# The politics and poetics of certain traditional circumstantial names:  Sisaali culture of Ghana

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## Abstract

This paper presents a literary study into certain circumstantial names in the Sisaala culture. These circumstantial names are purely political in nature since they relate to how traditional authority is obtained and used in the Sisaala traditional setting. By using the theory of onomastics, the researchers are able to filter the history, values, aesthetics and the Sisaalas' understanding of traditional authority (ethno-democracy) through these circumstantial names. The study reveals that circumstantial names in the Sisaala context that pertain to traditional authority are loaded in terms of semantics, history, politics and aesthetics. Circumstantial names can, therefore, be a source of knowledge that can shed light on contemporary problems that are related to the traditional power struggle in the Sisaala culture.

**Keywords:** History, onomastics, poetics, political rhetoric, Sisaala,

## Introduction

The interest to investigate Sisaala circumstantial names from a literary perspective stems from two reasons. Firstly, although research has been conducted into the personal address systems as well as personal names in Ghana, most of the studies were based on the major ethnic groups, namely:  the Akan (Agyekum, 2003, 2006; Afful, 2006; Obeng, 1997) and Ewe (Dakubu, 1981; Egbleworgbe, 1987). This implies that the personal address systems and names among ethnic groups such as the Sisaala in the northern part of Ghana had not been explored and constitutes a grey area in academic research.

## Ethnographic Background

Sɪsaalɪ is one of the 79 languages spoken in Ghana. It is classified as one of the Gur Languages under the Grusi language group (Naden, 1988: 16). The language is Sɪsaalɪ while the native users of the language are Sɪsaala (Luri, 2009). The Sɪsaalɪ language has several dialects, including Pasaalɪ, Tumuluŋ, Kpatolie, Gelbaglɪ, Gbieni, Bʊwaali and Bosillu.

Sɪsaala land (Sɪsɔ) lies to the north, between latitudes 10 and 11 degrees, and  is in the Sudanic savannah zone (Luri, 2009).

The Sɪsaala are dominant primarily in the Sɪsaala East and West Districts. Their numbers are considerable in the Wa East, Nadowli, and the Lambusie districts in the Upper West Region. Sɪsɔ is bounded to the north-east of the Upper West Region by the Kassena –Nankani District and to the east by the Builsa District which are both in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The West Mamprusi District in the Northern Region borders Sɪsɔto the south-east while the Lawra District in the Upper West Region borders it to the north-west. Wa West District borders it to the south-west. To the north is an extension into the Sɪsɔ Province of neighboring Burkina Faso. The Sɪsaala District was divided into Sɪsaala East and West Districts in 2005 with Tumu and Gwollu as the district capitals respectively. Funsi became the capital of the Wa East District the same year and Lambusie, an Sɪsaala community, became a district of its own in 2007. Therefore, administratively, there are four districts in Sɪsɔ and the same applies to the political constituencies since each district is a constituency.

**Purpose and Scope**

Even when one removes the ethnic element from the equation, it becomes evident that previous research concentrated on the typologies of names, the sources and the sociolinguistics or the pragmatics embedded in names in Ghana. This present study differs marginally.  It offers another perspective on personal names from a minority ethnic group such as the Sisaala and focuses on circumstantial names that carry political undertones in order to shed light on the people's understanding of authority in the traditional context. Moreover, the study demonstrates that language is dynamic and personal names change to accommodate the transformations that take place in society.

The second interest stems from the fact that among the Sisaalas and in Ghana in general, traditional politics has been the source of many conflicts and court litigations in recent years. In Sisaala land alone, several communities have cases pending in the regional court in Wa, the capital of the Upper West region. They include communities such as Kundungu, Funsi, Pulima, Wallimbelle and Kojokperi. All these communities have problems with the process of appointing their chief because they hold that due process has not been followed or a person not qualified to rule has been imposed on them. The sad effect of this negative development

is the absence of leadership and communal development in the areas affected by such an anomaly.

The aim of this article is to present politically-oriented circumstantial names among the Sisaalas as texts that can be analyzed to understand the people's philosophy about the office of the chief. The study does not endeavor to ascertain who qualifies to enskin or not. The article aims to present how people react during such clashes of opinions of who qualifies to enskin the chief and how they manage the crisis by resorting to rhetoric through using names to communicate their opinions, thoughts, concerns and anxieties without sounding offensive and initiating a conflict among the various gates of the community. The primary purpose of this article is purely academic and not political.

## Definition of Terms

In Sisaala land, traditional politics usually revolves round two key positions: firstly, the chief (*kworu*) and secondly, that of the custodian of the land (*beyetiina*). The term "traditional politics" has, therefore, been used in a limited context in this article.  It simply refers to the positions of the two most important individuals in terms of authority in a traditional Sisaala community and the processes that are used to obtain and exercise the power associated with these two titles based on the people's understanding of due process and due diligence. It must also be added that the chief (*kworu)* is more of a political leader than the custodian of the land (*beyetiina)* since the latter is more concerned with the spiritual wellbeing of the community than the politics that emanates therefrom.  It is, therefore, understandable that the office of the chief (*kworu)* has always been the source of political tension in traditional politics in the community.

## Hypothesis

The circumstantial names when suitably applied would project the democratic ideals that exist within traditional communities and that of the Sisaala in Ghana in particular. When same is applied it would have a positive impact on regional and national development.

## Methodology and Design

The theoretical framework that supports discussions in this research is onomastics. According to Algeo, onomastics is the study of "proper names including their form and usage" (Algeo,

1992: 727). Literary onomastics is another branch of onomastics that studies the meaning and impact of literary names on the overall understanding of a culture or a literary work. In this article, the concept of literary onomastics is used. The social, cultural, economic and political circumstances as well as the people that lived those experiences constitute the literary background. These are the elements based on which the names have been analyzed in the paper. The data was obtained from two fundamental sources: primary and secondary. By using data-gathering techniques such as observation, interviews, group discussions and frequent visits to the research grounds, the primary data for this study was obtained by the researchers. The secondary data was secured from a review of documented sources on personal names.

**Findings**

This section of the article pays attention to: the circumstantial names and ethno-democracy as well as the names and history among the Sisaala. The remainder of the article includes the poetics of certain political circumstantial names.

**Circumstantial Names And Ethno-Democratic Politics Among The Sisaala**

Suzman (1994: 254), Agyekum (2006: 208), Batoma (2006: 1), Bariki (2009: 46) and Ogunwale (2012:174) all agree that African names carry various meanings and they are not semantic labels that are used to tag people. Indeed, Agyekum explains that "Akan names are not arbitrary but they are based on socio-cultural and ethno-pragmatic contexts" (Agyekum, 2006: 208).  Batoma holds that:

> … ethnonymes and toponymes constitute an intricate and semantic structure, a kind of palimpsest that crystallizes a layer of meanings of community experience. These meanings can be conceived as approaches or facets of the collective experience of a group (Batoma, 2006: 1).

These observations point to the fact that it is possible to construct an understanding of traditional authority and how such an authority is acquired and exercised in the Sisaala traditional circumstance based on an analysis of circumstantial names that are related to traditional politics. This is an appropriate point to commence with so that the historical and

political perspectives as well as the verbal aesthetics on politically related circumstantial names will follow before a conclusion is drawn.

Traditionally, the Sisaalas believe that all authority and power on earth is derived from God the Creator. Consequently, they also believe that the power and authority of the chief (*kworu*) is no exception. Due to this belief, there are names such as *Wiisibine* and *Korowiise* in the Sisaala naming system. *Wiisibine* literally means "it is God who enskins" and *Korowiise* means "it is God who is the ultimate ruler." Metaphorically, however, both names seek to express the belief that it is God the Creator who determines our fate as humans in this world, therefore, the question of whether one becomes a chief or not is also determined by the same God. One might as well be the next in line to succeed as a chief and he might have all the qualities of a chief but if God decides otherwise, the person may never see daylight in order for him to be enskinned as a traditional ruler.

Therefore, among the Sisaalas, the chief (*kworu*) and the custodian of the land (*beyetiina*) are both given respect and veneration not because of their personalities *per se* but because of the office that they occupy. It is believed that God the Creator, through fate, has a hand in placing the chief or the custodian of the land in the office into which they are appointed. The chief, therefore, becomes both the political, spiritual and moral leader of the people and since they are believed to be the representatives of God on earth, they are accorded respect. Both Sarpong and Mbiti agree on the sacred role of traditional leadership in Africa. Indeed, Sarpong observes that: "… everywhere in Ghana a person in authority is considered to be sacred" (Sarpong, 1974: 65). Mbiti also makes the following observation on the sacred role of traditional rulers in Africa:

> "… they are the mystical and religious heads, the divine symbol of their people's health and welfare. The individuals as such may not have outstanding talents or abilities, but their office is the link between human rule and spiritual government. They are therefore, divine and sacral rulers, the shadow or reflection of God's rule in the universe. People regard them as God's earthly viceroys" (Mbiti, 1976: 182).

The import of the two names, *Wiisibine* and *Korowiise*, is that God, indeed, has a hand in the making and the unmaking of a chief. This implies that if the people believe in God, then they must, as a matter of natural course, respect God's representative on earth. The two names

further suggest that traditional rulers would be making a serious mistake if they were to arrogate the powers of God unto themselves and to rule high-handedly without recourse to natural justice since their personalities and the offices they occupy all fall under God's control.

If the preceding names talk about the place of God in traditional politics, the name *Nalayaakoro* also talks about the role and place of the people (kith and kin) in traditional politics. *Nalayaakoro* denotatively means "chieftaincy is people." Connotatively, however, this name can be interpreted in two different ways. The first figurative meaning that comes to mind is the observation that one needs to have numerous supporters in order to become a chief. In fact, it is not just the number of supporters, but countless people related through consanguinity who support you in your endeavor to become the chief. The reason is simply that to be enskinned as a chief is not a simple process and it is not a day's job. Political maneuvering for the office of *kworu* can cover a period of years and the one interested in such a position must have adequate time on his hands to conduct numerous consultations as well as travel as often as possible to the palace of the paramount chief to resolve matters should there be many people vying for the office of the chief (*kworu*). Since the Sisaala land is a place where majority of the people are farmers, it would not be expedient for one to concentrate on the activities of traditional politicking while neglecting one's farm work. This would lead to the person's inability to feed the family for years. This situation is made even more precarious by the fact that in the north of Ghana, unlike in the south, there is only one farming season. However, if one has many relatives who are hardworking and supportive, then the person could spend years courting the office of the chief and forget about farm work. The brothers will take care of the farm and help feed the family of the prospective chief. Even when it comes to contributions towards the attainment of the office of the chief, one can always rely on relatives to contribute in cash and in kind. It is based on this that the Sisaalas believe that one needs much support from relatives in order to be enskinned.  It is the support from the people that is literally translated to mean "chieftaincy is people."

The other figurative interpretation that can be given to *Nalayaakoro* is that the power of the chief is derived from the people and that without followership, the office of the chief (*kworu*) is irrelevant. When a chief loses his following, his position becomes untenable. Consequently, a chief should not lord it over his people. He becomes a chief in order to serve his people to the best of his ability so that, in return, the people can also serve him as their

true leader in the real sense of the word. Therefore, the position of the chief becomes such that he owes allegiance to God the Creator and to his own people. He cannot disrespect his God and he cannot disrespect his people. Once the ruled lose faith and confidence in the chief as a ruler, he loses his legitimacy and authority as the chief. This situation can be compared to Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God* where Ezeulu is indeed presented as:

> "… merely a watchman. His power was no more than the power of a child over a goat that was said to be his. As a long as the goat was alive it could be his; he would find it food and take care of it. But the day it was slaughtered he would know soon enough who the real owner was" (Achebe, 1986: 3).

In Armah's *Osiris Rising*, Asar reported a similar role of royals in Africa several centuries ago. "What royals had weren't personal power but the responsibility of presiding over regular meetings of family heads. It's the meetings that took the decisions" (Armah, 1995: 169).

One other meaning of traditional authority that can be traced to some circumstantial names in the Sisaala traditional system is that the office of the chief (*kworu)* is an ethno-democratic institution that has its rules. It is not money, physical strength or incumbency that gets one into office. It is the rules of succession that must be diligently followed in order to appoint someone who can appeal to all the different groups in the community in order to bring about unity. To this end, names such as *Badeikinlaa* and *Banyuasimma* are given to illustrate the fact that it is only due diligence and traditional democracy that leads to the installation of a chief who can work with the people. *Badeikinlaa* simply means "it is not a matter of their strength," rather, it is a question of following laid down rules and norms. *Banyuasimma* also means that "they are only boastful"; boastful in the sense that they do not know and are not ready to follow the rules of ethno-democracy when it comes to the office of the chief. Therefore, the opponents can be over-confident of their chances of getting their own to be appointed as the chief; it is only when it gets to the moment of truth that the opponents would realize their folly. These two names amply demonstrate that there was, and still is, democracy in traditional politics in Africa before the introduction of modern democracy into our body politics. Traditional democracy existed in the form of rules, norms, natural justice and the fact that the two or three families that qualified to rule must each have their chance or their turns and nothing humanly must be done to interrupt such a natural rule.

Finally, the name *Koroyaawiyaa* sums up the responsibilities that go with the office of the chief. Taken literally, the name evokes the idea that chieftaincy is complex, involving scores of issues. In the deeper sense, however, the name echoes the responsibilities and duties that are associated with the office of the chief. The chief is the leader of the people in all spheres of life. This alone is a great responsibility. In *The Gods Are Not to Blame* by Ola Rotimi, the Second Citizen summarizes the responsibility of the king by comparing it to the head of a household in the following terms: "When the head of a household dies, the house becomes an empty shell. But we have you as our head, and with you our Chiefs…" (Rotimi, 1979: 9). The role of the chief at the community level is still crucial and with the absence of a chief, the community will definitely be like an "empty shell." In the Sisaala tradition, any stranger who comes to the community is directed to the chief's palace. That is where he goes to state his mission and if his mission demands that he stays in the community for days, weeks, months or a year, it is the chief who accommodates and feeds such a stranger. Any government official who visits the community or wants the community to mobilize and execute a particular task or job has to do so through the chief and, if possible, the Assembly Member. Disputes at the community level are resolved by the chief and his elders using their knowledge of the customs and ethos of the people. The chief is required to provide leadership in affairs, moral and spiritual, while in matters related to the enforcement of community rules and by-laws, the chief and his council become the executive, the legislature and the judiciary and the list goes on in terms of responsibilities.

Thus, names such as *Wiisibine, Korowiise, Nalayaakoro, Badeikinlaa, Banyuasimma,* and *Koroyaawiyaa* are all circumstantial names that are loaded with meaning and history. These names are signposts that point to the people's understanding of traditional authority and ethno-democracy. This, therefore, confirms Bariki's observation that African names and by extension circumstantial names "have communicative functions" (Bariki, 2009: 46).

**Circumstantial Names and History among the Sisaalas**

Efforts have been made to establish the Sisaalas' understanding of traditional authority with regard to how it is sought, obtained and used in the life of the people. This segment traces empirical historical evidence that is embedded in the circumstantial names that are related to traditional politics.

Sisaala traditional personal names constitute one of the most reliable means of recording the history of the family and the community in general. This observation is not different from the one made by Krige with regard to Zulu names. Indeed, Krige observed that "Zulu names are nearly always of historical importance in the life of the sib (family). They refer to some event or recall to memory different ancestors" (Krige, 1936: 74). In the course of collecting data for this article, the researchers stumbled upon six names that were borne by both men and women. People who carried the names belonged to different ages but are all still alive. The six names actually reflect the true history that was lived by the two different communities at different times in the course of their development. The first two, *Badeikinlaa* (it is not a matter of their strength) and *Nbegyegiliba* (I do not pay attention to them) which were recorded in Kundungu were given around the same period by the Bayong Dumah and the Assumbiye families; two brothers who belonged to the same gate. While the Bayong Dumah family felt that it was not a matter of 'their' strength (*Badeikinlaa*). the Assumbiye family was of the view that it would not pay attention to 'them' (*Nbegyegiliba*). History has it that both brothers belonged to the same gate and were, therefore, qualified to appoint someone to succeed as a chief. However, the same history explained that the Assumbiye family did not belong to the families that were qualified to enskin a chief from among their own members. Naturally, the Bayong Dumah family who said *Badeikinlaa* (it is not a matter of their strength) felt it was its turn to enskin a chief since in its own estimation, the Assumbiye family was not qualified for such a duty and there was no way their strength could guarantee them that honor.  On the other hand, the Assumbiye family felt it was qualified; therefore, it would not pay attention to the allegations of the Bayong Dumah family.

Within the same community, three other names in the forms of *Batagiyaa* ('they' should not joke with it), *Adengdomo* (we shall see) and *Babeekilkoro* (you do not fight for something that is not naturally yours) were all given by the Bapene family who shared the same gate with the Daankogo family. The two families were vying for the office of the chief since it was the turn of their gate to enskin the chief. The Bapene family felt they were qualified to enskin the chief at that time and decided to communicate their intentions unequivocally to the Daankogo family by giving three names that carried political undertones to two boys and a girl that were born around that period. The Bapene family felt the Daankogo family had had adequate opportunities to enskin chiefs and the office of the chief that was in contention then was naturally theirs and hence the names *Batagiyaa* ('they' should not joke with it), Adengdomo (we shall see) and *Babeekilkoro* (you do not fight for something that is not

naturally yours). These five names are borne by people who are still alive and community elders who understand the politics of the time can still situate people in the context in which the names were given. Consequently, the names mark certain political epochs in the development of the community. They are also a clear demonstration of many ways in which pre-literate Africa recorded its history.

In the Funsi community where there has been a protracted chieftaincy dispute for well over six years now, the name *Banyuasima* (they are only boastful) also came up. The name was given during the maneuvering for the enskinning of a chief in which one of the claimants referred to the other as boastful. The others are referred to as boastful because they might not be the next in line, they might not be ready to follow laid down rules or better still, they might not understand the enormous responsibilities that go with the office of the chief (*kworu)* and hence they are being derided as braggarts.

Clearly, naming is one of the platforms that are used, traditionally, to make political statements. Such statements go a long way in making people's intentions clear and in reducing tension in the community since people are able to express themselves without confronting each other openly or making direct reference.  This underscores the following observation made by Suzman:

> This observation suggests that name giving provided an outlet for the regulation of social relations in the intense social interaction of small communities, it allowed people to communicate feelings indirectly, without overt confrontation and possible conflict. One might suggest that in making sources of conflict public, they perhaps neutralize or contain them by pointing out the person responsible (Suzman, 1994: 255, 259-260).

**The Poetics of Some Political Circumstantial Names**

The semantic relevance of circumstantial names among the Sisaalas, particularly those related to power has already been established in the analysis made in the two preceding sections of this article.  In the third part of this article, an effort is made to underscore the importance of language and the verbal patterns normally resorted to in naming practices among the Sisaala. There must be an aesthetic organization of the language in such a way that the resultant name that comes out of that effort

does not only aptly describe the circumstance and the feelings of the name giver but that such a name sounds euphonic, meaningful and acceptable in the language and culture of the people. Language is very important when it comes to names since according to Windt-Val, it is:

> "…our most important utensil in our mental organization of experiences and memories, in problem solving, in the very structuring of our lives. It is an indispensable instrument in our attempt to interpret our surroundings, when we make associations and when we try to express our feelings" (Windt-Val, 2012: 275).

The first process that is involved in the formation of most of these circumstantial names in the Sisaala culture is compounding. Indeed, for most parts, the names are actually full statements that are put together to form one noun. Since they are full sentences on their own, it stands to reason that they construct meanings that can be interpreted and understood. For example, the name *Badeikinlaa* is the compound form of the statement *Ba dei kin laa* which carries the same meaning as the compound form (it is not a matter of their strength). In much the same way, names such as *Nbegyegiliba*, *Wiisibine, Korowiise, Nalayaakoro, Banyuasimma* can all be broken down into their full statement forms and still retain the same meaning as their compound forms. Indeed, both Obeng (1997: 42) and Ogunwale (2012: 174-175) have reported similar verbal processes among the Akan and the Yoruba respectively.

The second verbal process that is used among the Sisaala with regard to circumstantial names is the process of indirect reference by using the plural form of the third person when indeed they are referring to someone in particular. As in all languages, the plural form of the third person pronoun ("*ba*" in Sisaali) can refer to anybody. Therefore, the process allows the parties involved in political maneuvering to make reference to each other without either being direct or committing themselves to pronouncements that can make them guilty of libel or slander. By so doing, intentions are made clear and feelings are expressed without sounding unnecessarily offensive. This provides a means to express one's emotions as well as the ability to contain such emotions in the social setting without open confrontation. In the names *Badeikinlaa, Babeikilkoro, Banyuasima* and *Nbeigyegiliba*, the process of indirect reference has been used as demonstrated by the presence of "*ba*" in the sentential names. Agyekum reports of the use of "…innuendos to depict the situation on the ground during pregnancy and childbirth" among the Akans of Ghana (Agyekum, 2006: 223). However, it is

interesting to note that when the Sisaalas refer to God in their naming practices, they no longer use indirect reference.  They use direct reference instead since whatever the name giver says or implies is between him and his God.

The use of ellipses also helps to make politically oriented circumstantial names more apt and cohesive in the culture of the people. Even though interested parties may know that what they are all fighting for is the office of the chief, they are always careful to neither make direct reference to the office in the names given nor give the full statement that makes the name. The implication is that the opponent should, as a matter of maturity and intelligence, complete the full statement and decode the meaning therein. Thus among all the names already referred to in this study, these are merely certain names that make direct reference to God that contain a form of the word *koro* (chieftaincy); the other names refer to other people interested in the office of the chief and does not contain the word or a form of it. Ellipsis is generally used to avoid the mention of that word or a variant of it in the name. Thus in the name *Badeikinlaa*, the full statement is that *Ba dei kin laa yaa koro*, Batagiyaa means *Ba gi yaa koro*, or *Ngbeigyeigiliba* means *Ng bei gyegili wiya baa basi*, *Banyuasima* means *Ba nyua sima bee wiya baa basi* and so forth.  By using this form of verbal arts, name givers somewhat invite opponents maneuvering for the same office to help in the creation and interpretation of the name, thus using a formula that is akin to the reader's response theory in literature.

Finally, metaphors are used often in the naming practice of the Sisaala. In fact, both metaphor of thought and words are used. In the Sisaali language and culture, *Babeikilkoro* contains a metaphor of words and of thought. The verb *kil* (chase) as used in the name is generally utilized to refer to something physical and concrete but not something abstract as in the form of *koro* (chieftaincy). This is what makes it a metaphor of words. Still on the same name, it contains a metaphor of meaning in the sense that it does not refer to the denotation embedded in the name but it rather refers to the conational meaning of the name. This indicates that names and naming among the Sisaala involves certain verbal art which accompanies the meaning of the name to give it the suitability it deserves among the people.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

In the analysis of the political, historical and aesthetic aspects of politically-oriented circumstantial names in the Sisaala culture, a number of intelligent observations can be made.

First and foremost, like many African names, the Sisaala culture has meaning. Second, the names analyzed in this article attest to the fact that certain names serve as a means of recording the history of the people. Third, certain names serve as a platform to make political statements and constitutes a pertinent source for understanding the philosophy of the people on political authority with regard to how traditional power is campaigned, obtained and used in the traditional system. The verbal art involved in the naming processes allow the people to express their sentiments and thoughts on issues affecting different spheres of their life without resorting to open confrontation. This is what makes the poetics and politics of the naming system among the people beautiful, useful and meaningful. Of course, the aesthetics as expatiated on also goes a long way to confirm that some level of thinking and artistry go into the naming system of the people. One can, therefore, agree with Windt-Val when she observes that "names and naming also constitute an important part of the work of the building of a nation" (Windt-Val, 2012: 275). It is essential for countries and communities in Africa and Ghana in particular to pay attention to some of these circumstantial names and traditions that hold the nuggets for peaceful coexistence and development. Our understanding of development should, however, start from peaceful co-existence and internal cohesion among African communities and the continent at large.

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