

# Naming and labelling contexts of cultural importance in Africa

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Names are a fundamental linguistic and semiotic phenomenon, which is deeply embedded in particular sociocultural contexts. The practice of name giving, as well as the meaning of names, strongly depends on specific environments and contexts, and is part of the most complex fields in human society and cultural practice. This special issue focuses on naming and labelling entities of cultural importance in various African settings. While anthroponyms (Mensah & Rowen 2020; Ndlovu 2023), ethnonyms (UNESCO 1984; Leyew 2024), glottonyms (Mitchell & Zimmermann 2024; Leyew 2024), and toponyms (Bigon 2016; Ngo 2009) range amongst the better researched fields of study in African onomastics<sup>1</sup> – and, more recently, naming in the context of (de)colonial practice and thought (Ndlovu 2022) – the naming, branding, and labelling of “cultural daily life contexts and environments” has been less in the focus of academic attention (with a few exceptions; see for instance Knipping, in preparation). Most probably this is because these processes go rather unnoticed, and because people potentially address these practices less often in their interactions, or question the names of cultural practices, items, products, and the things they use in daily life less often than one might expect. Likewise, these types of names and labels are to a lesser extent “prototypically” onomastic – representing a broader spectrum of heterogeneous examples, neatly bound to specific contexts. Equally, overview works in the anthropology of naming seldom contain data or analyses of such labelling or naming processes beyond the aforementioned major strands (see, e.g., vom Bruck & Bodenhorn 2006; Hough 2016, among others).

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1. The authors are aware of the fact that there is a huge body of literature on naming, especially in anthropology, and that the studies listed are only a few selected works. However, it must be said that the available studies on non-African contexts (e.g., focusing on American linguacultures) are many more in number than those focusing on African onomastics. Therefore, this collection of papers also aims at turning researchers’ attention more closely to the African continent.

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It is specifically the naming practices applied to such less researched everyday items, cultural practices and sites, social institutions, and economic products or fashionable practices that are at the core of this volume. Redirecting the focus from more “official acts” of name giving and name receiving to everyday labels that people get acquainted with, use, coin, manipulate, adapt, or omit from their usage also allows a new perspective on how established, invented, or coined names solidify through usage, and may eventually lose their actual etymology and experience a process of semantic bleaching, turning into labels that are only faintly reminiscent of what these names once actually stood for (see Völkel, this issue, for a typology of names and such processes of change). From an anthropological perspective, names and naming practices are a highly contextual phenomenon affecting language forms (name inventories and the structure of names), choices in name usage, and name-giving practices.

The connotative meaning and instrumentalizing power of names and labels only becomes evident for those acquainted with the particular context in which the names are embedded and out of which they arise. Associations can be provoked, triggered, and instrumentalized (see, e.g., Storch, this issue; Neethling, this issue; Wasosa & Mazuruse, this issue), or deliberately obfuscated and misled (see Nassenstein, this issue). In contrast to anthroponyms and other more “prototypical” types of names with fixed inventories or conventionalized naming practices, the labels for other culturally important entities are less clearly defined, allow for more creativity, and show a broader variety of realizations.

More generally speaking, the language-culture nexus of onomastics becomes apparent in multiple aspects with regard to naming and labelling. First, in relation to named or branded entities, names are given to culturally salient entities. Apart from persons, these include entities such as places (e.g., cities, stadia, farms; see Ndlovu, this issue; Makaudze & Magongo, this issue; Wasosa & Mazuruse, this issue), institutions (e.g., football clubs; see Dube, this issue), means of transportation (e.g., buses; see Chabata, Mamvura & Mashiri, this issue), and brands or commercial products (e.g., perfumes and gin; see Storch, this issue; Neethling, this issue). Second, practices of name giving, name use, and name avoidance are shaped by the cultural significance of names, as well as by concepts of social interaction. Third, names are generally ascribed culturally relevant semantic meaning (e.g., personal names are given in terms of parameters such as gender, rank, clan affiliation, etc.). Practices of name giving include a selection process which means that certain names are considered appropriate for their meaning while others are not. Exactly this cultural or semantic meaning is then attributed to or associated with the names (as multiple examples in this issue demonstrate). Apart from their cultural importance, names also express personal identification with (e.g., Dube,

this issue) or positioning towards the named entities (e.g., Wasosa & Mazuruse, this issue).

Despite the fact that names are inseparable from their socio-cultural environment of occurrence, the vast majority of onomastic studies focus on Indo-European languages in contexts of the Global North. With this issue, we aim to contribute new insights from less studied language families and cultural areas, namely African contexts. Most of the contributors are in fact scholars from the Global South, contributing emic perspectives on the topic.

As already stated, for many societies worldwide, most research in onomastics is concerned with personal names and place names – and anthroponyms and toponyms are without doubt the most cited sub-disciplines of onomastics. The contributions found in this issue, however, contribute new insights into less studied kinds of names, including names of public service vehicles (*kombis*) in Harare (Zimbabwe), names and nicknames of the Highlanders Football Club in Zimbabwe, names of stadia in the Kingdom of Eswatini, playful anthroponyms and toponyms in youth language from the Congo, the toponym Bulawayo and ideologies of Ndebele language purism in Zimbabwe, names of craft Gins and their brands in South Africa, names of perfumes representing an African theme or of perfumes for the African market, playful onomastic practices of people in Kinshasa (DR Congo), and names of sugarcane farms resettled by farmers in Chiredzi (Zimbabwe). A focus lies on Southern Africa in the present collection, with numerous innovative contributions coming from Zimbabwe. Linked to a lively and prolific scholarly scene in the field of onomastics in Southern Africa over the past few years (with the emergence of the “Names Society of Southern Africa”, <http://namessociety.za.org>, and the publication of the widely known journal *Nomina Africana: Journal of African Onomastics*), these authors’ contributions highlight different contemporary research strands within onomastics.

This special issue on naming and labelling contexts of cultural importance collects papers on various topics from different parts of the African continent. Völkel, in her overview paper, gives a broad cross-linguistic overview of the meaning of names and naming and their embeddedness in cultural contexts. Within this framework, the subsequent chapters provide specific examples of naming contexts of cultural importance in Africa. Völkel’s contribution, as a typological overview study, also paves the way for a variety of practices from Zimbabwe, the Congo, Eswatini, and other African settings, where the meaning of names evolves in specific social contexts, changes over time, and is situationally evoked.

Zimbabwean sugarcane farms feature prominently in Wasosa & Mazuruse’s paper, whereby they analyze how sugarcane farmers in Chiredzi name their farms in the context of resettlement in postcolonial times.

Makaudze & Magongo focus on naming stadia in the Southern African country of Eswatini as part of commemorative acts; they analyze where these names stem from and in what contexts the stadia were named as such. The authors include a perspective from Linguistic Landscape Studies, and trace the socio-historical significance of stadia names as collective and unifying heritage.

Ndlovu's paper investigates the origin and different realizations of the toponym Bulawayo, a city in southwestern Zimbabwe, mainly by focusing on speakers' folk linguistic judgements and ideologies – and by looking at purist ideologies around the “correct” names of specific places in Zimbabwe. The author looks at Ndebele language and culture, and places the urban place name in the context of chains of colonial and postcolonial discourse.

The paper by our late colleague Neethling, published posthumously, is an onomastic analysis of gin brand names from South Africa. He also looks at the names of the producing firms, distilleries, or estates. The focus of the paper is therefore on the actual name of the brand as it appears on the bottle, as well as on the place of production.

Dube, in his paper, analyses people's wishes, aspirations, and ideologies based on the names and nicknames that are attributed to the soccer club Highlanders FC, and how labelling and naming conveys sportive enthusiasm, sparks people's creativity, and is linked to other processes of naming – things, places, and people.

In Storch's paper, meanings of names in African perfumery practices are examined to shed light on the associations they evoke and the relations they symbolize, as well as the contexts in which they are used and the memories associated with language and the senses.

In the contribution by Chabata, Mamvura & Mashiri, the focus is on names for vehicles in the urban context of the Zimbabwean capital Harare. They investigate the origins of labels and people's practices of naming the local buses, *kombis*, as part of entrepreneurial endeavour.

Nassenstein looks at the playful use of different kinds of names in the “secret” linguistic practice Langila (used in urban contexts in Kinshasa and on social media, DR Congo), where young language users conceal meaning by replacing lexemes with similar-sounding names (of places, people, brands, etc.). The strategic practices of confusion by triggering wrong associations for the non-initiated hearer are approached from an onomastic perspective.

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**Svenja Völkel** is senior lecturer and researcher in Language Typology at the University of Mainz, Germany. Her research areas include anthropological linguistics/linguistic anthropology, language typology, cognitive linguistics, and language contact with a regional focus on the Pacific region, where she has conducted extensive fieldwork. Among other topics, she has a particular interest in social structure and person reference, including honorifics and taboo, kinship terminology, and onomastics in Tongan and other Polynesian languages and societies.

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