

A Study of Circumstantial Nicknames in Pabir-Bura Traditional Customs

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Abstract

Linguists have long established that the practice of naming human beings is as old as history itself. In the Pabir-Bura society, however, the naming system is undergoing rapid transformation due to increased contact with other cultures and languages. This shift can be attributed to the adoption of new religions, formal education systems, and foreign cultural influences that differ significantly from traditional knowledge systems inherited from ancestors. Consequently, the Pabir-Bura language faces the risk of endangerment, as cultural practices, including naming conventions, are increasingly being replaced by external models. One notable example of this shift is the society's growing preference for names derived from Islam and Christianity, often at the expense of traditional circumstantial nicknames. These nicknames, once widely used and deeply embedded in cultural identity, are gradually being abandoned. Data for this study was obtained from counterfoils of human tax records and market stall allocations collected from Ward Head offices. Historically, prior to the 1960s, individuals in the society were not identified by a single name; instead, they bore multiple names, often including circumstantial nicknames. In contemporary times, it is common to see individuals given only religious names or, at best, a combination of a modern religious name and a traditional nickname. Circumstantial nicknames in Pabir-Bura society are typically classified according to the specific conditions under which they were given. These may include character traits, personal achievements, social failures, or extraordinary events surrounding a person's birth or profession. This paper adopts a classification approach combined with semantic interpretation to analyze these names. The study aims to challenge the prevailing misconception that traditional nicknames are primitive or demeaning compared to religious names introduced through Islam and Christianity. On the contrary, it argues that circumstantial nicknames serve as culturally rich identifiers, often providing insight into an individual's background, social status, or spiritual

associations. The findings suggest that while the naming system in Pabir-Bura society evolves with each passing decade, the value of traditional nicknames remains significant, though increasingly marginalized, in the face of modernization and religious influence.

Introduction

According to the *BBC English Dictionary*, a nickname is defined as “an informal name for someone,” while *Encarta Encyclopedia* (1993–2007) explains that nicknames often reflect aspects of a person’s personality, accomplishments, or failures. In this context, “circumstances” refer to the conditions or situations that influence what happens to individuals. The practice of assigning nicknames based on one’s life conditions, achievements, or failures has long existed in Pabir-Bura society. Traditionally, this naming practice is tied to communal customs of honouring individuals who succeed and ridiculing those who fail. The tradition of bestowing honourific or derogatory names based on lived experiences, destiny, or societal events is deeply rooted in Pabir-Bura culture.

The historical depth of nickname assignment is also supported in Islamic tradition. Schimmel (1989), as cited in Shettima, A. K. and Abba, Kaka Gana (2012:188), traces the origins of such naming practices to the prophets. For instance, Prophet Ibrahim is referred to as *Khalilullah* (‘Friend of Allah’), Musa as *Kalimullah* (‘One who spoke to Allah’), Isa as *Ruhullah* (‘Spirit of Allah’), and Muhammad as *Al-Amin* (‘The Trustworthy’).

This paper, however, is concerned with indigenous African naming systems, particularly within Pabir-Bura society. It aims to classify circumstantial nicknames and explain the socio-cultural and contextual reasons behind their usage. The data employed in this study was collected from the counterfoils of human tax payment records (*Tsamnau-mda* in Pabir-Bura and *Haraji* in Hausa) and market stall allocations (*Tsamnau wur Kasuku* in Pabir-Bura and *Harajin Kasuwa* in Hausa), obtained from ward heads’ offices.

Human beings are typically born innocent, but through their journey in life, they may acquire nicknames—either positive or negative—based on circumstances surrounding their birth, their behavior, social roles, or personal achievements or failures. Among Chadic-speaking communities, such as the Pabir-Bura, circumstantial naming practices are widely accepted and serve important social functions.

In Pabir-Bura society, every male child is initially addressed as *Anjikwi*, while every female child is referred to as *Kubəli* according to oral tradition. In some cases, these names remain unchanged throughout the individual's life. Twins are identified with the names *Mwada* and *Thlama*, regardless of gender, and the general term for a newborn is *Makshu*. Other foundational nicknames include *Pindar* and *Mwajim*, which refer to single-born individuals considered twins by tradition, even though they are not born together.

Additionally, children associated with shrines (*Haptu*)—in line with traditional religious beliefs—receive names such as *Paskur*, *Pachang*, *Awa*, and *Dawi*. These names indicate spiritual connections believed to be instrumental to the child's conception or survival.

Circumstantial nicknames in Pabir-Bura society can be broadly categorized based on the nature of the birth or early-life events. These categories include:

- **Physical characteristics:** Names may reflect bodily features such as skin tone or facial structure. For instance, *Mamza* denotes a child with reddish complexion, while *Abore* refers to someone resembling the Fulani in appearance.
- **Location of birth:** If a child is born during a journey, names like *Laku* ('road') or *Mtaku* ('bush') may be assigned.
- **Time of birth:** Children born during daylight may be named *Kwapci* (girl) or *Tapchi* (boy), while moonlight births may result in the name *Kwathiya* (girl).
- **Response to repeated infant mortality:** A child born after the loss of several siblings may be named *Mtazhariya* ('Will God spare this one?').
- **Spiritual or theocratic beliefs:** Names like *Watirahyel* ('Who is superior to God?') reflect deep religious sentiment and reliance on divine will.
- **Marital context:** The relationship between parents can influence naming. A name like *Msirali* ('I am happy') may signify a joyful union, while *Hatsiwa* ('No helping hand') and *Akiliwa* ('He is not from me') suggest estrangement or neglect from the father.

- **Social rejection or emotional distress:** When the mother faces societal disdain or animosity, the child might bear a name such as *Dahirwa* ('They do not like me').
- **Delayed childbirth:** A child born after a prolonged period of infertility may be named *Sikhyel* ('Wait on God').
- **Philosophical or emotional expression:** A name like *Kumzhira* ('I am fed up') encapsulates the emotional state of the parents at the time of birth.

These examples demonstrate the rich cultural semantics and social significance embedded in Pabir-Bura circumstantial nicknames. The names are more than mere labels; they serve as historical records, spiritual indicators, and emotional expressions that capture the lived realities of the people. The gradual shift away from these traditional naming practices towards modern religious names reflects broader socio-cultural transformations that warrant further scholarly attention.

s/n	Nicknames	Class	Gloss	Circumstances
1	Si mwala Mwar Mwala	Religion/morality	She arrives virgin(from the bridegroom side) She went virgin (from her parents side)	The first arrival of bridegroom to her matrimonial home that is the effect of their first intercourse. This is cultural/religious teachings
2	Mwala Miwa	Characteristics/humble	The loved wife	If a woman displays a humble character, ready to succumb to her husband wishes, she then earns the nickname e.g Shatu, mwala miwa =shatu the favoured

				Wife
3	Mwala Dəra	Characteristics/hated wife	The hated wife	A woman of trouble some character not ready to succumb to the husband's Wishes
4	Mwala ciri Ndəla	Destination destiny/ befallen Gossip	Barren woman Barren woman	If a woman ends up not having a child that is, unable to have babies. The said woman is rejected by
				the society her grave is even separated from other peoples' grave
5	Aggera Mwala	Characteristics	The mother in law	A mother to one's wife
6	kukulər sala mwala Tsuhr sala mwala	Characteristics	The mother in laws' farming	The tradition demand a communal farming as a prerequisite element in a marriage thus a nickname for a farming type-woman seeking

				communal farming
7	Jiri	Characteristics Personality	The trustworthy e.g Samuel jiri	If one is straight forward in their dealings with other
8	Kur/Təbəl	Characteristics	That who has tail or sickness of tail sickness associated with body-part-anus	If one is fond steal in one's farm where horns of a cow are kept for protecting the farm product The person will catch the sickness kur/Təbəl
9	Kini/kwadakəli	Characteristics	One Who suffer from syphilis/gonorrhoea	If a man is fond of doing adultery he stands the chance of getting sex-related sickness syphilis/Gonorrhea
10	Mutu msira amma vir mta ni	Characteristics	The wizard	If one died of contagious disease like that small pox, one is nicknamed Mutu
11	Mda nzang	Failure	The man of the lowercadre	Over laziness in life earns one's poverty of the highest Order

12	Njana	Destiny	The perpetual sick	Always sick; not feeling Well
13	Ajilkudā	Failure	Laziness plus poverty	Not willing to work thus earns him/she extreme poverty Lowest strata in the society
14	Dimi	Personality	Undesirable	Behave unpleasantly to people or born during difficult condition alias poverty e.g Sunday Dimi
15	Abore	Characteristics	The Fulani-like	When someone looks so much alike with Fulani in terms of height and light complexion he/she earns this nickname e.g Muhammadu Abore
16	Bwani	Destiny	Abject poverty	If someone is born in serve condition of poverty he/she is nicknamed bwani e.g Jija Bwani
17	Yaḅəra/Asura	Destiny	Born after the death of one's father	A baby who has not seen their father is nicknamed Yaḅəra. And probably for suffering in their Life

18	Kadala Kəma	Characteristics	Dance-leader	Someone who is fond of dancing and takes leadership in dancing arena is nicknamed kadala kəma
19	Muuta	Destiny	Orphan	Early death of parents give rise to the affected person the characteristics of orphaned appearances plus Thoughts
20	Midar	Destiny	Bastard	One who is destined to come to the world outside the wedlock
21	Mwala a-nzi atambwawa	Characteristics	A fancy free divorcee woman	Fancy women- those who are fond of being divorced and the society shows her Disapproval
22	Mbzir Kurdəm-kir	Destiny	A child born prior to the seeing of menstruation before pregnancy	This is a child (male) born to someone who is fond of having arentaryl sex even during menstruation period. And it is believed that the boy will never be a man of Himself

23	mbelkər virri	Characteristics/destiny	A night wound	Long unfinished wound
24	Kwa laku	Characteristics/destiny	Born on the way	A child born on the mother's way to another village or place
25	Mwapu	Characteristics/ Destiny	White person	Albino skin-like
26	Məgəl	Characteristics/ Destiny	Black person	Darkness in complexion
27	Ghəranta	Characteristics	The one that punished Me	The mother suffered during this child's pregnancy
28	Pərkwə	Characteristics		A praise phrase to a particular shrine
29	Kwa fīling	Characteristics	The smallish	A child born small in Comparison to other children
30	Sikta	Accomplishment	Waited for the expected	A situation where the mother has waited for the what she has being Expecting
31	Dawī	Destiny	A male child before taking proper name	A praise phrase to particular shrine
32	Awa	Destiny	A female child	Also related to particular Shrine
33	Yarami	Failure	What I have done?	A situation whereby the mother expected a different/opposite Expectation
34	Pəlākawa	Joy	I have found it,	The long

			whom do, tell to?	awaited expectation of joy has finally arrived whom then do express my joy to?
35	Yapadawa Kumshida	Exclusion	Not like them Let them laugh	The mother excludes herself from the talk of the town's gossips or accusations A gift for them to smile or lets them laugh.
36	Wauta	State of aimities uncertain	Who ever saw it	The mother is expressing her mind as to who even seen the much expected Wishes
37	Yapelami	Destiny	What do I have to say	The mother is expressing her mind on the destined issue be it having yet another female child or a different thought entirely
38	Pakta	Destiny	I have found it	A situation whereby one of the parents has gotten the awaited thing. It can be the male or female child or other things

39	Yanudā	State of	Let me just follow then	A situation where the person with the nickname has no conscious of their own. The person is just a follower in any matter or Case
40	Wadlara		Who will help me	A situation whereby one of parents raised a rhetorical question in their thought “who will help me apart from God the almighty?”
41	Usa ka hyel	Praise	Thank you God	Showing happiness to God the almighty for everything
42	Huni	Characteristics	Miser	A child born during a period of difficulties or the person is fond of being a Miser
43	Pumtama	State of throwing	Where do I throw it to?	A child born after a number male children
44	Kutaduku	Praise	Trustworthy	Always frank In Dealings Is The Pabir/Bura has kutar duku apa kur gwalahu= she/his mind is always one as

				the hole of Gwalahu (Iguana Lizard/ Monitor)
45	Adhurawa	Resemblance	Will not match me	An addresser is excluding Themselves from a particular act
46	Garkui	Characteristics	The hill of goats	A person/man from the hill
				of goats (a place fully occupied/in habited by goats)
47	Kɔlbu	Characteristics	The potash	The potash seller she/he trades in potash
48	Una	Characteristics	The self	She/he trades in salt
49	Dika	Inanimate object	The bird	
50	Yahwi	State of moving	The number of the birth is moving steady	The nature of her giving birth is moving steady. In some sense. The birth has stopped that is, the gap between the last child born and the present hashed long Gap

51	Nziaghəli	Destiny	Stayed behind or the last child of the mother	The last born of a woman after been preceded by many. Mostly Female child
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Due to some socio-cultural circumstances in Human endeavor, circumstantial nicknames are added to religious names thus having two or more names to a person. Prior to 1960s, not a single being in Pabir-Bura society has a single name for identification but now the practice is fast changing. Analysis of the data in 1 to 51 reveal these features:

1. The tradition of having two or more names apart from Fathers' names is fast dyeing
2. Circumstantial names fully practiced prior to 1960s is being looked down by the bearers or considered so primitive
3. Single names and modern religions' names are favored to the detriment of circumstantial names considered as local or traditional custom's
4. Circumstantial nicknames depict Pabir-Bura Society's general occupational trends, religious thoughts (Ləhurkəy), Socialization, Society's world viewpoint, Human shapes, Wealth condition (wadata ko akasi) racial differences etc.

Conclusion

In Pabir-Bura society, every newborn child, regardless of gender, is traditionally assigned the nickname *Makshu*, a practice deeply rooted in the community's oral history and considered as old as the society itself. Additionally, the culture exhibits a pattern of indigenous naming with a notable prefix “Ma-”, seen in names such as *Maravi*, *Machabiri*, *Madika*, and *Macharbwaya*. These names reflect pre-Islamic and pre-Christian naming traditions that were dominant before the introduction of modern religions.

With the advent of Islam and Christianity, names of religious origin such as *Jesus*, *Peter*, and *David* from Christianity, and *Muhammadu*, *Adamu*, and *Haruna* from Islam began to spread across the region. However, due to strong socio-cultural factors, these names were rarely used in isolation. Instead, they were typically combined with circumstantial nicknames that reflected personal, social, or environmental contexts. As a result, until the 1960s, it was uncommon for individuals born in rural areas of Pabir-Bura society to bear only a single name. Composite names such as *Adamu Wadlara*, *Peter Usakahyel*, and *Zainabu Mwala Hulfa* were the norm, with the second component serving as a circumstantial identifier.

Furthermore, in everyday practice, circumstantial nicknames often took precedence over patronymic naming. For instance, instead of identifying a person as *Garba Adamu* (Garba, son of Adamu), the name *Garba Nvwa* might be used, where *Nvwa* is a circumstantial nickname derived from observable traits, events, or conditions related to the individual. This naming tradition underscores the cultural emphasis placed on lived experiences and local contexts in the identification and social positioning of individuals within the Pabir-Bura community.

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