The Attribution of Kabyle Personal Names

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Abstract

The present study attempts to investigate the socio-cultural dimensions of anthroponyms among the Kabyle people, with a specific focus on naming practices within both family and village contexts. It investigates the underlying factors that influence the choice, transmission, and transformation of personal names and surnames, including historical, cultural, social, and administrative considerations. Drawing on a corpus of personal names gathered from a range of Kabyle villages—namely Sahel, Wizgan, Ahriq, Ihitoussen, Tabouda, Igreb, Abourghes, Hijeb, and Tazrout—the research adopts a descriptive and interpretive approach to analyze the evolution and significance of naming practices over time. The analysis reveals that Kabyle names are not merely individual identifiers but carry deep symbolic and social significance. They serve as markers of ancestry, tribal affiliation, geographical origin, and collective memory. In this sense, anthroponyms function as a vital component of cultural identity, reinforcing social cohesion and continuity within the community. The study also highlights how naming conventions have evolved over time in response to broader socio-political influences, such as colonial rule, state administrative policies, migration, and the growing interaction with other cultures and languages. The findings suggest that the Kabyle naming system reflects a complex interplay between tradition and change. While many names continue to preserve linguistic and cultural heritage, others reveal signs of adaptation or loss due to external pressures. Moreover, the study emphasizes the role of names in shaping both personal identity and group belonging. Understanding these naming practices thus provides valuable insights into Kabyle society, its historical transformations, and its ongoing negotiation of cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Anthroponym; Custom; Surname; Symbolism; Identity.

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1. Introduction

With the emergence of language, humans have endeavored to give an identity to everything around them, starting with concrete objects and then moving on to abstract concepts. Indeed, language, a complex phenomenon essential to any community, is used for various purposes such as the expression of thoughts and emotions, as well as communication with others (Martinet, 1960). It is also employed to define objects and specify identities by assigning them names, in order to avoid any confusion or ambiguity that could hinder the process of communication and mutual understanding. Thus, language can be seen as a dynamic social organism, evolving within the community that uses it: it emerges and transforms with societal progress but also fades with societal decline and eventual disappearance (Imarazene, 2007). However, it is clear that the lexicon is the first component of language to undergo changes and succumb to the threat of extinction. Indeed, it is through the lexicon that language is most visibly manifested, integrating dozens or even hundreds of new lexical creations each year (Haddadou, 2007), drawing on its internal resources or borrowing from other languages. This continuous influx of new terms reflects not only the language's adaptability and responsiveness to new realities but also its vulnerability, as the loss of lexical richness can signal the beginning of a linguistic decline. In this context, numerous researchers have approached the question of anthroponyms from different angles (Chaker (1983); Galand (1950); Yarmeche (2018); Benramdane (2005); Tidjet (2005).

One of the most significantly impacted registers by these changes is onomastics, particularly in the realms of toponymy and patronymy (Haddadou, 2012). These names are crucial to the culture and heritage of any people, as they carry linguistic, social, religious, cultural, and historical significance. They reflect the state of society, its transformations, and its origins. For the Kabyles, anthroponyms and proper names serve as custodians of traditions and ancestral values handed down through numerous generations. These names often carry specific symbolic meanings, encapsulating the essence of the community's collective memory and identity (Cheriguen, 1993). Through these names, the evolving narrative of the Kabyle people, their enduring heritage, and their adaptive responses to changing times are vividly expressed.

As a matter of fact, the use of given names is a fundamental aspect of any society, reflecting its history, culture, and beliefs. In many cultures, choosing a name for a child is far more than a mere practical decision; it is an act imbued with deep and symbolic meanings. By exploring the origin and evolution of given names in society, we can uncover a wealth of traditions, customs, and influential factors.

The aim of this present study is to shed light on the significance of personal names in Kabyle society and culture. Moreover, it tries to answer the following questions:

- How are personal names shaped by societal beliefs and traditions?

- How do Kabyle names change over time?

2. Theoretical framework

Kabyle names have undergone significant changes, both in terms of form and lexicon (their root). Additionally, the attribution of these names seems to be governed by regulations, or at least by values and social practices that influence or dictate their use. Simultaneously, under various influences, particularly that of modernity, individuals resort to using foreign names. However, the revival of certain ancient names could result from identity activism or a nostalgia for their origins.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that there is a limited use of some male and female names before the Algerian independence. Additionally, some names were often accompanied by extensions such as adjectives (ameqqran "senior," amectuh "junior") or nominal determiners, such as changes in family names or the addition of the father's name (Zayna n 3mara, Werdiyya n 3umer). However, starting from the 1970s, new names began to emerge, heavily influenced by the East. This trend can be attributed to the rise of Eastern television and cinema, which had an increasing influence. About a decade later, Amazigh names began to gain popularity and revival partly due to the linguistic, cultural, and identity awareness and the efforts of the Amazigh cultural movement. Our study revealed a diversity in the origins of these names, whether they are Kabyle (Akli, Arezqi, Taklit, and Amectuh, which are typically Kabyle), Amazigh (Takfarinas, Tinhinan, Dyhia, and Massinissa, which are used in all Berber-speaking regions as they refer to famous Amazigh kings). Besides, we have recorded Eastern names as Kamilia, Dunia, and Hind, and Western ones as Anais, Melissa, and Aksil.

2.1. Personal names in Kabyle culture and their values

Personal or family names (surnames) hold significant importance in recognizing identity and belonging. It is important to note that most family names are masculine, reflecting a patriarchal society committed to certain values, including the preservation and protection of women and their honor. Affiliation is thus determined by the father's name, never the mother's.   Unlike other societies, such as certain Western cultures, that strip women of their origin and affiliation by removing their surname upon marriage and imposing a new one, Kabyle society ensures that a woman retains her father's surname throughout her life, regardless of her marital status. For identification purposes, she continues to be recognized by this surname even after marriage. However, upon relocating to another village, her surname often takes precedence over her given name in daily interactions. In such cases, it may undergo a linguistic adaptation, becoming feminized to reflect her gender, while still maintaining its connection to her paternal lineage. Thus, this woman is known among younger people solely by this given name, which is actually her surname. For example, "Tabekkurt" is a feminine name designating a woman from the family of "Ibekkuren," and "Tamerruct" is a feminine name identifying a woman from the family of "Imerrucen." However, a woman who does not leave her native village upon marriage and marries within the same village retains her name and her father's surname, such as "Zayna n Iɛetmanen," belonging to the family of "Iɛetmanen" and married to another family.

When two or more women from the same family marry and settle in the same village, merely retaining the family surname no longer ensures precise identification. In this situation, even though each woman is referred to by her original surname within her immediate family, the use of her name alongside the surname on a broader scale becomes necessary to avoid confusion. For example, a woman named 'Tabekkurt' might be referred to as 'Seɛdiya Ibekkuren' when other women from her family settle in the same village. However, within her in-laws' family, she retains her original surname unless a cousin from her paternal lineage joins the same household. In that case, to distinguish between them, an adjective is added: *tameqqrant* for 'the elder' and *tamecṭuḥt* for 'the younger.

This practice of designating a person is also applied to a notable man who moves to another village or locality to live or work. For example, "Usalem" is used to refer to a man from the family of "At-Salem," or "amerruc" for a man from the family of "Imerrucen." This is a way to remind a person of his origins and signify that he represents his entire extended family, as blood and land ties are sacred in this society, for which he is prepared for sacrifice and even to face death

(Imarazène, 2015). Besides, people can also be designated simply by a role, a quality, or a defect (e.g., afaktur, ccix, taqewqawt).

2.2.. Assigning the same name

In the traditional Kabyle society, it was considered improper, even unacceptable according to customary law (Basset, 1920; Hanoteau & Letourneau, 1873; Camps, 1984; Camps, 1987), to give a newborn the same name as a family member, as it was seen as an ill omen, as if predicting the death of the elder to be replaced by the newborn. However, despite this belief, we observed that several members of the same family sometimes had the same name. This could happen if parents deliberately kept their child's name secret or if the given name became widely admired and respected. Although this could lead to subsequent administrative issues, it never caused problems within the community or in daily practices. Identification of individuals was unambiguous by adding elements such as the father's name, the function, the specific place of residence, a quality or a defect, or other adjectives. For example: Akli n Bujemca, Akli ağadermi, Akli n uzaçar, Muḥend aqewqaw, Muḥend Amezyan, Muḥend Ameqqran, etc.

Creativity in naming reaches its peak with the adaptation of the name of the Islamic prophet. The Kabyles, seeking blessings while respecting the custom of avoiding identical names within the same family, have modified both phonetics and morphology. Phonetically, they have created variations such as Muḥemmed, Muḥend, Mḥend, Mḥemmed, Ḥmed, and Weḥmed. They also devised compound names by adding a determiner or an adjective, such as (Muḥend Ameqqran, Muḥend Amezyan, Muḥand Ucecban, Muḥand Uremḍan, Muḥend Uqasi, Muḥend Arezqi, Muḥend Wecmer, Muḥend Wecli, Muḥend Umusa, Muḥend Ssecdi, Muḥend Ṣṣir, Muḥend Ulhusin, Muḥend Akli, Muḥend Leerbi, Muḥend Ṣṣaleḥ, Muḥend Ulewnis, Muḥend Ubelcid, Muḥend Weḥmed, Hmed Weḥmed ...).

2.3. Warding off bad luck

The Kabyles primarily lived off the produce of their land, which was often mountainous and rocky, yielding limited harvests. The harsh and exhausting living conditions, coupled with a lack of medical care and precautions, sometimes placed pregnant women in precarious situations during their pregnancies. As a result, some women gave birth to stillborns, while others lost their babies within the first hours, days, or weeks after birth. In the collective imagination, these events were interpreted as a curse. To counter this infant mortality, it was necessary to ensure that Death, personified, did not approach and take these babies. Hence, some names with pejorative meanings, such as (Akli) "black, male slave" and (Taklit) "black, female slave," originated.

In other cases, these names referred to life in order to preserve it, such as: (Yidir) "living," (Yehya) "living," borrowed from Arabic, (Tasecdit) "the fortunate, the joyful," (M-ssecd) "the fortunate." The name (Tasecdit) was also used as a euphemism to avoid mentioning a serious illness and to soften its impact. Thus, one would say (teṭtef-it tsecdit-nni) "the fortunate one has taken it" to mean "he is very ill/dying."

2.4. Symbolism of personal names

Personal names generally carry specific symbols and deep meanings of great importance in Kabyle culture and society, in addition to serving as a designation of a person's identity. However, sometimes these names are assigned randomly, without any particular reference. When a deliberate choice is made, it often focuses on names that signify goodness, beauty, success, and happiness, especially for female names. This positive symbolism guides the selection process.

It can also happen that the choice is automatic following a death in the family. As a sign of respect, love, and recognition for the deceased, their children or grandchildren perpetuate their name, thus keeping it alive through their descendants.

- Ferruǧa (Taferruǧt): A feminine name with an Arabized morphology, referring to the young of the partridge, symbolizing beauty. It has an Arabized morphology.
- Taklit: A feminine name with Amazigh morphology, referring to a black woman or a slave.
- Akli: The masculine form of the previous name. It has an Amazigh morphology, referring to a slave or a black man.
- Yidir: A masculine name with Amazigh morphology. It derives from the verb (idir) "to live" and symbolizes life.
- Arezqi: A masculine name with Amazigh morphology. It is borrowed from Arabic and signifies wealth and abundance of means of subsistence.
- Tasecdit : A feminine name with Amazigh morphology. It is borrowed from Arabic, like (M-ssecd, Sacida, and Secdiya). All these names signify luck and good fortune. However, as noted above, this name, Tasecdit, is also used euphemistically and ironically to indicate the misfortune of an illness with unlikely recovery.
- Tameczuzt: A feminine name with Amazigh morphology. This name is also borrowed from Arabic, like (Eziza), and both refer to a dear and highly valued person.

2.5. Value of personal names

A personal name is an essential part of a person's identity. Even in small communities, such as villages, where identification is often done relative to the father's name—referring to someone as the son or daughter of a particular individual—this can become insufficient when parents have several children of the same gender. In the absence of a descriptive adjective, it becomes necessary to mention the first name, followed by the father's name, and sometimes the mother's name or even the family name. The diversity among individuals makes the exclusive use of the first name inadequate for identification. Indeed, using only the first name is appropriate only when there is only one person with that name in a family, social, educational, or professional setting.

Just as in any society, the patronymic and first names assigned to a person among the Kabyles are integral parts of intangible heritage, individual and collective cultural and linguistic identity. These names often carry meanings and values related to history, traditions, customary practices, and community heritage. They reflect the belonging and attachment to the group's identity and its culture. It has been observed since the 1980s that many ancestral names borne by ancient Amazighs, particularly kings, are being assigned to newborns in a militant effort to proudly reconnect with their origins: Yugurten, Yuba, Masinisa, Amnay, Agur, Kahina, Dihia, Amaziy, etc.

Furthermore, the choice of names plays a crucial role in preserving heritage and ancestral traditions. Adopting the name of a deceased person helps to build and maintain good relations between families and neighbors, as it is seen as a sign of respect and appreciation. Retaining old names strengthens the language, culture, heritage, and social ties, especially in rural areas.

Moreover, names carry important symbols that reflect origins among the Kabyles. They indicate lineage and family relationships and are tied to the family's history. The choice of names for offspring illustrates a person's attachment to their roots or their attraction to an encroaching foreign culture. In an era when diverse cultural influences threaten individual integrity, some refuse to stray from their origins and heritage by preserving names passed down through generations.

3. Methodology

This article examines the importance of names, drawing on sociological and anthropological studies. Therefore, our objective through this inquiry is to analyze how names are shaped by elements such as history, geography, religion, beliefs, cultural values, and contemporary trends. For this purpose, data were collected from a corpus composed of various examples, drawn from traditional to contemporary societies, so as to highlight the different factors that guide the choice of names. Additionally, the research explores the impact of modern media on the evolution of names and the diversity of contemporary choices. Finally, it addresses issues of cultural preservation and identity. In other words, how names can serve as a link between the past, the present, and the future of a given society. By gathering empirical data and analyzing concrete cases, this study aims to shed light on the complex and multifaceted role of names in the social and cultural construction of Kabyle society.

Research design

To achieve the aim of the present research, a corpus composed of a set of names that existed in the past was examined to explore the symbolism and meanings of these names as well as the reasons for their use. Additionally, the researchers analyzed some new names that have emerged over the past decades, under the influence of different factors such as religion, administration, culture, and media. This descriptive approach allowed us to highlight certain Kabyle cultural values and practices and their impact on the construction of individual and social identity, for example, the use of specific names to ward off bad luck. Furthermore, the influence of the familial, social, and cultural environment, as well as external influences on the choice and attribution of names in this region are identified so as to better understand the role of personal names in Kabyle society and their contribution to the formation of collective and individual identity.

The context of the study

The study was conducted in Tizi-Ouzou, a Kabyle region located 100 km east of the capital, Algiers. The examined corpus was primarily collected from the civil status offices of the municipalities of Illoula Oumalou and Bouzeguène, located in the former daïra of Azazga. These two localities are situated in the high mountains of Kabylia, on the border between Tizi-Ouzou and Bejaïa.

Data collection procedure

Data collection took place during the first quarter of 2023, with the collaboration of officials and employees from the Local Popular Assemblies as well as relevant services. Working with old records proved challenging due to the complexity or inaccuracy of the transcription of certain names. For example, the pharyngeal sound (ع) in Arabic is often transcribed as (ao) in French on civil status registers, making it difficult to read for those unfamiliar with the language. Moreover, the distinction between certain names like Fatma, Fatima, and Fadhma was often ambiguous, with all being frequently transcribed as (Fatma). This ambiguity was later resolved through a survey we conducted directly with citizens from various villages such as Sahel, Wizgan, Ahriq, Ihitoussen, Tabouda, Igreb, Abourghes, Hijeb, and Tazrout during the second quarter of 2023, as well as by adopting a dual transcription system in the registers (French and Arabic).

4. Discussion of the results

Like in other societies, the Kabyles closely link the history and origins of their names to their situation and environment. Everything that surrounds a person and society plays a crucial role in the choice of names, as language, a pillar of this cultural and social act, is itself a product of its environment. This environment is intrinsically connected to nature, the level of education, culture, beliefs, and historical processes.

Kabyle society is shaped by these various factors, and personal names in Kabylia reflect both ancient roots and the multiple influences the region has experienced over the centuries. Below are some explanations on the history, origin, and usage of some names within the Kabyle tribes.

Kabyle first names find their origin in Amazigh culture, language, and civilization. Among these names, there are those that have been used since ancient times, such as Yidir, Azwaw, Akli, Amezyan, and Ameqqran, as well as those dating back to the oldest Amazigh kingdoms, such as Masinisa, Yugurten, and Yuba.

With the advent of Islam and the influence of religion and the Arabic language, the Kabyles adopted and widely integrated certain Arabic names. In some cases, individuals claimed Arab affiliations to gain higher social status or to avoid paying the *jizya* by presenting themselves as descendants of Arabs from the East (Laddaoui & Bennadji, 2024). Most names of Arabic origin underwent slight phonetic modifications, such as *Malha* instead of *Malihatu*, while others experienced morphological adaptation under Kabyle influence, like *Tameczuzt* instead of *Eazizatu*. Additionally, some names of Kabyle origin were influenced by the morphology of Arabic names and were Arabized in this respect, such as Ferṛuǧa and Jeǧǧiga instead of Taferruǧt and Tajeǧǧigt.

In the modern era, with the direct and indirect contacts of the Kabyles with other societies, languages, and cultures, new names have been introduced into the repertoire of this community's names. Indeed, under the influence of colonization, emigration, education, and especially the media, particularly television, the Kabyle language, its culture, and society undergo multiple influences that introduce hundreds of words into this language. Consequently, many old names are relegated to the background, while others have come to supplant them under the influence of films and actors from Egypt, Brazil, and Turkey. Thus, several names of famous actors in the sports and artistic circles are adopted as first names for newborns (e.g., Mennad, Fahem, and Rahim, which have taken on first names in other regions where they exist as family names). Similarly, films and emigration have imported other names from the East (Samra, Samira, and Zakaria) and the West (Leticia, Anais, and Aksil).

Sociocultural values and beliefs influence the choice of names given to newborns. The transition from ancient to new names, sometimes borrowed from the East and others from the West, and even from the most distant origins, reflects numerous sociocultural and political changes. The choice or imposition of names can sometimes be dictated by one of these factors:

Religious beliefs and the sanctification of Islam and the Arabic language have led to the adoption of many names into Kabyle society in search of blessings. During the early centuries of Islam's arrival in North Africa, some Berbers would adopt Arabic surnames merely to avoid paying the jizya or to gain a higher social status (Imarazene, 2007).

Sociocultural and familial factors also exert a significant influence on the choice of names. Respect for elders and ancestors often leads parents to name a newborn after a deceased relative,

even if these names may seem old-fashioned or archaic to younger generations. Admiration for political, sports, artistic, or other figures has also inspired many people to perpetuate this sentiment by naming their children after these personalities. Sometimes, national convictions or administrative reasons have led to the imposition of name lists and the banning of others.

Furthermore, with the proliferation and frequent use of names in the same environment, and in an effort to avoid confusion, it has become necessary to grammatically define and specify them by adding complements or adjectives to distinguish them. Thus, it was possible to use the same name, differentiated by the addition of an adjective, the father's name, the place of residence, profession, or other available means in each language.

The patronym holds significant importance in Kabyle society for various reasons. It is closely tied to each individual, male or female, until their death. Even after marriage, a woman continues to be identified by her original family name, which remains associated with her first name.

Despite the evident influence of Western and Eastern cultures on the Kabyles, particularly in the adoption of names from these cultures, there has been a resurgence of interest in rehabilitating ancient Amazigh names over the past few decades. There are even lists of so-called Amazigh names that are widely shared and circulated on social media. Similarly, names of revolution heroes have been reintroduced, as if hoping that newborns would embody these heroes and become symbols of their era. Famous family names, as well as those of artists, athletes, and others, are also adopted as first names out of admiration.

With the dissolution of the traditional family unit, the disappearance of the traditional village lifestyle, and the rise of individualism, the Kabyles are no longer constrained in their choice of names for their children. For example, the tradition of reviving the names of the deceased, which had been deeply rooted in Kabyle society as a sign of profound love for the departed and a desire to preserve their memory, is gradually losing its significance to the point where some rejected names are considered outdated. It is also common for newborns to receive two names, one official and the other as a nickname. In other cases, a single person may be given two official names for various reasons.

5. Conclusion

Throughout history, names have continually evolved under the influence of the environment, with new names emerging while others disappear, sometimes reappearing due to particular events. These names bear traces of the language, origins, and history of the society, as the language itself preserves social and cultural memory within its folds. In summary, the use of names among the Kabyles reflects a complex blend of traditions, social and administrative changes, and external influences. Over time, these names have mirrored sociocultural values, beliefs, political changes, and interactions with other cultures. While the influence of Eastern and Western cultures is notable, it is also clear that the Kabyles strive to preserve and revitalize their ancient traditions and identities through the choice of Amazigh names and the reappropriation of the names of historical heroes. In a constantly evolving world, the use of names among the Kabyles will continue to evolve while maintaining a strong connection to their history, culture, and oldest values, even though there is some rejection of ancient names, especially for girls.

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