Perceptions of Aboriginal Names among the Meru People of Tanzania: Colonial Disruption and Cultural Continuity in a Typological Perspective

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Abstract

Faith, education, Westernisation, and development have significantly transformed African naming systems. The arrival of Europeans in

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Tanzania marked a period of cultural, social, and linguistic disruption, particularly among indigenous communities such as the Meru. This article examines perceptions of personal names in the Meru community following European colonisation. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and guided by the theory of cultural transmission, the study explores shifts in naming practices and their meanings. Findings indicate that colonial administrative structures, language policies, and religious influences led to the adoption of foreign names and the reinterpretation of Meru lexemes into religiously aligned names. Examples include names like *-langa* "light" and *-fura-* "happy," which were embraced for their semantic parallels to Biblical concepts. These developments generated both acceptance and resistance, reflecting broader negotiations of identity. Furthermore, the study highlights the emergence of functional domains of name usage: While some names were reserved for formal spaces such as schools, churches, and workplaces, others were retained for domestic and cultural contexts. However, some traditional names, particularly those tied to specific birth circumstances, have been lost or marginalised. The article concludes that Meru naming practices have undergone complex transformations, reflecting the tensions between cultural continuity and colonial influence.

1. Introduction

The Meru people, an ethnic group in northeastern Tanzania, reside near Mount Meru in the Arusha region. Their origins are debated, with some scholars suggesting they migrated from the Usambara Mountains in Tanga about 300 years ago, speaking Chaga or Machame languages (Mbise 1974, Henry 1981, Spear 1997, Mesaki 2013, Baroin 2015). The Meru speak Ki-rwa, a Bantu language classified as E53 (Maho 2004), and also use Kiswahili. They preserve their identity through

local language, traditional names, and cultural practices. Clan and peer cohort names are significant markers of their cultural heritage.

Prior to the influence of European colonial powers, the Meru community upheld complex beliefs and customs regarding personal names. These names carried deep significance, often reflecting ancestry, personal aspirations, or honouring forebears. Naming ceremonies were essential social events that marked an individual's formal integration into the community and reinforced family and communal ties.

However, the forces that contributed to the erosion of traditional names were rooted in Western cultural influence, beginning with the European scramble for Africa in the 19th century. During the period of European colonisation, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ethnic communities like the Meru underwent profound cultural transformations. European rule reformed social structures, including naming systems (Moyo 1996, Saarelma-Maunumaa 2003, Akinyemi 2005, Agyekum 2006, Ngade 2011). The adoption or imposition of European names upon the indigenous population, often intended to facilitate assimilation or simplify identification for colonial authorities, disrupted and altered traditional African, including Meru, naming practices.

The coming of Europeans and the introduction of Christianity in the African continent in the 19th century led to changes in African cultures at large. The number of Christians and Muslims in Africa became high, which resulted in rapid sociocultural changes, including the introduction of schools and churches (Ikenga-Metuh 1987, Peil & Oyeneye 1998). For example, in Meru, most people who became Christians adopted biblical names like *Michael, Luka, Jacob, Matthew, Zachary, Elizabeth, Joshua, Sarah,* and *Joseph,* among others. On the other hand, for Islam, there are names like *Malik* "king," *Mahmoud* "fulfillment," etc.

As in many African ethnic societies, before European influence, the

Meru people had a nuanced naming system immersed in cultural significance. Names were chosen with careful consideration, reflecting elements of nature, family lineage, events, or assets valued by the community. They (Meru people) practice a traditional naming process involving ceremonies where elders bestow names upon newborns, echoing ancestral bonds and communal values. The Europeans, to the African continent, were filled with spirits of culture and superiority, which encouraged them to condemn the indigenous practices, together with African personal naming. Meeting with European naming systems and Christian name-giving practices led to exceptionally rapid and exhaustive changes in African naming systems (Saarelma-Maunumaa 1996, Mabuza 2014, Lusekelo & Muro 2018, Lusekelo & Mtenga 2020). With other African cultures, the African indigenous names were condemned by Europeans not only because they were regarded as pagans but also because of the missionaries' ignorance about the African indigenous names (Saarelma-Maunumaa 2003).

The arrival of Europeans introduced a divergence from these traditional naming practices. The imposition of European names, sometimes replacing/supplementing traditional names, led to a transformation in how names were perceived in the Meru community. This cultural intersection raised questions about identity, belonging, and the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage attached to personal names and naming practices.

2. Cultural Transmission Theory

In this preliminary understanding, we applied the theory of cultural transmission / cultural learning / social learning, which explains how

culture is passed from one generation to the next and how individuals learn behaviours, values, norms, and social practices in the community (Malinowski 1922, Mead 1928). Al Zumor (2009) argues that the change, development, and death of personal names may be a result of language change. Under the umbrella of the social learning theory, we emphasise the role of observational learning, imitation, modelling, social interaction, and cultural tools, including language in cognitive development (Sutherland 1947, Bandura 1977, Vygotsky & Cole 1978). As naming can be considered a universal cultural practice (Al Zumor 2009), we use Cultural Transmission Theory to explain how language is used as a cultural practice and how it is used as a powerful tool to view and understand the worldview of a particular society. Also, the theory helped in understanding that names are a platform to study changes in society.

Recent scholarship in the *Journal of Universal Language* underscores the socio-political dimensions of naming and language. For instance, Sanni-Suleiman (2025) discusses colonial legacies in African language planning; Lee and Chin (2025) examine how religious text translations reflect identity authority; and Park (2023) addresses how multilingual hierarchies shape social identity. Together, these studies provide a broader backdrop for analysing Meru naming practices as sites of identity negotiation and power dynamics.

Through the use of the theory for studying personal names, we comprehend the changes that society seeks to create through language, education, rituals, and social interactions, which are the significant means for cultural knowledge, practices, and values in the communication across generations. These changes are influenced by the agents of socialisation such as family, peers, schools, religious institutions, and media, which may play a major role through social contexts that create learning processes. Thus, the shift in naming perceptions among the

Meru people created a complex relationship between traditional values and external influences. This hybridisation of naming practices might have influenced social identities, family dynamics, and the overall cultural substance of the Meru community. The adoption of European names could have symbolised adaptation to colonial rule while also challenging the preservation of indigenous cultural identity. The naming perceptions among the Meru people of Tanzania may be revealed as a combination of traditional practices and remnants of European influence. Understanding these dynamics sheds light on the evolving nature of cultural identities within the community and the ongoing efforts to recover, preserve, or reinterpret traditional naming practices.

3. Methodology

This study examines how the Meru people have responded to the adoption of European names while maintaining or modifying their traditional naming practices. It adopts a qualitative approach to explore the interplay between indigenous naming customs and the sociocultural transformations introduced by colonialism. The research contributes to broader discourses on African onomastics and cultural resilience by focusing on the enduring and evolving significance of aboriginal names in the Meru community.

The study was conducted in five villages within Meru District in northern Tanzania: Leguruki, Miririni, King'ori, Nkoansiyo, and Olkung'wado, which were selected for their strong Meru ethnic structure and continued use of traditional naming practices. A total of 35 informants were engaged, representing a diverse demographic that included elders, youth, religious leaders, and local leaders. Snowball

sampling was employed to identify informants, beginning with a few knowledgeable individuals who referred the researcher to others within their networks. This method was appropriate due to the cultural sensitivity of the topic and the need to access individuals with an in-depth understanding of Meru naming traditions.

Data were gathered through in-depth, face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. The guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit informant reflections on the meanings, values, and transformations of both traditional and foreign names within the Meru community. Sample questions included:

1. What is the essence of a Bible or European name to the Meru people?
2. What is the impact of Bible or European names in the Meru community?
3. Which names do you use at home but not in other places?
4. Which names do you use in public spaces, and why?

The interviews were conducted in Swahili or Kimeru, depending on the informant's preference, and later translated into English for analysis. Informed consent was obtained from all informants, both verbally and in writing, after a clear explanation of the study's aims and procedures. Informants were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in all reporting. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic categories were developed inductively to reflect emerging patterns in the data, and selected informant quotations are included to illustrate key findings. This article acknowledges the following limitations. The use of snowball

sampling may have introduced a degree of consistency in informant views, as referrals often came from within shared social or ideological circles. Additionally, qualitative methods enable in-depth cultural insights; However, the findings were not intended to be statistically generalisable to the broader Meru population.

3.1. Perceptions of Meru People on Aboriginal Names

Drawing from the analysed data, it is evident that before European contact in the 19th century, the Meru community held deeply rooted beliefs about personal naming practices. Names were not arbitrarily assigned but carried specific meanings related to ancestry, aspirations, and the honouring of elders and ancestors. These practices were typically carried out during ceremonial events that formally welcomed a child into the community, thereby strengthening familial and social ties. Even traditional leadership structures reflected this system, with leaders addressed using indigenous names that denoted their clan and generational group. In Meru, before the arrival of Europeans, two forms of leadership structures existed: Mangi, inherited through lineage, and Nshili, associated with leadership through clans or peer-age groups. Table 1 provides a summary of the names of the traditional leaders (Mangi), highlighting their personal, clan, and peer-group names.

The following Table 1 shows that before the coming of the missionaries, the Kaaya and Nanyaro clans dominated the authority. In some cases, the exact dates of administration are unknown. Nonetheless, traditional Meru names retained cultural and historical significance, functioning as markers of ancestry and milestones within the collective memory of the community.

Table 1. Names of Traditional Leaders (Mangi) in the Meru Community

First Name of a Leader	Peer Name of a Leader	Clan Name of a Leader	Year of Administration
Kaaya	*Ulukuvai*	*Kaaya*	-
Kisarika	*Kisavai*	*Kaaya*	-
Nginana Malenkye	*Nginana*	*Kaaya*	-
Kisaruni Samana	*Kisaruni*	*Kaaya*	-
Marishari Raari	*Marishari*	*Kaaya*	-
Nndemi	*Aremu*	*Kaaya*	-
Matunda	*Soori/Nkuu*	*Kaaya*	1887–1896
Lobulu	*Siyoi*	*Kaaya*	1896–1900
Masenkye	*Dung'uri*	*Kaaya*	1900
Nyereu	*Mangusha*	*Kaaya*	1901
Sambekye	*Ulutalala*	*Nanyaro*	1902–1925
Sandi	*Seuri*	*Nanyaro*	1925–1930
Kishili	*Ulutareto*	*Kaaya*	1930–1945
Sandi	*Kisali*	*Nanyaro*	1945–1953
Silvanus	*Sitimu*	*Kaaya*	1953–1963

However, from the late 19th century onwards, traditional naming practices began to shift due to the growing influence of European administrative structures, missionary teachings, and the expansion of formal education. During colonial administration, many African

societies adopted European names to facilitate administrative classification (Saarelma-Maunumaa 2003, Akinyemi 2005, Agyekum 2006, Ngade 2011). These foreign names became more widespread, especially among children attending mission schools, and were frequently taken in favour of native ones. To better illustrate the major historical milestones that influenced naming practices in the Meru community, the following timeline Figure 1 presents key events from the late 19th century to the post-WWII era.

Figure 1. Historical Timeline of Naming Shifts in Meru Society (1887–1963)
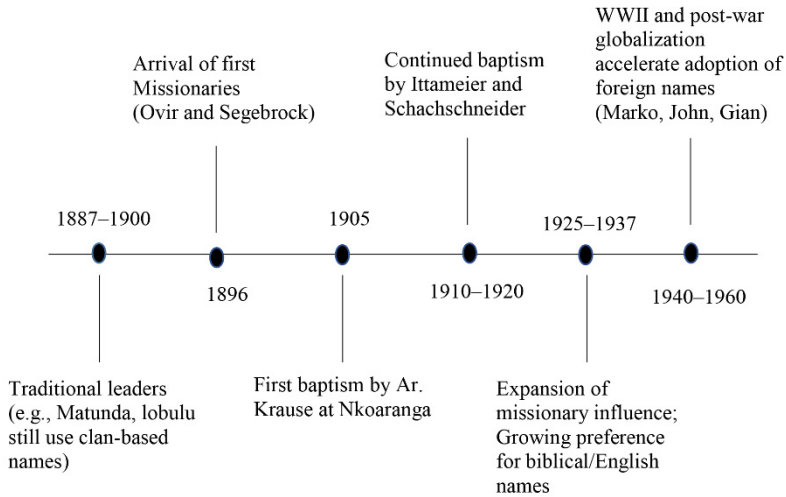
Historical accounts indicate that the arrival of missionaries in Meru further accelerated this cultural shift. Around 1896, the first missionaries, Ovir and Segebrock, were welcomed to Akjeri village by Mangi Matunda. However, fearing land dispossession, local warriors (Vasero) allied with the Waarusha to kill them. A colonial officer named Yohanes later buried them and returned to Moshi, prompting

violent retaliatory attacks on Meru by German forces and Chagga allies. These events led to significant casualties, the capture of women, the destruction of homes, and mass confiscation of livestock. Major battles such as the Battle of Rawito, named after a fallen warrior, Oltumure, marked turning points, culminating in the construction of the Arusha Boma in 1900.

This traumatic interaction with Europeans, particularly missionaries and colonial forces, introduced systemic changes to naming practices. As part of cultural assimilation efforts, missionaries discouraged the use of names they perceived as un-Christian or associated with traditional beliefs. Names referencing animals (e.g., *Nkafunga* "born in dust," *Ifisi* "hyena") or natural elements were deemed inappropriate and replaced with biblical or Western equivalents. Meanwhile, children whose parents embraced Christianity or attended mission schools increasingly received names from foreign traditions.

3.1.1. Establishment of Biblical Names in the Meru Community

The analysis revealed that religious leaders played a fundamental role in shaping naming practices following the spread of Christianity in Meru and other African communities. Upon baptism, converts were often given Christian or biblical names by priests or spiritual leaders. These names were considered to reflect the family's faith, embody spiritual blessings, and signify moral transformation.

The first Christian baptism in Meru was conducted in 1905 by missionary Ar. Krause at Nkoaranga. This marked a turning point in local naming traditions. Table 2 presents the names of the first individuals baptised, combining their new Christian names with retained clan names:

Table 2. First Baptism in the Meru Community

No.	Baptismal Name	Clan Name
1	*Luka*	*Kaaya*
2	*Ndetiyo*	*Ndoosi*
3	*Yohane*	*Ndoosi*
4	*Stefano*	*Palanjo*
5	*Ndetaulwa*	*Nanyaro*
6	*Ndelekwa*	*Urio*
7	*Nderingwa*	*Palanjo*
8	*Elia*	*Palanjo*
9	*Ndekirwa*	*Laizer*
10	*Manase*	*Ndoosi*
11	*Mikaeli*	*Palanjo*

Although Krause later returned to the Netherlands due to illness, his work was continued by missionary E. Ittameier. Under Ittameier's leadership, preceding rounds of baptisms were conducted, further cementing biblical names in Meru society (Table 3).

Ittameier was succeeded by Schachschneider, who continued the work until World War I disrupted missionary activities in 1914. After the war, Ittameier returned to Meru and resumed baptisms for another decade.

Despite missionary influence, data suggests that aboriginal and clan names were not entirely erased. During the first baptismal phase, all 11 individuals retained their clan names. In the second and third phases, approximately 71% kept lineage names, while 29% adopted alternative Meru names. This indicates a persistent cultural attachment

to traditional naming.

Table 3. Second and Third Baptisms in the Meru Community

Second Baptism		
No.	Baptismal name	Clan name
1	*Ndeshilio*	*Palanjo*
2	*Petro*	*Kaaya*
Third Baptism		
1	*Matayo*	*Sekalai*
2	*Marko*	*Sumari*
3	*Samweli*	*Mbise*
4	*Yosefu*	*Palanjo*
5	*Paulo*	*Natai*

Between 1925 and 1937, the arrival of additional European missionaries in Meru further shaped local naming practices by promoting Western religious and cultural norms. Their efforts significantly altered the meanings and applications of indigenous names. Terhi and Saarikivi (2017) note that, following World War II, traditional names across many cultures were increasingly abandoned in favour of foreign ones. In Meru, missionaries believed certain indigenous names unsuitable because of their perceived connections to conventional beliefs. Names that commemorated specific events, such as *Nka-mbaka* "cat," *Nka-ngumi* "born in the bush," *Nkafunga* "born in dust," *Ifie* "gorilla," and *Ifisi* "hyena" were particularly discouraged. Missionaries argued that associating individuals with animal descriptions perpetuated negative stereotypes, prompting a systematic replacement of such names with

biblical or English alternatives (Saarelma-Maunumaa 2003). Although many Meru adopted these foreign names, they often lacked understanding of their meanings or cultural significance. By contrast, traditional names like *Mannya*, *Kadoko*, and *Ngarina* conveyed notions of childhood and youthfulness, similar to Yoruba naming conventions in Nigeria, which reflect familial heritage and life circumstances (Agyekum 2006).

Interviews revealed tensions between traditional naming practices and Christian expectations. One case involved a man named Tangoi, who wished to be baptised as *Taa-ngoi* "light in the heart," a name rich in spiritual symbolism. However, he was rejected because pastors failed to recognise its religious significance. A Meru church leader explained:

> "Tangoi wanted to be named *Taa-ngoi*, meaning 'light in the heart,' but some pastors rejected it, saying it did not glorify God. Yet the name carries spiritual meaning: *Taa* means light, *ngoi* means heart. In our faith, Jesus is the light who lives in people's hearts." (Interview with a Meru church leader, age 55+, 2022)

This example highlights how some religious leaders overlooked the symbolic richness of indigenous names, privileging Western linguistic familiarity over cultural relevance. Nonetheless, other leaders acknowledged that names like *Tangoi* aligned closely with Christian themes. Despite missionary discouragement, many Meru retained a deep respect for their naming traditions. For example, names such as *Roketi* "victory," which commemorates Tanzanian fighter jets in 1961, and *Nkalerai* "born near a traditional tree, namely *lerai*" illustrate how naming was used to mark historical events and environmental ties.

Mbiti (1969) observes that in African societies, personal names function as repositories of collective memory and cultural identity. In the Meru community, it is customary for each child to receive a traditional name at birth, prior to the adoption of any foreign name, highlighting the community's deep-rooted commitment to preserving aboriginal identity. The renaming practices introduced by missionaries were often perceived as acts of cultural erasure. As Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2018) contends, Westernisation has gradually diminished the original meanings of indigenous names, leading to cultural ambiguity. Furthermore, Raheem (2013) notes that globalisation has facilitated the anglicisation of African names, particularly through their presentation on digital platforms. Western names became fashionable, and even non-Christians adopted them to avoid being labelled backward or ignorant by colonial authorities (Ayandele 1979, Saarelma-Maunumaa 2003). As a result, identifying individuals' cultural backgrounds from their names became increasingly difficult. Regardless of this, traditional peer cohort names remain essential in Meru society. One Meru informant stated:

> "I want to be named Kisali, as it has always been my name. It is a good name … but not everyone can use it, only those from my peer age group would apply it to me." (Interview with a Meru man, age 85+, 2022)

The quotation reflects the enduring significance of traditional naming practices in the Meru community, particularly the use of age-set or peer cohort names like Kisali, which are reserved for use by individuals within the same generational group. This practice highlights a strong sense of cultural identity, social etiquette, and generational respect, where name usage is governed by clearly defined social boundaries. The speaker's insistence on being called by his traditional

name, despite the prevalence of foreign names, underscores the resilience of indigenous naming traditions and their role in maintaining social cohesion, hierarchy, and cultural memory in the Meru society.

This indicates that, while missionary activity significantly influenced naming in the Meru community, traditional names continue to carry deep social, spiritual, and historical meanings. Yet, without active efforts to preserve and revitalise these traditions, there is a real risk of losing vital aspects of Meru cultural identity.

3.1.2. Meru Names with Religion Interpretation and Belief(s)

Data analysis reveals that before missionary influence, Meru people commonly used traditional names such as *Nnkuuku* "very old," *Tareto* "one of peer cohorts," *Nnkuu* "old person," and *Vaava* "old person" in formal contexts such as offices, churches, and schools. Over time, however, these names became confined to domestic and ritual spaces, largely due to the influence of European missionaries (Fakuade et al. 2018, Lusekelo & Muro 2018, Lusekelo & Mtenga 2020, Nnamdi-Eruchalu 2021). With the arrival of Christianity and Western education, some Meru individuals began adopting European or biblical names.

Missionaries, particularly those affiliated with Lutheran and Catholic denominations, sought to impart Christian ideals into naming practices by encouraging biblical name adoption. This was rooted in the belief that traditional names were linked to ancestral spirits or "ghosts," and thus incompatible with Christian values. Consequently, cultural practices such as circumcision, which are often linked to the bestowal of peer cohort names, were discouraged. A Pentecostal pastor from Meru explained that:

"… some Christian groups believed indigenous names were linked to 'false gods through deceased ancestors' and associated them with 'bad traditions and ghost worship.' Not all traditional names were negative; some traditional names carry meaning and value, and thus they should be preserved for the next generations. Churches across denominations, such as the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT), Roman Catholic Church (RC), Council of Pentecostal Churches of Tanzania (CPCT), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), should work together to sustain culturally meaningful naming practices." (Interview with a Meru pastor, age 66+, 2022)

This quote reflects the broader tension between religious belief and cultural heritage. While some religious leaders discouraged traditional names, others acknowledged their role in preserving moral values, social bonds, and cultural identity. Lusekelo and Muro (2018) note that although many African Christians replaced indigenous names with baptismal names, communities like the Machame-Chagga, similar to the Meru, maintained both traditional and Christian elements in their naming systems. Saarelma-Maunumaa (2003) further argues that 19th-century Christian evangelism deliberately promoted European names to weaken African cultural foundations.

Table 4 presents Meru names with biblical interpretations, categorised by gender, meaning, and grammatical structure. These names typically follow specific patterns such as noun-verb-noun (N+V+N), verb-noun (V+N), or noun-noun (N+N), blending Meru and biblical lexicons. For example, *Ndetirishwa* (female) combines *Nde* (God) with *tirishwa* (protect), meaning "protected by God," while *Elieka* (female) combines *Eli* (God) and *eka* (thank), translating to

Table 4. Meru Names with Bible Interpretation

Name	Sex		Literal Meaning	N	Meaning	V	Meaning	N	Meaning	Adv/ adj	Meaning
	M	F									
Elieka		√	thank you, God	*Eli-*	God	*-eka*	thank				
Ndetiri-shwa		√	protected by God	*Nde-*	God	*-tirishwa*	protect				
Ndetamba-shulwa		√	saved by God	*Nde-*	God	*Tamba-shulwa*	saved				
Wariatikisi		√	receive a blessing			*Waria-*	receive	*-tikisi*	blessing		
Wariam-bora		√	receive a blessing			*Waria-*	receive	*-mbora*	blessing		
Afuraeli	√		rejoice with God			*Afura-*	rejoice	*-eli*	God		
Asoraeli	√		followed God			*Asora-*	follow	*-eli*	God		
Kumbuaeli	√		remember God			*kumbua*	remember	*-eli*	God		
Wariaeli	√		receive God			*Waria-*	receive	*-eli*	God		
Ndening-walanga		√	given light by God	*Nde-*	God	*-ningwa*	given			*langa*	light
Ndening-wafinya		√	given strength by God	*Nde-*	God	*-ningwa*	given	*finya*	strength		
Ndekoyo		√	found by God	*Nde-*	God	*-koyo*	found				
Nde-eshifoose		√	God knows all	*Nde-*	God	*-eshi*	know			*foose*	all
Warian-kira	√	√	receive the healer			*Waria-*	receive	*-nkira*	healer		
Elinde		√	God farther	*Eli-*	God			*-nde*	God		
Unambwe	√		peace	*unambwe*	peace						

Note: N, noun; V, verb; Adj, adjective; Adv, adverb; M, male; F, female

"Thank you, God." Other names such as *Kaanankira* and *Kaanaeli* "remain with God" for male, *Wariatikisi* and *Wariambora* "receive a blessing" for female, integrate verbs and nouns to express spiritual ideas.

The incorporation of religious concepts into Meru names aligns with naming trends observed in neighbouring communities. In Machame-Chagga culture, names such as *Aikaeli* "Thank you, God," *Aminaeli* "Faith in God," and *Shisaeli* "God guide me" reflect a similar fusion of local and Christian elements. The Meru term *Ndumi*, used to signify God, also appears in Chagga naming conventions, underscoring a shared regional pattern.

This section illustrates how Christianity influenced the transformation of Meru naming practices by encouraging the incorporation of biblical meanings into traditional names. While some religious leaders viewed indigenous names as spiritually problematic, others recognised their cultural and moral significance. The result is a naming system that blends Meru linguistic structures with Christian theology, mirroring trends in other East African communities such as the Machame-Chagga. This demonstrates both the resilience and adaptability of indigenous identity under religious influence.

3.1.3. Swahili Names Blended with Hebrew Lexicon (*eli*)

The analysed data revealed that after the arrival of missionaries in Meru land, churches and schools were established, leading to the introduction of religious and modern names. This resulted in the blending of Meru indigenous names with Christian, Swahili, and Hebrew names, particularly the lexicon *Eli*, meaning "God." Consequently, many traditional Meru names were affected. From a biblical perspective, Eli originates from the Hebrew word אֵלִי, symbolising "ascension / my God" or "high priest" (Nelson 1985).

During the 19th century, missionaries encouraged or required Meru converts to adopt Christian names, many of which were of European or biblical origin. Among these, Swahili names were also blended with Hebrew words, particularly *Eli*, due to their religious significance. Data analysis shows that in Meru, *Eli* can be placed at the beginning or end of Swahili or Meru words, forming names with biblical interpretations. The influence of Swahili on Meru names is linked to cultural exchange, linguistic merging, and colonial history. As Kiswahili emerged as a lingua franca in East Africa through trade, administration, and missionary activities, it extended its influence into areas previously dominated by ethnic languages, including the Meru community (Lusekelo & Mtenga 2020). Thus, hybrid names combining Swahili and Hebrew elements became widespread.

As missionaries engaged with the Meru, European and biblical names influenced local naming patterns. While indigenous names traditionally carried cultural, spiritual, or familial meanings, some Meru believe that Christian names should coexist with traditional ones. Others, however, have abandoned indigenous names entirely. One interviewee affirmed:

> "I feel good because ... there is a Meru name for circumcision, a church name ... and a clan name ... For example, my church name is Elinasi, a baptismal name." (Interview with a Meru man, age 54+, 2022)

This quote illustrates how Christian names are perceived not as replacements but as complementary to clan and cohort names, symbolising religious identity. Names such as *Shukuru* "thank you," *Ombeni* "pray," *Asifiwe* "he is praised," and *Neema* "grace" became widely adopted. Likewise, names like *Amani* "peace," *Rehema*

"mercy," *Pokea* "receive," *Asante* "thank you," *Nuru* "light," *Baraka* "blessings," and *Nasi* "with us" reflect the integration of Christian values into Meru naming traditions.

The study further reveals Swahili names merging with the Hebrew lexicon *Eli*, producing names such as *Elinasi* "God with us," *Elineema* "the grace of God," *Eliamani* "peace of God," and *Elirehema* "God's mercy." As Kiswahili is Tanzania's official language, such hybrid names are common, especially in urban areas (Table 5).

Table 5. Swahili-Hebrew Christian Names

Name	Sex		Literal Meaning	N	Meaning	V	Meaning	N	Meaning	Pron	Meaning
	Male	Female									
Elirehema	√		God has mercy	*Eli-*	God			*rehema*	mercy		
Elipokea	√		accept God	*Eli-*	God	*pokea*	accept				
Eliasifiwe		√	praise God	*Eli-*	God	*asifiwe*	praised				
Elihuruma	√	√	God's Mercy	*Eli-*	God	*huruma*	mercy				
Elisante	√		thank God	*Eli-*	God	*sante*	thank you				
Elinasi	√		God with us	*Eli-*	God					*nasi*	us
Elisifa		√	praise God	*Eli-*	God	*sifa*	praise				
Sifaeli	√		praise to God			*Sifa-*	praise	*eli*	God		
Sirieli	√	√	God's mystery	*Siri-*	mystery			*eli*	God		

These examples show how missionary influence led to a blending of Meru, Swahili, and biblical elements, reinforcing Christian identity. The structure typically includes *eli* as a prefix or suffix in patterns

such as noun + verb, verb + noun, and noun + pronoun. However, despite this linguistic creativity, many Christians in Meru are unaware of the meanings of their names. A Meru retired Pastor lamented:

> "Some people go to church but do not know how to read. They receive names without knowing what they mean ... The goal of white people was to convince Africans that everything they had was better." (Interview with a Meru retired pastor, age 80+, 2022)

This quote suggests that the acceptance of Christian names, often without understanding, was shaped by colonial influence and feelings of cultural inferiority.

Another pastor shared:

> "If I had the ability, I would change this system of giving local names like *Nkuku* ... I wish the children's names could reflect the spirit of Jesus. Our traditions delay God's blessings." (Interview with a Meru pastor, age 60+, 2022)

Here, traditional names like *Nkuku, Soori,* and *Kiwandai* are rejected in favour of Christian ones believed to attract divine favour, illustrating a tension between heritage and spiritual aspiration. Generational differences also emerge. Older Meru placed emphasis on a name's meaning and often consulted elders or church leaders. As one elder observed:

> "Nowadays, someone just takes a name ... without knowing its meaning. Before, we used to ask the pastor for a name and its meaning." (Interview with a Meru elder, age 75+, 2023)

This quote highlights a cultural shift as names are now often chosen based on popularity or religious affiliation rather than their original significance.

This section shows that missionary activities and Kiswahili influence led to a unique blend of Christian, Swahili, and Hebrew naming patterns in the Meru community, particularly through the incorporation of the lexicon *eli*. Although these names reinforce religious identity, they also reflect the erosion of traditional naming practices. Interviewees expressed varied views. For instance, some integrate Christian and Meru names harmoniously, while others reject indigenous names as spiritually regressive. The rise of names without meaningful understanding reflects broader changes in identity and the influence of colonial and missionary legacies. This transformation raises concerns about the long-term preservation of Meru cultural heritage.

3.1.4. English Names in the Meru Community

The findings indicate that civilisation and globalisation have significantly influenced naming traditions in the Meru community. English names have become common, often used alongside or in place of traditional names. Many Meru, especially the youth, view English names as modern, fashionable, and reflective of a global identity. These names are also considered easier for outsiders to pronounce, facilitating communication in broader contexts.

It is now common for individuals to possess both an indigenous name that signifies cultural heritage and an English name used in school, work, or religious spaces. Some parents consult literature, religious texts, or naming dictionaries when choosing names. One Meru parent detailed:

"Godlove is a name that exists in a book ... I looked for the meaning because in our church you cannot give an unknown name to a child." (Interview with a Meru woman, age 42+, 2023)

The quote shows a shift from traditional to church-influenced naming practices. It highlights the role of written sources in validating names like "Godlove." Religious institutions now guide acceptable naming based on meaning. This trend may marginalise indigenous names not found in books.

Another key driver is the internet. One informant said:

"Even if I go to YouTube and type a name, several meanings appear. People now download baby names from online. That is how names like Mishel, Ricardo, Daniela, or Junior entered Meru." (Interview with a Meru woman, age 46+, 2023)

The quote highlights how digital media, especially YouTube, has become a key source for name selection in the Meru community. It reflects a shift from traditional naming practices to global, internet-driven influences. Names like Mishel, Ricardo, and Daniela illustrate how foreign names enter Meru society through online platforms. This trend signifies the growing impact of globalisation and technology on local cultural identity. Also, analysis of the data revealed that some parents prioritise name meanings over cultural origins. For instance, an informant explained:

"Fredrick symbolises a peace leader. My father called me *Jenipha*, meaning white clouds. He liked the meaning, not the origin. Also, we would not name a girl *Utukufu* in Swahili, but

we use the English equivalent, Glory." (Interview with a Meru
woman, age 40+, 2022)

The quote reflects a growing preference in the Meru community for
names based on appealing meanings rather than cultural or linguistic
origins. The informant's father chose Jenipha for its symbolic meaning,
"white clouds," regardless of its foreign origin, highlighting how
meaning now overshadows tradition in name selection. The preference
for the English name Glory over the Swahili equivalent *Utukufu*
suggests that English names are perceived as more modern or socially
acceptable. This indicates a shift in naming attitudes, where foreign
names are favoured for their prestige, potentially at the expense of
indigenous linguistic and cultural identity.

Television and music also influence naming. An informant
informed:

"Names like Brenda and Ricardo came from a Philippine
drama ... many children got names from that series." (Interview
with a Meru woman, age 38+, 2022)

The quote shows that televised pop culture, in this case, a Philippine
drama, has become a powerful naming source for some Meru parents.
Characters' names, such as Brenda and Ricardo, are adopted because
repeated exposure makes them familiar and desirable, even though
they have no local linguistic or cultural roots. This underscores how
global media can dominate traditional naming practices, introducing
foreign names that signal modernity and multicultural identity.
Consequently, indigenous Meru names risk further marginalisation as
entertainment-driven trends reshape the community's onomastic
landscape.

Also, analysis of the data revealed that cultural erosion may result from illiteracy. One retired pastor insisted:

> "The problem is mindset. We have lost our way. For example, someone might name their child 'Very nice,' and it is accepted. Europeans convinced us their way was better, even their names." (Interview with a retired pastor, age 73+, 2022)

The quote underscores a deep concern over cultural erosion in the Meru community, attributing the loss of traditional naming practices to a shift in mindset rather than external forces alone. The retired pastor suggests that some Meru people have internalised the belief that European ways, including names, are superior, leading to uncritical acceptance of foreign names like Very Nice, which lack cultural meaning or relevance. This mindset, shaped by colonial influence, has contributed to the abandonment of indigenous identity markers, highlighting how psychological and ideological changes can undermine cultural heritage more powerfully than external pressure alone.

In Meru, some parents also choose foreign names without understanding them. A Christian mother reflected:

> "My first son's name is Donald, I never thought of its meaning. But my second child's name, Godrich, combines 'God' and 'Rich,' his grandfather's name. Your question made me realise I was wrong." (Interview with a Meru woman, age 40+, 2022)

The quote illustrates a shift from naming by trend to naming by meaning: Her first child's name, Donald, was chosen with no thought to significance, whereas the second child's name, Godrich, deliberately annoys religious values, "God" with family heritage

"Rich," from the grandfather. Acknowledgement of data, "Your question made me realise I was wrong," reveals growing self-awareness about the cultural and spiritual weight of names, suggesting that external reflection can prompt parents to reconsider and potentially recover more meaningful, lineage-conscious naming practices in the Meru community.

Another woman explained:

> "My second daughter's second name is Brenda … I do not understand its meaning. The name comes from Brenda Fassie, a South African singer whose music I like." (Interview with a Meru woman, age 36+, 2022)

The data shows that popular culture, particularly music, influences naming practices in the Meru community. The informant named her daughter Brenda after South African singer Brenda Fassie, based on admiration rather than meaning. This reflects a shift where names are chosen for emotional or cultural associations rather than traditional or linguistic significance. It also highlights a growing disconnection from indigenous naming values and meanings.

While there is a commitment to ensuring that future generations appreciate the significance of naming practices, the current trend of assigning names arbitrarily reflects dissatisfaction with contemporary naming customs. Some community members in Meru argue that losing touch with one's origin is similar to being enslaved. Indigenous names in Meru hold unique qualities that commemorate past, present, and future generations. The community stresses the need to re-educate younger generations on the importance of indigenous names, which help identify family lineage and prevent accidental marriages between relatives. The loss of indigenous names is linked to language and cultural shifts. A pastor noted growing concerns over the diminishing

use of indigenous names:

> "Meru people have lost their identity, especially the younger generation. Many children no longer know their indigenous names or speak their home language. This has negatively affected our culture, as names, especially clan and peer cohort names, are central to identity." (Interview with a Meru pastor, age 60+, 2022)

The data reflects concern over cultural and linguistic erosion in the Meru community. The informant (pastor) highlights how younger generations are losing touch with their roots, evident in their inability to recall indigenous names or use the Meru language. This disconnect suggests a weakening of traditional identity markers, such as clan and peer cohort names. The statement underscores a broader fear that modern influences are replacing foundational elements of Meru cultural identity.

Mokala (2020) argues that "European names are just arbitrary labels, they have no real meaning." In a similar vein, Chauke (2015) notes that communities such as the Basotho have increasingly adopted both family names and Christian or English names, illustrating a pattern of cultural hybridisation. This blending of indigenous and Western naming traditions is also evident among the Vatsonga people, reflecting a wider African trend. In the Meru context, the adoption of foreign names was largely driven by the influence of Christian missionaries and colonial authorities. With the introduction of mission and colonial government schools, Western education became accessible, and students began adopting English names as symbols of education and elevated social standing. Some Christian leaders even insisted that true religious devotion required bearing a biblical or

English name during baptism (Saarelma-Maunumaa 2003).

This pattern persists today, as globalisation and modernisation reinforce the perception of foreign names as modern, prestigious, and internationally acceptable. A Meru church leader reflected on this development:

"Young generations prefer English names, which are not originally Meru. These names were introduced through European influence and globalisation, which also weakened men's decision-making power in naming." (Interview with a Meru church leader, age 54+, 2022)

The data suggest that foreign influences not only introduced new naming conventions but also reshaped family structures and gender roles in decision-making. While globalisation has encouraged cultural blending, it has simultaneously eroded some traditional values, especially those related to naming. The widespread trend of assigning children three names: A foreign first name, a father's name, and a clan name, demonstrates this cultural transition. Yet, many Meru still advocate for the preservation of indigenous names, recognising them as vital to cultural continuity and identity.

Naming practices in Meru have thus undergone deep transformation, shaped by colonialism, Christianity, education, and globalisation. While some community members uphold traditional names, many now favour foreign ones, often without a clear understanding of their meaning. Table 6 provides examples of such foreign names for males and females, as recorded during the field study.

Table 6 illustrates that European names in the Meru community foster intercultural connections and ease communication across linguistic boundaries. However, this shift has contributed to the

Table 6. English Names for Males and Females in the Meru Community

No	Name	Sex		No	Name	Sex	
		Male	Female			Male	Female
1	Gabriela		√	19	Peace		√
2	God-rich	√		20	Happiness		√
3	Godfrey	√		21	Ricardo		√
4	God-lack	√		22	Junior	√	
5	Elvin	√		23	Miracle		√
6	Jonson	√		24	Brilliant	√	
7	Donald	√		25	Flower		√
8	Aron	√		26	Gift		√
9	Rosemary		√	27	Prince or Princess	√	√
10	Rose		√	28	Queen		√
11	Very-nice		√	29	Angle		√
12	God-bless	√		30	Love-ness		√
13	God-enough	√		31	Holyness		√
14	Innocent	√		32	Alice		√
15	Innocence		√	33	Hance	√	
16	Heaven-light	√	√	34	Oliver		√
17	Good-luck	√		35	Collin	√	
18	Livingstone	√		36	Daylen	√	

erosion of traditional naming customs, especially among the youth. Many indigenous names are being replaced, reducing the cultural lexicon and undermining historical continuity. For instance, while "Livingstone" is typically a Western surname, some Meru individuals use it as a first name. The same applies to "Collin," a name shared by

celebrities like Phil Collins and Joan Collins, now used as a personal name in Meru.

The prestige associated with Western, Islamic, and Christian names reinforces their desirability (Agyekum 2006). As older generations pass, the knowledge and cultural meaning of indigenous names may not be transmitted effectively, leading to a weakened sense of heritage. This naming shift also contributes to a broader linguistic and semantic transformation, with ethnic languages increasingly sidelined. English, Swahili, Christian, and Muslim names dominate formal settings such as churches, mosques, schools, and workplaces.

Lusekelo and Muro (2018) observed a similar pattern among the Machame-Chagga, where formal schooling facilitated Westernisation and the widespread adoption of English names. Likewise, Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2018) notes that many educated and employed Igbo parents have distanced themselves from traditional naming practices. In Meru, indigenous names are often absent from birth certificates. During baptisms, a standard formula of biblical/foreign first name, surname, and clan name is used. This blend preserves clan identity for cultural purposes while promoting foreign names for official identification.

Yet, unlike in the Igbo community, where clan names are disappearing (Nnamdi-Eruchalu 2021), Meru still retains them. This balance reflects a dual identity strategy: Embracing modernity without entirely abandoning tradition. Islamic naming patterns in Meru also support this view. Muslim families from clans like Sikawa and Pallangyo adopt Islamic names (e.g., Mohammed, Salim, Hemed) but retain their Meru clan names. This pattern mirrors trends observed by Agyekum (2006) among the Akan and by Lusekelo and Muro (2018) among various African groups, where Islamic and Christian names erode traditional naming systems while coexisting with them in some contexts. The list of names presented in Table 7 may illustrate this.

Table 7. Foreign Names Registered in Meru Society

1	Abel Peter Sumari	37	Emmanuel Isangya	73	Helen John Manento
2	Anna A. Nkya	38	Eva Anderson Pallangyo	74	Hilda Jonus Nyiti
3	Agape Raymond Pallangyo	39	Emmanuel Isangya	75	Hilda Ndekirwa Sumari
4	Allen Joshua Mbise	40	Eunice Ndetaulwa Pallangyo	76	Holness Charles Pallangyo
5	Aman Thomas Ikayo	41	Elitwaza Jeremia Manento	77	Happy Emmanueli Nanyaro
6	Alpha Exaud Urassa	42	Elizabeth Jerome Kiungai	78	Hillary Mungure
7	Anna Jonson Sumari	43	Erick Jonson Sumari	79	Hosiana Zebedayo Sumari
8	Anna Sifaeli Kaaya	44	Emmanuel Mussa Kaaya	80	Hillary Amosi Pallangyo
9	Joyce Kisali	45	Ephather Abraham Isangya	81	Henrich Sumari
10	Anitha Kiungai	46	Eliakira Wilson Pallangyo	82	Hevenlight Isangya
11	Abeli Niwaeli Sumari	47	Hamphrey Robert Mbaga	83	Husen Jumanne Jumma
12	Arthal Ernest Pallangyo	48	Hance Ayo	84	Innocent Patrich Pallangyo
13	Asifiwe Wariaeli Sumari	49	Erick Gidion Pallangyo	85	Irine Terevael Sawe
14	Ayoub Elisante Pallangyo	50	Jonson Pallangyo	86	Irene Jackson Pallangyo
15	Beatrice Elibariki Nyiti	51	Farida Jumanne	87	Jackline Joshua Pallangyo

16	Baraka Noeli Mbaga	52	Florance Israeli Anael	88	Jasmin Peter Nasari
17	Baraka Joel Isangya	53	Florah Mmari	89	Jackson Sifaeli Isangya
18	Baraka Samson Pallangyo	54	Faustine Loth Isangya	90	James Israeli Kaaya
19	Beatrice Samweli Pallangyo	55	Florah Pallangyo	91	Janeth Moses Nyiti
20	Calvinsiou Jonathan Mbise	56	Furaha Msofe	92	Johakimu Jonson Mwenga
21	Caroline Silvester Pallangyo	57	Francis Nyiti	93	Janeth Josephat Pallangyo
22	Shidala Warioba Mlugu	58	Fredrick G. Pallangyo	94	Jemima Epaphra Pallangyo
23	Daniel Kaaya	59	Florida Amos Sumari	95	Jesca Chrispher Mbaga
24	David Nahumu Mwidadi	60	Francis John Ayo	96	Jesca Simon Isangya
25	Danieli Samweli Sikawa	61	Frank Thomas Sikawa	97	Joyce Aman Akyoo
26	Debora Daniel Suamari	62	Frank Augustino Kaaya	98	Jesca Lazaro Akyoo
27	Denis Christopher Isangya	63	Furaha Pendaeli Pallangyo	99	Jenipher Richard Pallangyo
28	Dorice Kanaangira Sindila	64	Godlove Lazaro Kaaya	100	Jesca Noel Tilya
29	Diana Lewis Mbuya	65	Godfather Richard Kaaya	101	Jesca Elirehema Nasari
30	Dorine Musa Ekayo	66	Getrude Zablon Sumari	102	Jesca Abrahamu Sikawa
31	Devis Assenga	67	Getrude Zakaria Pallangyo	103	Janeth Sifaeli Mungure

32	Dursila Efatha Sumari	68	Gerald Reuben Kaaya	104	John Joel Sumari
33	Ecobeth Samwel Sumari	69	Gift Noel Mbise	105	Joan Mawere
34	Edwin Fanueli Pallangyo	70	Gladness Obed Mbise	106	Joyce Ayo
35	Eunice Erick Sikawa	71	Godlack Nyiti	107	Judith Richard Ayo
36	Edward Ignas	72	Humphrey Pallangyo	108	John Joshua Sikawa

To validate the data in Table 7, this article employed a qualitative approach incorporating percentages. While percentages are more common in quantitative research, they can effectively highlight trends in qualitative analysis by illustrating the frequency of specific naming patterns (Miles et al. 2013, Creswell & Poth 2017, Flick 2018). To assess the growing prevalence of foreign first names in the Meru community, particularly among younger generations, the study analysed the names of 108 individuals who registered as a group to collect donations. These names were drawn from social spaces such as churches, mosques, schools, and workplaces.

Traditionally, being recognised as a full Meru person requires three core elements: fluency in the Meru language, identification with peer cohort names, and a clan name. However, globalisation and regional interactions have weakened the role of indigenous languages and naming conventions. The analysis focused on the first and third (clan) names to measure the extent of Western influence. Among the 108 names in Table 7, six lacked a clan name, making origin identification difficult, while thirteen used non-Meru clan names. Of the remaining 89 individuals, nine (10%) had biblical (first) names, four (5%) had Swahili names, and a significant 76 (85%) had English names. While

96% still used Meru clan names, 5% substituted them with another indigenous name, such as a grandfather's.

These findings underscore the widespread replacement of indigenous names with English or other foreign names, driven by forces of colonisation, globalisation, education, and religious conversion. Western names are increasingly viewed as prestigious, modern, and internationally recognisable, especially among the youth. This shift in naming conventions risks eroding the cultural and historical lexicon of traditional names.

This widespread preference for English names aligns with earlier observations by Saarelma-Maunumaa (2003), Agyekum (2006), Makoni et al. (2007), Chauke (2015), Lusekelo and Muro (2018), and Lusekelo and Mtenga (2020), who found that Western names often introduced through Christian baptism or colonial education signify higher status and modernity. In Meru, these foreign names have become dominant in institutions such as churches, schools, and formal documentation, while indigenous names are increasingly confined to informal or clan contexts. Despite this shift, clan names continue to play a vital role in preserving Meru identity and family.

4. Discussion

The article examines perceptions of aboriginal names among the Meru people of Tanzania after the onset of Europeans on the African continent. Analysis of data revealed that the imposition of European administrative structures, linguistic impositions, and cultural assimilation efforts brought about a model shift in naming practices, the adoption of foreign names, as well as the creation of names by using religious concepts from Meru words or lexemes. The change in naming concord

not only reflected a cultural imposition but also a noticeable disappearance from the traditional implications and meanings embedded in aboriginal names.

With the imposition of European naming practices, most individuals in Meru society tend to name their children using Christian names. Mbiti (2015) identifies Christianity as a major force of cultural transformation in Africa, particularly in its influence on indigenous rituals, belief systems, and naming practices. This is echoed by Dadey (2022), who notes that Christian missionary activities significantly altered traditional ceremonies, such as the Akan naming ritual. These ceremonies, which traditionally involved specific timings, symbolic acts, ancestral roles, and the selection of culturally meaningful names, were gradually restructured or replaced under Christian influence. Despite the imposition of European naming practices in Meru land, most Meru individuals sought to preserve their cultural identity by maintaining or integrating their traditional names alongside the newly acquired ones (foreign names). For example, some individuals in Meru choose to incorporate English names alongside their indigenous names, either by adopting them as additional names or by using them interchangeably with their indigenous names.

The article established that foreign names and clan names in Meru society are legally used in family ID cards, educational certificates, driving licenses, schools, churches, and other official places. Fakuade et al. (2018) contend that religious feelings, the rigid personal naming practices of the people, the tendency to cover identity, political and socio-economic motivation are remote causes of the name shift. The shift resulted in an extreme decline of ethnic personal names, reflecting the cultural shift and the loss of indigenous terminology. In Meru, for example, English names are not only seen as modern, fashionable, and international, attractive to some individuals as a way to express their

connection to the wider world, but they are also chosen for practical reasons, such as facilitating communication with people who are not familiar with indigenous names.

Aribowo and Herawati (2016) argue that the shift in naming in Javanese society encourages modern parents to use new words (i.e., Arabic words) for their children, leading to the Javanese people identifying as part of the Muslim community rather than as Javanese. The tone may reflect the situation in the Meru community.

These findings on Meru naming transformations resonate with broader scholarly insights on the socio-political dimensions of language and identity. Recent studies in the *Journal of Universal Language* further illuminate the significance of naming in shaping cultural and institutional dynamics. For example, Sanni-Suleiman (2025) highlights how colonial language planning continues to influence African educational and administrative structures, echoing the legal and institutional roles names now play in Meru society. Lee and Chin (2025) demonstrate how religious texts and translation practices shape authority and identity, mirroring how Christian and Islamic influences have altered naming perceptions in Meru. Similarly, Park (2023) explores how multilingual hierarchies affect social identity in postcolonial contexts, reinforcing the idea that English and Islamic names in Meru reflect both aspirational and pragmatic alignments with broader global systems. These comparative perspectives not only validate the Meru experience but also underscore its relevance within African naming typologies and the evolving field of postcolonial sociolinguistics.

While this study focuses on the Meru community, similar transformations in naming practices have been observed across Africa. Among the Akan of Ghana, for instance, names are used to mark days of birth or ancestral lineage, and many communities have

experienced shifts toward Western or Christian names due to colonial and religious influence (Agyekum 2006). Likewise, among the Yoruba of Nigeria, names often reflect spiritual meanings or social circumstances, but colonial pressures introduced changes in naming choices and public identity (Akinyemi 2005). These cases mirror the Meru experience, where traditional names are maintained in domestic or ceremonial settings while European names dominate formal domains. Such parallels illustrate the typological patterns in naming across postcolonial African societies, where naming becomes a site of negotiation between heritage and imposed identities.

The article revealed that the establishment of the Islamic religion in some areas in Meru reinforced the shift in naming practices. For example, a few individuals who were civilised into Muslim belief led to the existence of a new faith in society, which in turn resulted in some parents and families practising Islam and using Islamic names for themselves and their children.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of European colonialism, Christianity, and Islam on naming practices in the Meru community of northern Tanzania. Findings reveal that indigenous names, once central to cultural identity and spiritual meaning, were undervalued by missionary ideologies that associated them with ancestral worship and impurity. As a result, many Meru individuals adopted Christian, English, and, to a lesser extent, Islamic names for official and institutional use. However, rather than completely abandoning tradition, some continued to use indigenous names in local and informal domains, reflecting a dual system of cultural negotiation.

The study highlights that naming among the Meru is not only a personal or cultural act but a reflection of broader socio-religious and political dynamics. This underscores the importance of recognising naming as a site of identity formation, cultural preservation, and power relations in postcolonial contexts. The findings suggest the need for culturally responsive approaches in religious and educational institutions, such as promoting the Meru language in catechism and preserving initiation practices that transmit traditional names to sustain indigenous knowledge and values.

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