

# A Person Can Be Called *Jidulamabambasi*

## *Sukuma Nicknaming in Tanzania*

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### Abstract

Among the Sukuma people of Tanzania, the practice of nicknaming is a powerful tradition that serves multiple functions. Nicknames highlight individuals' moral traits, social status, indexing community approval or disapproval. Nicknames also weld relationships, ostracise individuals, and exert social pressure. Nicknaming is inspired by various triggers, including the target's physical traits, habitual behaviour, occupation, wealth, sexual orientation, and pomposity; it may serve as a tag for *utani* (teasing or joking). Ordinary speakers are sensitive to the significance of nicknames, and have recounted both positive and negative consequences of their use: as a means of discouraging unbecoming behaviour, enhancing closeness, signalling familiarity, inviting intimacy, and expressing approval of laudable deeds. Nicknames are also intended to embarrass, shame, undermine a target's good standing in the community, and sometimes to deliberately escalate conflict. An important societal dimension of Sukuma nicknaming is their use in fostering and publicizing a change in a person's social status or network of relationships, often signalling the cohesive bonds among specific members of a speech community.

### Keywords

nicknaming – Sukuma of Tanzania – *utani* – social cohesion – unusual behaviour

## Introduction

Sukuma is a Tanzanian Bantu language in the Niger-Congo phylum (Williamson and Blench 2004, Gunderson 2010) and grouped as F21 by Maho (2009: 44). It is spoken mainly in the five administrative regions of Shinyanga, Mwanza, Tabora, Geita and Simiyu as recorded by the National Bureau of Statistics Tanzania (NBS) (2022: 8). The speech community is located in the north-western part of the country. The approximate total population of Sukuma speakers in the regions is estimated at 14,450,955 people (NBS 2022), using official population data.<sup>1</sup> Important elements of the social structuring and its transformation in Sukuma communities is recognised by analysing systematically their use of nicknames.

A number of studies have been carried out on Sukuma personal names (e.g. Athanas 2019, Shigini and Mapunda 2023, Mapunda and Shigini 2024). Some of these studies have focused on morphological characteristics of the names, others highlight their semantic features (Athanas 2019); other studies delve into contrasts in the ethnography of clan-centred naming (Kalekwa 2018); still others illuminate the rituals surrounding the naming process (Manyasa 2008); more recent studies focus on the gender implications of naming (e.g. the work of Lusekelo and Manyasa (2022) on Nyamwezi, a closely related sister language to Sukuma. Shigini (2020, 2023) examined the principles guiding varied personal naming practices among the Sukuma; and Mapunda and Shigini (2024) studied the different motivations for the selection of personal names among the Sukuma.

Yet there is no study to date devoted to Sukuma nicknames. Very little is known about nicknames in Tanzania in general. As of now, only four studies are known of: one is by Mapunda (2014) which exposes the practice of nicknaming University of Dar es Salaam lecturers bestowed by students; Taji (2024) has focussed on the morphosemantics of Kiswahili nicknames. Mapunda (2025) has also researched the nicknaming of Tanzanian secondary school teachers by their students. A study by Omari (2011) talks about the selection of pseudonyms among Tanzanian *bongo fleva* popular musicians. However, hers is not properly classified as a study purely of nicknames since she includes a professional and sometimes a legal dimension in her analysis. Morgan (1979: 16) views a nickname as “... an *eke*-name derived from the old English verb

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1 Even though the National Bureau of Statistics Tanzania did not include a question on ethnic background, the common practice is to make approximations based on the population. In this case, the approximation is informed by the demographic composition of the five regions.

*acan*, meaning to add to or augment, thus an *eke*-name was one given above legal baptismal name.”

Strictly speaking nicknames are informal, and remain chiefly within the community of the individual's birth; they describe mannerisms, dressing and speaking styles, personal relationships, and physical characteristics. Nicknames are regarded as unofficial; they are not documented or formally recorded on birth certificates, academic qualifications, driving licenses or other legally binding documents. Sukuma nicknames convey humour, admiration, opprobrium reflecting the individual's daily life (Mapunda 2014).

In Sukuma, nicknames are not assigned for their own sake; they are always determined by social dynamics in the sector of the community where their use is sustained. This finding confirms the point made by Leslie and Skipper (1990: 273), nicknames and names in general:

are not just arbitrary symbols; they signify status, achievement, privilege, and meaningful social organization. They may communicate ethnicity, social status, and social prestige, all understood as meaningful within social contexts.

### Recognising 'Nickname' as a Distinct Genre

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1978: 330) defines a nickname as “an informal name given to an individual in place of, or in addition to, his given name.” Mapunda (2014: 90) emphasises that unlike names given at or soon after an infant's birth, an individual gets nicknamed for a variety of reasons related to the contexts in which that person is related to others, such as work or school, or in arenas where people from different cultures or ethnicities interact. Nicknaming in these contexts captures noteworthy stereotypes and popularly recognised characteristics such as the way the nicknamed individual works, their common speech mannerisms, dress style, and so on. In school contexts, Mapunda (2025) found that in Tanzanian secondary schools, students nickname their teachers clandestinely; so these nicknames function as a way of speaking in an insubordinate way albeit behind the authority's back. Teachers' nicknames usually reflect their mannerisms, physical appearance, their mastery or incompetence regarding their subject matter, and mannerisms of their choice of words when teaching.

The definition of 'nickname' adopted here follows that of Mapunda (2014), being an additional name given beyond the formally adopted baptismal name and associated with observed or imagined attributes of the referent. In Sukuma,

new born children do not necessarily bear any baptismal (i.e. Christian) name. As Mapunda and Shigini (2024) point out, there are Sukuma people with ‘inherent’ names such as *Masanja* [lit. meetings] (i.e. born at a point where two roads meet), *Mabhula* (born during heavy rains) and *Nyamiji* (root bearer); but these individuals may still acquire nicknames, either given by themselves or by others in the community according to different discourse-pragmatic contexts, including their behaviour, character strengths such as diligence, or weaknesses such as laziness, physical attributes such as beauty or stature. Therefore, Sukuma nicknames are granted to people in addition to their formal and family-assigned names.

### Sukuma People and Their Naming Practices

The Sukuma people engage in a range of economic activities including agriculture where they grow maize, rice, groundnuts, cotton, sweet potatoes, cassava, sorghum, and millet, and other food crops. They also are known for their husbandry, keeping cows, goats, sheep, dogs, and donkeys in addition to poultry. Wijzen and Tanner (2002: 69) observe that “[f]or the Sukuma, livestock particularly cattle, serve as the standard measure of wealth, status, and means of exchange.” They are artisanal fishermen especially around Lake Victoria; and they sustain artisanal mining of diamonds and gold. Some of them conduct different types of commercial businesses, selling the products of their agricultural activities (Mapunda and Shigini 2024). Some of the nicknaming reflects the economic activities performed throughout their community.

Virtually all societies observe characteristic naming practices, according to the existing literature (e.g. Ngubane 2000, Shigini 2023). But the Sukuma are notable for having three distinct classifications which capture different systems of naming. The first category refers to a person’s home name or inside name, known as *liina lya mkaaya*. As Koopman (2000) suggests, there is an auxiliary category of names comprising traditional home names. These include names capturing circumstances of the person’s birth (e.g. *Masanja*, mentioned above), and also *Kulwa* (first twin born), or *Shija* (born after twins). These are classed as home names because their use cannot be extended to public arenas including school or the workplace. This kind of naming reflects an inherited custom that has carried on over generations and sustaining it can be read as a way of contemporary Sukuma conscientiously maintaining their traditions and honouring their ancestors.

A second category of naming is religious, and mostly involves Christian names. The Sukuma refer to this as a person's *liina lya shule* or their 'school name'. Ngubane (2000) maintains that traditional naming systems show that early contact period between African and European societies influenced the naming practice among most African societies. The same scenario obtains in Sukuma-land in which people are baptised and given foreign or Christian names such as John and James for boys, and Mary or Esther for girls. English names are mainly reserved for use in formal religious settings or in the work place; this brackets the colonial influence brought about through conversion to Christianity as a deviation from Sukuma cultural practices.

Home names were found difficult to pronounce by foreigners, and people who entered school had to be given English names that could be easily pronounced by European authorities. Christian names are considered prestigious, as a sign of potential for advancement from 'primitive' to 'modern' upward mobility, associating the bearer with western civilisation (cf. Mapunda and Shigini 2024).

The third category of attribution is that of nicknames. Sukuma people regard nicknames as central to the overall naming practice; they describe the very category of nicknames in several ways, e.g. as *liina lya mbina* (lit. name used in traditional dances), or as *liina lya mamelo* (lit. joke name). Sukuma nicknames carry interesting semantic values. Nicknames are important insofar as they communicate implicitly social information about the nicknamed person. Joke names oftentimes are used for teasing the bearer. Nicknames are coined for other societal functions beyond teasing, as well.

As shown in other studies (Mapunda 2014, Dianitami et al. 2023), Sukuma nicknames may carry positive or negative connotations, depending on their source or motivation. Self-given nicknames may be a version of self-praise or aggrandizement. When such a self-appointed nickname is sustained by others, then it emphasises social approval of an attribute of the bearer. For example, a person with a strong character who can solve stressful societal conflicts or troubles, or someone who habitually brings joy to others, will definitely be assigned a pleasant and flattering nickname. In contrast, someone who displays a feeble character or laziness will sustain a derogatory nickname.

### Nicknaming and Social Cohesion

Sukuma nicknames demonstrate the importance of social cohesion. Members of this society are identified by the particular bonds they share with others in

their community. Among the proponents of this social cohesion perspective are the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Émile Durkheim. Durkheim (1893) argued that in order to sustain social order, two forms of solidarity are needed: firstly, *mechanical solidarity* is evident in traditional and small-scale societies such as the Sukuma, where homogeneity follows from the fact that all individuals share many attributes in common such as religion, culture, and work. This contrasts with the *organic solidarity*, which Durkheim regarded as emerging within modern capitalist societies, referring to the kinds of interdependence resulting from the division of labour.

Recent studies (Smith and Jones 2021, Thompson 2022) have also suggested the role of nicknames in fostering social bonds and community identity in contemporary society. Nicknames not only contribute to recognition of the individual, but also play a vital role in enhancing interpersonal connections among community members, further emphasising the enduring cultural practices surrounding naming conventions.

In regard to the application of social cohesion theory in sociology, social psychology, and leaving to one side political discourse, Chan et al. (2006) identify key features of behaviour as cohesive because it is contributing to sub-groups' integration, or to a community's stability, or conversely to its disintegration. While all these relationships inform our own study, we are primarily concerned with social cohesion as it enters into the idea of belonging in a group. As social psychologists Bollen and Hoyle (2001) recognise it, belonging is central to the very existence of a social group or a community. Thus we regard nicknaming as a social practice to be central to the way members of a community sustain its cohesion and its integrity as a system of norms and regulating pressures; this is particularly clear in the cases where a nickname negatively evaluates a behavioural trait or habit and thereby has the potential effect of extinguishing or minimizing that habit.

### Collecting the Nicknames and Reflections upon the Nicknaming Practice

Data in this study was through interviews in two districts, one in Didia Village, Shinyanga Region and in Shaleng'wa Village, Tabora Region. A total of 120 nicknames were collected, sixty of which are presented in the appendix. Even though there is a general understanding that Tabora is inhabited by the Nyamwezi ethnic group, this is not completely true. In Shaleng'wa and in neighbouring villages located in the Nzega District, the inhabitants are mostly Sukuma. A total of twenty-four consultants helped with the identification

and description of the nicknames. We held the interviews in the consultants' homes for their convenience. The age of these consultants ranged from fifteen to over sixty years old; fourteen of these were male, and the remaining ten were female, in order to get views of nicknaming from both genders. The interviews were aimed to get information about existing nicknames as well as their significance in the community. We reached out for further clarification sometimes after the initial interviews by telephone. Most of the consultants were primary school graduates, with a few having secondary or post-secondary education.

### Typology of Sukuma Nicknames

We propose a comprehensive typology of Sukuma nicknames, based on at least eight categories from the patterns we have observed. This typology is meant to address all kinds of nicknames, not just ethnic or traditional names such as those proposed by Manyasa (2008) and Shigini (2023). So our typology includes nicknames based upon physical appearance, eccentric behaviour, occupation, wealth, conspicuous habits, boasting, sexual orientation, and *utani* (joking) relationships. Due to the very large number of the nicknames collected, we discuss only a portion here and present others in the appendix, where the richer understanding and diversity of Sukuma nicknames can be better appreciated.

**Physical appearance.** As a very prominent source of nicknames among the Sukuma, one example is the common *Matemba* which originates from the verb *temba*. *Kutemba* is to show anger by elongating one's lips. At present, *Matemba* is a nickname bestowed on individuals with prominent lips regardless of whether they are prone to expressing anger in this way. A person who keeps his beard long is nicknamed *Malezu* (beard). A person with red eyes was given the nickname *Tundubhala* derived from two Sukuma words: *tundu* meaning red eyes, and *bhala* which is a type of bird that preys upon baby chicks.

A person who is very tall may be given the nickname *Isanzule*, which refers to a species of tall tree found in the Sukuma region. Notably, slim people are nicknamed *Ngonye* which translates as 'an extremely slim cow'. Perceived beauty is also a common source of nicknames among the Sukuma people. For example, a beautiful girl may be nicknamed *Nyankole*, which originally refers to a long-horned cow from the neighbouring countries of Rwanda and Uganda. It is particularly assigned to a girl who is tall and beautiful. Conversely, *Ngikulu Kumiso* is a nickname formed from two words: *Ngikulu* meaning old lady, and *Kumiso* which means in the eyes. This nickname is given to a young girl who is plump and appears older than her actual age.

On the other hand, not all nicknaming is complimentary. *Mabundu*, derived from the verb *bhundula* meaning to gaze intently at something or someone, is given to individuals with prominent or bulging eyes. If not carefully handled, nicknaming triggered by such physical characteristics can cause embarrassment and emotional distress for the target. Calling someone *Mabundu* or *Kimbulu* (which refers to a species of wild cat) just because of the dimensions of his eyes, can be both insulting and humiliating. According to our consultants, the Sukuma practice of nicknaming is not always socially acceptable.

Borrowed words are used as nicknames across the different categories. Sukuma speakers may also nickname a slim person *Kimobiteli* which originates from the time when mobile phones were introduced in Tanzania by a company called Mobitel. The phones were very slim in design, and so to this day a slender woman is referred to as *Kimobiteli*. Other scholars of onomastics have also observed this (cf. Mapunda 2014, Pais 2018). Being concerned about a person's appearance can serve as a social cohesion strategy either by appreciating that person or regarding them in a derogatory way.

**Unusual behaviour.** Distinctive mannerisms or behavioural idiosyncrasies contribute to individuals' identity (cf. Wijzen and Tanner 2002: 13). An example in Sukuma is *Maashi Geegela*, ('shit is approaching') given to a person known for using provocative words, as a means of signalling the need to brace oneself for bad luck upon his or her approach. Cultural nuance shapes language as it does identity; it may also condition behaviour of the brunt of such a nickname. In communities where confidentiality is valued, people who are tattle-tales or tend to gossip and appear unable to keep secrets are nicknamed *Gabagu*, meaning 'a big open mouth' (cf. Mapunda 2023: 89). Additionally the nickname *Kalomo Njcho* (*kalomo* refers to a small mouth (since *njcho* can be translated as 'lightweight'), meaning a person who tends to talk carelessly about other people's affairs. Such nicknames serve both as playful jibes among members of a community that frowns upon such behaviour.

Some individuals display the habit of visiting other people's homes close to mealtime and leave immediately after eating. Such individuals are nicknamed *Lyaguje* meaning 'eat and run'. Sukuma people traditionally share their meals communally on a shared plate and often eat with their bare hands; so an indecorous expression of gluttony is to scoop large handfuls of food at once, making it difficult for others to get their fair share. Such individuals are usually nicknamed *Magandula* to describe this lack of consideration for others.

**Occupation.** Different occupations can serve as significant inspirations for nicknaming, highlighting the close relationship between a person's work or trade and their public identity. *Mafulila* (cooking pots) is the name given to someone whose primary occupation is to repair damaged cooking vessels.

The name *Ng'wananyama* (literally, 'child of meat') is given to the tradesperson well-known in the village for selling meat and other ingredients for soup. This coheres with the findings of Chiwanga and Mkiramweni (2019: 4) in the Serengeti, where Natta individuals get named after their occupations: e.g. *Manungu* (derived from *anungu*, meaning ostrich) is given to successful male hunters, particularly those who are known for running with speed and agility much like the ostrich. Additionally, expert hunters are also given the name of their most common prey, such as the nickname *Kahache* for those renowned for catching the *kahache* (hornbill) bird.

**Wealth.** Our informants were consistent in revealing that positive nicknames are associated with wealth and possession, usually given to men and thereby reflecting Sukuma society's patriarchal structure, whereby men traditionally own land, livestock, other forms of property, or command large reserves of food, while women generally do not. A person who is well-provided with food may be nicknamed *Lutuubhilakule* (literally, someone who is responsible for a domicile where inhabitants only go hungry when away from home, since there is always plenty of varied types of food available).

An individual who is financially secure would be nicknamed *Ng'wanzalupia* (someone who dresses his bed with money because of richness). *Ng'wanzalupia* is a compound of two nouns, *ng'wanza* (someone who makes beds) and *lupia* (money). The noun *lupia* is borrowed from Hindi and nativized into the Sukuma lexicon. Another nickname for wealthy persons is *Ng'weenhwandege* (someone who is brought home by an aeroplane). This is another compound noun composed of *Ng'weenhwa* (someone in transport) and *ndege* (aeroplane). Air tickets are extremely expensive for rural dwellers who normally move by motorcycle, bicycle, or car. People who can afford to frequent commercial airplanes are likely to be famous in the community. Many nicknames adorn people of conspicuous wealth and wherewithal.

Conversely, *Masilindi* which literally means rags is a nickname generally given to someone who wears worn-out or inexpensive clothes; which is a habit associated with poverty or financial difficulties. A person with this nickname is regarded as a pauper, destitute, or completely indigent. Consultant Px3 (a forty-two year old male teacher) asserted that *Masilindi* is never attributed to oneself. A person so nicknamed has no cattle, no land, and no house of value. Such a person does not have any say in society. Usually it is difficult for him to get a wife. *Dondogoso* (pronounced as *Tondogoso* in some Sukuma dialects) is a nickname given to someone who commands low respect in society due to his laziness and indolence. The literal meaning of this nickname is a species of grasshopper that is inedible, thus it carries no value. An orphan who has been left by parents without property is given the nickname *Kahabi*.

**Common behaviour.** Some people who display conspicuous character traits get labelled with that as part of their identity. For example, a person who is very shy or cautious of others is nicknamed *Ikunguulu* (a scarecrow). Those who frequently drink local alcohol are nicknamed *Manengelo*, referring to the Sukuma word for the large pots commonly used for local beer brewing. Thus an alcoholic will attract this nickname. Those who are physically belligerent and habitually assault others in public are nicknamed *Jidachaang'wa*. Such individuals think that they are displaying domination over others which is not generally condoned in Sukuma society.

*Ya Ng'hwe* was reported as given to a man who frequently imitated a hyena, and thereby attracted the label. A person known to be fond of his large herd of cattle will be nicknamed *Mang'ombe* (many big cows).

**Self-promotion.** It became apparent that some Sukuma people are fond of bragging. Bravado is particularly common during traditional dances, especially when different *ng'oma* (dance) troupes are in competition with each other. Self-appointed bombastic nicknaming occurs in other social situations such as in local brew clubs, or during public quarrels. As Masanja (2016: 69) argues, there are different situations or personalities whereby an individual sets about "winning exceptional personal identity" for himself or herself. Those individuals may assign themselves the nickname *Jidulamabambasi*, which means 'a person who can pinch a hard rock', suggesting the person is unrivalled in physical strength or some other exceptional skill or ability, such as clearing uncultivated land single-handedly; this nickname is especially reserved for men. Such nicknames convey a sense of status, dominance, and personal fortitude. This behaviour is also noted by Wijzen and Tanner (2002: 19–20) and Gunderson (2020: 25–27). One consultant had nicknamed himself *Ituungo* (a honey badger). This is a small but incredibly fierce animal that shows no fear of any creature. It can swiftly eliminate its enemy in the blink of an eye. A person who self-identifies with this nickname takes pride in their ability to defeat their adversary no matter the circumstances.

One nickname accorded by others in this category is *Jimilanzooka*, literally denoting a species of bird known for swallowing snakes. As a nickname it denotes someone capable of extraordinary feats. In addition, we found the nickname *Jipalan'hoonga*, whose literal meaning is 'a person capable of removing every part of a shelled snail'. This is a name given to someone who is able to discern and understand even the most hidden or difficult facts, highlighting their ability to analyse and reveal what others might find indecipherable.

**Gender-based nicknaming.** From the Sukuma consultants' view, gender plays an important role in the assignment of nicknames; some are clearly for men or boys, and others for women or girls. Male nicknames, for instance,

often reflect characteristics associated with power, property ownership, and resilience; these frequently drew upon the concepts property, land, and food, and are linked to traits including toughness, resilience, strength, maturity, boldness, and a sense of humour, as noted above. Further examples include the nickname *Nkali Gucha* (one who is not scared of death) and *Ntale O'balogi* (leading magician). A strong belief in witchcraft is retained among the Sukuma (Wijisen and Tanner 2002: 135–139) and boasting of one's abilities in witchcraft can be highly regarded in this community.

In contrast, the nicknames reserved for women are typically tied to physical appearance, biological characteristics, and social manners, including gentleness, kindness, pleasantness, sweetness, beauty, and overall appeal. Female nicknames reflect a more nurturing, endearing, or aesthetically pleasing image, emphasising qualities often cross-culturally associated with femininity. The focus on appearance or personality in these names revealed societal perceptions of women as they serve, attract and please others. Notable examples include *Kaswa Kadoto* (small green grass), *Kachencha* (a small watermelon, roundly shaped and sweet to taste), and *Nyankole* (a breed of cattle known for their tall stature and long horns, originating from Rwanda and Uganda) is used to describe tall girls perceived as particularly beautiful among the Sukuma.

***'Utani' (joking) relationship.*** As holds in many traditional societies and in many Tanzanian communities, the joking relationship signals this kind of bond, known in Kiswahili as *utani*, and *mamelo* in Sukuma. Lucas (1975: 5) explains *utani* as:

[a] social relationship between some categories of consanguineal kin in alternate generations by which is established a stated identity of interests, an equality of age, and a context of freedom of expression (characterised by the joking exchanges) for the purpose of socialisation.

Ponera (2010) views this kind of relationship as endemic among Africans, one having clear procedures to follow. Accordingly, Mlaga (2017) identifies at least five types of *utani*: (i) between grandparents and grandchildren, (ii) between brothers-in-law or sisters-in-law, (iii) between different ethnic groups (e.g. Ngoni and Hehe in Tanzania) based on previous warring or trading relationships, (iv) between peers or friends such as within the football fan base of the popular sports teams Simba and Yanga in Tanzania (e.g. Mapunda 2024), and (v) between people who are in competition and decide to display much bravado in public.

Nicknames with negative connotations are used in the absence of the nicknamed person unless the bearer has a joking relationship license. It is here

where *utani* relationship is capable of cushioning negative consequences of the negative nicknames.

Among the Sukuma, *utani* is a quite common practice. Gunderson (2010: 25) comments about *utani* relationships between the *banuunguli* (porcupine dancers) and the *bayeye* (snake dancers). Examples of such nicknames include *Zunzu* which is given to a person who taps other people's drinks, or *Kanziki* given to a person who walks with a swagger or swinging motion as if they are dancing. Another nickname in this category is *Jidafula* which is given to a person who always needs more of whatever they get.

On the next page is a table reflecting these different connotations and types of nickname. A recent study that closely relates to our findings presented below one is by Julius Taji (2024), which focuses on the morpho-semantic analysis of Kiswahili nicknames. Taji classified his nicknames into two broad categories: semantic and morphological. The classification here shows some similarities with his semantic categorization, but none with the morphological. His semantic categories included: (i) talents and abilities, (ii) behaviour, (iii) socioeconomic activities, (iv) physical appearance, (v) dress style and fashion, and (vi) personal history and experience.

TABLE 1      Typology of Sukuma nicknames

	Category	Nickname	Explanation
1	Physical appearance	<i>Tundubhala</i> (A kite with red eyes)	Nickname bestowed on a person whose eyes are red just the red-eyed kite.
		<i>Matuu</i> (Ears)	It is given to a person who has big ears.
2	Unusual behaviour	<i>Mala ga Nzobhe</i> (Hoofs of a donkey)	The name is given to a quarrelsome person who kicks others like the kicking of a donkey.
		<i>Jaraguda</i> (A bird that changes colours with the seasons)	This nickname is given to a person who does not bathe as often during the dry season, but bathes many times during the rainy season because of the availability of water.
3	Occupation	<i>Mchemba Ngoye</i> (A rope cutter)	This nickname is given to someone involved in sisal harvesting.
		<i>Mafulila</i> (Cooking pots)	This nickname is assigned to a person who repairs cooking pots

TABLE 1      Typology of Sukuma nicknames (*cont.*)

	Category	Nickname	Explanation
4	Wealth	<i>Madakope</i> (Uncovered bums)	This nickname is self-given or given by others to refer to a person who is completely poor.
		<i>Lutome</i> (A rich person)	This is a nickname assigned to a person who has a big herd of cattle, food reserve, etc.
5	Common behaviour	<i>Ngwana Ng’hulujo</i> (A child of rope)	This nickname is given to a person who uses a rope to belt his trousers.
		<i>Lumaliya</i> (One who finishes)	It is bestowed on a person who typically speaks last and serves as the one who concludes.
6	Self-promotion	<i>Lukondyamabhiti</i> (One who slims down many hyenas)	This is typically a self-assigned nickname used by a Sukuma traditional dancer to boast.
		<i>Nzoka Yihenge</i> (A cross-eyed snake)	This is typically a self-assigned nickname used in Sukuma traditional dance competitions to boast of exceptional skill.
7	Sexual orientation	<i>Kankenya</i> (A girl who prefers the company of men)	A nickname bestowed on a girl who has more male friends than fellow girls. She can also be a tomboy.
		<i>Nyegela bhoope</i> (One who is cheerful with everyone)	This nickname is sometimes given to a woman who is a concubine.
8	Joking relationship	<i>Kapongo</i> (An antelope with a varied colour pattern)	This nickname is assigned to a person whose hair has two different colour patterns.
		<i>Ngikulu Kuntwe</i> (One who is old in the head)	It is a nickname given to a young girl who appears older due to having gray hair.

Given that Dar es Salaam is a large city with a diversity of activities, educational backgrounds, and occupations, it is challenging to see how Taji (2024) was able to classify the nicknames without selecting consultants based on specific criteria. Nevertheless, a few parallels can be drawn between our study's classification system and his. In the current study, Taji's categories of *physical appearance* and *dress style and fashion* are combined into a single category: *physical appearance*. Another similarity is seen in what Taji terms *socioeconomic activities*, which corresponds to *occupation* in the present paper. Additionally, his category *behaviour* is reflected in this study as *common behaviour*.

### Significance of Nicknames as Recognised by Sukuma Themselves

Nicknames clearly carry positive and pleasant connotations while others are negative, with corresponding consequences. Our consultants were fully equipped to explain the broader significance and impact of this social practice.

**Positive consequences of nicknaming among the Sukuma.** Consultant Px1 (a twenty-nine year old male) asserted: "Sukuma nicknames are assigned by people who are close to, honoured and trusted by the individual being nicknamed, such as grandparents." Others are close friends, playmates, fellow dance troupe mates who are at liberty to highlight attributes of a person's personality, unique character, or physiology. Thus nicknaming is often a form of public display of affection. Nicknames often arise from semantic finesse and linguistic creativity; whereby familiar language is manipulated to create a new identifier. The use of nicknames reflects the complex significance that names carry and the importance of intimates influencing each other's social behaviour (Mapunda 2014).

According to Consultant Px2 (a fifty-seven year old male), nicknames serve various purposes among the Sukuma:

*Majina haya ya utani hutumika mtaani, na wakati mwingine nyumbani. Na hutumika kwa lengo la kuleta furaha na ukaribu.*

These nicknames are used in the community, and sometimes at home. They are employed to promote happiness and closeness.

Consultants also recognised that nicknames are used as ways of deterring behaviour considered unbecoming in the community. Consultant Px6 (a fifty year old female) provided an example of the nickname *Masingija* (loiterer) given to a person who does not want to settle down at one place and do some

work. The unpleasant nickname has the potential of discouraging the behaviour of such a person, thus encouraging them to engage in productive work.

The community's representatives in this study perceived nicknames as having positive qualities admired by the Sukuma. One such attribute is being curvy, which is valued as it symbolizes prosperity. Consultant Px4 (a thirty-three year old male) had this to say regarding the usefulness of some nicknames:

*Wapo wanaofurahia inapotokea jina la utani limebeba tabia nzuri kwa mtazamo wake, au limebeba maumbile anayoyafurahia kama vile urefu. Watu hufurahia kutaniwa kwa urefu.*

There are people who enjoy a nickname particularly if they believe it has positive connotations or highlights admirable physiological attributes such as tallness. People enjoy to be given nicknames based on tallness.

Consequently, someone given a positive nickname becomes famous for that reason in the community. Nicknames like *Nkwabi* (someone who went out of the community to find wealth and comes back rich), or someone who gives himself a bragging nickname such as *Nkalighucha* (a person who is not scared of death), or *Buyegi* (a joyful and happy girl) will always become famous among the Sukuma. This finding is also reported in studies by Mapunda (2014) on lecturers' nicknames at the University of Dar es Salaam, and by Dianitami et al. (2023) as true of Javanese people's nicknames as well.

Sukuma consultants approved of the nicknaming practice because they see it as leading to happiness, well-being, good behaviour, and because it reduces social distance between community members. Consultant Px7 (a twenty-one year old male farmer) explained:

*Majina ya utani hutumika kama namna moja ya kuendeleza utani, ukaribu, kuleta furaha, na kuondoa hali ya kuogopana miongoni mwa wanajamii.*

Nicknames are used as one way of perpetuating jokes, closeness, bringing happiness, and getting rid of the feeling of fear among community members.

Consultants also highlighted the role of nicknaming in social conditioning as a conscious effort to improve behaviour, such as in child rearing: *Kazozo* means 'bedwetter', or using the nickname *Magandula* to point out greediness in settings of communal eating. These are intended as indirect ways to discourage certain kinds of behaviour.

*Negative consequences of nicknaming recognised by the Sukuma themselves.* A number of our consultants disapproved nicknaming among the Sukuma when it dominates clan names or formally bestowed names of individuals, sometimes leading to the eventual extinction of using the latter. This tendency has the potential of tampering with the community's cultural heritage and weakening the clan's ties by distorting individual identities. Preserving clan names is considered a necessity for community integrity and cohesion among the Sukuma. For example, Consultant Px3 (a fifty-seven year old female) explained that:

*Majina ya utani yakitolewa kwa mtoto yanaweza kufunika jina lake la ukoo, na kuanza kutumika katika mazingira rasmi, ikiwemo kuandikishwa shuleni.*

When given to children, nicknames can overshadow their clan names, and may start to be used even in official settings, including school registration.

Nicknames can sometimes lead to disputes within a community, particularly when they emphasize unpleasant traits of the individual being nicknamed. For instance, names like *Nkombi Ituna*, which refers to a species of short sorghum, or *Kakwizu*, a type of short hoe, are commonly assigned to short individuals. Some people may feel offended or marginalized if referred to by their height, and particularly if they are short. As Rosenberg (2009: 914) argues, “[h]eight impacts self-esteem (how individuals regard themselves) and social esteem (how individuals are regarded by others)”, arguing that being short is taken as a deficit. Such negative associations can create tension and resentment, leading to quarrels among community members.

## Conclusion

Nicknaming is an important social practice among the Sukuma of Tanzania, serving as a summary of their entire lifestyle. The practice is rich and practiced by almost all age groups. The typology of nicknames offered here suggests a clear link to physical features of a person, behaviours which are considered unusual in the community, relative economic and material wealth, common behaviours, vocations, norms, special activities reserved for dance pageants, gendered attributes, and signalling interpersonal relations. Not only did the study show the importance of nicknames as a marker of social cohesion and

a practice for enhancing closeness in the community, but the data revealed Sukuma speakers themselves are astute about the psycho-sociological impacts of the nicknaming practice. They informed us that their nicknames have the function of both reinforcing and preserving those individual traits that their society values, and discouraging those traits that are unacceptable in their social eye. Sukuma are aware and fully conversant with these traits being gender-specific.

Sukuma speakers are, thus, sophisticated in their awareness of the points of nexus between the onomastics of nicknames and their importance for establishing individuals' social identity. They are also astute at intentionally using nicknames as a tool for social conditioning, as well as a practice involved in reinforcing community cohesion. Our discussions with the consultants indicated their psycho-sociological awareness about the impact of nicknames, as well as reasons to monitor restraint in their use. Consultants reflected upon the normative symbolism of nicknames: the value placed on material wealth and abundance in Sukuma society, sensitivity for individuals' feelings, the importance of the community's traditional legacies, sensitivity to the importance of co-dependency, and the way names serve as markers of social status, gendered attributes and symbols of prosperity.

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### Appendix: Other Sukuma Nicknames

S/N	Sukuma nicknames	Brief description
1	Bhudooshi Bhojogoo	A person who boasts of becoming better or more successful than other people in his community
2	Bhunguligu	A person who always runs away from problems after escaping their first problem
3	Bhuuyu	A person who has lost some of the teeth
4	Chenya	A person who can pass across fearful or dangerous places
5	Deede	A name was given to a person, especially a woman, whose legs are slim
6	Dome	A person who does not grow despite eating a variety of food
7	Getegete	A man who used to put emphasis on his point with that word
8	Gige	A person with one leg short
9	Iduulu	It is the Sukuma word for zebra, given to a tall person who escapes different situations by running away like a zebra
10	Jeenha Miyeye	A person who brings home happiness
11	Jidagaanda	A person who never gets slim.
12	Jidagina	A person who never gets fat despite eating so much food
13	Jidapang'wa Nyaga	A strong man who cannot be stopped by any means
14	Jipiga	A person who is big in size and can beat up all his enemies
15	Jipoondya	A person who likes to interfere other people's affairs
16	Jisha Mapanda	A person who can grind roads
17	Jitaanga Bhazugi	A person who goes home before dinner is served
18	Jitiinya	A person who can walk freely anywhere without being hurt
19	Ka Bhupaashe	A person whose buttocks are not protruded. Sometimes it is referred to as 'English figure'
20	Kalasta	A person with dreadlock
21	Kabubuni	A person who can chew difficult nuts without any problem

(cont.)

S/N	Sukuma nicknames	Brief description
22	Kamatamtam	A person who sells sweet things
23	Kandundi	A person whose legs are slim
24	Kansimamiko	A person whose one leg looks very much like a bicycle's stand
25	Kanyuke	A person who uses such a word to denote an emphasis on somebody punishing another one
26	Kuube	A person who can provide everything, god
27	Lubhaaga Mhanga	A person who can skin a human or an animal while still alive
28	Lugendenga Manyau	A person who deals with cats that are used by witchcraft
29	Lugulaaja Mhuli	A person who in the past killed an elephant
30	Luhuluula Bhaliingi	A person who can make other opponents perish
31	Lukundagula Mbogoshi	A person who can open witchcraft material things that other normal people cannot afford to do and the person is not affected in anyhow
32	Lweelwe	A name given to a person who is not well understood
33	Lyamapondo	A person with some scars on his head
34	Magulu adatu	A person whose one of the legs has some problems thus using a stick as a support
35	Masalago	A person with many scars
36	Miso Mng'ombe	A person whose eyes are always onto cows
37	Mpang'wa limbe	A name was given to a lazy or weak person
38	Nchagijo	A person with one leg shorter than the other, causing them to walk with a slight twist of the body.
39	Ndamhala Yanguku	An old person who walks like an old monkey
40	Ndilanha	A person who is quick in everything, just like a calf
41	Ng'holo	A docile person, just like a sheep
42	Ng'ogela Shiida	A person who takes shower only when travelling
43	Ng'wana Oshimba	A person who believes that he is a son of a lion
44	Ng'wana Waalwa	A person who likes beer
45	Ng'wanagandila	A person professional in traditional medicine
46	Ng'wanamageembe	A person whose base or nature is from agricultural activities

(cont.)

S/N	Sukuma nicknames	Brief description
47	Ng'wanamaliya	A person who takes himself as a son of Mary, the mother of Jesus
48	Ng'wiizahoongo	A name given to a man who did not want to work rather was waiting for the harvesting periods
49	Ngaka Gubhonwa	A person whose rare appearance is regarded as precious. When one sees such a person, it is considered a blessing
50	Ngaya ng'huuni	A person whose head has no nape at the back
51	Ng'wana Mbuli	A person who is fond of goats
52	Ng'wanipalage	A son of <i>Ipalage</i> (ipalage is a dry uncooked potato food)
53	Nhiga	A tall person who walks majestically just like a giraffe
54	Nkalango	A kind of sauce which is so sweet and is preferred by most of the people in the community. So, the name refers to a sweet person
55	Nkomya Lume	A name given to a person who used to wake up early in the morning and walk out to the farm, wetting his trousers with dew
56	Ntinika	A person with one hand or leg
57	Nzagamba	A strong person with the quality of a bull
58	O'liiso	A person whose one eye is not normal
59	O'ntwe	A person whose head has abnormal shape
60	Ya'wanga	A person whose head has no hair