

## NAMES IN THE LIFE CYCLES OF THE MURLE

The Murle people live in the south-eastern Sudan adjoining the Ethiopian border. They number about 40,000 people and belong to the Surma language-family. They live on the flood plains of the Pibor River, and this terrain alternates according to the season between swamp and desert. Due to the harsh and varied environmental conditions, the Murle practise a transhumant life-style. Cattle are the focus of their economy, but they also hunt, fish, gather wild fruit, and grow grain.

The Murle still retain much of their traditional culture. The area in which they live is remote, and the outside world has had little influence on them until the present war. They are a proud and independent people. They live and function in small family units, with the eldest brother in each family acting as the head of the homestead. Above this basic family unit there is virtually no central authority, and each family makes its own decisions. In times of war or of hunting the people will temporarily band together, but soon afterward will again divide into their separate family units. There are also age-sets to which every man belongs. These age-sets are the basis for a man's friends and social life and operate beside and in addition to the family units.

My wife and I lived and worked among the Murle people at Pibor for eight years. Our work was primarily linguistic, but my wife did make a personal project of gathering information on Murle names. This paper is a descriptive summary of the information which she collected.

### *Birth Names*

A Murle woman giving birth is assisted by several women who serve as midwives. The woman gives birth from a standing or kneeling

position, and one of the midwives is given the job of catching the child. The newly born child is not given a name immediately at birth, but this is done at a naming ceremony called *konyit*. The parents of the child set the date for this ceremony approximately one month after the baby is born. Much food is prepared, and relatives and neighbours are invited to the ceremony. After the people have gathered, the father of the child announces its new name. Then an important member of the family takes butter and pours it around the fire where the food is being cooked. This butter is regarded as a blessing upon the new child and upon the family. The food is now distributed to the guests, and after eating they are free to leave, although many will spend the greater part of the day sitting around joking and singing.

The close relatives of the child are the people primarily responsible for choosing the name, but sometimes the midwife who catches the child also makes suggestions. There are a number of bases for choosing a name, but it is essential to realize that a Murle name always has meaning. Names can be taken from a number of different categories. Often something observed by the midwife or the mother during late pregnancy is chosen for the name. These are usually common things seen in everyday experience, resulting in names such as *Tutu* 'hyacinth', *Korok* 'homestead', *Konyi* 'male goat', and *Tolwa* 'beehive'.

Another category of names are those which relate to the mother's experience at birth. Examples of these are *Tilalo* 'tears', *Kadaai* 'I am dying', *qaare* 'wait woman', and *Anyan* 'God has given me'. Sometimes names are given which denote some characteristic of the newly born child such as *Koli* 'black', *Logodok* 'big head', *Mooti* 'fierce', and *Moomo* 'sickly'.

Occasionally a child is deliberately given an unlovely name so as not to draw attention to the child. This is usually done if the mother has already lost another child and fears for the life of the second. It is believed that a nice name would draw attention from evil powers who may kill the child. So this naming is an attempt to deceive the evil powers into thinking that the parents do not really care for the child. Examples of such names are *Kaaka* 'bitterness', *Looc Doon* 'just dirt', *Agoor* 'green snake', *Kuduwaan* 'vulture', and *Guzul* 'hyena'.

Because of the transhumant life-style of the Murle, both places and seasons are always in focus. There is therefore an extensive vocabulary regarding these areas of interest. Children are often named after a place, a certain season, or a seasonal event which occurred at the time of their birth. They are given names such as *Lukurinyan* 'the place of his birth', *Loom* 'rainy season', *Tawan* 'flood', and *Aqorkoamana* 'green unripened grain'. Usually people do not know their age, and this is especially true of older people. However, if a person is named after a widely known event such as a flood, drought, or epidemic which can be dated through government records, it then becomes possible to assess his age. Since all men in a given age-set are approximately the same age, it is then possible to ascertain the ages of those in the same age-set.

Occasionally a child is named after a relative who has died. This is done to honour and remember the deceased, but the child is

not thought to be a reincarnation of the dead person. Normally a child is not given the name of any other living person. However, there is an exception to this in which the child is given the name of the midwife, the woman who catches the child at birth. This is considered a great honour, and the child becomes like a godchild of the midwife. My wife Barbara was asked by one of her Murle friends to 'catch' her first child. She did so, and the child was named *Bafura*, the closest the Murle could come to pronouncing *Barbara*. The mother frequently came and asked for cloth, milk, and food for baby Bafura, and my wife was obligated by custom to give these things.

Foreign names are becoming increasingly common as the Murle begin to interact with other neighbouring societies. Some of these are well-known Dinka and Nuer names such as *Macar* and *Lual*. These names have meanings in the original languages, but the meanings are usually unknown to the Murle. With the coming of Christianity to the area, some children now receive biblical names at birth. Due to the resistance of the people to Islam, I have not found any children bearing Arabic names.

Up to this point I have been discussing the first name a child receives at birth. However, a child may receive several secondary names from people close to the child. These are used as nicknames to refer to the child. In most cases their usage dies out, but in some cases the nickname may actually take precedence and a person may become known by his secondary name.

The Murle language does not have gender, so any word can be used for either a boy or a girl. If I hear the name *Guzul* I have no way of knowing whether it refers to a male or a female. However, some girls and boys are given names which have words meaning 'woman' or 'boy' as part of the name, such as *qaacun* 'your woman', *qaatin* 'cow woman', *qaaruben* 'blind woman', and *Logoco* 'this boy'. However, even this cannot assure that the person referred to is a man or woman. B.A. Lewis, who worked among the Murle as a government officer, used as one of his main informants a man called *qaacinol* 'lame woman'. So a man can go through life with a name which we would consider a woman's name.

There is a great deal of individualism among the Murle people, and this is reinforced by the fact that each has a different name. People do not normally have the same name as anybody else, so there is no confusion when a name is used as to who is being referred to. There are of course exceptions, such as two people being named after the same flood, or the case of a person being named after a midwife who is still living. Because names are seldom used twice, there are literally thousands of names in existence at any one time. Although names may be similar, there are usually efforts to make them different in some way. The names *Logoto* 'it is a boy' and *Logoco* 'this is a boy' are similar in both pronunciation and meaning, but the subtle difference between them is enough to differentiate them.

The Murle names all have meaning, but even after studying the language for eight years I could only understand about half of them until I asked for an explanation. Because of the large number of different names required, the people sometimes use rare words and unusual linguistic forms to come up with new names, and this can

frustrate a foreign linguist such as myself. Often names are very obscure words which are synonyms for more commonly used words. At times a single word stands for a much wider meaning than can be symbolized by the single word, as in the name *Anyan*. Literally this means 'give me' but is understood by the Murle to mean 'God has given me a child'. In other situations several words or a phrase are compacted together into one word having several morphemes of meaning but without the usual grammatical endings. *ɲatiin* is made up of the two morphemes 'woman' and 'cow', but the proper grammatical phrase should be *ɲaa ci tiinu*. Even the Murle themselves do not always understand the meaning of another person's name until they ask them to unravel it.

### *Calf Names*

The name given at birth is usually the name used by a person for the rest of his life. However, as a person passes through various stages in life he will obtain other names. When a boy reaches the age of 8 or 9, he is given a calf by his father. This is a symbol that he is growing up, and this calf is the start of his own herd. At this stage the boy takes a name based on the colour of his new calf. The new name is a riddle based on the calf's colour. The boy's friends have to try and work out the colour of his calf based on the riddle.

One has to have a good understanding of the Murle world in order to solve these riddles, and I was seldom able to do so. One boy told me that his calf name was *Gol Rii*, which literally means 'road shade'. After I failed to solve the riddle he explained that the local safari ants walk in a long trail until they wear a deep groove into the ground. Eventually the ants raise the soil on the sides of the groove, and they are walking in shade and are protected from the hot sun. These ants are coloured a deep red and therefore the boy's calf is the colour red. Another boy told me that his name was *Rigiz Kul*, which means 'hanging tail'. This riddle was easier than the first, and I was eventually able to guess that it referred to a giraffe; this meant that his calf was spotted red and white. The boys have a lot of fun with these names and they refer to each other by them. Using these names with each other is evidence that they are growing up.

### *Ox Names*

When a boy reaches about 18 years of age he receives his name ox. Many years ago the Murle had an initiation ceremony in which boys were initiated into manhood. However, this ceremony disappeared over eighty years ago, and the only important feature which remains is the name ox. Upon receiving this ox the boy takes a new name which is his manhood name. This ox is very special to the boy as it is a symbol of his becoming a man. The new name is a play on words based on the colour of the ox, but the words used are from the Toposa language so that most people do not know the components of

the word and even less its true meaning.

The Toposa are considered to be the enemies of the Murle, and the two ethnic groups are presently separated by a 150-mile buffer zone. However, there have been associations in the past and a few old men know the Toposa language. It is significant that some of the Murle dance songs also use the Toposa language. The Murle men memorize these songs from generation to generation but usually have no idea what they mean. When I was given an ox name based on a yellow ox, the young men had to find an old man who knew the Toposa language and he was able to come up with the proper wording of my new name *Acunyan* 'yellow lion'.

The ox name is not normally used by people in referring to each other. The name is not kept secret but is frequently shouted out in praise songs and at dances. However, the meaning of the name is not usually given out except to close friends in the age-set and occasionally to outsiders like myself.

### *Teknonymy*

After a man marries and has a child he is often referred to as the father of that child rather than by his personal name. My oldest child is called Lisa, so I was often called *Baatilisa*. This name was used by people when formally greeting me, but most people dropped this respectful form and referred to me as Jon. Children often use such a term in addressing an older person since it would be disrespectful to call him by his name as if he were their equal. This term is also used in formal gatherings such as a council meeting or in a church. More than once I missed my cue to speak since I was expecting them to call me Jon and instead they used *Baatilisa*. It is considered a term of respect since it is an honour to have a child. The same principle holds true of women when they become mothers, and my wife was often referred to as *Yaatilisa*.

Even though boys and men receive new names at various stages of their lives they are usually referred to by the name they were given at birth. When I was asking some older men for their calf names some of them had to think for a minute, as it had been so long since they had used them. In my case I took an ox name a number of years after I arrived in Murle land. However, everyone continued to refer to me as Jon, and I doubt if more than a few people even remember my ox name.

There is an exception to a person being referred to by the same name all of their life. If a person is converted to Christianity they usually take a new name. When a visiting church leader came to Pibor and baptized some young men they suddenly had new Christian names taken from the Bible. They looked upon baptism as a rite of passage into a new phase of life, and a name change was thought to be appropriate. I still called them by their old names, but gradually I was forced to change since they continually corrected me and other Murle were referring to them by their new names.

At the same time others took a Christian name, but people continued to call them by their old name. I think it depended on the person himself correcting people as to which name he preferred.

The identity of a Murle person is closely tied to his name. A personal name shows who he is, and since names in Murle have meaning it tells a little about his birth or when or where he was born. The later names based on cow colours show a person's station in life. Being called the father of somebody is even one step higher. Eventually when a man or woman grows old the personal name is often dropped, and they are referred to as *Jiji* 'grandfather' or *Abe* 'grandmother'. These are considered to be titles of great respect and mean that the person referred to is being highly honoured.

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