

# **Portrayal of Disability through Personal Names and Proverbs in Kenya; Evidence from Ekegusii and Nandi\***

**Nathan Oyori Ogechi, Sara Jerop Ruto**

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses perceptions of disability as portrayed in the Abagusii and Nandi communities of Kenya. It is motivated by the need to show that many existing studies uphold blanket generalisations on disability and subsequently do not cater for different cultural views. For instance, existing literature is replete with cases describing the social stigma attached to disability which compounds the social handicap of the disabled person. However, inquiries on disability among the Abagusii and Nandi communities imply that the social stigma is not always attached to one on the basis of her/his disability; rather, on one's potential to function as a member of the society. From the analysed data, it is clear that an understanding of the concept, causes and treatment of disability entails a holistic mastery of the cultural beliefs concerning relationships of man, nature and the universe.

## **Introduction**

For a long time, countries of the South were deemed as lagging behind when compared with those of the North not only in modern technology but also in their worldview in general. Whatever perceptions they (especially some African peoples) held were very often criticised as "primitive, uncultured and barbaric" (Bogonko 1994:1). Out of their ignorance, the European missionaries, for instance, concluded that Africans were faithless (Ochieng 1975: 66). These criticisms were largely anchored on what was perceived as the norm in the North. The African perceptions were subsequently shunned and replaced with those of the North. However, with time, the views of the North have changed but as it were old habits die-hard. So, some perceptions are still mis-

construed. This means that the countries of the South often have to mediate and fit into a scheme that may be foreign to their own worldview due to this domination by the North. However, whatever comes out of the remodelling, especially of the perceptions and practices, is largely (but not always) alien to some communities in Africa. For instance, from the cultural point of view, the perceptions and practices are particularly evident in the area of disability.

It has been observed that the term disability "can have very different meanings and connotations depending on the cultural background and social environment" (Bruhns et. al. 1995: 5) of using it. For example, in some African cultures, the concept of disability, as a distinct and recognisable category, does not exist (Albrecht 1999, Gbodossou 1999, Kisanji 1999, Ingstad & Whyte 1995). That is, the term "disabled" does not readily translate into some African languages. Even when it does, it appears that there are different expectations to which individuals must live and also measures that promote the integration of the disabled persons between the North and the South. For example, both in the Western world and the communities studied in this article, disability essentially means either to be somehow unable or severely unable to live up to societal expectations. However, among the Abagusii and Nandi peoples, disability goes beyond the concrete/visible impairment as it calls for an explanation of its probable causes that are not always medically-based. For instance, a woman with an impairment in her limbs, but who is married and has satisfied her procreation role, is not deemed disabled as opposed to the beautiful, unblemished but sterile woman (Gbodossou 1999). Alternatively, a man that is not in any visible way impaired but is unmarried (*Kipkochutkei*, Nandi and *Omogesi*, *Ekegusii*<sup>37</sup>) is readily identified as "not normal".

The foregoing examples point to the fact that the concept of disability cannot be taken for granted. This is because it is a culturally bound and determined notion. However, the reality today is that, the disabled, as a social category, are being created through research surveys, projects, the school system and government policy pronouncements (Ingstad & Whyte 1995). The positive indigenous treatment of the disabled is now fast eroding away. This paper,

---

37 Our discussion uses the native speakers' forms and meaning as follows: Abagusii – people (plural), Omogusii (singular), Ekegusii – the language and Gusii – the land they occupy.

would therefore like to explore the Ekegusii and Nandi perceptions and attitudes towards the disabled people. This will be done by:

- Presenting some tenets that governed the indigenous belief system.
- Exploring attitudes towards the disabled people through the analysis of the naming system and proverbs in Ekegusii and Nandi languages of Kenya.

For purposes of clarity, we use existing terms – impairment, disability and handicap - according to WHO (1993). An impairment refers to any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function. A disability is any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being. Finally, a handicap is a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability, that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal (depending on age, sex, and social and cultural factors) for that individual. The WHO definition implies that an impairment can lead to a reduction in the efficiency of an individual according to usual norms of a society, and it is only this deviation that makes an impaired person disabled. A handicap implies that an impaired person is socially disadvantaged, and may be discriminated against for deviating from social norms. Bruhns et.al. (1995) note that a disabled person often faces negative attitudes, rejection and even isolation in society, and therefore becomes handicapped. All these add up to showing that disability is nothing absolute; rather, it is a social construction.

WHO recognises the following types of impairments and disabilities: physical and visual disabilities, hearing and/or speech impairments, mental impairments, mental illness, fits and lack of feelings. Although we recognise these categories, for purposes of this paper we follow Helander (1992; 14) that "a disabled person is the one who in his or her society is regarded or officially recognised as such, because of a difference in appearance and/or behaviour, in combination with a functional limitation or even an activity restriction". We first identify the people who constitute the studied communities.

## The Abagusii and the Nandi of Kenya

The Abagusii are a Bantu-speaking people numbering close to 1.9 million and they are the sixth most populous community in Kenya (UNESCO in Webb & Kembo-Sure 2000). They are settled in the fertile highlands of Kisii, Guucha and Nyamira districts of Nyanza Province. Nilotic-speaking peoples i.e. Luo, Kipsigis and Maasai surround them. Due to contact with these neighbours, their culture has both Bantu and Nilotic affinities. Some of their lexicon and personal names are cultural borrowings. For example, with the Kipsigis they share *kamati* (sister-in-law) and from the Luo many personal names like *Ogechi* (*Okech* in Luo, meaning hunger [*kech*]) have been borrowed.

Their age-old tradition of circumcision for boys and cliteridectomy for girls is considered the core of their indigenous education part of whose curriculum is their belief system (Bogonko 1994). Once circumcised/clitoridectomised, *omoro* (ritual fire) was lit and the novitiates had to keep it aglow throughout the novitiate that lasted for a month or so. If it went off, then, the gods would be annoyed and the novices would be rendered impotent/sterile unless sacrifices are offered to appease the gods. Bogonko (1994) further observes that evil might not have happened to the novices, but they were psychologically played upon through a belief system to become responsible and caring persons. This belief system was extended to their interpretation and explanation of disability. However, the strong and positive attitude towards cliteridectomy is now fast fading away due to campaigns by the church, various non-governmental organizations and women groups. The enactment of a law on children's rights in December 2001 has also given the government legal power to prosecute whoever subjects girls to clitoridectomy.

The Nandi are a Nilotic-speaking community, numbering approximately 0.8 million, and forming part of the larger Kalenjin<sup>38</sup>. The combined Kalenjin dialects are numerically the fourth largest ethnic community in Kenya. The Nandi occupy the agriculturally productive areas spreading from Nandi through Uasin Gishu to Trans Nzoia districts in the Rift Valley Province.

---

38 The Kalenjin comprise of the following dialects: Nandi, Terik, Kipsigis, Keiyo, Marakwet, Tugen, Sabaot, Pokot and Kony. Except the Sabaot, who are also found in Uganda, all the rest live in Kenya.

They are surrounded by their fellow Kalenjin dialect speakers – Marakwet, Keiyo, Tugen and Kipsigis to the north, east and south respectively, while the Abaluyia and Luo are their Western neighbours.

Whereas the Nandi are both large and small-scale farmers, the Abagusii are only small scale-farmers. Both communities specialise in growing cereals, tea production and livestock rearing. However, the Nandi so much adore their cattle. As Morton (1998:1) notes, there is "a deeply rooted role of cattle in [Kalenjin] culture. Animals mattered much more than money, land or crops, and manliness, conflict and status were defined by the cattle which featured so prominently in a tribe's time-honoured ceremonies and rituals".

Patrilineal-descent groups of varying scope provide the organisational framework for all social behaviour for both the Nandi and the Abagusii (LeVine 1979; Chebet & Dietz 2000; Ochieng' 1974; Matsuzono n.d.). All functions are vested in kinship roles. Both communities are divided into different clans. No intra-clan marriages are sanctioned. Both communities practice polygamy. For instance, an estimated 33% of Abagusii households are polygamous unions (Republic of Kenya 1980). Children belong to the father's lineage and a wife joins her husband on his father's land.

However, exceptions exist. A childless woman can "marry" a younger woman whose sole purpose is to beget children. The children are considered legitimate and are accorded all social rights and privileges including rights of inheritance. This practice should not be misconstrued to imply a lesbian relationship. Whilst these "female unions" are found in both communities, the detailed practices differ. For instance, among the Nandi, the sterile woman must have reached menopause. She could/can then be allowed to participate in the highly secretive and exclusive male circumcision ceremonies and even partake other social activities with the men. In a way, she will have achieved the status of a man and could therefore marry a woman to beget children (Ruto-Tuimur, Personal interview 2001). These children would "belong" to the childless woman. On the other hand, the Omogusii woman who marries another woman could either be childless or has only daughters and no son to inherit her share of her husband's property especially if the husband is po-

lygamous. The married woman is therefore not considered her wife; rather, her "son's" wife. The children born of the woman married to another woman are treated as grandchildren. The practice of woman-to-woman marriage is slowly dying out.

### **The Indigenous World View on Disability**

In this section, we briefly explore the Ekegusii and Nandi social set up and their beliefs about the relationship between man and nature that provide the framework upon which the causes of disability are explained. This is because the different perceptions, attitudes to and the treatment of the disabled people seem to be determined by the indigenous belief system.

The way of life in both the Abagusii and Nandi is governed by communality and participation. Social responsibility is esteemed and highly stressed. The family, the age group, the clan and the community participate in the tasks at hand, be it rearing up a child, or building a hut etc. Being a person is defined by the degree of one's integration into the social and communal life (Chebet & Dietz 2000, Ng'andou 1999, Talle 1995). One can term it as the "I am" because "we are" philosophy'. That is, if one person has a problem, then, it is seen as a problem for the whole community. The extension of services, and the reciprocal expectation did and does not exclude persons with impairments. Every person is included in the value system. Both the impaired and the "normal" are overtly treated in the same way; they are neither neglected and/or mistreated nor are they favoured (Talle 1995). They just are. That is, there is overtly no "they" and "we" group. From this perspective, then, an umbrella term like "the disabled" does not overtly exist. It does not fit in the indigenous frame of thinking.

It should be noted that the studied communities are quite accurate about the description of specific impairments. The physically, hearing and visually impaired people and so on are distinguished but this does not transcend into what Albrecht (1999) terms as the overarching categorisation of them into a distinct group. Deviation is noted and accepted as thus but not redefined. Naturally, this has both advantages and disadvantages. Constructing the dis-

abled as a distinct group means that it is easy to focus on the specific impairments and therefore think of ways of alleviating the handicap these impairments may present rather than rehabilitating and equalising of opportunities<sup>39</sup>. Dealing with disabled people as a separate group of the society is overtly evident in countries of the North where special services and facilities are adapted to the needs of the disabled people. The unintended consequence, however, is that this leads to the focus of the impairment, sometimes to the exclusion of the person (Ingstad 1990; Devlieger 1995; Albrecht 1999). It is on this note that the indigenous view becomes advantageous. It views the disabled person as normal, but different. This person is therefore, *in principle*, integrated into the community. We stress *in principle* because although the disabled person is considered normal, the belief system tries to find an explanation for the causes of disabilities and efforts are made to avoid the occurrence of disabilities.

As a way of avoiding disabilities, the indigenous view stresses being in harmony with the other. Two broad levels of concord can be discerned:

- *the vertical relationship* – comprising the hierarchy from God, to the ancestors and to the present and the future descendants, and
- *the horizontal relationship* – constituting parents, uncles and aunts, grandparents, children, siblings' children, neighbours and so on.

Any alteration of a harmonious functioning of these relationships is deemed to lead to or cause disability. To understand the Ekegusii and Nandi concept of disability, one needs to view it holistically within these sets of relationships.

### 1) The vertical relationship

A major transgression that injures vertical relationships is dishonour to the ancestors and/or God. God is omniscient but can be manifested through thun-

---

<sup>39</sup> Rehabilitation aims at enabling persons with a disability to reach and maintain their optimal physical, sensory, intellectual, psychic and/or social functional level and to live their lives as independently as possible. Equalization of opportunities means the process through which the general systems of society, such as the physical environment, housing and transportation, social and health services, educational and work opportunities, and cultural and social life including sports and recreational facilities, are made accessible to all.

der, earthquakes or storms (Ochieng' 1974). Ancestors' anger is seen as being provoked by the living relatives either by not behaving properly while the person was still alive (for instance, by not providing for an ageing relative) or by not nourishing the relationship after death through proper offerings and rituals. The belief in the retributive power of the ancestors/God to the present and future generations is strong. Subsequently, when a phenomenon such as a disability occurs, there has to be a reason. That is, the impairment, which anyone is susceptible to, is a sign that the ancestors and/or the creator are/is not happy. It is therefore crucial to establish the reason, and pacify the creator and/or the ancestors, rather than focus on the disabled person (Albrecht 1999, Devlieger 1999, Talle 1995). For instance, the Nandi believe that congenital disabilities caused by the wrath of the ancestors or the creator can be corrected after an elaborate appeasement ritual that is performed immediately after the birth of the child.

Closely related to the belief in ancestors and/or God is the strong encouragement of a harmonious coexistence with flora and fauna. Observing certain food restrictions was common among the studied communities. For example, among the Abagusii, chewing sugar cane, taking alcohol and eating of chicken, and especially eggs during pregnancy, was forbidden for a woman (Raikes 1990). If she consumed eggs, it was believed that she could bear eggs or impaired babies. Another example can be drawn from the way animals were/are treated. Among the Nandi it is wrong to kill animals without provocation especially when one's wife is expectant. If this is not observed, a disabled child is born. For the Abagusii, the birth of a child with a cleft lip is associated with either killing a warthog without cause or laughing at someone with cleft lips. The birth was therefore a punishment from *Engoro* (God) for failing to respect the animal or the person.

## 2) The horizontal relationships

The horizontal relationships can be damaged, either through moral misdemeanour (for example, not complying with sex taboos when a woman is pregnant, incest etc) or bad personal relations (resulting in curses, sorcery etc). An example of the horizontal relationship can be illustrated through the marriage system of the Nandi. They utilise symbols - totems - to define and



regulate social relations. These totems are identified by animals/birds (whose meat is not often eaten) or a manifestation of nature (the sun, thunder etc). The totems are used to identify traits. This is the method the community uses to keep track of past happenings, identify characteristics of lineage's, distinguish people who are reputed as "bad", and more specifically, trace genealogies to discern if marriage is feasible between two parties (Arap Barno, Personal Interview 2001; Arap Kirui, SAYARI Radio interview series 2000). During engagement ceremonies, the lineages of prospective partners are scrutinised, totems evoked etc. This is done because it is believed that certain lineages are good and produce good children but other "roads" do not match. If marriage is allowed to proceed, between what is termed as "close" blood or "bad" blood, then the end result will be the birth of a disabled child.

For the Abagusii, the hand of *Engoro* was always present to ensure observance of the horizontal relationships. Unpleasant behaviour such as inter-clan homicide, adultery, incest or such related wrongs could invite a penalty from intermediary spirits (Ochieng 1974). The spirits could kill members of the offending homestead through disease, make them insane, sterile or even cause them to bring forth children with impairments. When symptoms like impairments were observed, an *omoragori* (seer or diviner) was consulted to interpret the wishes of the ancestors and once known, they were carried out (Ochieng' 1974). In a recent study, Raikes (1990) notes that there is fear of witchcraft especially during pregnancy among Abagusii which is associated with the traditional beliefs. This retrogressive culture is particularly upheld by those not highly schooled in Western education. Therefore, when impairments that can be simply explained medically (such as polio-related impairments) strike, witchcraft is invoked and a neighbour or a co-wife suspected of being jealous could be accused of bewitching one. This type of witchcraft, *ogok-onwa*, is commonly invoked between co-wives in polygamous households.

In addition, both study communities uphold maintenance of good personal relations. It is wrong to ridicule, imitate or laugh at the disabled people. This might provoke the aggrieved party to curse the offender. Three things could then happen: 1) the cursed person would beget a child with impairments; 2)

an accident might befall the cursed person and one might be rendered disabled; or 3) future generations of one's genealogy would be tainted.

In sum, the causes of disability can be cross-culturally grouped into three: 1) caused by others through witchcraft and sorcery, evil eye, curses etc; 2) caused by oneself, say, through a breach of social relations and provocation of the ancestors (old people) and finally, 3) caused by fate, the will of God (Ingstad 1990). God's will is sometimes not seen as a punishment, but more as God's trust in the parent(s)' ability to take care of a "special child". Thus for the Nandi and the Abagusii respectively they have a saying - "*Lakwa ko lakwa*" or '*Omwana n'omwana*' - a child is a child regardless of its impairment. This means that a disabled child can receive a higher rather than diminished status and is treated with affection because, after all, it is not the child's fault (Albrecht 1999, Devlieger 1999). It encourages one to accept any child be it disabled or not for it originates from God.

The foregoing hypotheses are falsified by some traditional and modern realities. On one hand, insofar as the disabled were accepted in the traditional communities, none looked forward to begetting a disabled child. That is why the two levels of concord were invoked and upheld in attempts to ward off getting children with impairments. In addition, the cleansing ceremonies that were done to correct any impairments show that children with disabilities were readily accepted. On the other hand, modern African societies do not seriously uphold the traditional beliefs on the causes of disability. With the influence of Christianity, Western education and medicine, the traditional causes of disability are considered archaic and people no longer have any awe over the disabled people.

In a recent study, Bota (2002) reports of a case where parents among a polygamous Abagusii family neglected their disabled child. The mother of the child with multiple disabilities abandoned it at her matrimonial home after she divorced the husband. On his part, the estranged husband left the child under the care of his other wife who had no obligation to take care of another woman's baby. To make it worse, she had no awe over a disabled child that required much more attention. Subsequently, the neglected child died. In addition, Raikes (1990) found out that Abagusii traditions about sexual decorum

and foods have dwindled while the acts of cliteridectomy and the preservation of the ritual fire are fast dying out. He also avers that there is no evidence at all that today men are less promiscuous while their wives are pregnant. These studies show that the traditional beliefs no longer have a bearing on the people.

Closely related to the foregoing, one might argue that unlike in the West, harsh social, economic and political realities in the South have made it difficult to positively integrate the disabled persons. In another recent study<sup>40</sup>, it was reported that 10% of Kenyans are disabled and they are discriminated against. For instance, the laws of Kenya provide for the removal of a President from office if s/he is disabled and citizens with visual and hearing disabilities are barred from contesting for a political office since a potential contestant must be able to read and write in Kiswahili and English. It was reported that a negative attitude is shown to the disabled people in case a poor family has to make a choice between paying for the education of a disabled child and a non-disabled one. In this case, the latter would be preferred as s/he is considered an asset that the family would lean on in the future<sup>41</sup>. In spite of these challenges, the overall picture still largely reflects the Ekegusii-Nandi traditional worldview towards people with disabilities albeit with a blend of acceptance, integration and stereotype.

In the next section, we try to unravel the extent to which the Abagusii and Nandi attitude to disability is reflected through personal names and proverbs.

### **Personal names**

Personal names "serve principally to label and identify individuals" (Allerton 1987:69). Various communities in the world adopt different selecting and naming systems. Some communities give children names of their living relatives like the Chindali of Tanzania (Swilla 2000) and the Kikuyu of Kenya

---

40 The Kenya Society of the Physically Handicapped (KSPH) conducted a research on disability, gender and education focusing on violence against women with disabilities whose results were released in April 2001.

41 Ibid. The discrimination is worse when a decision has to be made between a boy and a girl.

(Kenyatta 1962). For others children are named after the ancestors, for instance, the Jews (Allerton 1987:69). In other communities children are given new fashion names at birth depicting a current event, plus an ethnic/clan name e.g. *Bomblast Otieno* (e.g. the Luo of Kenya are known for this practice). The name *Bomblast* refers to a child born after the 1998 bombing of the USA embassy in Nairobi while *Otieno* is a Luo name for a child born at night.

Children in Gusii are known by two names – a personal childhood name and the father's name. The names for infants are chosen and given by women after the umbilical cord drops off. LeVine and LeVine (1966:118) describe the naming ceremony thus:

”Up until this time the neonate is called Mosamba Mwaye, ”the burner of his own home”, indicating that he has left his previous habitat (the womb) and cannot return to it. Now one or two names are chosen with the approval of the child's paternal grandmother and mother. There are many criteria of determining the name: the weather conditions or other events occurring at the time of birth, evil omens seen before the birth, previous condition of the mother with respect to childbirth.”

If a chosen name is related to any of the foregoing conditions, then, it is likely to have a meaning. However, most names do not have a literal meaning. The mother would avoid choosing a name that portends evil but the meaning of a name is not an overriding criterion in its selection. Some names may reflect one form or other of disability. A name denoting disability may or may not systematically convey information about the referents' disability. For instance, it is not uncommon for a child to be called a disability-related name i.e. *Kerema* (physically impaired), *Gechiino* (one who squints) or *Nyang'ong'o* (one with a cleft lip) whether it has the disability or not. As other researchers concur, this naming by bodily parts is not necessarily derogatory but rather it reveals cultural acceptance of difference (Talle 1995).

One explanation for the rise of such names is the nicknames theory (Freestone 1990). Many modern personal names were either nicknames or praise

names<sup>42</sup>. In the Abagusii naming system, a child is named after a recently dead relative. The child not only inherits the late person's name but also his/her nickname and/or praise name too. Nicknames and praise names of the deceased person after whom a child is named hold and at times overshadow the deceased person's given name. For example, we are aware of a man whose personal name, *Moindi*, is overshadowed by the nickname, *Kerema* (the physically impaired one), of the deceased person after whom he was named. The same applies to *Mogaaro* whose nickname, *Keguku* (one with a hunchback), overshadows the given name. In addition, a woman might, for instance, fondly praise her disabled child as, "Nyakiara one" (my child with a deformed finger) as a reward for a child's good performance. Alternatively, the phrase can be used when one is cajoling such a child to perform a task. Subsequent generations may inherit this former praise name as the real name. In these contexts, therefore, the disability related nicknames and praise names do not impute a negative attitude.

The Nandi have an elaborate naming system that spans a lifetime. The initial name, also called porridge<sup>43</sup> name, is given soon after birth mainly by the infant's grandmother or other women, such as the midwife, present at birth. The name is derived from the prevailing conditions at the child's birth be they climatic conditions, time of day, location of birth, events at birth etc.

The second name is a clan name, often given at a naming ceremony known as "kuurseet" (the naming). These names arise from various sources. They can either refer to the attributes of the recently departed ancestors or those members of the lineage who were known for prowess or some other virtue. A *kuurseet* ceremony is of significance if a child shows some peculiar behaviour or feature like incessant crying or failure to open eyes soon after birth. When this happens, two interpretations with naming implications are assumed. One, the infant is taken for a reincarnation of an ancestor who died in circumstances where the eye of the deceased was destroyed. Once this is acknowledged and the child is named after the deceased, then, the child gets well.

---

42A nickname derives from 'an eke name' – an added name or substitute for proper names. People use them to praise each other or to describe the behaviour, characteristics or one's mannerisms.

43 As the child grows and goes through other rights of passage, they are bestowed other names which take precedence.

Two, it is believed that perhaps the infant's father killed an animal without provocation e.g. a cat or snake during the mother's gestation. In this case, there is need to appease the animal's soul by, for example, performing a mock simulation of the killing act while uttering mollifying words. The infant is then named *Chebusi* or *Chebusit* (*pusit* – cat [for males]) if the animal was a cat. For the snake, the appeasing words e.g. *Aasai eren* (come snake) are uttered or the child is given the species name of the snake that was killed. Once this is done, the child's eyes open. Children with such visual impairment are called *Tiongoi* (derived from a *tioni-* animal and *-goi* long). Inasmuch as the child is accepted as thus, the fact that the community has to go through this elaborate ceremony to correct the impairment depicts that one would rather have a normal and not a disabled child.

The third group of names are pronounced during the initiation period. The men give names to the male initiates where they are formally bestowed the title and honour *Arap* (son of so and so). It is in initiation that both cultural acceptance and reverence for the disabled are seen. For example, a father who has an eye impairment may formally be called *Kipkemboi Arap Ruto*. Informally and when he is absent, one can say, "That is *Kimais*' (the visionless one's) bull". His son, who already has the porridge name (birth name) *Kipkoech* can acquire either his father's main name or the disability name without the prefix *Kip*<sup>44</sup>. His full new name thereafter is either *Kipkoech Arap Kemboi* or *Kipkoech Arap Mais*. This is similar to the Abagusii case, where a nickname related to disability develops and becomes a bonafide name. It should be noted that the nickname is initially used in the absence of the person with the impairment. This shows that the acceptance of the impairment may after all be only on the lips and not genuine.

The table below illustrates the common names referring to disabilities among the Abagusii and the Nandi. While all the names below refer to various forms of impairments, the italicised words have transcended to personal names.

---

44 Among some Kalenjin dialects, some male personal names have either a *ki-* or *kip-* prefix i.e. *Kimeli* or *Kipyator*. Sons take their father's first names as surnames but the prefix is dropped. Hence, *Kimeli* becomes *Meli* and *Kipyator* becomes *Yator*.

Those that have not are used as nicknames and might perhaps one day graduate to personal names.

Category	English Gloss	Ekegusii	Nandi <sup>45</sup>
Physical Impairments	General term	<i>Kerema</i>	Solomwo
	Impaired hand	Nyakoboko	Kimugung/Jemugung
	Impaired finger	Nyakiara	
	Physically impaired	<i>Konosi/Koombo/Kerema</i>	Kimugung/Jemugung
Sensory Impairments	Dumb	Rimama	Kipsisei/Jepsisei/Maminda
	One who stammers	Motuturi/Getuturi	Kibuigut/Jebuigut
	Visually impaired	<i>Mouko</i>	Kipkoratiat/Jepkoratiat
	Mono eyed	Getong'o/ Keriiso	Ki <i>Mais</i> /Jemais; Kimegong/Jemegong
	One who squints	<i>Gechiino</i>	
	One with small eyes	<i>Obiiso</i>	
	One with big eyes	Nyamaiso	Kiboogong/Jeboogong
	Cross eye		Kimurgong/Jemurgong
	Faint vision		Tamirmiron
	Hearing impaired	Otiino	Kiptimatiat/Jeptimatiat
Mental Impairments	Crazy/Mad person	Barimo	Kibiywet/Jebiywet
	Learning disability	<i>Nyarimbota</i>	
	Big head	<i>Ontwe</i>	Kiboomet/Jeboomet

---

45 Names describing the same disabilities on cows and human beings are identical in Nandi.

## Proverbs

Proverbs present generalisations of the community's perception of various issues. They form a legal framework for settling disputes, teaching etc. They depict cultural values, beliefs and customs about disabled persons (Kisanji 1995). We here analyse only a few of those proverbs that have a close bearing on disability. The Abagusii use the following proverbs to illustrate disability.

Bogotu ngesango ngokiina kore okuya  
 'Old age is shared, growing up is good'

Disability is not just a physical/mental impairment; rather, it entails the inability of a person to live up to the social expectations. This may include procreation, working out in the agricultural fields, fending for oneself etc. One group that cannot meet these obligations are the aged. The Abagusii teach that it is the duty of the strong young person to take care of the old person who is considered weak<sup>46</sup>. Old age is portrayed as not being unique but one to which all will succumb. It particularly warns the youth that the old people lived up to society's expectation at their youth especially if they married and had children. Therefore, one should not look down upon the old people thinking that they are disabled, hence the proverb - 'Old age is shared, growing up is good'.

Oborema igoro bore.  
 'Disability (may) befall one late in his life'.

This proverb shows that impairments especially physical ones are not always realised at birth. They can surface later in life through disease or an accident. People are, therefore, taught not to despise the disabled people because they too can be impaired. In a more overt expression, Ekegusii makes use of another proverb – *Toseka ekerema, giachia gokwambokera*, 'Do not laugh at a disabled (person) lest it (disability) befalls you'.

---

<sup>46</sup> Among the Abagusii, the aged live with the family of their last borne son and all the paternal grandchildren surround them for stories, counselling and assistance.



Kiore kiomo giaseka kiore kebesa  
 ‘A dry skull laughs at a wet skull’.

This proverb means that one should not laugh at (look down upon) a person with impairments. S/he might think that the other person has visible impairments while he has none – a dry skull laughing at a wet skull. However, the proverb warns that impairments are not always visible. The one laughing may be the disabled person because perhaps s/he has not lived up to society’s expectation i.e. not married, has no children, cried and ran away from the circumciser’s knife, is uncircumcised/unclitoridectomised etc. In brief, since disability is culturally based the proverb discourages negative perceptions towards those with disabilities.

Whereas Ekegusii seems to have some proverbs related to disabilities, our preliminary investigation shows that it is difficult to come across a proverb referring to disability in Nandi. This is because speaking about disability is considered almost a taboo subject. However, we came across a proverb that emphasises the equality or humanness of all regardless of difference. For example,

Karkei moi  
 ‘All calves are equal’.

As already indicated, the Nandi life revolves around their cattle. Cows are a sign of wealth, health and happiness. They attach a lot of value and protection to the cows. No cow is inferior or superior to the other. This view is extended to their perception of persons with or without disability. The proverb is a metaphor, which symbolises that in the same way that all calves are equal, so are human beings – be they disabled persons or not.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Our goal was to discuss the conceptualisation and reflection of disability among the Abagusii and Nandi through personal names and proverbs. It has been shown that an understanding of the concept, causes and treatment of disability entails a holistic mastery of the cultural beliefs concerning the relation-

ship of man, nature and the universe. The concepts of impairment, handicap or disability are rooted in the social environment and the cultural worldview of the studied communities. Hence persons with conditions not normally associated with disability, such as one with stunted growth or having big eyes have a "deviation" and therefore they can be readily identified as disabled people by members of the specific communities. However, disability goes beyond the visible impairments. While one who has failed to live up to what society expects of people of his/her age group and sex is regarded as an example of a "deviation", a visibly impaired person is not regarded as a disabled one if s/he has met the social obligations.

Subsequently, it has come out that inasmuch as the disabled people are recognised as existing in society, they are largely (but not wholly) integrated and treated just like any other member of the society. They can play any role that "normal" people perform and as long as they live up to what society expects of any of its members, they are accorded due respect. But it has also been shown that there is a blend of acceptance and awe on the one hand with a negative attitude on the other. Use of imageries such as monkey to refer to the lame depicts the negative attitude. Nevertheless, the positive attitude seems to override the negative.

The paper has also shown that there exist names that are related to disabilities. However, while some have matured to personal names, others are still used as nicknames, praise names or just common nouns.

Since this is a preliminary investigation, there is need to investigate why some nicknames in Ekegusii graduate to personal names while others do not. Finally, the morphological structure and semantics of disability related names could also form an interesting inquiry.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Beitrag behandelt das Verständnis bzw. die Wahrnehmung von Behinderungen bei den Abagusii und Nandi von Kenia. Der Artikel will zeigen, dass viele existierende Studien nach wie vor Generalisierungen zu

Behinderungen vornehmen und somit auch verschiedene kulturelle Blickpunkte nicht berücksichtigen.

## References

- Albrecht, Friedrich 1999. The use of non-western approaches for special education in the western world; a cross-cultural approach. In: Brigitte Holzer, Authur Vreede and Gabriele Weigt (eds). *Disability in Different Cultures: Reflections of Local Concepts*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Allerton, D. J 1987. The linguistic and sociolinguistic status of proper names. *Journal of Pragmatics* 11:61-92
- Bogonko, Sorobe, N. 1994. *A History of Modern Education in Kenya (1895-1991)*. Nairobi: Evans Brothers (Kenya) Ltd.
- Bruhns, Barbo-Isabel, Andrew Murray, Tjiuai Kanguhi & Tangeni Nuukuawo 1995. NEPRU Research Project No. 9: *Disability and Rehabilitation in Namibia; A National Survey*. Windhoek: Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit.
- Carroll, John M. 1985. *What's in a Name? An Essay in the Psychology of Reference*. New York: W. H. Freeman and Company.
- Chebet, Susan and Ton Dietz 2000. *Climbing the Cliff: A History of the Keiyo*. Eldoret: Moi University Press.
- Devlieger, Patrick. 1995. Why disabled? The cultural understanding of physical disability in an African society. In: Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Reynolds White 1995. *Disability and Culture*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Devlieger, Patrick. 1999. Local knowledge and international cooperation in disability programmes. In: Brigitte Holzer, Authur Vreede and Gabriele Weigt (eds)
- Freestone, Basil 1990. *Harrap's Book of Nicknames and their Origins; A Comprehensive Guide to Personal Nicknames in the English Speaking World*. London: Harrap
- Gbodossou, Eric V. A. 1999. Defining the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of persons with disability in the Fatick region, Senegal, and the Mono region, Benin. In: Brigitte Holzer, Authur Vreede and Gabriele Weigt (eds).
- Helander, Einar 1992. *Prejudice and Dignity. An Introduction to Community-Based Rehabilitation*. UNDP, Interregional Programme for Disabled People. New York: UNDP.
- Holzer, Brigitte , Authur Vreede and Gabriele Weigt (eds.) 1999. *Disability in Different Cultures: Reflections of Local Concepts*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Ingstad, Benedicte. 1990. The disabled person in the community: social and cultural aspects. *International Journal of Rehabilitation Research* 13, 187-194
- Ingstad, Benedicte & Susan Reynolds White 1995. *Disability and Culture*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press. Kenya Society of the Physically Handicapped. 2001. *Disability, Gender and Education; Violence against Women with Disabilities in Eastern and Western Provinces and Factors Affecting Girls with Disabilities to Access Education in Rift Valley Province*. Nairobi: Cleartone Graphics.

- Kenyatta, Jomo 1962. *Facing Mount Kenya. The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Impr. London: Mercury Books.
- Kisanji, Joseph 1999. Folklore based analysis for a culture specific concept of inclusive education. In: Brigitte Holzer, Authur Vreede and Gabriele Weigt (eds)
- LeVine, Robert A. and Barbara B. LeVine 1966. *Nyansongo: A Gusii Community in Kenya*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- LeVine, Sarah 1979. *Mothers and Wives: Gusii Women of East Africa*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Matsuzano, Makio (n.d.) A preliminary report on the Gusii socio-cultural changes. Unpublished manuscript.
- Morton, Andrew 1998. *Moi: The Making of an African Statesman*. London: Michael O'Mara Books Limited
- Ng'andou, Sophie K. Biomedical versus indigenous approaches to disability. In: Brigitte Holzer, Authur Vreede and Gabriele Weigt (eds).
- Ochieng', William R. 1974. *A Pre-colonial History of the Gusii of Western Kenya, C. A.D 1500 – 1914*. Nairobi: East Africa Literature Bureau.
- Ochieng', William R. 1975. God, spirits and the sun in Gusii Theology. In: William R. Ochieng. *The First World; Essays on Kenya History*. Nairobi: East Africa Literature Bureau.
- Raines, Alanagh 1990. CDR Research Report No. 15. *Pregnancy, Birthing and Family Planning in Kenya: Changing Patterns of Behaviour; A Health Service Utilization in Kisii District*. Copenhagen: Centre for Development Research.
- Republic of Kenya 1980. *Kenya Fertility Survey, 1977-1978 Vol.1*. Nairobi: Central Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning.
- Swilla, Imani N. 2000. Names in Chindali. *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere* 63: 35-62
- Talle, Aud 1995. A child is a child: disability and equality among the Kenya Maasai. In: Benedicte Ingstad and Susan Reynolds White 1995.
- Webb, V. & Kembo-Sure 2000. *African Voices: An Introduction the Languages and Linguistics of Africa*. Oxford University Press – Southern Africa. Cape Town
- WHO 1993. *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps*. Geneva: WHO-Geneva, Switzerland.

\*Information received from the following persons is duly acknowledged and appreciated:  
 Nandi - Christine Ruto-Tuimur, Kabutie Village, Nandi District; Kiptogom Arap Barno, Kapsoo Village, Nandi District, Dr. Peter Arap Simatei, Moi University, Kenya and Ekegusii - Kennedy Nyabuto Bota, Sameeta, Guucha District and University of Hamburg.