

## Semantic Analysis of the Ndali Place Names: A Case of Bundali Division of Ileje District, Tanzania

<sup>1</sup>Raytoni Brauni Songa

Mbeya University of Science and Technology

[songaray1999@gmail.com](mailto:songaray1999@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Chrispina Alphonce

University of Dodoma

[chrispina.alphonce@udom.ac.tz](mailto:chrispina.alphonce@udom.ac.tz)

<sup>3</sup>Andwele Mwakasege

University of Dodoma

[andwelemwakasege2@gmail.com](mailto:andwelemwakasege2@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Place names carry the memories, historical background, and dynamism of the respective communities and their environment. However, Ndali names have not been analysed, overshadowing their rich cultural and historical meanings. To address this lacuna, the paper analysed 148 Ndali place names in the Bundali Division, Songwe Region, to determine how they reflect cultural and environmental contexts. The study used qualitative and descriptive design to analyse data. Snowball and purposive sampling were used to collect data from 69 participants through focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and introspection. The analysis reveals that the Ndali place names derive their meanings from water bodies, landscape features, flora, fauna, historical events, and prominent individuals. Consequently, paper analysis demonstrates that these place names are both linguistically and geographically specific, reflecting the pivotal role of language in documenting local environments, history and culture. Moreover, the findings emphasise the significance of place names in cultural and environmental preservation and historical documentation. Future research may focus on evaluating the impact of modernisation on the preservation of place names in other regions of Tanzania and globally.*

**Keywords:** semantics analysis, naming, toponymy, language

### 1 Introduction

Naming is a universal human practice; nevertheless, there is consensus that naming systems are profoundly shaped by the specific language, culture, history, and environment of each society. Ainiala et al. (2016) argue that places are named primarily for recognition, such as identifying fishing areas, farms, or water bodies. Elias et al. (2023) similarly assert that naming practices are society-specific, while Stewart (1954) maintains that the meanings conveyed by place names are not universal but are influenced by the motives and mechanisms of naming within a particular speech community. These views converge on the idea that understanding place names draws attention to local semantic and cultural frameworks.

In the African context, naming systems are important for they express community identity, history, and cultural heritage (Mandillah, 2022). David (2011) and Jenjekwa (2021) concur that place names are more than linguistic labels, for they reveal social, economic, religious, and historical values. Patrick (2021) adds that linguistic elements in place names reflect settlement history, economic activities, and political change, while Williams (2023) holds that place names act as evidence of human interaction with the environment and with other people. Collectively, these studies highlight the multifunctional role of place names in documenting societal experience.

Place names carry information about political, social and cultural views of a given society (Abdikhalikova, 2020). Machaba (2004) adds that the naming of objects does not occur in a vacuum but in society. So, the name of places is directly connected to the society in which they take place. Nkansah & Bonsu (2024) argue that place names reflect the historical, cultural and linguistic factors of the society they represent. This aligns with Alasli (2019), who claims that past events are reflected in the current generation through place names. Likewise, Buberwa (2012) contends that place names derive meaning from references to flora, fauna, personal names, natural phenomena, and senses of belonging, while Jenjekwa (2021) expands this view by linking place names to religious, historical, social, and economic dimensions of society. Similarly, several toponymic scholars emphasise that place names function as repositories of communal memory, history, and lived experience (Alphonse & Sane, 2019; Alasli, 2019; Nwaha, 2020). This shared perspective underscores the linguistic and cultural value of place names as carriers of collective knowledge.

Despite broad agreement on the significance of place names, there is theoretical debate about whether names inherently possess meaning. Classical philosophers such as Mill (1884), Russell (1940), and Gardiner (1954), as cited in Helleland (2012), argue that names merely refer to entities and are themselves meaningless. In contrast, Hilgermann (1974), also cited in Helleland (2012), argues that names acquire meaning through connotation and association. This debate is crucial to the present study, as it frames place names not as arbitrary labels but as meaningful signs shaped by social and cultural reference.

Many scholars consistently show that while place names do carry meaning, such meanings are language-specific (Anindo, 2016; Buberwa, 2012; Liu & Rybakov, 2021; Schotsman & Bryceson, 2006). Elias et al. (2023) note that both meanings and structural patterns of place names vary across languages, reinforcing the need for language-specific studies. Moreover, Cantile and Kerfoot (2016) warn that place names are vulnerable to loss if they are not documented. Tent and Blair (2021) further argue that naming practices are influenced by semantic components relevant to toponymic motivation of a respective speech community. Employing this perspective in the Ndali context suggests that the Ndali place names reveal culturally and historically specific meanings that cannot be fully understood without focused analysis.

Although extensive studies on place names have been conducted globally and in Africa, including Tanzania, limited attention has been paid to the meanings of the Ndali place names. In response to this gap, the present study focuses on analysing the meanings of the Ndali place names to uncover the historical, cultural, and social elements they convey. By analysing the Ndali place names through the lens of reference, the study examined how these names relate to objects, experiences, and environments within the Ndali speech community, thereby contributing to the preservation and understanding of Ndali linguistic and cultural heritage.

## 2 Methodology

The study employed qualitative approach to obtain in-depth information about place naming in the Ndali speech community. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that qualitative research seeks to understand how people interpret their experiences, construct the world, and attribute meaning to them. So, the approach was relevant to the study, as it helped the researchers obtain the views, opinions, and experiences of Ndali native speakers regarding the meaning of the Ndali place names. A descriptive research design was used in capturing narratives and descriptions of the Ndali place names. The data were collected through semi-structured interview and focus group discussion (FGD) that involved narrating and describing the meanings of the Ndali place names. A total of 148 place names were gathered from interviews and FGDs.

The paper used non-probability sampling techniques to select participants, as it allowed the researchers to select participants who were available and convenient and had the required information the investigators sought. Thus, purposive sampling was used to select Ndali native speakers who know the meanings of the Ndali place names, and snowball sampling helped the researchers identify additional participants referred by the selected participants. The sample consisted of 69 participants. In-depth interviews were conducted with 50 participants, mainly elders who are native speakers and have extensive knowledge of the Ndali place names.

Additionally, four focus group discussion (FGD) sessions were conducted, involving a total of 19 participants, with each session comprising 4 to 6 participants. Participants were purposively selected with the assistance of village leaders who possessed in-depth knowledge of individuals with expertise on the subject matter. Introspection was also employed as a methodological approach to capture an insider's perspective while minimising potential researchers' bias.

Data collection procedures included audio recording and systematic note-taking during interviews and FGDs. The data were subsequently transcribed, translated, coded, and organised into themes, which were then analysed using thematic analysis. As articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis entails the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns or themes within qualitative data.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring they were fully informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. The researchers' insider perspective, grounded in their proficiency in the Ndali language and familiarity with the cultural context, enhanced the depth and credibility of the analysis. To address potential bias, analytical interpretations were cross-validated with participants' responses and further scrutinised through peer feedback.

With regard to the theoretical framework, the study was guided by the African Onomastic Theory of Proper Names (AOTPN), developed by Batoma in 2006. The theory assumes that a name is a cluster of three layers of meaning: the basic layer, the cultural layer, and the pragmatic layer. The theory shows that place names, like other names, have meanings that are created by the society in which they were coined. Helleland (2012) demonstrates this by contending that place names are important in characterising people's feelings of social group affiliation. A proper name's linguistic or basic layer of meaning reveals its essential meaning, enabling the creation of additional meanings. According to Botoma (2009), linguistic meaning helps construct, deconstruct, and understand onomastic meaning, but cannot supersede it. Therefore, the researchers' interpretation of the

onomastic meaning of place names in the Ndali speech community was guided by the linguistic layer of meaning.

The cultural layer of meaning dwells on the ground that proper names have meaning beyond the motivation of the people who coined them. The layer connects a language to its culture, with a language serving as a medium for cultural expression. Batoma (2009) states that the cultural layer demonstrates the language community's sociocultural and philosophical motivations. The pragmatic layer of meaning depicts the context in which a proper name is used. Proper names are used in a variety of circumstances, including societal, situational, and interpersonal ones, depending on the social norms of the society in question. Since the Ndali place names acquired their meanings from the environment, the context of use, and the cultural practices of the Ndali community, the theory helped the researchers interpret and analyse data on the meanings of the Ndali place names. The idea is pertinent to the study because the context of use determined the meaning of the Ndali place names, and the basic meaning contributed to the construction of their onomastic meaning.

### **3 Findings and discussion**

This section presents and discusses the findings in relation to the context of the Ndali place names. This is because the meanings of place names cannot be separated from the social, economic, historical, and environmental contexts from which they were coined. It is difficult to define the meaning of names clearly; as a result, two major schools of thought have emerged: The Millian and the Fregean approaches, which differ in their views on whether names are meaningful or meaningless (Nguyen, 2022). Millian theorists argue that names do not possess meaning but function merely as designators or referents. In contrast, Fregean scholars maintain that names have both referents and senses. Guided by the Fregean perspective, this paper argues that the Ndali place names are meaningful.

The study examined a range of the Ndali place names, including those of wards, villages, hamlets, and their subdivisions, reflecting the population distribution within the study area. The findings reveal that these place names are imbued with meanings deeply rooted in the region's history, lifestyle, and natural environment. Specifically, the meanings of the Ndali place names are influenced by local flora and fauna, landscape features, water bodies, and significant historical events. Overall, these names reflect the linguistic environment and cultural heritage of the Ndali community, encapsulating their interactions with and perceptions of their surroundings. The analysis below reveals the way the meaning of the Ndali place names reflects the Ndali context.

#### **3.1 Place names associated with flora**

The study's findings reveal that native vegetation, encompassing a diverse range of plants and trees, significantly influenced the meanings of place names within the Ndali speech community. Table 4.1 illustrates the linkage between place names and plant species that were prominent in the region at the time of coinage.

**Table 1: The Ndali place names reflecting vegetation**

Place name	Meaning	Frequency in interviews	Frequency in FGDs	Plant common name
Muchitete	A place with reed plants	9		Reed plants
Mwakakoma	A place with a fan palm tree	6	4	Fan palm tree
Mukashunguti	A place with small species of olive plants	5	4	Olive plant
Muhalale	A place with halale banana tree	4	5	Banana tree
Mwisoko	A place with sokola thatching grass	8	0	Thatching grass
Mumishununu	A place with mishununu sugar cane	5	4	Sugar cane
Mukafule	A place with African teak	10	0	African teak

**Source: Fieldwork (2023)**

The place name *Mukafule*, which means “small African teak tree,” underscores the importance of local flora in naming practices. As one participant elaborated during an interview, the name is rooted in historical and cultural contexts, highlighting how the presence of specific tree species has influenced the identity and meaning of place within the community. This connection highlights the deep relationship between the Ndali people and their natural environment, with place names serving as a living record of the vegetation that once defined their landscape. This is captured in the narration of one participant below.

*Ijholo kakabhapo akafule kamu panu, popapo abhandu bhakati tukomane pakafule pala, papo kakabha pa sila indekaania. Po ukwandila lulalula ingamu jikapy, bhandu kuti Mukafule papo akafule kakabhapo. Nuruu she po umfule ghughu ghulipo lole po ghukangele.* (A long time ago, there was a small tree of African teak here; then people declared it an easy place to meet one another, for it was at the junction. Since then, the name has become famous, as people call the place Mukafule after a small African teak tree. Even now, the tree is there, but it is too old, and it is about to fall.) (Interview, Kafule)

The quotation indicates that the place name *Mukafule* is deeply rooted in the natural vegetation that once characterised the area, specifically the African teak tree, known locally as *mfule*. As noted by Anindo (2016), place names frequently reflect the physical characteristics of their locations, particularly the plant life present at the time of naming. Accordingly, *Mukafule* derives its name from the prominence of the African teak tree in that region.

Similarly, the place name *Mwakakoma* is associated with the *mkoma* tree, a fan palm species native to the region and culturally significant in the Ndali language. According to the majority of participants, six out of seven interviewees and four out of five focus group discussion participants, the place was named *Kakoma* after a small *mkoma* tree that once grew beside a steep slope along the main road. Although the tree no longer exists, the name *Mwakakoma* continues to be used, symbolising the community’s enduring historical and cultural connection to its natural environment. This pattern aligns with Buberwa’s (2012) observation that many place names in the Ruhaya region

derive their meanings from local flora. For instance, *Kisheka* refers to a large tree called *o-musheka*, and *Mishasha* denotes a species known as *e-mishasha*. These names reflect a broader cultural practice of embedding ecological knowledge within toponyms.

The findings from interviews and focus group discussions indicate that Ndali place names often carry symbolic meanings linked to plant species, even when the actual vegetation has disappeared. Specifically, data from 47 of 50 interviewees and 17 of 19 focus group participants revealed that certain place names preserve ecological and cultural memory. For instance, the place name *Mulyale*, meaning “a big *mwale* tree,” continues to be used despite the absence of the tree. This persistence highlights the community’s role in maintaining connections to its historical and natural environment.

The case of *Mulyale* illustrates the concept of ecological memory within the Ndali community. Although the *mwale* tree is now scarce due to timber harvesting and other economic activities, the place name serves as a living record of the species’ former presence in the landscape. This underscores the broader cultural function of place naming, whereby communities embed ecological knowledge and historical experiences into the nomenclature of their environment. Consequently, Ndali place names operate not only as geographic identifiers but also as instruments for preserving environmental history and cultural identity.

These findings underscore how place names function not only as spatial identifiers but also as reservoirs of ecological and historical knowledge. Even amid environmental change, the symbolic value of these names persists, reinforcing their cultural significance. This supports the idea that African toponymy is a dynamic system that records environmental, botanical, and cultural transformations across generations. The findings are consistent with the first layer of meaning of AOTPN, which states that the basic meaning of proper name constructs onomastic meaning, as the meaning of *Mulyale* and *Mwakakoma* has been built from *lyale* and *kakoma*, respectively.

Responses from 47 of 50 interviewed participants revealed that neighbouring plant and tree species significantly influenced the meanings of place names. For example, *Muhalale*, meaning “a place with the *halale* banana tree,” derives its name from a specific type of banana tree. One participant explained that this area was the first to cultivate the *halale* banana, which later spread to other regions. Thus, the name *Muhalale* serves as a cultural and historical marker, linking the Ndali community to their tradition of using banana as food and preserving this association even if the *halale* species were to disappear. The findings are in line with the pragmatic layer of AOTPN, which states that the context of use determines the meaning of a proper name. Consequently, the way *Halale* was used has facilitated the meaning of *Muhalale*.

Another example is *Mwisoko*, meaning “a place with *sokola* grasses.” According to 8 of the 9 participants interviewed, the name originated from *isokola*, a type of local grass used for roofing houses. When missionaries arrived in the area, they struggled to pronounce the original term and shortened it to *isoko*, effectively clipping the syllable *-la*. This phonological adjustment resulted in the place name *Mwisoko*, illustrating how linguistic adaptations can shape toponymy. The connection between the plant name *sokola* and the place name *Mwisoko* exemplifies the first layer of meaning in the African Onomastic Theory of Proper Names (AOTPN), wherein the linguistic meaning of a plant contributes directly to the onomastic meaning of a place. These examples demonstrate the integral role of local plant species in shaping place names, serving as enduring records of historical, cultural, and environmental knowledge.

The participants' responses during the focus group discussions illustrated how local flora, including grasses, plants, and trees, contributed to the meanings of various places. These contributions were evident in the narratives shared during the discussions.

*Kula bhakati mwo Mumswanga papo kukabha nimikokwe mywingi, na abhoswanga bhakimama mumikokwe jhilajhila. Abhoswanga bhabha bhakalya utukuku po abhandu bhajhipa ingamu imikokwe jhilajhila jhabha miswanga. Po abhandu bhakati bhakusenga utwajha kula kula bhakakupa ingamu jha mumuswanga. Po linga umundu akujha kula kula po bhatingiishe najha mswanga. Jho nongwi ijhi bhakuti Mumuswanga* (That place is called Mumswanga because there were many trees where hawk birds were hiding. Those hawk birds were eating chicks, so people named those trees after them. It reached a time when people started to establish a settlement in the area, then they opted for the name of the tree called mswanga to be the name of the place.) (Malangali, FGD)

The quotation demonstrates that the name of the *Mswanga* tree influenced the meaning of the place name *Mumswanga*, which means “a place with the *Mswanga* tree.” This place was named after the trees where hawk-birds, known as *swanga* in the Ndali language, used to perch and hide. The coinage of the name *Mumswanga* was directly shaped by both the local vegetation and the behaviour of the hawk-birds, which hid in the trees to attack chickens. This reflects the pragmatic layer of meaning described in the African Onomastic Theory of Proper Names (AOTPN), which emphasises that the context in which a name is used contributes significantly to its meaning. In this case, the naming was informed by environmental and behavioural context, as well as by the interaction between specific trees and the birds they shelter.

These findings align with Machaba's (2004) observation that the vegetation characteristic of a given area often shapes the meanings of place names. Similarly, Anindo (2016) found that in the Lulogooli community, the use of flora, especially for medicinal purposes, influenced place naming. For instance, *Kisangula* was named after the *Masangula* tree, while *Muhalia* refers to plants believed to enhance milk production in cows. Therefore, the meanings of names like *Mumswanga* and *Mukambakasa* reveal the relevance of the third layer of AOTPN, which posits that meaning is generated from the context of coinage, particularly from the symbolic and functional significance of local flora, as *tumbakasi* was used as food for the Ndali community.

The findings are contrary to those of Tent and Blair (2011), who argue that many place names in Australia emerged from colonial, political, or administrative processes, often detached from local ecological knowledge and community participation. This perspective foregrounds external authority in the naming process. Thus, being contrary to Ndali place names, which were locally generated, arising from communal interaction with flora. The Ndali naming practices reflect indigenous knowledge systems rather than imposed administrative frameworks.

### 3.2 Place names associated with water bodies

The findings revealed that water bodies, such as rivers and springs, play a significant role in shaping the meanings of place names within the Ndali speech community. This is mainly due to the community's geographic location in a mountainous region rich in freshwater sources. Many places in the area derive their names from nearby rivers and springs. For instance, *Mwasongwe*, meaning “along the *Songwe* River,” is named after the *Songwe* River, which flows through the region and forms part of the border between Tanzania and Malawi. The physical presence of the river and the

community's proximity to it directly influenced the coinage and meaning of the place name. The findings align with the first layer of meaning in the African Onomastic Theory of Proper Names (AOTPN), which posits that the fundamental meaning of a proper name contributes to its onomastic meaning. In this case, the *Songwe* River serves as the referent that constructs the onomastic meaning of *Mwasongwe*.

Furthermore, the geographical name *Mukishima*, which means 'a place with a water spring', has a meaning that was influenced by the water spring found in the area. The residents of the area were using fresh water from the spring. This can be proved by a narration of one of the participants during interviews:

*Ijholo, abhandu bhakasemba amishi kukishima kula kula, po abhomama bhakatingiishe bhakujha kusemba amishi bhatii najha mukishima. Po abhandu bhakati bhakusenga nyumba mula mula bhakakupa ingamu jha mukishima. Po nulu she ichishima chilipo, lole po abhandu bhakaleka ukusemba amishi muchishima papo bhali na mabhomba mutwajha twabho* (A long time ago, people were fetching water from the spring. So, when women went to fetch water in the spring, they claimed that they were going to Mukishima. Then, when people began to establish settlements in the area, they named it Mukishima. Currently, the spring is present, but people have stopped fetching water from the spring because they have water taps at their homes). (Interview, Ibeta).

The participants' responses from the interviews highlighted that the place name *Mukishima* is directly associated with a spring that existed before the location was named. In the Ndali language, *kishima* means "water spring." Given the abundance of springs in the Ndali community, many local place names have been influenced by them. For instance, *Mwiteja* derives from the *Iteja* spring, *Mwachembe* from the *Chembe* spring, and *Mukilege* from the *Kilege* spring. Similarly, the place name *Muchifu* originated from a nearby river. Locals would commonly say they were "going to *Chifu*," which eventually led to the area being named *Muchifu*. The Ndali community's mountainous geography, a natural source of freshwater, has significantly influenced the naming and meanings of places in the region. This pattern aligns with the pragmatic layer of the African Onomastic Theory of Proper Names (AOTPN), which states that proper names often reflect practical and environmental realities. In this context, the names of rivers and springs are not only geographical markers but also serve as cultural signifiers, shaping the linguistic landscape of Ndali community as well as acting as boundaries between places.

The findings are consistent with Jenjekwa's (2021) research on Zimbabwean toponymy, which demonstrates that river names have influenced the meanings of local place names. For instance, *Dewure* River gave rise to the meaning of *Dewure*, and *Mutirikwi* River influenced the meaning of *Mutirikwi*. Similarly, Nwaha (2020) observed that rivers played a significant role in shaping the meanings of place names among the Basa'a people of Cameroon. These examples highlight a widespread pattern in African toponymy, where the names of water bodies often predate and inform the naming of surrounding locations. This analysis suggests that the naming practices within the Ndali speech community are consistent with broader trends across the continent. However, the Ndali case offers specific insights, as natural features such as springs and rivers are not only geographical markers but also reflect the community's environmental and historical identity.

The findings differ from those of Guyot and Seethal (2007), who argue that place names are redefined due to political transformation and identity reconstruction rather than to water bodies. This



happened in South Africa, where places like Gauteng, ‘the place of gold’, and KwaZulu-Natal were renamed during political transformation after apartheid. Their study in post-apartheid South Africa shows that historical events and sociopolitical agendas can override long-standing geographically motivated names. This contrasts with the Ndali context, where rivers and springs have maintained a stable influence on place naming over time.

### 3.3 Place names related to fauna

Some place names in the Ndali community are derived from local wildlife, particularly birds and other animals. A notable example is the place name *Muchikubhi*, which means “a place with small hawk birds.” This name originates from the presence of the *hawk* species (*kubhi*), which were known to prey on chicks in the area. According to the participants interviewed, the abundance and predatory behaviour of these birds were the key reasons the area was given this name. As detailed in Table 2, the participants’ responses reveal the significant role of local wildlife in shaping the meanings of place names. The presence and behaviour of animals, especially hawk-birds (*kubhi*), have directly influenced naming practices in the Ndali community. These findings highlight how local fauna serve not only as environmental features but also as cultural signifiers that inform and preserve aspects of communal knowledge and history through toponymy. In the case of the Ndali community, the naming of *Muchikubhi*, based on the behavioural traits of local birds, reflects a broader pattern in traditional African onomastics, where names are not arbitrary but deeply rooted in environmental observation and communal experience.

**Table 2: The Ndali place names reflecting names of animals and birds**

Place name	Meaning	Frequency in interviews	Frequency in FGDs	Animal/bird common name
Muchibhuli	A place with a honey badger	5	4	Honey badger
Muchikubhi	A place with a small hawk bird	8	0	African goshawk
Kwafuko	A place with moles	4	4	Moles

**Source: Fieldwork (2023)**

Table 2 illustrates that place names in the Ndali-speaking community are deeply influenced by the local fauna, particularly animals and birds. For instance, *Muchibhuli*, meaning “a place with a honey badger,” is derived from *Chibhuli*, the local name for the honey badger, an animal noted for raiding beehives in search of honey. This reflects how animal behaviour directly shapes place naming. Similarly, *Mumijhuni*, which translates to “a place with many big birds,” was named after a forest in the area known for hosting many big birds. The prevalence and behaviours of these birds contributed to the naming of the place, underscoring the role of environmental context in shaping linguistic identity.

These findings resonate with the pragmatic layer of meaning of the AOTPN framework, where the meanings of place names emerge from their contextual use. In this case, the names *Muchibhuli* and *Mumijhuni* gain significance from the honey badger's environmental presence and the large birds' cultural awareness, respectively. Buberwa (2012) makes similar observations about the Ruhaya language, in which place names often refer to animals that once inhabited the region. For example, *Kyenjubu* denoted an area inhabited by hippopotamuses, while *Kankende* was named after monkeys.

However, the animals that influence the meanings of place names vary from one community to another due to cultural differences. Anindo (2016) agrees that place names derived from animals can be language-specific. In his study of Lulogooli, place names like *Chamakanga*, which means ‘of guinea fowl’, and *Wamage*, which means ‘of termites’, differ from Ndali names, for in Ndali, they have different names; that is, *Mumakanga* means ‘of guinea fowl’, and *Mwang’era* means ‘of termites’, respectively. This emphasises the unique linguistic and cultural context of the Ndali place names. In Ndali, the place name *Muchikubhi* derives from *kubhi*, a small hawk known for preying on chicks, highlighting the community’s close observation of animal behaviour.

Overall, these findings show that place names function as cultural memory, preserving ecological and historical knowledge. They serve as a “living voice” of the past, transmitting the environmental experiences and cultural priorities of the Ndali community to future generations. The findings highlight how local wildlife significantly affects place names, reflecting their symbolic meanings. They illustrate the distinctive role of local wildlife in shaping place names within the Ndali community, contributing to a broader understanding of how environmental factors influence onomastic practices. In this particular study, the findings suggest that the Ndali place names are more than locational labels; they are living archives that encode interactions between people and their natural surroundings. This supports broader theories in African onomastics that emphasise the pragmatic and referential roles of proper names in oral cultures

### 3.4 Place names associated with landscapes

The findings of this study demonstrate that place names in the Ndali-speaking community are deeply rooted in both the natural environment and cultural practices, reflecting a dynamic interplay between physical geography, ecological knowledge, and socio-cultural interpretation. Through the lens of the Analysis of AOTPN, the research reveals that the Ndali place names function not merely as geographic labels but as communicative acts rich with contextual meaning.

One prominent theme that emerged is the impact of topography and landscape features on place naming. Names such as *Mubwima* and *Mundambala*, both denoting "highland" areas, were mentioned by many interviewees. 4 out of 5 participants interviewed across different study areas reported that the places were named for their landscape. This illustrates how elevation is used as a referential and orientational tool. The contextual understanding of these names aligns with the third layer of AOTPN, which emphasises the role of interpellation- the process by which a name is called into being within a specific social and spatial context. Similarly, place names like *Pabhunwongala*, "having many sharp corners", and *Pachipalapatwe* “, linked to steep slopes”, highlight the significance of physical terrain in shaping linguistic identity, confirming Gammeltoft’s (2016) argument that place names are spoken reflections of the surrounding environment.

Additionally, the research highlights the symbolic role of visibility and concealment in the naming process. Names such as *Mulundo*, "not seen," and *Mulufunda*, "being hidden", are tied to geographical seclusion, areas obscured by mountains or located in valleys. These findings reveal how visual perception and spatial isolation become culturally meaningful. In particular, *Mulufunda* carries deeper cultural resonance, as it metaphorically links to the practice of using *kafunda* (a traditional bag for hiding valuables), revealing how the second layer of AOTPN culturally influences and shapes toponymic meaning. This reflects a localised way of understanding and encoding space, where physical features acquire significance through metaphor and cultural practice.

The findings are similar to those of Tent and Blair (2021), who contend that island landscapes influenced the meaning of Australian place names. For instance, *Broken Bay* was named for its unique environment, formed by broken land. These findings are also connected to the assumption of AOTPN's first layer of meaning, which holds that proper names contain a basic meaning that may be used to generate further meanings. Consequently, the core meanings of the words *lundo* and *lufunda* have been used to construct the meanings of the place names *Mulundo* and *Mulufunda*. This shows how the environment is intertwined with place names, as the meaning of a place is derived from the environment.

The findings also indicated that flat terrain affected the meaning of certain places. Although the Ndali speech community is located in mountainous areas, there are a few flatlands. For example, the place name *Mwibhanda* designates a flatland next to a river, and *Mulusungu* designates a flatland situated between two rivers. These findings are consistent with Buberwa's (2012) argument that the Ruhaya community's place names were influenced by the area's topography, which includes valleys, mountains, and other natural features. However, Buberwa notes that each speech community has its own unique set of natural features, as numerous places were named based on the characteristics of their landscapes. Thus, the landscapes of the Ndali-speaking community play a crucial role in defining the meaning of place names, as these names reflect the physical characteristics of the local environment.

### 3.5 Place names deriving from the famous people

The findings of the study reveal that in the Ndali speech community, many place names are derived from the names of prominent individuals. These individuals are honoured for their leadership, social contributions, or status as early settlers. Such naming practices serve not only as geographical identifiers but also as cultural records that preserve the community's social memory. For instance, the place names *Kwamwandenga* and *Kwakiloso* commemorate early settlers who played significant roles in their respective communities. *Kiloso*, in particular, is remembered not only as a pioneer settler but also for his role in cassava farming and its distribution among locals, which earned him recognition and respect. Similarly, the name *Mwikinga* is derived from the original inhabitants, who were migrants from *Ukinga* (Makete). As explained by local participants, the area was initially referred to as "the place of *Mkinga*," which eventually evolved into *Mwikinga*.

Other place names, such as *Kwamwanyale* and *Pamwatila*, reflect symbolic recognition of local leadership. *Kwamwanyale* means "at Mwanyale's place," a reference to a respected traditional leader who ruled the *Msongwi* area. His influence was so profound that the area became known by his name among locals and visitors alike. *Pamwatila* similarly honours Chief *Mwatila*, meaning 'At Mwatila's place', a chief who inherited from his father, *Mulagha*. *Mwatila's* residence also functioned as a communal space for essential gatherings, further solidifying its symbolic and practical significance within the community. Consequently, adding Kwa- before a person's name changed it to the name of the place, which was then the community's capital.

These examples illustrate how the Ndali place names are deeply embedded in the community's socio-cultural framework. They not only reflect individual contributions to the community but also function as repositories of local history, leadership succession, and collective memory. In doing so, these place names act as enduring records of African cultural heritage, preserving narratives of identity, migration, and governance for future generations. Furthermore, these findings support the second layer of the African Onomastic Theory of Proper Names (AOTPN), which emphasises the

philosophical and cultural dimensions of naming practices. In the Ndali context, the meanings of place names are shaped by the lived experiences and societal roles of renowned individuals. This reinforces the idea that African toponymy is not merely descriptive but is a powerful medium for expressing communal values, honouring ancestry, and transmitting indigenous knowledge systems.

These findings align with Zwinoira (1984), who argues that the names of chiefs, such as Chief Manzini Motse and Chief Mbabane Kunene, influenced the meanings of the places Manzini and *Mbabane* in Swaziland. The findings also align with Chilala and Hang'ombe (2020), who claim that the names of prominent political figures influenced the meaning of renamed international airports and national stadia in Zambia. For example, *Kenneth Kaunda International Airport* was renamed after the first president of the Zambian Republic, and *Levy Mwanawasa Stadium* was renamed after the third president of the Zambian Republic.

In contrast, the findings differ from Algeo's (1988) assertion that colonial leaders, including the Queen of England, influenced Australian place names such as Victoria, Queenstown, and Queensland. The study revealed that the Ndali place names reflect the contributions of prominent indigenous members of the Ndali speech community rather than colonial figures. This suggests that the Ndali place names were not shaped by colonial influences. Moreover, the findings differ from those of Schotsman and Bryceson (2006), who claimed that some place names in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, were influenced by religious leaders. For example, the name *Idrissa* honours a well-known imam of a mosque. The Ndali place names, however, do not derive their meanings from religious leaders.

### 3.6 Place names associated with historical events

The findings indicate that some place names in the Ndali-speaking community are derived from significant historical events, especially those that were traumatic, unusual, or socially impactful. These names serve as cultural markers that preserve collective memory and embed historical narratives within the linguistic landscape. One such example is *Kulutagho*, which translates to "a place where dead bodies were thrown." According to community participants, this name refers to a period before colonial influence, when deceased individuals were not formally buried but discarded in that area. The perceived impurity of the site also led to cultural restrictions, such as prohibitions against using water from the area's rivers or collecting firewood nearby. Another powerful example is *Mwitunga Bhandu*, meaning "hanging people," which recalls a violent episode during which invaders from Chief Merere's local army, known as Tuta, executed individuals who resisted capture.

These names reflect an enduring imprint of collective trauma and the historical memory of the Ndali community. These findings strongly align with Algeo's (1988) assertion that historical events are a significant influence on place naming, as in the case of *Anxious Bay* in Australia, named after a distressing maritime incident and *Mount Spec*, named during a period of mineral speculation. The names in the Ndali context illustrate how socio-historical occurrences are encoded into local geographies. Similarly, Onipede (2020) found that names in Ogbomoso, Nigeria, such as *Apake* (kill toads), stem from local incidents, further supporting the broader applicability of this phenomenon across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

Within the theoretical framework of the Analysis of AOTPN, these findings reflect the third layer of meaning, which emphasises the role of historical and situational context in shaping the interpretation of proper names. Place names like *Mwitunga Bhandu* gain their semantic significance

from the specific historical incidents they commemorate, illustrating how names are not arbitrary but are deeply tied to local lived experiences and collective memory. Therefore, toponyms function as historical texts in their own right, revealing the emotional and cultural impact of past events while serving as geographical reference points. They reveal how the Ndali-speaking community has preserved its history through naming practices, reinforcing the view that place names act as vessels of memory and identity across generations.

#### 4 Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that place names in the Ndali-speaking community operate on multiple semantic layers, encompassing ecological awareness, spatial understanding, and cultural symbolism. This study concludes that place naming in the Ndali-speaking community is a culturally embedded and environmentally responsive practice. Place names are shaped not only by the physical characteristics of the landscape, such as hills, slopes, and visibility, but also by the community's interaction with local fauna and symbolic cultural practices. The interplay between environment and naming practice illustrates that toponyms are not static identifiers but dynamic cultural artefacts. Using the AOTPN framework, the study has shown that the Ndali place names convey meaning through pragmatic use, contextual origin, and cultural reference, serving as a rich repository of indigenous knowledge systems that reinforce communal memory and provide insight into the ways communities perceive and interact with their environment. The findings reinforce the view that toponyms are living linguistic expressions that encapsulate a community's history, identity, and values. Further studies should be conducted on place names at the global level and in other regions of Tanzania to examine how modernisation has influenced their meanings and the extent to which these names continue to reflect the identities of their respective communities. Since place-name meanings are shaped by a society's environment, history, and culture, such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural change and continuity. Additionally, future research should focus on the morphological structure of the Ndali place names, as morphological elements are closely related to meaning and can provide further insights into the linguistic and cultural significance of these names.

#### 5 References

- Abdikhalikovna, K. F. (2020). Principles of toponyms (place names) classification. *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, 7 (6), 73-76.
- Ainiala, T., Saarelma, M., & Sjöblom, P. (2016). *Names in focus: An introduction to Finnish Onomastics*. Studia Fennica.
- Alasli, M. (2019). Toponyms' contribution to identity: A case study of Rabat (Morocco). *International Cartographic Association Proceedings. 29<sup>th</sup> International Cartographic Conference*, Tokyo, Japan.
- Algeo, J. (1988). The Australianness of Australian placenames. *Names*, 36 (3&4), 173-185.
- Alphonse, C., & Sane, E. (2019). Toponyms and identity in Hanang District: Their origin and meaning. *Ethnologia Actualis*, 19 (1), 106-116. doi: 10.2478/eas-2019-0012.
- Anindo, C. (2016). *A morphosemantic study of toponyms Lulogooli place names*. Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, University of Nairobi.

- Batoma, A. (2006). African ethnonyms and toponyms: An annotated bibliography. *Electronic Journal of African Bibliography* (EJAB), 10 (1), 11-21.
- Batoma, A. (2009). Onomastics and indirect communication among the Kabre of Northern Togo. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 18 (3), 215-234.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.
- Buberwa, A. (2012). Sociolinguistic meaning of Bantu place names: The case of Ruhaya in north-western Tanzania. *Journal for Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1 (2), 111-120.
- Cantile, A., & Kerfoot, H. (Eds). (2016). Place names as intangible cultural heritage. United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, Romano-Hellenic Division. *International Scientific Symposium*, Florence- Italy.
- Chilala, B. & Hang'ombe, F. P. (2020). Commemorative naming of landmarks and the perpetuation of social inequality in Zambia. A critical toponymies perspective. *Journal of Lexicography and Sociolinguistic Studies* 1 (1), 45-59.
- David, J. (2011). Commemorative place names- their specificity and problems. *Names*, 59 (4), 214-228.
- Elias, T. N., Mpobela, L., Tibategeza, E. R. (2023). A linguistic study of village names in Ngara District, Kagera Region, Tanzania. *International Journal of Culture and History*, 10 (1), 32-59. doi: 10.5296/ijch.v10i1.20695.
- Gammeltoft, P. (2016). "Names and geography". In Hough (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*. Oxford University Press, 502-513.
- Guyot, S., & Seethal, C. (2007). Identity of place, places of identities: Change of place names in post-apartheid South Africa. *South African Geographical Journal*, 89(1), 55–63.
- Helleland, B. (2012). Place names and identities. *Names and Identities, Oslo Studies in Language*, 4 (2), 95-116.
- Jenjekwa, V. (2021). Post-2000 revitalisation of Shona place names in Zimbabwe: Recovering voices from the past. *Nomina Africana*, 35 (1), 1-14. <http://doi.org/10.2989/NA2021.35.1.1.1356>.
- Liu, L. & Rybakov, M. (2021). Methods and motives for naming geographical objects in Chinese and Western cultures. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business and Government*, 27 (2), 4198-4201.
- Machaba, M. A. (2004). Naming, identity and African renaissance in a South African context: PhD Dissertation, University of Natal. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.
- Mandillah, L. (2022). "A morphosyntactic and semantic analysis of toponyms among the Luhya: A case of Bungoma County." *Journal of Languages, Linguistics and Literary Studies*, 2 (1), 28-37.
- Merriam, S. B. & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Brand.

- Nguyen, V. K. (2022). Revisiting semantics issues of proper names: A Vietnamese perspective. *Names, A Journal of Onomastics*, 70 (1), 41-49. doi. 10.5195/names.2022.2378.
- Nkansah, S. K & Bonsu, E. M (2024). Indigenous place names. A literary toponomastics study of suburb names in Cape Coast. *Discourse on Culture*, 21 (1), 47-72.
- Nwaha, S. (2020). The toponyms and their meaning among Basa'a people: Towards a preservation of cultural and ancestral heritage. *International Journal of Development Research*, 10 (7), 37649-37653.
- Onipede, K. (2020). A preliminary survey of place names in Ogbomoso, Southwest Nigeria. *Interdisciplinary Journal of African and Asian Studies (IJAAS)*, 6 (2), 215-226.
- Patrick, K. O. (2021). Syntactic-semantic analysis of toponyms of Igbo. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria*, 24 (1), 83-95.
- Schotsman, P. & Bryceson, D. F. (2006). Dar es Salaam place names: Mapping urban physical growth and moral value transformation. *Tanzanian Journal of Population Studies and Development*, 13 (2), 29-68.
- Stewart, G. R. (1954). A classification of place names. *Names*, 2 (1), 1-13.
- Tent, J., & Blair, D. (2011). Motivation for naming: The development of toponymic typology for Australian placenames. *Names*, 59 (2), 67-89.
- Tent, J., & Blair, D. (2021). A revised typology of place-naming. *Names, a Journal of Onomastics*, 69 (4), 31-47.
- Williams, A. (2023). A survey of socio-onomastic features and economic values of place names of Baruten in Nigeria. *Journal of West African Languages*, 50, 145-156.
- Zwinoira, R. T. (1984). Some toponyms and ethnonyms of Swaziland: In UNESCO, the general history of Africa: Studies and documents. *Symposium Organised by UNESCO on African Ethnonyms and Toponyms held in Paris from 3 to 7 July 1978*, 9 (6), 23-38.