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Examining the Significance of Names of Rivers in South Africa: aNorthern Sotho Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Naming expresses reality in various ways around the globe. Names form part of people's collective identity and heritage (Mphela & Mogoboya, 2019). In other words, they are carriers of people's culture and tradition which, in Africa, is passed on to posterity by word of mouth. Rivers are named because they are natural assets cherished by communities that live next to them. They carry sanctimonious significance in Africa. Furthermore, names of rivers reveal people's richness of their spoken and written language. Therefore, people need to keep these rivers clean and free from pollution. By allowing them to flow, people will be drinking clean water, which is a health benefit. The other benefit is that they prevent the outbreak of waterborne diseases which are harmful and detrimental to the human life. This is a qualitative study whose aim is to examine the significance of names of rivers in South Africa from a Northern Sotho perspective. Afrocentric theoretical assumptions have been employed to underpin the study. Interviews were used to collect data which was later on analysed morphologically and semantically. Participants were purposefully sampled in relation to the title of the study. This study recommends for active involvement of all stakeholders in preserving the names and identity of the rivers as part of people's cultural heritage.

Introduction

The names of the rivers are important in that they are undoubtedly the country's greatest and most precious resource, for rivers and their names are society's source of life. The question may be: Who reaps the fruits of these precious natural resource? It is a foregone conclusion that the community, in

the broadest sense of the word, benefits. The names of the rivers play an important part in different human modes of existence. These names interpret the historical events of the Northern Sotho speaking people and will continue to relate their physical, psychic, social and spiritual lives. Additionally, these names remain within their culturally accountable limits. They are attached to their tradition from childhood to their adulthood. They are socio-cultural tags that convey the messages to the Northern Sotho people. Mphela and Mogoboya (2019:240) aver that naming belongs to the field of onomastics which examines the linguistic roots and historical development of names. Ngubane (1999:687) states: "The naming of rivers, places, and other things, is both a linguistics and a heritage matter". Every place that a person visits or talks about alerts them about the importance of names (Valoyi, 2017). Names reflect the culture and philosophy of the cultural group that bestows them. Mandende, Cekiso and Rwodzi (2020) confirm that among the Vhavanḁa people of South Africa, names function beyond identity construction as they are used as communicative tools to transmit their beliefs, historical antecedents, values, intentions, experiences and other cultural practices from one generation to another.

Objectives

The study sought to explore the following objectives:

To investigate the meaning of names.

To establish the meanings that Northern Sotho names of rivers represent.

To determine the role of context in bestowing Northern Sotho names.

To illustrate the significance of names in reflecting Northern Sotho culture and history.

Literature Review

Names play a significant role among the Northern Sotho speaking people. Each name is influenced by the context in which it has been used. Mphela (2010) who declares that each community is characterised by names that reveal its culture and tradition. They explain much about the community. Mphela implies that there is no name that is randomly given. Geographical names, like other types of names, identify the community. Neethling (2012) indicates that all the names are firmly embedded in the specific culture and language. These names display the meaning or message about the events that took place previously. Heaversthat the names are strong indicators of identity. Brennen (2000:154) states in agreement with Neethling: "People master nature through the ability to name it".

Names of rivers comprise of activities, relationships and philosophy of the affected group of people. There is no part of ecology which can exist without a name. Reber (1995) consents that every name is a mark of community. Even the most rudimentary community cannot exist without it. Certainly, names indicate bonds that keep the community together. Mungoshi (1975) also maintains that names are symbols that will remain with the people throughout

their lives. They promote and propagate health practices to mankind. They ensure that members of the community improve their economy.

History as a Typically Human Phenomenon

From the beginning of history of man, names of rivers are a matter of great significance. To him/her, their value is not theoretical but practical and spiritual in nature in that they assist man to create their own meaningful life-world. In other words, the value and appreciation man attaches to names positively influence their well-being. This value and importance should, furthermore, be cherished and preserved for the generations to come. Oberholzer (2000:2) concedes that the value which is attached to names is an integral part of a nation's way of living, a part of its culture. Stenhouse (1967:10) adds that once the dignity of the names of the rivers and their value are dishonoured and desecrated.

One of the values and advantages of naming rivers is biological in that in this sphere, everybody is bound by space and time. People must know the names of the rivers and the way these rivers service the communities and animals. All these creatures find themselves in a situation of a symbiotic relationship because none of them can function on their own. They have no choice. Names of rivers are important in the preservation of culture and heritage in that they help describe human and economic profiles of the places in which they are, as in, for example, tourism and fishery.

Because of fear of misfortunes that may befall those who dismember and violate the rights of these rivers, some people are deterred from polluting them. In other words, rivers can give and take life, if people do not carefully relate with them.

Theoretical framework

The fact that this article deals with Northern Sotho names of rivers essentialises the use a theory that takes into account aspects that are relevant and applicable to Africa. For this reason, this study is buttressed by the Afrocentric theoretical assumptions. According to Asante (1988), Afrocentricity is a framework where events are scrutinised from the viewpoint of the Africans. He further mentions that Afrocentricity is a manner of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values and perspectives predominate. Afrocentricity helps Africans to perceive themselves as people who can restore their history. Moreover, Coates (2015:32) mentions that any semantic and intentional literary naming involves the strengthening of the name by adding potential (repotentiation), or the reanalysis of the meaning (resemanticisation) of the word history. This study, therefore, aims to examine the significance of names of rivers in South Africa from a Northern Sotho perspective.

Significance of naming

Naming affords a unique identity to people in that it signifies their local and familiar knowledge which is differentiated from other cultures. Names are used to inform the broader public about the past events. They help people to deepen their understanding of who they are, their identity. They, furthermore, capture, share and communicate the group's belief systems as well as direct human participation. Chauke (1992) states that the importance of names is that people are able to preserve their shared knowledge which also enlighten future generations of where they come from. Baldwin (1963:71) indicates that identification with any society's foundations of life are persuasively presented as "to accept one's past - one's history - is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it". This knowledge influences the way they live, think and behave. By talking orally about what they have heard in the streets, kitchens and everywhere, they make meaning of the world around them. Social cohesion is also promoted in this way in that people collectively agree on many common and timeless cultural aspects to advance in their lives such as history, beliefs and home language. People can make judgements about their own lives. Co-operation and collaboration rather than competition become the order of the day. In this context, names form part of the philosophy of life and development of the Northern Sotho people. There are no names which are temporary but they are there to stay because they are based on historical events. They are pointers indicating relevant information that is useful to people's lives. They speak of positivity, encouragement and hope. Most African people do not need them anymore because of the negative influence of modernisation.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative research approach. Qualitative study is a process that entails multiple data collection methods for analysis (Creswell, 2013). Among other things, qualitative research is based on naturalistic enquiry where the researcher uses multimethod strategies to gather data. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. Creswell (2000) indicates that quantitative research refers to the research that makes use of various theoretical assumptions, strategies of inquiry, analysis, interpretation and methods of data collection. Qualitative approach is used to understand people's beliefs, attitudes, experiences, behaviour, and interactions. Participants were selected purposefully, as researchers rely on their own judgment when choosing participants in their study. The interviews were conducted in Northern Sotho which was a mother tongue of the participants. Audio recording was used with the permission of all the respondents and notes were taken in the process of interviews. Information gathered through interviews was later translated into English, and analysed morphologically and semantically. All respondents were Northern Sotho speakers from Capricorn District of the Limpopo Province, South Africa.

Participants

Ten (10) adults (five elderly men and five elderly women) who live in Capricorn District were selected as participants. The ages of participants ranged from 60 to 68. These participants were selected based on their rich knowledge of Northern Sotho culture.

Morphological and Semantical Examination of Names of Rivers

Hlapabalo (A place where witches wash themselves): It takes prefix 9 **N-** and it is made up of a verb **hlapa** (wash) and a noun **baloi** (witches). This river passes through Segopje and goes through Mamotintane. Legend has it that all the witches were washing themselves in this river after performing their evil activities.

Lelebore (Big corn): It is derived from **lebele** (corn) of prefix 5 **le-** and **bore** (plants) which is derived from prefix 14 **bo-**. It is clearly visible between Senwamokgope and Sefhukubje. The name means well-nourished corns that look like plants. These are the corns that are sowed along the river bank. The soil where the corns germinate is always wet and fertile, and as such, the corns remain strong and green. As they do not have shortage of water, they grow big and resemble plants. The products (**mafela**) are also fresh.

Senwabarwana (a fountain or a well where “Bushmen” drink water from): It is derived from prefix 7 **se-**, **nwa** ‘drink’ and **Barwana** (Bushmen). It is situated in the town called **Senwabarwana**, which is named after it (the river). The town was formally known as Bochum.

Majabatho (People who feed on [eat] human flesh): It is a noun that is marked by prefix 6 **Ma-**, a verb **ja** (eat) and a noun **batho** (people). The river is found next to Matlading, GaNkoana, and was given this name because it drowned all female initiates who went there to wash themselves at the end of the initiation school. The river acted like a cannibal in that it fed on the people’s flesh.

Tseletsele (Something that is straight): It is marked by the prefix 9 **N-**. It is a river that is found near the village called Makushwaneng, at GaMphahlele, and it flows into Olifants River. It does not meander but flows in a long, straight manner, and it is very long.

Noka ye Tšhweu (White River): It is made up of the prefix 9 **N-**, **ye** (adjectival concord) and **tšhweu** (white), which is an adjective. The river is found between Nobody and Dalmada. It was given this name because of the white sand that is found in it.

Molototsi (Protector): It starts from Midingene Mountains and flows through GaModjadji. It takes care of Balobedu in that they use its water to drink, cook food and wash their clothes. Their livestock also drink from it.

Tšhudumo (Type of sound): It is derived from ideophone **tšhudu**, which is a type of sound that is audible. It falls under audibility as a perception. Ideophone, as a word category, is a phonic presentation (sound symbolism) of human perception like seeing, hearing, feeling (touching), smelling, tasting, and inner feeling. The river starts from Groothoek Dam and flows into Olifants River. When it is full, it murmurs a lot (Lombard, van Wyk&Mokgokong, 1985:180) confirm that this river makes a big rushing sound when it is full.

Tswaing (At the salt): This is a locative noun. It is found between mountains at GaMolepo and GaChoene. Its name shows that the water is salty.

Tlhakaro (A meeting place): It starts from the Drakensberg mountains and is clearly visible between Mphahlele Tribal Authority and Mashite Village. Tlhakaro results from a confluence of two rivers, and it flows into Olifants River.

Kgaphamadi (Blood River): The name takes the prefix **9 N-**. It is made up of the verb **kgapha** (wipe away) and a noun **madi** (blood). It passes between Seshego and Blood River, which is a place named after it. Groups of people from either side of the river met there and fought spilling blood, hence, the name Blood River.

Discussion of findings

The river names, as presented above, validate the fact that Northern Sotho naming practices are determined by the culture of the people whose rivers bear those names. This study shows that the names of rivers are beneficial to people in many different ways. They belong to people's culture and link them with modern practices. People become aware of the importance of preserving this heritage. They also take cultural pride in contributing to the existing onomastic knowledge of names of rivers. Names conscientise people about their identity. They also promote social cohesion. Naming is firmly embedded in the Northern Sotho culture and language. Naming is interwoven with traditional African beliefs that feature events that took place in the past. It is also a cultural avenue to express societal values. Indigenous languages are also developed naming. This study reveals that names are a clearly defined set of unchanging ways of behaviour which should be preserved. It, furthermore, shows that names provide valuable information which is indispensable to solving problems and organising contemporary social life. Even though some Northern Sotho cultural practices appear to be eroded by Western belief systems, some cultural aspects that relate to names of rivers have been preserved. For example, some rituals and rites are still privately or publicly performed in or near the river(s) for specific purposes in the Northern Sotho culture and other (South) African cultures. Those that are publicly performed also offer spectators traditional entertaining lessons. Such events should be staged for traditional amusement. This study, furthermore, reveals that the Northern Sotho naming practice is a sociocultural interpretation of historical events.

Recommendations

Anthropologists, language experts and community leaders should be invited by relevant authorities to lead some discussions about the names of rivers and related topics.

Onomastics must be introduced to learners early in their schooling career in order for them to grow up embedded and immersed in their cultural tradition. Departments of Education, and Arts and Culture should actively be involved in this venture. Through this cultural awareness, social cohesion, and cultural integration will be realised in Africa.

Conclusion

When rain falls, rivers are brought back to life and flow again. In this way, they revive and rekindle their role as cultural symbols which people can identify themselves with throughout their journey of life. Naming of rivers remind people that water is the source life and that it should be properly utilised. In other words, people must use it responsibly. People need to keep their rivers clean for them to flow freely. Dumping rubbish in the rivers leads to flooding as water will be forced to get alternative routes. Flooding is not good because it destroys homes, roads and so many other valuable things. It also leads to the unwarranted destruction of infrastructure such as bridges. Clean water brings relief to some drought-stricken parts of the country. It is, therefore, important to keep rivers unpolluted by not dumping dirty things into them. Citizens have to treat their environments and rivers with immense responsibility as some of our rivers serve as tourist attractions. Rivers which are currently in a dilapidated stage because of, *inter alia*, pollution and improper naming, should be restored to their former glory for the benefit of posterity.

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