

An onomastics survey of contemporary Zimbabwe's Musical Arts Industry: Unpacking selected Dancehall, Urban Grooves and Afro-jazz musicians' stage names.

Tendai Owen Chikara[°]

[°]Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This study relies on broad semantic theory to understand names in the Zimbabwe music scene. The paper operates on Saussurean thinking that words are carriers of meaning. Another position the paper holds is that names and the naming ritual are never neutral affairs as names reflect ideas of who a person is thought or who they think themselves to be. The paper notes that names and naming practices in the Zimbabwean music industry are motivated and associated with a number of factors such as tradition (totemism), current developments in the cultural arts, body size and type; gender and there is a lot of power dynamics at play in the naming process.

KEYWORDS: Onomastics, Names, Zimbabwe, Music, Proper names, Stage Names, Monickers, Totem, Culture



Introduction

This paper proceeds partially from a Saussurean perspective in which words are seen as carriers of meaning. Words are signifiers and they create mental images in the minds of individuals involved in a communication process. These images are the “signified”. According to Saussure, the relationship between a word and what it signifies is arbitrary. To arrive at meaning we have to depend on history and make associations on the basis of what we have learnt from the past, and come to associate such words with from previous experiences. In the process of meaning construction, the signifier and the signified are continuously combined (Wang, 2016).

This paper argues that Names are words and as such are meaningful and this meaning is to be found in historical experience. In addition, words are significant and from a Systemic Functional Linguistic perspective which posits that whenever we use language, we do so with effect i.e. Language is functional and when we give names to individuals and things we do so for a purpose. The field in which names are studied, onomastics, though autonomous cuts across a numerous other discipline. As such, it is possible to study the discipline from a multiplicity of perspectives (Algeo & Algeo, 2000). Several studies have looked at names from a multiplicity of perspectives. Studies from Literary studies on the subject have been the most prominent and have led to a branch of onomastics now known as Literary Onomastics. The process of naming is significant as it is, in most cultures, a form of meaningful communication (Pongweni, 2017; Viriri & Ndimande-Hlongwa, 2023).

The Collins dictionary defines a moniker of a person or thing as being their name, especially when they have changed it One may, for example use a different name to identify themselves when penning a work of art, that name becomes their moniker. A brand name on the other hand is used as a proxy for information that relates to a product. These brand names come in five categories: generic, descriptive, suggestive, arbitrary, and coined (Melton 1979 in Kohli, 2020). A nickname on the other hand is generally regarded a name other than the one that one is given and is considered their legal name. In the case of a nickname usually this is a name given to one in jest and is supposed to be used in casual settings.

Methodology

The study used a multiplicity of methods for the study of artists' names. These methods included methods borrowed from literary onomastics as well as methods from other branches of onomastics. Again, the history of individuals studied in this study is drawn upon as a means of trying to make sense of their names. This history includes the lyrics from these musicians and any social history surrounding the sampled musicians in this study. In addition, the study also builds on methods from other onomastic studies. The dual positions long held by philosophers that names may either act as designators or they may carry descriptive meaning are held to be true with this study emphasising the second position. This position does not negate the importance of names as designators but is one that emphasises that there is more to a name than just designating an entity from other similar entities.

This paper proceeds by means of exploring how contemporary musicians in Zimbabwe have been influenced in their naming. The author contends that globalisation is a phenomenon too strong to ignore for Zimbabwe's artists. In addition to this, Zimbabwe's "cultural revolution" which included a clouding out of Western music in favour of local artists on Zimbabwe's airwaves through a 75% local content policy initiated in 2000 (Manase, 2009) alongside the land reform program. The policy produced conditions for the rise of new artists who produced art forms that mostly mimicked the foreign art forms they were supposedly replacing. This mimicry extended beyond the art forms to the names that the artists then gave themselves as is shown below.

Another position given in this paper is that artists derive their names from their fans. Through analysis of what the artists have said or what has been said about the artists through the media, the paper explores how artists came to have the stage names that they have.

Again, the paper discusses the politics of names and naming in the music industry of Zimbabwe. The gendered nature of the names, the naming process, the sexual aspect in the naming process is also explored.

Results

Foreign influences on names and naming Zimbabwean Musicians

With the rise of globalisation, the entertainment industry (particularly the music industry) in Zimbabwe has not escaped external influences. Genres like Zimdancehall and Urban Grooves exude a Jamaican and Western influence respectively. The influence has extended in some cases beyond the rhythms to the names that the artists in these genres also adopt (Charivanda, 2019; Mabuto & Saidi, 2018). These names identify them readily to their audiences and are usually in sync with their persona or the music genre in which they participate. A survey of the industry demonstrates this observation with numerous artists in the Zimdancehall genre taking names akin to those of Jamaican artists as the genre borrows heavily from the Jamaican dancehall scene. Examples would include Killer T, Lady Squanda, Soul Jah Love, Shinsoman, King Labash, and Tocky Vibes, amongst others. One cannot help but notice the similarities between these names and those of Jamaican dancehall artists: Bounty Killer, Lady Saw, Lady G, Jah Love, Beeniemann, King Shango and Vybz Kartel.

It appears, the Zimbabwean dancehall artists' names are names that are formulated based on the particular Jamaican artist that a Zimdancehall artist admires or tries to emulate in terms of stage performance and music style. Similar to Jamaican dancehall artists' names are Zimbabwean artists' stage names as well as rhythms and fashion sense that accusations have been thrown at them that they are mere copy-cats of their Jamaican counterparts (Dube, 2016).

The same scenario can also be seen at play within the Urban Grooves genre which was 'born' as a replacement of Western hip hop and soul music following the 75% local content policy at a time of political revolution in Zimbabwe that sought to replace everything Western (Bere, 2008). The genre mimicked everything in Western music, particularly American, and was one which readily identified with urban youth in terms of sound and lyrical content. The artists in the genre then turned West for their stage names and took on names such as Exquisite (ExQ), Rocqui, Nutty O, Stunner and Maskiri.

As testament of their urbane appeal, the artists feature lyrics which normally celebrate the urban lifestyle and denigrate the rural. ExQ's in his song, "Salala" clearly states, "Ndiri musalad" (I am a salad) and goes on to sing that he will not survive "kumusha" (the rural areas) because there is no electricity and he does

not drink well water but bottled mineral water. As such, the artist associates himself with that which is deemed urban, exquisite and expensive, hence, the Anglocentric and evidently urban stage name adopted. The same can also be said of other urban artists whose names are clearly depictive of the urbane space. Maskiri's name is an adaptation of the English 'skill' and communicates the need for innovativeness to survive the urban space, late alone the Urban Grooves musical space. The artist describes himself in a collaboration with American songstress, Keisha White.

Stage names

Wallace Chirimuko, a dancehall artist, uses 'Winky D' as the stage name, and has in the course of his career adopted several monickers which associate with each of his musical projects. One of his albums was titled 'Gafa' which, according to him means a 'boss'. Chirimuko is a fan of European football as testified by lyrics in several of his songs, draws this meaning from the British English colloquial "gaffer", a term used by individuals managing football teams in the English premier soccer league. Chirimuko's more commonly known stage name was shown to be a derivative from his pseudonym (Wicked DJ) used in an earlier career as a club disc jockey, and was then turned into Winky D by his fans (Pindula, 2024).

The names that Zimdancehall artists take may also be indicative of the times in which they live and what they believe in and their particular backgrounds. Chirimuko also calls himself 'Gombwe' (Masau, 2019), a title given to a Shona spiritual healer and guide who heals and guides other spiritual healers when they need spiritual guidance and healing. This is testified to by the musician in his song, Gombwe where he says "*Ndini gombwe ramangoma, Gafa rinobata matare engoma*" (I am the spiritual leader of the music world). In Shona/African traditional spiritualism, the spiritual healer is always accorded a masculine persona even when the healer is female and this title claimed by Chirimuko shows the masculine nature of names in the music fraternity. Dancehall artist, Wallace Chirimuko (Winky D) also uses the name 'Igwe' and would frequently prefix this with "Dancehall" and given the Nigerian movies allusion of the title this monicker then suggests that he considered himself the man at the apex in the music genre.

A significant section of Zimdancehall artists have been influenced by recent Zimbabwean history with the military playing a significant role. The Zimbabwean military has influenced a lot of what has happened and is

happening in the country and as such is revered as well as feared. Resultantly monikers like “musoja” are claimed by many of them. Jah Prayzer, Sniper Storm and Guspj Warrior all use this moniker. These artists’ emulation of the military is so strong that they all wear imitations of military gear and Jah Prayzer has been given the right to wear actual military fatigues, an honorary rank within the military forces as well as an ambassadorial role for the Zimbabwe Defence Forces. In their music the reference to themselves, their band members and fans as “masoja” is frequent. This is evident from the following lyrics by the artists:

“Iri ndiro soja rinosvika kure” (This is the soldier that goes far) - Jah Prayzah
Akatapirirwa ne love yemusoja” (She fell for a soldier’s charm) - Sniper Storm

This appropriation of the military titles by these artists is a way of getting power and claiming the prowess commonly associated with the military (Mpofu & Tembo, 2015).

Names in the musical arts industry are a way of claiming power and this is not limited to the use of military names but other monikers that may be associated with structures of power within politics. Kelvin Kusikwenyu, more popularly known as “Killer T” periodically uses the moniker, “Chairman” which is a position of authority within political party structures. The artist however asserts that his moniker is associated with his leadership role within the Zimdancehall circles and was ascribed to him by youths owing to his artistry which supersedes other artists in the genre (*The NewsDay*, 2016).

Some of the names that Zimdancehall artists go by reflect the nature of the genre. The genre has come to be associated with a sub-culture that is predominant amongst the downtrodden of society and the bulk of the artists in the genre come from areas such as Harare’s Mbare-Matapi or Chitungwiza which are some of the poorest geographical locations in urban Zimbabwe. These areas are easily associated with vices such as drug and substance abuse, violence and theft. Some of these vices are in-fact celebrated and this celebration is evident in the lyrics as well the artists’ names. For example, as noted by Chidora (2017) (in Kufakurinani & Mwatwara, 2017) violence is a defining characteristic of the genre. It is not surprising that artists would then choose names like “Killer-T”. While the artist was given the first portion of his moniker by his mother as a celebration of how he metaphorically “killed” his competition, the choice of name may be reflective of how the genre is characterised by violence with violent physical clashes being characteristic. The lyrics in the genre also tend to

be violent or lewd as well as demonstrated by the following lyrics from different artists:

Vanofamba vachitaura, hanzi Winky D uchakaura. Itoita easy naMwari ndingakutsapura.

(Translation: They go around saying Winky D you shall suffer. Relax because I swear by God that I will beat you.) – Winky D

Ndovaendesa kumarinda vakada kuvhiringa Ndinovaattacker nemavhinga

(Translation: I will send them to the cemetery if they want to interfere, I will attack them with hard lumps of soil)- Lady Squanda

Hatiite zoeke reasoner

Fanike ukationa tiripamusoro pemulundukwa

Gucca tichidhulula

Kana uchida kuziva skiri redu enda unori googler

Fanike akamudhura, totoita kunge tikumufinhura

Shamira, soisvina ramba wakamira, wakatarisa pamirror

Usafe wakamira nekuti yako yakamira

(Translation: We do not reason

As is the case when you see us on top of mulundukwa

We will be taking meth

If you want to know how we do it search on google

If you become moody, we will abuse you

Open your mouth, suck it while standing as you look into the mirror)

A large proportion of the Zimdancehall genre's artists thrive on controversy as shown by Silent Killer's lyrics above. The controversy also extends

With the genre leaning very heavily on Jamaican dancehall and Rastafarianism, most artists have created images of themselves which show a strong inclination to the Jamaican roots of the genre. As such, their names tend to be more of descriptive brand names. It is thus common to see most artists prefixing their names with "Ras". Examples would include Ras Caleb whose social consciousness has made him a household name. Ras Caleb has, through songs such as Tokwe Mukosi in which the artist highlights the plight of of people displaced by flooding (Ndimande & Moyo, 2018) or his 2024 song, "ZiG Mari" where he encourages the use of the newly introduced Zimbabwean currency. Along with exuding social consciousness in his music, Ras Caleb also sports dreadlocks which are normally identified with Rastafarianism and a sizeable number of artists in Zimdancehall also have the same. A sizeable number also beyond using the title "Ras" to delineate themselves as subscribing to Rastafarian culture use the title as part of their monikers. Examples include Ras Pompy, Ras Caleb and Ras Tavonga (Jah Bless).

In Zimbabwean music industry the naming ritual speaks volumes in terms of where power lies in the broader Zimbabwean society. Some actors in the industry owe their names to fans, others choose their names, others use their birth names while some may get their names from the band leaders and other members in the bands.

Zimdancehall artist, Lady Squanda's name captures her gender and elements of her character. The "lady" element captures her sex while "squanda" may be a transformed spelling of 'squander'. Squandering means reckless spending and this may suggest that the musician spends recklessly as is characteristic of most celebrities in the Western world.

Money is used wantonly for gratification of personal desire amongst musicians in Zimbabwe. The musician came under attack from fans and promoters for not behaving in a "lady" like manner when she physically abused a fellow artist, Tatenda Matika who also called himself "Ziso Regondo". The abuse followed a report that Matika carried on his social media channels in which he ridiculed the female artist. Her stage name soon assumed other meanings with social media actors arguing that to squander is to "bash others". In a bid to regain her fan base which threatened to stop supporting the artist then did the "lady-like" thing and offered her apologies to her fans and fellow nationals for the incident. The name may thus be seen as giving a social identity which carries with it certain expectations in terms of behaviour (Eggins, 2004). Lady Squanda's 'attacks' on Matika were premised on his social media reports of her and Matika in turn called himself Ziso Regondo (Eagle's Eye), a name which though not specifically gendered, is pregnant with meaning. The eagle is known for its roving eye which spots the minutest of detail and Matika brought information about the female artist which she may not have wanted revealed to the public. Thus, in addition to Eggins (2004) observation, Aceto (2002, pp. 577-578) posits that names "offer windows into how a culture views individuals, or how these individuals prefer to be perceived by society at large according to the identities, roles, expectations hierarchies, or values constructed within a social space".

Names, power and gender

The naming rite in any setting can be indicative of the power politics in any scenario. In most cases the naming process is never neutral but rather ideological. Just as in terminology, naming is never a haphazard endeavour. Where individuals fail to name themselves, others then take the prerogative and

name them (Hudson-Weems, 2007). When others name 'us', they are exercising power over those whom they are naming. The naming process within the musical arts industry has been one area in which band leaders have exercised power over their band members. Jah Prayzah's (Mukudzei Mukombe) exercise of this power has objectified his female band members in terms of their sexuality. One former band member, Pamela Zulu was named 'Gonyeti' (haulage truck), an apparent allusion to the dancer's build. The significance of the name 'Gonyeti' can be appreciated even more in the context of the alleged sexual abuse of Zulu by Mukombe. This significance was both aptly and crudely communicated in a joke by a social media comic (Comic Pastor) who said, "Jah Prayzah *haakwire gonyeti, ane benz*" (Translation: Jah Prayzah does not ride in a haulage truck, he has a Mercedes Benz). A "gonyeti" is a haulage truck and these were a commonly preferred forms of transport by hitch-hikers not willing to pay the normal fares over certain long distances in Zimbabwe. In this context, the name makes the bearer 'cheap' and accusations of sexual abuse by Gonyeti against Jah Prayzah make this connotation weightier. The joke was a source of both mirth and consternation. Some marvelled at Comic Pastor's creativity while others were not amused by the way he was apparently unfeeling towards the female who was allegedly the subject of abuse at the hands of the musician.

In Shona youth language sexual intercourse can also be loosely called "kukwira" and the import of the joke was that Jah Prayzah did not need to be sexually intimate with Zulu (equated to a haulage truck) since he had a beautiful wife who, in this case was equated to a portable car comparable to a haulage truck. This shows how women are sexually objectified through the names and naming process. In addition to Zulu, other female band members were also christened with names carrying sexual connotations in them. Yet, another female band member was called Simbilimbi, a name seemingly derived from the Shona street colloquial for a beautiful woman who is described as being a "simbi" (heavy metal). The fact that the women are recipients in the naming process shows the power play in the music arts in a Zimbabwean context where the women take on the role of the subservient subject and the men show themselves to be powerful as they engage in naming. While the examples used here relate to the naming of females, the lack of examples in which men are being named does not suggest that men are not named. Rather, it suggests the existence of unequal power dynamics where women are mostly on the receiving end compared to their male counterparts.

As demonstrated in the previous section, there are cases of sexualization and trolling through naming practices as shown through yet another of Jah Prayzah's vocalists and dancers, Stimela. The name "Stimela implies a train, yet again a cheap form of transport used by commuters in Zimbabwe. It was highlighted in the previous section that the most common picture that thought of a train conjures is how it "steams" and this can easily be linked to a description of sexually attractive women as being "steaming hot". Again, given the colloquial meaning of 'riding' in Zimbabwe, one cannot avoid the sexual innuendos in the name ascribed to the vocalist. These names are all ascribed to the musicians by band leader, Jah Prayzah. That the ladies' names are sexualised and gendered names is evident when one sees how their dances are sexual in nature featuring a lot of gyrating, a feature of the Jiti genre of music into which some of the band's music can be classified.

As argued by Al-Zumor (2009) studies into names and patterns of naming can be revelatory in terms of culture. The naming ritual and patterns in Zimbabwe are usually male dominated. Men have more control and it is normally the preserve of men to give names to children in most cases. In the same vein, band leaders usually give names to those in their bands. The music industry in Zimbabwe is male dominated and the patriarchal nature of Zimbabwean society thus permeates into the music arts not only through the performances but the naming rituals.

The sexualisation of women is reflected in some artists' names with a good example being that of Kiki BadAss. The artist's moniker reflects how the female artist is always viewed. In terms of her body structure. In the case of Kiki Badass, the artist prides herself because of her buttocks and the suffix "ass" in her name is the colloquial for buttocks. The artist rose to fame with her highly sexual song, Body Conversations which speaks of a sexual encounter between two individuals. The artist thrives on presenting an image of herself as a sex-goddess and such images are in keeping with her lyrical content as illustrated by the lyrics of her song, 'Bata pasi' (Translated: Hold the ground) in which sexual innuendo is characteristic as evinced by the line below:

*Bata pasi , bata pasi, show me that you're naughty,
Move your body, show me that you're naughty,
Donhedza musika (Colloquial for shake your buttocks)
...i turn them on*

The artist thus appeals to sexual innuendo for her moniker.

Age is also a consideration in the monikers and stage names adopted by some contemporary Zimbabwean musicians. Tania Seremwe calls herself Young Gemini and the name she chose is premised on the fact that she entered the music industry at a very young age and was born in the month of June which by Horoscope signs implies she was born a Gemini hence her moniker, Young Gemini (SA Hip Hop Music, 2024).

Conclusion

This paper sought to demonstrate the significance of the names that artists in the Zimbabwean music industry adopt or are given and it was shown that the names are largely gendered and the patriarchal nature of wider society is also mirrored in the manner the female artist is named. The names of female artists show that Zimbabwe is typical patriarchal terrain by objectifying these social actors and making them mere sex-objects. In addition, it was clearly established that Zimdancehall's heavy leanings on Jamaican dancehall has had an influence that extends beyond the music sound and quality but the names adopted by artists in the genre. Similarities exist between the Jamaican landscape and the Zimbabwean landscape where the genre is popular amongst an impoverished population where violence and subcultural behaviours may even be celebrated. The violence exuded in some lyrics also finds expression in the monikers that artists choose or adopt. In conclusion it is evident that individuals in contemporary Zimbabwe's music industry have turned to numerous sources such as their bodies, belief systems, age and their horoscopic stars for their stage names.

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