusii people from the land of the Luo people to their current area of occupation: *Kemunto*, *Kwamboka*, *Kerubo* and *Moraa*. *Kemunto* is derived from the noun *ekemunto*, a gulf. The Abagusii believe that the girls who were born when, in their migration from around the Lake Victoria region (that is in the Luo land), their parents reached the Kavirondo gulf,<sup>2</sup> were assigned this name. The word *Kwamboka*, is a verb which means 'to cross over a water body such as a river', but it is used as a name given to the girls who were born after crossing the Kavirondo gulf. For its part, *Kerubo* originates from the noun '*ekerubo*' which means 'a plain'. The name was

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<sup>2</sup> This gulf is now known as the Winam gulf/bay. It is on the northeastern corner of Lake Victoria. It is a shallow inlet, 56 km long and 9.4km wide ( according to information available online at: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>, accessed on 12 Sep 2017).

given to girls who were born when the Abagusii reached the Kano plains.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the name *Moraa* is derived from the noun, *emeraa*, a type of vegetation. The name was given to girls who were born when the Abagusii reached their current homeland in southwestern Kenya to the east of Luoland, an area whose landscape was characterized by *emeraa* shrubs. Not a single male name exists that refers to the Abagusii migration. A possible explanation for this, which was suggested to me by one of my informants, is that it is women who are considered to be transitory, as they relocate to other places upon marriage. So, this movement heritage could not have been entrusted to men. This gender identity has since then been maintained in spite of the fact that the Abagusii are no longer a people on the move. This historical enshrinement through names shows the relative stability of gender identity since the women are the ones who bear this role of what one would call 'heirs to the past'.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2 Male and female identity in names related to physical attributes, character and adornment

There are names which relate to the appreciation of a girl's physique, character and adornments. These names are: *Bosibori* (in reference to a brown and plump girl), *Sarange* (in reference to a girl with a slender, long neck), *Gicheni* (from the noun, *obochenu*, or adjective *omochenu*, meaning 'cleanliness' and 'clean', respectively, in reference to a clean person), *Bochaberi* (from the verb, *gochabera*, meaning, 'to decorate'), *Bochere* (related to the noun, *obochere*, meaning 'beads for adornment')

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<sup>3</sup> This is an expansive plain in Kisumu County. It is known for its black cotton soil which is very fertile.

<sup>4</sup> This idea of women playing a central role in the history of a people is also observed among the *Kikuyu*, a central Bantu group of Kenya. In this community, the clan founders are the nine daughters of *Mumbi*, namely: *Wanjiru*, *Wanjiku*, *Wambui*, *Wangui/Waithiegeni*, *Wangeci/Waithira*, *Waceera/Wanjeri* and *Nyambura/Akiuru/Ethaga*, *Wairimu/Gathiigia*, and *Wangari/Muithekahuno*. There is a controversy surrounding the existence of a tenth daughter named *Wamuyu/Warigia* (according to information available online at: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>, accessed on 12/09/2017)

and *Nyanduko*<sup>5</sup> (related to the noun, *chinduko*, meaning ‘beads for waist-line ornaments’). These names show that the female beauty attributes among the Abagusii relate to skin colour, to the shape of the body and to the neck, as well as to their personal grooming and their adornments. All those names are considered as commendation for the females who were either endowed with these attributes or who could attractively adorn themselves. While it may not be easy to tell whether the girl child born will be brown, plump or slender, it can be assumed that whoever that the child is named after must have had the physical attributes that are implied in the name. This will also be assumed to be the case for the names related to adornments. Such names may have started as nick-names but were appreciated over time as names that could be given to children from one generation to another. Only two names refer to male attributes: *Mokinu* and *Omariba*. *Mokinu* is derived from the adjective, *omokinu*, which means ‘a robust person’ while, *Omariba* is related to the noun *amariba*, meaning ‘muddy/dirty water’. *Mokinu* may subtly suggest the physique that is either a result of, or a prerequisite for, manual work to probably reinforce some forms of ‘wealth gathering’. *Omariba*, on the other hand, seems to be a direct opposite of the female name *Gicheni* (cleanliness) since it implies ‘dirt’. While girls are socialized towards cleanliness, men are socialized towards grime. However, it is not a surety that a person will live up to the attributes of their name. For instance, a male who bears the name *Omariba*, may be ‘clean’ and ‘tidy’, while a female named *Gicheni*, may not be inevitably ‘clean’. Nonetheless, such names suggest the liberties, such as playing with mud or getting dirty, that the male children have, and the ideal expectations for females.

In relation to such names that are descriptive of physical attributes, Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2010: 158) note that there are “cultural

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<sup>5</sup> The morpheme *nya* in names such as *Nyanduko*, *Nyaera*, and *Nyaron’gi* means ‘of’ or ‘relating to’.

differences on what constitutes gender beauty and its display also varies between cultures.” These differences can be illustrated by the fact that the Akamba, another Bantu speaking people (but one from eastern Kenya), also have descriptive names, but unlike those of the Abagusii, emphasize abnormal features such as dark-skin, ugly looking or big ears<sup>6</sup>, instead of emphasizing the beautiful side.

### 2.3 Male and female identities in dress-type-related names

The Gusii community seems to appreciate fashion in terms of which dress type is appropriate for males and for females. That is why the community has names that are derived from various types of garments. The male names are: *Tai* (adopted from *etai*, a tie), *Nyaron’gi* (adopted from *eron’gi*, a pair of trousers), *Kenyansa* (adopted from *ekenyansa*, a pair of shorts), *Nyasweta* (adopted from *esweta*, a sweater), *Chanai* (adopted from *echanai*, a chain), and *Okenyuri* (adopted from *ekenyuri*, a zipper). The female names are: *Kerebi* (adopted from *ekerebi*, a headscarf) and *Nyarinda/ Marinda* (adopted from *erinda*, a wrapper skirt). Although women nowadays also put on pairs of trousers, sweaters and clothes that have zippers, it is only men who so far bear names that are associated with them.

Those names came into use following the arrival of the colonizers and the missionaries in the Gusii land a little over a century ago.<sup>7</sup> In spite of the initial resistance against them from the Abagusii, the colonizers and missionaries settled on the land and had influence in the dress type, among other cultural aspects. Although those names are not very frequent, they have been appreciated and are passed on through generations as family names. However, the female names, *Nyarinda* and *Kerebi*, are getting less and less frequent probably because the wrapper

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<sup>6</sup> Names like *Mwilu*, *Kithuku* and *Matu* illustrate this.

<sup>7</sup> According to Maxon (2006: 293), this is the period between 1900 and 1908.

skirts and headscarves are no longer common and fashionable, especially among the young and the educated women.

While women have more names that relate to beauty, men have more names that relate to dress types. A possible explanation for this is that men had more contact with the whites and, thus, had more opportunity to associate with different types of garments. Their role of wealth gathering would have made them travel more or associate more with the colonizers and the missionaries. The existence of such names gives credence to the observations made by Ting-Toomey and Chung (2007: 158) who propose that fashion is one way through which gender identity may be culturally expressed.

#### **2.4 Male and female identities in types of food and crop-related names**

The Abagusii people grow both cash and food crops. Some names derived from these crops have been incorporated into the naming system. The male names derived from food are: *Obuba* (related to *obuba*, a traditional term for *ugali*<sup>8</sup>, which is the community's staple food), *Nyachae* (related to *echae*, meaning 'tea'; it refers to a person who either grows tea or who likes tea), *Getuma/Nyabando*<sup>9</sup> (related to *ebituma/chibando*, maize), *Machani* (related to *amachani*, tea leaves), *Monyenye* (related to *omonyenye*, a tender stage of the spider plant vegetables), *Mboga/Omboga/Nyamboga* (related to *emboga*, pigweed), *Omayio* (related to *amayio*, fresh milk) and *Sosa/Masosa* (related to *risosa*, the leaves of the pumpkin plant which are used as vegetables). The female names are: *Gesare* (related to *egesare*, cowpea vegetables) and *Nyaboke* (related to *oboke*, honey).

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<sup>8</sup> This is a type of thick porridge made from maize, or finger millet, eaten in eastern and central Africa.

<sup>9</sup> This term is borrowed from the Dholuo term *bando* ('maize').



The notable observation about food-related names is that the males bear more of them than the females do<sup>10</sup>. Only males bear names which relate to maize, which is not only grown as the source of the community's staple food but also as a cash crop. Only they bear a name related to tea, which is also a major cash crop in the region. Since tea and maize are a source of income, giving such names to only males reinforces the suggestion that they are the ones whose role in society is to look for wealth. Similarly, only males bear names (such as *Monyenye*) that relate to vegetables that are perceived to be tender and, thus, not bitter, to vegetables that are added to bitter ones to counter the bitterness (those are names such as, *Mboga/Omboga/Nyamboga*) and that which relates to fresh milk (*Omayio*) as opposed to sour milk. Although the duty of plucking vegetables is considered feminine, men are seemingly socialized into 'unsour' behaviour. The women bear the name *Nyaboke*, honey, which is a precious but rare commodity in the community. While honey has medicinal and economic value in some communities (such as the Akamba), the Abagusii are not culturally bee keepers and, honey, for them, is not considered as a source of income.

## **2.5 Male identity in wealth-gathering-related names**

The male roles are ingrained in what can be considered as the traditional versus the modern forms of wealth gathering. The traditional forms refer to what was in existence before the arrival of European colonizers and missionaries, while the modern ones refer to what was adopted after.

### **2.5.1 Male names related to traditional forms of wealth gathering**

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<sup>10</sup> A similar phenomenon can be observed among the Ababukusu, another Bantu people of western Kenya. They have male names such as *Wanyama* (relating to meat), *Namasaga* (relating to spider plant vegetables) and *Maziwa* (relating to milk).

The male names that show some of the traditional roles assigned to men as part of their wealth gathering are: *Kenyoru*, *Orina*, *Omete/Nyamete*, *Moturi*, *Nyabioge* and *Motieri*. *Kenyoru* is derived from *ekenyoru*, a type of grass that is used for thatching houses, one of the traditional economic activities that is reserved for men. *Orina* is derived from the verb *korina*, which means ‘to climb’. A number of chores (such as thatching houses) required one to climb to the roof tops. The men also climbed trees to cut branches for masculine duties such as fencing and construction. *Omete* and *Nyamete* are derived from *emete*, which means ‘trees’. Trees have many economic uses such as construction, fencing, making some weapons and handles for farm tools. They also have medicinal value. The two names refer to a person who planted many trees, especially for commercial purposes. According to Sindiga (2005: 285), the names may have also originated from *omonyamete*, a herbalist or a herbal dispenser.

Although Sindiga has observed that both men and women can be herbalists, these names are assigned to men only, most likely because there are more male herbalists than female among the Abagusii. The services of the herbalists are paid for, usually by domestic animals such as goats, sheep and chickens. The name *Moturi* comes from the verb *gotura*, which means to forge or shape items from iron. Some Abagusii men are blacksmiths who make a living by forging weapons, farm tools and ornaments. Nyang’era (n.d., p.8) notes that the Abagusii were surrounded by tribes that were war-like which caused the Abagusii men to be well armed to defend the community by forging arrows, spears and swords. The name *Nyabioge* is derived from *ekioge*, which literally means ‘sharp’ while the name *Motieri*, is derived from the verb *gotieria* which means ‘to sharpen’. *Nyabioge* and *Motieri* are related to working with iron which is also indicative of the traditional roles of the males.

### **2.5.2 Names related to the modern forms of wealth gathering**

Due to societal change resulting from westernization, the Abagusii men adopted other forms of ‘looking for or wealth-gathering’. They engaged in newer<sup>11</sup> professions and crafts. Some of the names that reflect this change are: *Nyatuka* (derived from *etuka*, a shop), *Bundi* (derived from the Kiswahili word *fundi*, meaning an artisan such as a mason, a carpenter, a cobbler, etc.) and *Nyaanga* (derived from *chianga*, clothes, used to refer to a clothes stockist). Other names that indicate involvement in gainful employment are: *Keraka* (derived from the English word clerk), *Bunduki* (derived from *ebunduki*, a gun), *Somoni* (derived from *esomoni*, a fifty-cent coin), *Maboyi/Maboye* and *Oboyi* (which are adaptations of *my boy* and *oh boy* respectively)<sup>12</sup>. While household chores (such as cooking) are usually done by females, the males who did such chores were not scorned because they were doing it for a pay. The acceptance of the household tasks by males is consistent with Wardhaugh and Fuller’s (2015) suggestion that “within contemporary social theory, gender identities, like other aspects of identity, may change over time and vary according to the setting, topic or interlocutors” (p.313) In the present context of Ekegusii culture, the setting of performing feminine duties is pay-oriented and the perception of those duties as being feminine changes.

Two other names are worth mentioning: *Raini* (derived from *eraini*, a line) and *Siro* (derived from *esiro*, a zero). *Raini* suggests the method of planting crops in lines, as opposed to the traditional broadcasting method. Such a method alludes to the exposure that the men had, due to their interaction with the whites and their working on the white settlers’ farms. *Siro* has its origin from the method of payment that was common during the colonial days when workers were given food rations whose monetary value was deducted from their monthly wages. If a worker took too many food rations, they earned nothing (zero) at the end of the month. Such a

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<sup>11</sup> This must have been after 1901-1902, when the Germans built the first shops in the present day Kisii town.

<sup>12</sup> *My boy* was used to refer to the men who worked as house servants while *oh boy* was used as an exclamation when these servants did not meet their master’s expectations.

term may have been a way of causing chagrin to the worker concerned, but with time it was accepted as a name without any negative connotation. Nevertheless, its origin is a pointer to the duties that men did in order to get wealth.

Education is viewed as a form of empowerment, since it is a gateway to securing a white collar job, and, hence to wealth. The names that are derived from formal education are a preserve for men, suggesting that education was, initially, a right for men only. The names are: *Marube* (derived from *amarube*, letters), *Nyanamba* and *Manamba* (derived from *chinamba*, numbers, to refer to one who is an expert at numbers), *Mosomi* (derived from *omosomu*, the learned one) and *Nyabaro* (derived from the verb, *kobara*, to count; and thus refers to one who is good at counting).

The only female name that is associated with wealth is *Nyaera*. It is derived from the noun *era*, which refers to a coin which is now obsolete and whose value was less than five cents. Besides being tiny, this coin was the least denomination of the currency in terms of value. Its size probably made it to be ‘taken care of’ so that it did not get lost or misplaced. So, assigning such a name to women could be linked with their gender role of taking care of the wealth.

### **2.5.3 Names showing the results of wealth gathering**

Since the Abagusii men were socialized into ‘looking for/gathering wealth’, those who succeeded in this role were acknowledged through names assigned to their descendants, particularly the ones named after them. This success was manifested through money, buildings, vehicles, livestock, and plenty of food. The names that illustrate this accomplishment are: *Monda* (derived from *omonda*, a rich/wealthy person) and *Nyamari* (this may have been borrowed, with some slight change in spelling, from the Kiswahili noun, *mali*, wealth, to refer to a wealthy person). Acquisition of wealth offered one the opportunity to own

some forms of property, which the poor could not have. This can explain how names such as *Koroba* (borrowed, with some change in spelling, from the Kiswahili noun *gorofa*, a storeyed building) and *Nyagari* (borrowed from the Kiswahili word *gari*, a vehicle) were created. The names *Rori* and *Nyarori* must be an adaptation of the English word *lorry*. The Ekegusii term for a *lorry* is *erori*, but the meaning of the latter has been expanded to include any type of a vehicle; cars, buses, pick-ups and lorries. *Nyagari* and *Rori/Nyarori* were originally assigned to children named after one who owned a vehicle.

The names that are related to owning livestock are: *Ong'ombe* (derived from *eng'ombe*, a cow), *Kemori* (derived from *emori*, a calf), *Ombori/Ombuori*<sup>13</sup>(derived from *embori*, a goat), *Ong'ondi* (derived from *eng'ondi*, a sheep), *Ngoko* (derived from *engoko*, chicken) and *Otwoni* (derived from *etwoni*, a cock. Then there is the name *Monyoncho*, derived from *omonyoncho* (a traditional large hand woven basket for storing food such as finger millet and sorghum). With modernity, people learnt to construct granaries, known as *ebiage* (the plural of *ekiage*). A consequence of this development is the name *Kiage*.

## 2.6 Male and female identity in names reflecting cultural contact

The Abagusii men's role of *gosacha*, (to look for/gather wealth) made them to occasionally travel to other parts outside of their native land. These travels<sup>14</sup> led to contact with other communities, resulting in borrowing of their names. The names resulting from these contacts are: *Ondieki*, *Okinyi*, *Ochora*, *Onyango*, *Ouko*, *Nyandega*, *Ochwangi*, and *Otieno* (all of which were borrowed from the Luo people) and *Karioki*,

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<sup>13</sup> *Ombuori* may have been coined from the Dholuo *Nyaburi*, which refers to a goat that has already given birth.

<sup>14</sup> Being well travelled is considered a virtue in the community and is captured in the proverb: *omomura otana/otanya gotara nigo agokaga ng'a sobo oka bokorugwa bwayia* (an untravelled young man thinks that it is only in his home where *ugali* gets well cooked)

*Kimani*, and *Nchoroke* (borrowed from the Kikuyu people). Some of these names have undergone phonological adaptations: *Ondieki* and *Ochwangi*, end in a vowel sound, while their counterparts in Dholuo, *Ondiek* and *Ojwang* do not. The name *Ochwangi* has a voiceless palato-alveolar affricate, and not a palatal glide, as is the case in the corresponding Luo name, *Ojwang* whereas, *Ochora* has a trill, and not a lateral, sound, as is the case in its Dholuo equivalent, *Ochola*. The adaptations in the Kikuyu names are in *Karioki* and *Nchoroke*. For the former, the back high vowel /u/ in the Kikuyu name *Kariuki* has been replaced with a mid-vowel /o/, whereas for the latter, the voiced palato-alveolar affricate /ndʒ/<sup>15</sup> of the original Kikuyu name *Njoroge* is replaced with the voiceless palato-alveolar affricate /ntʃ/. In addition, the voiced velar fricative /ɣ/ has been replaced with a voiceless velar plosive /k/. It is quite surprising that the Abagusii did not borrow names from their other adjacent neighbours: the Maasai and the Kipsigis. A possible explanation could be the conflicts, resulting from cattle rustling, between these two communities and Abagusii. On the contrary, Abagusii have amiable relations with the Luo, with whom they interact frequently in trade.

Women have only one borrowed name, *Ncheri*.<sup>16</sup> This name is from the Kikuyu name *Njeri*, and the borrowing of it may have been quite incidental since women were not socialized into a culture of venturing outside their community. The name could have been introduced by the men whose role allowed them to be the travellers. But why they should have borrowed only *Njeri* and no other female Kikuyu name is a mystery. Another mystery lies in why they did not borrow a single female name from the Luo who are their immediate neighbours. The existence of only one borrowed name adds credence to the idea of women's duties being centred around the homestead.

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<sup>15</sup> The /ndʒ/ is however dialectal and is realized as /dʒ/ among some speakers (according to Kenneth K. Ngure personal communication, 25 Oct 2017)

<sup>16</sup> This name has also been phonotactically adapted to fit into Ekegusii phonology.

## 2.7 Cross-gender names

There are exceptions to the gender specific names that have been discussed so far, because there are names that are assigned to both males and females, even though they still have male or female gender role undertones. These are: *Manoti* (derived from *amanoti*, money in the form of notes), *Nyasiringi* and *Siringi* (derived from *esiringi*, a shilling) *Nyakagwa* (derived from *ekagwa*, coffee), *Nyareso* (derived from *lesso/khanga*) and *Nyatichi* (derived from *etichi*, any working day). There are other cross-gender names like *Basweti* (related to *ebasweti*, a python) and *Matoke* (related to *amatoke*, bananas) which I refer to as ‘dedication names’ since they were given to children whose siblings had died in infancy in an effort to ward off evil spirits.

One reason why there are cross gender names has to do with the fact that when a close relative died, the baby who was born after that, was named after that dead kin, irrespective of the gender of the child or that of the dead kin. For instance, a name such as *Manoti* is expected to be male because it is men whose role is to look for ‘money’, but this name is assigned to women as well. However, more men than women bear this name. The same applies to names such as *Nyakagwa* (related to coffee) and *Nyasiringi/Siringi* (related to a shilling). Another possible explanation for the cross-gender names is that the gender roles and, hence, identity, are subtly being challenged especially by the women. Women now want to be perceived as participating in ‘looking for wealth’ and not just ‘looking after wealth’, a role which they may want to be recognized in the names they are given. The name *Nyareso*, is expected to be female since it is women who wrap themselves with *lessos*. However, as one informant reported, the practice of giving birth in hospitals (as opposed to giving birth at home) under the assistance of mid-wives is now a reality much more than it used to be. As a result of this, babies born in hospitals, regardless of their sex, are likely to be wrapped in *lessos*, resulting to the name being cross-gender.

### 3. CONCLUSION

This paper started its description of Ekegusii names with, no doubt, the four most meaningful names in Ekegusii culture, as they record the Abagusii's migration from Luo land to their current homeland. The four are: *Kemunto*, *Kwamboka*, *Kerubo*, and *Moraa*, all of which are given only to females. The paper went on to investigate whether the social identities into which males and females were traditionally socialized in the Ekegusii culture were reflected in the names given to either gender. The starting assumption was that the females were socialized into 'taking care of (wealth)' and 'belonging to the house', while the males were socialized into 'wealth gathering' and 'belonging to the outside'. In addition, women were expected to have certain physical looks, characteristics and adornments. From these societal expectations, women indeed bear names like *Sarange* (related to a slender long neck) and *Nyanduko* (related to *chinduko*, beads for waist-line ornaments). However, not all the Ekegusii names assigned to female necessarily reflect the expected female socialization: for instance, names such as *Nyaera*, *Manoti* and *Nyasiringi/Siringi*, all related to money, are given to females too, even though these are not socialized into 'looking for wealth'

With regard to the names given to the males, they mainly relate to the various traditional and modern forms of 'wealth-gathering' and to some of the crafts that the Abagusii men engaged in before the arrival of the colonizers and the missionaries. They include *Kenyoru* (related to a type of thatching grass) and *Orina* (related to climbing). With the arrival of the whites, the Abagusii men devised modern 'wealth-gathering' ventures, as a result of which "new" names were "born", among which *Marube* (related to letters) and *Mosomi* (meaning the learned/educated one). Though still reflecting the contact and dealings with the whites, the inventory of names extended beyond practices reflecting the various forms of wealth-gathering: for instance, names such as *Siro* (related to



zero) and *Maboyi/Maboye* and *Oboye* (as adaptations of *my boy* and *oh boy*), were born, so were names referring to some crops, such as *Nyachae* (one who grows tea), and those indicating possession of wealth, such as *Koroba* (a storeyed house).

But besides the typically female names and the typically male ones, the paper also showed that some names were borne by both genders. Examples are: *Manoti* and *Nyareso*. A further observation made in the paper is that a number of names were borrowed from some other Kenyan languages, all of which, except one (*Ncheri*), are male names. This, one again, points to societal gender-role assignment, as a manifestation of which men are expected to travel more outside the community than the women.

It transpires from this paper that some aspects of naming and gender identity in the Ekegusii culture call for further research: first, although there is a deliberate effort to maintain gender identity through the names assigned to each gender, it is worth investigating whether some of the wealth-related names borne by the females (such as *Nyaera*, derived from a ten-cent coin) and cross-gender names (such as *Manoti*, referring to bank notes) are a form of contestation by the females<sup>17</sup> who might want to also bear names that reflect an extension of the male gender roles to women as well. Second, one might wonder why such a hypothesised contestation has not led the Abagusii community, in particular the women themselves (who, after all, are responsible for naming the children) to “allow” female names (the best candidates being the four that record the Abagusii people’s migration history) to be borne as family names, in particular in the case of single mothers, the way it is among e.g. the Kikuyu, where female names (such as *Wanjiru*) can also be borne by the males as family names. Third, since there are more names than those discussed in this paper which are either typically male or typically female, which reflect other cultural aspects than gender identity, more research on the Ekegusii naming system is desirable. Such research is justified

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<sup>17</sup> This is in consideration of the fact that it is women who usually name babies.

because the current author discovered, in her own research, that many educated Ekegusii speakers, including linguists and anthropologists, have little (or no) idea of what even very popular Ekegusii names (some of which are their own) mean.

Finally, a claim has been made by an American economist, Figlio (2005), that “[...] boys who have names that are commonly given to girls are more prone to misbehaviour at school as they get older”. While this is a claim made by someone who, at least geographically speaking, is very far away from the Gusii culture, it would be interesting to investigate whether it has any psychological and sociological reality in Gusii (and Kenyan) context. By the same token, one might want to investigate the hypothetical (for not having been made by anybody known to the present author yet) claim that the girls who bear names that are typically reserved for boys exhibit some strange behaviour.

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*Author's address:*

Zipporah K. Otiso  
University of Nairobi  
Email: ???