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An Onomastic Study of Siswati and Northern Sotho Naming Customs, Their Social Significance, and Their Cultural Meaning

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the sociological and linguistic relevance of naming traditions within these communities. They contain social ideals, personal histories, and collective memories; they frequently represent birth circumstances or group experiences. Names serve as indicators of kinship, gender roles, social rank, and intergenerational history in addition to their literal meaning. In order to understand how names function as communicative acts that store cultural knowledge, uphold moral teachings, and preserve indigenous epistemologies in a fast globalizing world, this study investigates the sociological and linguistic significance of naming traditions within these societies. The goal was to investigate the cultural values that are contained in names, the meanings and patterns of naming, and the effects of contemporary influences on these customs. Using a qualitative ethnolinguistic approach, data was gathered from 48 people in semi-structured interviews and focus groups throughout Mpumalanga and Limpopo. Document analysis was also conducted. The results, which are informed by ethnography and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, show that names serve as both indirect communication tools and symbols of family histories, feelings, and sociopolitical commentary. As a result of urbanisation, globalization and cultural adaption to Christianity, newer generations are increasingly taking on English and biblical names. Participants highlighted the importance of preserving traditional name knowledge through education and community-based archives, while also expressing cultural pride in spite of these changes. According to the study's findings, names continue to be resilient and durable markers of cultural memory, forming both individual and community identities and bridging the past and present.

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1. Introduction

Names are linguistic indicators that convey layers of meaning associated with social, cultural, and historical contexts; they are not just labels^[1]. Naming serves as a linguistic and symbolic act in African nations, helping groups express their identities, preserve cultural memory, and conform to social norms^[2]. For the Siswati and Northern Sotho, names serve as condensed accounts of lived experience and are frequently inspired by lineage, emotions, political situations, or birth circumstances. Therefore, naming is not just a private or family activity in African communities; it is also a social event that is ingrained in ceremonies, rituals, and oral traditions that represent shared values and worldviews. Giving someone a name is a major socio-cultural phenomenon since it frequently contains expectations, social commentary, and even subtly protesting oppression or historical injustices.

The linguistic aspects of African naming practices are still little understood, despite their rich cultural diversity. Smaller languages like Siswati and Northern Sotho have received less attention in Southern Africa due to onomastic scholarship's heavy emphasis on dominant languages like Zulu and Xhosa^[3,4]. The majority of current research provides descriptive cultural explanations, but it does not investigate how naming systems function as linguistic structures through morphological processes, semantic patterns, and metaphorical encodings that disclose different worldviews. The research gap that the current study fills is this deficiency in comparative linguistic analysis. Because of this lack of scholarly involvement, there is a knowledge gap about how naming in less-dominant languages expresses identity, worldview, and cultural resilience. In order to place naming within larger discussions on language preservation, cultural revitalization, and African knowledge systems, comprehensive linguistic study is therefore required.

Its comparative ethnolinguistic approach, which examines how Siswati and Northern Sotho naming systems both reflect cultural norms and exhibit systematic linguistic procedures for encoding meaning, is what makes this study novel. The study demonstrates how language itself operates as a tool for identity development and cultural continuity by examin-

ing the morphological construction, pragmatic functions in conversation, and semantics of names (e.g., Nomsa “grace,” Ntsako “joy”). The study also looks at how modern forces like globalization, Christianity, urbanization, and Western education are changing these naming patterns, creating hybrid forms, and indicating identity negotiation. The research demonstrates how naming practices in African civilizations are dynamic and adaptive, functioning as areas of negotiation between heritage and modernity by emphasizing both tradition and change.

In light of this, this study aims to: (1) record and examine Siswati and Northern Sotho name customs; (2) decipher their linguistic and cultural connotations; and (3) assess the degree to which contemporary influences modify traditional naming schemes. By demonstrating how language form and cultural meaning interact in naming practices, the study offers fresh perspectives on African onomastics. Additionally, it is anticipated that the results would add to more general conversations on multilingualism in South Africa, where minority language appreciation and acknowledgment are still essential for identity affirmation, cultural inclusivity, and educational policy.

The study's methodology combines document analysis, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews in a qualitative ethnolinguistic design. Fieldwork was carried out in the Siswati and Northern Sotho-speaking regions of Mpumalanga and Limpopo. The theoretical framework is based on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and Ethnolinguistic Theory, which hold that language influences social reality and thought^[5]. With the use of this framework, naming may be seen as both a cultural practice and linguistic proof of the conception and transmission of worldviews. This theoretical foundation enables the study to connect cultural anthropology with linguistic analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of how names serve as social practices and verbal art in African cultures.

2. Backgrounds

Names are cultural artifacts that represent the histories, values, and life experiences of the communities that give

them their meanings; they are more than just meaningless linguistic symbols. Globally, naming customs represent community memory, legacy, and worldview in addition to being a way for individuals to identify themselves^[6]. Names serve as linguistic texts that communities use to convey social norms, emotional moods, and historical knowledge in many countries. They include layers of meaning that extend beyond personal identification^[7]. Hence, name is a linguistic and cultural practice that is ingrained in a community's social structure.

Naming customs have long been acknowledged as important conduits of cultural knowledge and identity in the African environment. Names frequently represent birth circumstances, ancestry, historical events, natural phenomena, or moral principles^[8]. They frequently serve as tools of resistance against marginalization or erasure and might represent adulation, mourning, or societal critique^[9]. In situations where colonial and postcolonial forces have sought to impose external cultural norms, for example, names may help to preserve indigenous worldviews^[10]. As a result, studying names offers a window into how African communities deal with change and continuity in the face of shifting political and historical contexts.

Onomastics, or the study of names, has advanced dramatically in Southern Africa in recent decades, with noteworthy studies conducted on major languages like Setswana, isiZulu, and isiXhosa^[11]. Smaller languages, such as Northern Sotho and Siswati, haven't gotten as much scholarly attention as Mpe^[12]. The majority of the literature now in publication focuses on cultural or anthropological explanations of naming customs, emphasizing their symbolic connotations without delving into their language patterns. Because of this, little is known about the morphological, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of naming in minority languages^[13]. Both theoretical and applied onomastic studies are hindered by this imbalance.

Particularly rich and deserving of further study are the naming systems of Siswati and Northern Sotho. Whereas names in Northern Sotho frequently represent communal beliefs, historical narratives, or birth circumstances, names in Siswati may be influenced by social interactions, emotional experiences, or ancestral links^[14]. Names serve as condensed accounts of cultural affiliation and identity in both languages. However, there hasn't been a thorough compara-

tive analysis of the structural processes that underlie these names, such as their morphological construction, pragmatic communication function, and semantic layers that disclose distinct worldviews^[15]. A linguistic-ethnographic approach that places naming at the nexus of language, culture, and identity is thus made possible.

This picture is further complicated by the effect of modernism. New naming patterns brought about by urbanization, Christianity, globalization, and Western education increasingly coexist with or even replace old systems^[16]. In multilingual and multicultural situations, hybrid naming forms which combine indigenous and Western names are more prevalent and represent larger identity debates^[17]. This calls into question the sustainability of indigenous knowledge systems, language shift, and cultural preservation. The study aims to document both continuity and change in African name systems by examining naming practices within this dynamic sociolinguistic context.

Therefore, by concentrating on Siswati and Northern Sotho, the current study expands on the necessity to correct the imbalance in African onomastic scholarship. It presents name as a language structure that uses morphology, semantics, and pragmatics to encode meaning in addition to being a cultural phenomenon^[18]. The study emphasizes how these languages advance our knowledge of identity development, worldview transmission, and cultural resilience by taking an ethnolinguistic and comparative perspective. Additionally, it seeks to clarify how modern influences transform customs, resulting in hybridized identities that persist in changing within South Africa's multilingual terrain^[19].

3. Theoretical Framework

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Linguistic Relativity) and Ethnolinguistic Theory are the two interconnected theoretical pillars around which this work is based. These frameworks offer a prism through which Siswati and Northern Sotho speakers' cultural, cognitive, and social aspects of naming practices can be scrutinized.

The relationship between language and cultural identity is emphasized by Ethnolinguistic Theory, which holds that language is a storehouse of cultural knowledge, values, and worldview in addition to being a means of communication^[20]. According to this viewpoint, names are important

linguistic artifacts that represent and pass down cultural significance down the generations. Names frequently function as cultural texts in African communities, encoding social commentary, moral lessons, emotions, ancestral lineages, and histories. Personal names are used to represent social reality, commemorate important occasions, and communicate family expectations in Siswati and Northern Sotho cultures. Thus, Ethnolinguistic Theory aids in comprehending how name serves as a conduit and a mirror of cultural identity.

This study is further informed by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which holds that language affects perception and thought^[21]. It is also referred to as the theory of linguistic relativity. This idea holds that the linguistic patterns and vocabularies of speakers' mother tongues influence how they see and understand the world. When it comes to onomastics, this implies that Siswati and Northern Sotho naming practices may influence people's understanding of ideas like kinship, morality, fate, and time in addition to their social interactions and sense of self. Names that allude to spiritual ideas, feelings, or birth circumstances, for instance, show how speakers of these languages socially and cognitively classify their experiences.

When combined, these two theories offer a strong analytical foundation for examining the richness and intricacy of naming in African contexts. While the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis emphasizes the cognitive and perceptual roles that language plays in forming human experience, Ethnolinguistic Theory makes it easier to understand names culturally. This dual approach enables a detailed examination of how names serve as potent linguistic instruments that store cultural values, collective memory, and changing social realities in addition to serving as labels.

In summary, the study's goal of examining how naming customs in Siswati and Northern Sotho communities reflect, and impact larger cultural and societal structures is supported by this theoretical framework. It also makes it possible to examine how these customs are evolving in response to outside influences like globalization, urbanization, and religion, and what this means for identity and cultural continuity.

4. Methodology

A qualitative research design based on sociocultural and ethnolinguistic viewpoints on onomastics was used in

this study. Particularly in African societies where names have profound cultural value, this method is ideal for revealing the symbolic, historical, and emotional implications ingrained in naming traditions^[22]. The goal was to document the cultural narratives, lived experiences, and beliefs that influence naming decisions in addition to investigating the linguistic structure of Siswati and Northern Sotho names.

Selected communities in Mpumalanga (speaking Siswati) and Limpopo (speaking Northern Sotho) were used to recruit participants. Local chiefs, language teachers, and cultural groups served as community gatekeepers during the recruitment process, introducing the researcher to the first participants. Purposive sampling was then used to choose people who were known to be familiar with both traditional and modern naming customs. Parents, elders, traditional leaders, cultural practitioners, and language instructors were among them.

In order to guarantee a range of viewpoints, the inclusion requirements demanded that participants:

- possess Northern Sotho or Siswati as their first tongue.
- possess firsthand knowledge of naming customs, such as having named children, taken part in ceremonies, or maintained genealogical knowledge.
- to capture gendered and generational viewpoints, represent a range of age groups and genders.
- be prepared to give informed consent.

Snowball sampling was also employed, in which participants suggested other people who were thought to be the keepers of naming customs in their communities. By using this tactic, the study was able to connect with people who had hidden information, like senior citizens who are not officially connected to cultural organizations.

Three complementary techniques were used for data collection:

- **Semi-structured interviews** with 25 participants provided in-depth personal narratives and an examination of the significance of particular names, naming customs, and the impact of sociopolitical change^[23].
- **Focus groups** with a mix of genders and generations were held in four sessions, each with six to eight participants. These group discussions sparked debates about naming customs, allowing members to expand on one another's opinions and emphasize shared practices.
- **Document analysis** involved examining family lin-

eages, historical documents, and cultural texts with indigenous names. These written sources contextualized oral experiences and revealed continuity and change in historical naming practices.

Findings were cross-checked from these three sources to increase reliability. For example, focus group narratives and names discussed in interviews were examined to find any inconsistencies or conflicts, and document analysis provided a historical foundation for modern interpretations. By making sure that themes represented the convergence of several viewpoints rather than being selected from a single data type, this procedure improved validity.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the data^[24]. To find recurrent themes pertaining to colonial impact, social commentary, cultural symbolism, and contemporary adaptations, transcripts were inductively coded. Codes were then grouped into more general categories so that data from Northern Sotho and Siswati could be compared.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical norms. After being informed of the study's objectives, participants completed informed consent forms. Pseudonyms were employed to maintain confidentiality, and all information was safely preserved^[25].

The Ethnolinguistic Theory and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which highlight how language stores cultural values and impacts perception, served as the basis for the methodology^[5]. This approach ensured that the study remained grounded in community worldviews by providing guidance for both data gathering and interpretation.

5. Literature Review

In African civilizations, names serve as more than just linguistic identifiers; they represent symbols of heritage, shared ideals, religious convictions, and historical awareness^[26]. Names are social tools and cultural texts that help Siswati and Northern Sotho speakers form their identities and memories. Although there has been some interest in African onomastics, most of it has been in dominant languages like Xhosa and Zulu^[3,4]. Little is known about smaller language communities like Siswati and Northern Sotho, especially when it comes to the linguistic and symbolic functions of their naming systems.

By doing a comparative ethnolinguistic examination

of Siswati and Northern Sotho naming practices, this study fills that gap. It looks at how names convey sociocultural information, how naming is altered by current factors like urbanization and Christianity, and how traditional and modern systems coexist or clash while constructing identities. By concentrating on the semantic, pragmatic, and symbolic linguistic mechanisms of naming, the study goes beyond cultural description in onomastic research, providing fresh perspectives on underrepresented Bantu languages and advancing discussions on language, culture, and social change.

The study of names, or onomastics, has long piqued academic curiosity due to its capacity to provide sociological, historical, and linguistic insights. Personal names in African contexts represent social structures, historical consciousness, belief systems, and collective values in addition to being individual identifiers^[27]. Thus, naming is a dynamic cultural practice influenced by sociopolitical contexts, colonial history, language, and religion. Indigenous African naming systems in lesser-studied languages like Siswati and Northern Sotho, however, are still poorly understood in spite of considerable diversity. Dominant languages like Yoruba, Xhosa, and Zulu are frequently given preference in current studies^[28].

Names in Bantu-speaking cultures are frequently small stories that capture birth-related events, familial expectations, ancestors' views, and even the feelings of the community at a particular moment. Musonda^[29] asserts that names are not picked at random but rather are purposefully chosen to honour important events or to represent the child's place in the family. For instance, in Northern Sotho, a child born following a string of adversity would be named *Ntsako* (joy), signifying optimism and fresh starts. Similarly, a Siswati name like *Nokuthula* (peace) can represent the parents' desire for family harmony.

Names function as "mini-narratives" in many Bantu-speaking societies, encapsulating birth circumstances, familial expectations, ancestry, and collective feelings. According to Musonda^[29], names are purposefully chosen to allude to important occasions or to place the child in relation to social or familial structures. For example, the Siswati name *Nokuthula* (peace) conveys parents' aspirations for concord, while the Northern Sotho name *Ntsako* (joy) may honour recovery following adversity. These instances demonstrate how names serve as both cultural meaning bearers and lin-

guistic artifacts.

According to ethnolinguistic research, names frequently serve as historical memory, moral instruction, and social commentary^[30]. Janowitz^[31] also notes that they serve as indirect speech acts that might express blessings, discontent, or goals in ways that are acceptable in society. These roles are likely present in Siswati and Northern Sotho as well, and they are generally recognized in larger African naming traditions.

But naming conventions have changed over time. Pressures brought about by colonialism and Christianity pushed or compelled Africans to take on Western or biblical names, frequently erasing native ones^[32]. Since many parents still choose English names for perceived modernity or social mobility, the legacy of this change endures today^[33]. Younger generations have recently been encouraged by globalization and urbanization to select cosmopolitan or English-friendly names, leading to dual-naming systems in which people use a Western name for formal settings and an indigenous name for cultural identity^[34].

Comparative studies on name conventions in under-documented Bantu languages are conspicuously lacking, despite these insightful observations. Although Koopman^[35] investigated Zulu naming systems and Mphande^[36] studied Chewa names, Siswati and Northern Sotho have received relatively little attention. This disparity obscures the cultural resiliency ingrained in these traditions and restricts comprehension of South Africa's linguistic diversity.

Overall, research to date supports the idea that naming is a culturally charged and socially ingrained process in African communities. However, much of the research either minimizes the changing dynamics brought about by modernity or concentrates on languages that are widely spoken. By comparing the naming systems of Siswati and Northern Sotho, this study fills in these gaps. In doing so, it not only helps to preserve intangible cultural heritage but also demonstrates how names still represent continuity, identity, and resistance in a world that is changing quickly.

6. Findings

The study yielded significant insights into Northern Sotho and Siswati speakers' naming practices. The results are arranged thematically, supported by direct quotations,

and connected to the Sapir-Whorf and ethnolinguistic frameworks. Through focus groups and interviews, a total of 47 participants, 25 from Siswati-speaking communities and 22 from Northern Sotho-speaking areas contributed.

6.1. Naming as a Mirror of Life Experiences and Birth Situations

Both groups frequently assign names associated with emotional or birth conditions, illustrating how language encodes lived experience, consistent with the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis^[5]. One Siswati mother stated:

“We wanted to express our gratitude by giving him the name Siyabonga because, following numerous miscarriages, this child was a gift” (female, 38, Mpumalanga).

Similarly, a Northern Sotho parent noted:

“I wanted peace to enter our home, so I named my daughter Kgotso when she was born, following a period of conflict in the family” (male, 46, Limpopo).

These examples highlight how names serve as linguistic markers of memory, resilience, and personal or collective history.

6.2. Names as Carriers of Moral and Cultural Values

According to Ethnolinguistic Theory, names act as instruments for cultural continuity and moral instruction^[6]. An elder from Northern Sotho explained:

“We are teaching that rain is life and that a child must be a blessing like rain when we name them Pule” (elder, 72, Limpopo).

Names such as *Tsembeka* (“be trustworthy”) reflect Siswati principles of integrity and trust. Twenty-nine participants (62%) specifically emphasized that names function as cultural texts that instill values in children.

6.3. Naming as Social Commentary

Names can also serve as indirect societal critique, aligning with Janowitz's view of names as speech acts^[31]. For instance:

"Because we were being divided by family members, we called the boy Makgoka. It serves as a reminder of that dispute" (female, 55, Limpopo).

Such socially coded names illustrate how language shapes perception and social reality, supporting the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis^[5].

6.4. Dual Naming and Modern Influences

Modernity and globalization have led to dual-name systems as a form of identity negotiation^[20]. A young mother noted:

"At school, my son goes by Daniel, but at home, he goes by Sipho. Both names are significant, one for us and one for the world" (female, 29, Mpumalanga).

Among participants under 40, 74% reported using or giving both Western and indigenous names, indicating how naming mediates between tradition and modernity.

6.5. Changing Generational Naming Authority

Elders historically held significant authority in naming. However, generational differences emerged. One grandmother from Siswati lamented:

"Previously, we grandparents were the ones who gave names with a backstory. Young parents now make decisions without consulting anyone" (female, 81, Mpumalanga).

Fifteen of twenty (75%) seniors expressed concern that younger parents lack the cultural depth needed to sustain traditional naming practices, raising questions about inter-generational transmission.

6.6. Patterns of Gendered Naming

The study found consistent gendered naming patterns reflecting cultural expectations. Female names like *Nobuhle* "beauty" and *Kgaogelo* "grace" emphasized beauty and submissiveness, while male names like *Sipho* "gift" and *Thapelo* "prayer" were associated with strength and leadership^[16].

"We select names that convey tenderness for girls. We select names that convey strength for boys" (male, 60, Limpopo).

This linguistic embedding of gender norms supports ethnolinguistic viewpoints by illuminating how names use language to reproduce social institutions.

6.7. Pride in Culture and Heritage Preservation

Despite modern influences, participants expressed strong commitment to preserving indigenous naming systems. An elder remarked:

"History is written in our names. We become someone else if we cease offering them" (male, 77, Limpopo).

Thirty-six participants (77%) advocated initiatives like recording names, teaching their significance in schools, and integrating cultural education into curricula, reflecting a drive to protect intangible cultural heritage.

6.8. Summary of Findings

Northern Sotho and Siswati names function as linguistic artifacts encoding identity negotiation, cultural values, life events, and social commentary. By linking these practices to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, the study demonstrates how language not only reflects but also influences cultural conceptions of reality. Viewed through the ethnolinguistic lens, names emerge as cultural texts with enduring social and historical significance.

7. Discussion

This study demonstrates that naming in Siswati and Northern Sotho societies is a deeply embedded expression

of identity, worldview, and cultural continuity, rather than a mere labelling practice. The findings support the ethnolinguistic view that language serves as a repository of culture, with names carrying layers of social, historical, emotional, and spiritual meaning^[12]. However, they also challenge the determinism of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis by showing that while names shape perception, they also act as sites of resistance, negotiation, and change, aspects not fully captured by existing frameworks.

7.1. Names as Cultural Memory and Narratives

The results strongly validate Ethnolinguistic Theory by confirming that names encode cultural memory and collective values^[6]. Participants emphasized that names like *Mahlori* “miracle” or *Nobuhle* “beautiful” are more than descriptive they carry histories, aspirations, and ideals. As one participant noted:

“I instantly think of the hardship his parents endured prior to his birth when I hear the name Siyabonga. In a nutshell, it is history” (male, 52, Mpumalanga).

This supports the notion of names as oral texts or “mini-narratives”^[15]. Yet, the data also extends beyond static cultural interpretation, illustrating that names are dynamic and performative, constantly reinterpreted in evolving sociocultural contexts.

7.2. Testing Sapir-Whorf: Words and Perception

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis posits that language frames thought and perception^[1,5]. The findings partially support this: names like *Lerato* “love” reinforce moral ideals beyond mere reference, and critical names like *Diketo* “trouble” shape perceptions of conflict. However, participants’ ability to switch between names contextually e.g., *Kgotso* at home and *Daniel* at school suggests agency rather than linguistic determinism. These highlights naming as a flexible, context-dependent tool for identity negotiation, aligning with studies of strategic code-switching in African naming practices^[20,21].

7.3. Names as Indirect Speech and Social Commentary

The findings confirm Janowitz’s argument that names can operate as indirect speech acts, serving as tools for subtle critique^[31]. Names like *Makgoka* (“those who sow division”) demonstrate how naming encodes dissent and social commentary within socially sanctioned forms of expression. This perspective enriches Ethnolinguistic Theory by presenting names as active instruments of power, resistance, and cultural agency rather than passive cultural containers.

7.4. Balancing Modernity and Tradition

Dual naming systems underscore the tension between traditional and modern identities. While Ethnolinguistic Theory explains cultural continuity, it does not fully account for the strategic duality participants displayed. The choice to adopt both indigenous and Western names reflects sociopolitical considerations, including global integration, education, and mobility^[19,20]. Naming, therefore, emerges as both a cultural and pragmatic practice, adapting to modern pressures while maintaining indigenous roots.

7.5. Generational Change and Cultural Transmission

The declining authority of elders in naming mirrors concerns in earlier scholarship regarding the erosion of traditional cultural transmission under globalization^[21,22]. However, this study reveals a dialectical process rather than outright loss: younger parents value autonomy in naming, while elders perceive a weakening of cultural depth. This dynamic suggests that naming traditions are being reconfigured rather than abandoned, demonstrating cultural adaptability.

7.6. Gendered Naming and Social Change

The persistence of gendered naming patterns, which emphasize strength and leadership for males *Sipho*, *Thapelo* and beauty and grace for females *Nobuhle*, *Kgaogelo*, reflects the embedding of gender norms within language^[16]. Yet, some younger participants criticized these practices as outdated, indicating that naming could become a site for challenging patriarchal norms. This points to a potential evolution in the sociocultural meanings attached to names.

7.7. Cultural Pride and Future Prospects

The strong cultural pride expressed by participants highlights the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems^[12,13]. Calls for documentation, education, and cultural revitalization reflect an active effort to safeguard naming traditions against erasure. Such initiatives align with broader movements for decolonizing knowledge and reclaiming linguistic heritage^[37,38].

Names are essential markers of identity, worldview, and cultural continuity in the Siswati and Northern Sotho cultures. They preserve communal memory, codify societal ideals, and capture personal histories in addition to identifying an individual^[39]. Naming customs usually represent birth circumstances, important historical or social occurrences, parental goals, or moral teachings meant for the general public. Names serve as indicators of kinship relationships, gendered expectations, social hierarchy, and intergenerational inheritance in addition to their literal semantic meaning. This helps to explain the cultural logic underlying social organization. The sociological and linguistic significance of naming customs in these communities is examined in this study, which also examines how names function as semiotic resources and communicative acts that transmit indigenous epistemologies, uphold moral and ethical teachings, and maintain cultural resilience in the face of linguistic change and globalization.

8. Conclusions

This study examined the linguistic, cultural, and social significance of naming customs among Northern Sotho and Siswati speakers, drawing on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and Ethnolinguistic Theory^[5,6]. The findings reveal that personal names in these societies are symbolic repositories of identity, history, and worldview, extending far beyond simple identification.

Naming practices were shown to be deeply rooted in shared experiences, beliefs, and values. Names serve to honour ancestors, impart moral lessons, reflect birth circumstances, and function as social commentary, thereby reinforcing community cohesion^[12,15,16]. These findings align with earlier research demonstrating the cultural and social utility of African naming systems^[21,22,24].

However, the study also uncovered significant cul-

tural shifts driven by external influences such as urbanization, Christianity, and Western education^[18,19]. The increasing adoption of biblical and English names, especially by younger generations, illustrates an ongoing negotiation between traditional values and modern identities. While this shift may suggest cultural loss, it simultaneously highlights the adaptability of indigenous practices in navigating contemporary sociopolitical landscapes.

Despite these changes, a strong sense of cultural pride persists. Elders and cultural custodians continue to recognize the importance of indigenous names as symbols of heritage and identity. This resilience underscores the need for intentional preservation efforts, including documentation, education, and cultural revitalization initiatives^[13,23].

Ultimately, the study concludes that names in Siswati and Northern Sotho communities are dynamic cultural tools shaped by history, vital in the present, and essential for future generations. Their preservation is crucial for sustaining cultural diversity and affirming African epistemologies in a postcolonial context. This research not only contributes to onomastic scholarship but also lays the foundation for future work aimed at safeguarding the power and legacy of African naming traditions.

9. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations are proposed to promote the preservation, revitalization, and appreciation of Siswati and Northern Sotho naming customs. These recommendations target community members, educators, cultural institutions, and policymakers.

9.1. Documentation and Preservation of Indigenous Names

Establishing formal repositories of traditional Siswati and Northern Sotho names, including their origins, meanings, and cultural contexts, is essential. Such repositories could take the form of digital platforms, oral history archives, or onomastic dictionaries. These initiatives would ensure that indigenous naming practices are safeguarded for future generations and provide valuable resources for linguistic and cultural research^[13,23].

9.2. Integration into Educational Curricula

Incorporating indigenous naming systems into school curricula particularly within language, history, and life orientation subjects would promote greater awareness of cultural heritage. Lessons could explore the cultural meanings of names, the social significance of naming customs, and their role in shaping identity^[12,15].

9.3. Community-Based Naming Workshops and Dialogues

Intergenerational forums led by elders, cultural practitioners, and traditional leaders should be organized to teach the origins and significance of names. Such workshops would strengthen cultural knowledge transmission and encourage young parents to draw from traditional practices when naming their children^[6,16].

9.4. Use of Indigenous Names in Formal and Public Domains

Policies encouraging the use of indigenous names in official contexts including workplaces, media, schools, and government documents should be implemented. Respectful use of traditional names in public spaces would validate cultural identities and promote linguistic diversity^[18,23].

9.5. Cultural Promotion through Arts and Media

Support for creative initiatives such as films, literature, music, and storytelling platforms that celebrate indigenous names is recommended. Such efforts can enhance public appreciation of traditional naming practices and ensure their continued relevance in contemporary society^[19,24].

9.6. Further Research and Comparative Analysis

Future studies should expand comparative investigations of naming conventions in other African languages to deepen understanding of naming as a tool for identity and resistance. Such research would contribute to broader onomastic and sociolinguistic scholarship^[21,22].

9.7. Policy Support for Language and Cultural Preservation

Government agencies and language policy bodies, such as the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), should develop policies that recognize indigenous naming practices as part of South Africa's intangible cultural heritage, ensuring their protection and promotion^[23].

By implementing these recommendations, Siswati and Northern Sotho naming traditions can be preserved and adapted to contemporary realities, fostering cultural pride, continuity, and stronger connections to ancestral heritage.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, N.G.M., M.J.M., and L.E.M.; methodology, N.G.M.; validation, N.G.M., M.J.M., and L.E.M.; formal analysis, N.G.M., M.J.M., and L.E.M.; investigation, N.G.M., M.J.M., and L.E.M.; resources, N.G.M.; data curation, N.G.M., M.J.M., and L.E.M.; writing original draft preparation, N.G.M. (Siswati section), M.J.M. and L.E.M. (Northern Sotho section); writing review and editing, N.G.M., M.J.M., and L.E.M.; visualization, N.G.M.; supervision, N.G.M.; project administration, N.G.M., M.J.M. and L.E.M. contributed directly to the Northern Sotho component of the study, whereas N.G.M. contributed to the Siswati component. The full paper was distributed equally among all three authors. The published version of the manuscript has been read and approved by all authors.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Focus groups and low-risk cultural and linguistic interviews were used in the study; no sensitive personal data was gathered. All procedures followed the ethical rules of the University of Venda, and informed consent was acquired from all subjects.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was acquired from all subjects who participated in the study. Participants were adequately informed about the goal of the research, their voluntary involvement, and their choice to withdraw at any moment. No identifying personal information was collected. Written informed consent for publishing was not necessary, as individuals cannot be personally identified in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with the conduct, analysis, or publication of this research. No personal, financial, or professional relationships influenced the study in any way.

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