Semantic Approach of First Name in Seereer Traditional Society

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Abstract: The social imperatives underlying the naming of the child seereer and the protocol that rules outdoor ceremony remain an original and fascinating research topic. The seereer first name has an informative character on, for instance, the geographical origin, the circumstances of birth, the date of birth, the sex, the character, among others, of the child. This study on the Seereer traditional naming system is semantically oriented to provide a better understanding of such a cultural fact. The article tries also to explore the origin of some seereer names. It also aims to study the process of the traditional way of naming of seereer people, to show how the name is given, who is entitled to give the name, then to draw up the typology of names in the Seereer culture, so as to list the social peculiarities of first names, the social factors of choice, through a decipherment of the semantic content (message to be grasped), the social value and the symbolism that the seereer first name encodes. Through the seereer first name, appears a set of things of a strong sociocultural connotation. The terminology of the Seereer names includes items with value of simulation, conjuration, prayers, etc.

Keywords: First name, seereer, semantics, tradition, society, outdoor ceremony.

INTRODUCTION

The culture of naming newborn babies is known and practiced by all linguistic communities. However, the realities that govern the attribution and the choice of the name of the child differ from one community to another.

They are linked to the religious practices, traditional beliefs and mystical practices of each society.

In Seereer society where traditional beliefs and mystical practices are strongly and deeply rooted, baptizing a newborn follows a traditional protocol. The ignorance or non-respect of this cultural requirement is prejudicial to the child as well as to his parents and family.

That is the reason why, among seereer people, the choice of the name of the child is not done blindly; it is conditioned by the socio-cultural realities, it is done according to the period of birth, the precedent of the birth, the circumstances in which the baby is born, the nature and the type of the baby, etc. The child born on the day of an annual event bears the name of the event, so the child born on the day of the Miis (Prehivernal Hunting), is called Miis, the one born the month before the pre-winter hunting Sam Suuy̌ is named after the month, his name is Sam Suuy̌. All these social parameters are taken into consideration before giving the newborn a name. The seereer way of perceiving universe appears through the traditional system of naming their children.

Giving a name to the newborn, in the seereer traditional society, is an entire family affair or matter that requires a mature reflection based on the recommendations of the ancestors, and often that of the totem of the concerned family. The parents of the child are not sometimes free and independent when it comes to giving a name to their child, as they would have liked. The choice depends on several cultural factors, often unavoidable. We could say that the seereer first name is dictated to the parents of the child. According to seereer tradition, some children deserve, for reasons that we will discuss in the next section, names that have a derogatory sociological connotation and, from the semantic point of view, a negative meaning, others receive socially desirable first names. Names such as Močaan (the best), Mosaan (the most beautiful), Jam (Peace), Jeg-jam (The peaceful), express the goodness and good habits, etc.

This is to say that the seereer first name has a character with informative value. Thus, the studies on the first name or family names are generally of the onomastics (branch of the lexicology which studies the etymology of the first names), and it presents a great interest for linguistics if one considers that the seereer first name is not empty of meaning, it has an informative function perceived as an element of social identification of the child on his own character and on

several family factors. The first name has a social dimension with a more or less explicit informative meaning (sometimes implicit) that allows to make a positive or negative judgment on the child or even to predict his future. According to Jean-Michel Berthelot, the name "allows everyone, at the price of some elementary calculations, to know if his choice (or that of his parents) was innovative, classic or conformist" [1].

The first names analyzed in this article reveal many social and cultural facts related to popular beliefs and occult practices. We will try to elucidate all these parameters that underlie the choice of the first name in seereer society, from the date of birth to the celebration of baptism from the semantic and sometimes sociological angle to reveal and analyze the informational continuum of the seereer first name. We will also adopt the sociolinguistic approach to establish the link between the first name and inherent social factors.

Problematic and methodological approach

Many studies have been done on seereer. Some focus on the study of ethnic group civilization and seereer oral literature. The famous and remarkable works *Coosaan* by Henry Gravrand, *La femme seereer* by Issa Laye Thiaw, and *Le théme de la mort dans la literature seereer* by Amad respectively explored the culture, civilization, man and society seereer, the process of the initiation of the seereer woman and the philosophy of seereer on death; some works focus on the seereer language, more specifically on phonology and morphology; Among the descriptive works on the seereer language, we note Précis grammatical sereer by Waly Coly Faye, *Grammaire dialectale seereer* by Souleymane Faye, Seereer-French dictionary by Leon Cretois, among others. These areas of seereer language are exploited by linguists, historians and anthropologists.

However, some linguistic themes of this language have not been yet the subject of scientific studies. Domains of syntax, semantics, onomastics, lexicology, etc. suffer from scientific studies. Works on these areas of the Seereer language are very rare not to say inexistent. In general, Senegalese languages are not sufficiently described. These areas of linguistics must now be researchers' fields of investigation.

We strongly believe that today researches can and must necessarily be oriented towards other aspects of language other than phonology and morphology. This invitation to a new direction of researches

corresponds to new trends in linguistics. To the traditional division of linguistic reflection between phonetics, morphology and syntax, is added, today, semantics, lexicology, discourse analysis, pragmatics, etc. This is the main reason that justifies the choice of this present work. We are under the impression that this is where the researches need to be done now. The choice made on this particular aspect (the first name) of the oral tradition of seereer people, will constitute a contribution to the elaboration of a scientific knowledge, more detailed on the oral tradition and the seereer language in the sense that a study on the first name is a "beautiful undertaking to demystify family legends" [2].

Regarding the naming of the seereer child, linguistically, we find a morphological and structural typology whose analysis requires an onomastic, anthropological knowledge in order to decipher the social origin and informational content of the seereer first name. The socio-cultural dimension of the seereer first name derives from the symbolic character of it. For the interpretation and analysis of the data, we refer to the Durkheimian model of analysis, which is a "particularly original inspiration for the philosophy of the social sciences". The choice of such an approach to study the first name in the seereer traditional society is based on many considerations. Firstly, because we are interested in the study of the meaning of the first name, its explicit and implicit information content, in other words, the implication and presupposition of the first name. Secondly, the semantic theory aims to "account for significant phenomena in language". This will allow us to discover how the seereer first name is acquired: its meaning, and its origin. This approach seems appropriate because some seereer names are derived from a story, a blunder, special circumstances, etc.

The operation "muumi muumi": determining factor for the choice of the first name

In the seereer society, the choice of first name is not exclusively the parents' affair; it is also a concern for the whole family, especially the paternal aunt. The paternal aunt is the sister of the father of the newborn. She is essential to the naming process. The newborn cannot receive a name in her absence, or without consultation of the father with her. Tradition gives her the right to give a name to the newborn, like the father. On the day of the ceremony of baptism bat or christening nduus, two names are given to the child; one is given by the father himself and the other by the paternal aunt. The selection of the final name is known after the results of the "vote" for the first name by the children of the village during the session of "muumi

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[1] Berthelot, J. M. (2004). "Le choix du prénom. Des régularités statistiques aux mécanismes cognitifs. » in *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, XLII-129. Translation mine.

[2] Berthelot. J, M. (2004). "Le choix du prénom. Des régularités statistiques aux mécanismes cognitifs. » in *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, XLII-129. Translation mine.

muumi". The "muumi muumi" is a ritualized procedure that is used to indicate the child's first name, between the first name given by the father and the one wanted by the maternal aunt. This session is held in the evening of the naming ceremony and is conducted as follows: the children of the concerned village (or district) are gathered in the center of the courtyard of the house, each receives two kinds of donut ball called "o fonq", the one that is made with wet millet flour "o fonq kaaf" is put in the right hand and in the left hand that made with wet millet bran "o fonq soxon".

Two other big donut balls of the same kind, made with millet flour, are placed on a horse-box "ndal" and each ball corresponds to a first name, one bearing the name given by the father and the other the name given by the aunt. Children are not informed of the name of a particular ball. They do not even know the purpose of this practice. The horse-box is placed on a calabash; the calabash is also placed on a mortar put next a hole. The donut ball with millet flour must be kept and eaten afterwards and that of millet bran must be thrown into the hole. The aunt (or her representative in case of unavailability) and the father's representative supervise the "vote"

The children, in a folk atmosphere of songs muumi-muumi, are called to touch with the right hand a ball on the horse-box, one cannot touch the two at the same time. When a child touches a ball, it corresponds to a voice as in electoral vote. When children are touching one by one, representatives and audience count the voices for each ball for four rounds when the baby is a man and for three rounds when it is a woman. A round consists of a round trip from the central yard to the house gate. After completing the three or four rounds, the name which obtains more voices wins and the child bears that name. Thus, this name will be used in and by the community.

During the vote, the children will sing a song of prayers and wishes for the baby and his parents. This song is accompanied by a jovial musical rhythm. The song is composed in seereer language as follows:

Muumi! -Muumi! Be dumb! Be dumb!
Fata ñoow a ñoow! May he live! May he live!
ɗooƴaa! juukaa! Give birth! Give birth!, (it implies without spacing the pregnancies)
Bas! Bas! A lot! A lot!

The first segment of the song *Muumi! Muumi* (Be dumb, be dumb!) is structured under the imperative mode, so it delivers a recommendation, an order to the mother of the child. The children order her to be submissive, not to listen to what the others are saying. The second sentence of the song: *fata ñoow añoow* (May he live! May he live!), is equivalent to an injunction that denotes prayers addressed to the

newborn, wishing him long life. As for the third *ɗooƴaa juukaa*! (Give birth! Give birth! without spacing the pregnancies) and the fourth Bas! Bas! (A lot! A lot!) They are advice given to the parents, mainly to the mother so that she continues to give birth without spacing pregnancies. The children, through the song, express their disagreement about the spacing of births for a woman, in other words, family planning.

The celebration of the muumi! muumi! song has also an educational and evaluative character, it allows seereer to test the intelligence of children. For them, the children who throw the ball of millet flour into the hole and keep that of millet bran are considered less intelligent, they are imprudent as for those who keep the ball of millet flour they can eat it or bring it home as a reward, they are considered as careful. That is why the seereer child, traditionally, bears two names, one given by the father and the other proposed by the paternal aunt or vice verso. This is how the attribution and choice of first name takes place in the seereer society. It is important to note that today, with the advent of religions as the Muslim religion (Islam) whose main purpose is the "islamization" of people; the seereer traditional names lose ground. Since some seereer are converted to Islam, they prefer Arabic names that sound more Islamic to traditional names that denote syncretism, religion and traditional beliefs of ancestors. As a result, the current seereer child (modern converted seereer) often carries two names, a traditional first name and an Arabic first name.

Typological analysis of first names and their social and semantic value

In this section, it is a question of classifying the first names in different categories in order to identify and analyze their social and semantic value according to the traditional beliefs and the mystical practices related to their creation.

First names of twins

Traditionally, in seereer society, twins are scary. According to traditional beliefs, twins are not mystically ordinary babies; they are considered "supernatural characters", endowed with mystic power. The birth of twins sometimes creates fear within their family. For these considerations, the naming of twins is highly ceremonial and ritualized. There are specific names given to seereer twins. When they are twin brothers Ngoo-maak and Ngoo-ndeɓ are the names mostly used. Ngoo is the diminutive of Ngoor, derived from the name (o) Koor which refers to the man and the adjectives maak (grand, elder, senior) and ndeɓ (junior, younger) denote a seniority relationship. Therefore, the name Ngoo-maak semantically means Ngoor Senior / Ngoor the elder and Ngoo-ndeɓ refers to Ngoor Junior or Ngoor the younger. At first glance, regarding the meaning of these first names, we will say that the first name Ngoo-maak (Ngoor senior or Ngoor the elder) is

given to the twin who is born first and Ngoo-ndeɓ (Ngoor the younger) to the last born twin. It's chronologically logical and normal. But these names are attributed to twins in a contradictory way. Ngoo-ndeɓ (Ngoor the younger) is the name given to the first born twin and Ngoo-maak (Ngoor the older) to is attributed to the last born twin. This contradictory naming is the same for twin sisters whose best known names are Maakaan and Ndeɓaan.

When the twins are a man and a woman, Ngoo-maak or Ngoo-ndeɓ is the name that the male twin bear and Maakaan or Ndeɓaan is that of the female one. This chronological inversion of the twins' first names is based on traditional beliefs and mystical practices. It aims to avoid mystical fight between the twins, according to seereer oral tradition.

First names of prayers and wishes

These are first names that express wishes and prayers. These prayers and wishes are focused on the health of the newborn, on its protection by God. These names are formed under the injunctive mode and resemble orders given to the newborn and the Almighty God. Among these names, there are: Wodi! (Be healthy) Moyí (Be better). The names Wodi and Moyí are respectively formed by derivation, the verbs wod (to be in good health) or moy̆ (to be better) are suffixed with **-i** which is the marker of the imperative in seereer for the second person singular. These first names are exclusively given to female children. For male babies, we have prayers such as Jam (Peace), Jegjam (The Peaceful), Moy̆aan (The Best). Jam refers to peace; Jegjam is the combination of the verb jeg (to have, to get) and the common noun Jam meaning peace. On a semantic level, Jegjam means Who has peace or Who is peaceful and the name Moy̆aan is morphologically formed with the verb moy̆ (to be better) and the suffix -aan which indicates the attributive in seereer language. There are also names expressing prayers for the protection of God, for example Roogwuusi! / Roogwaasi! (God leave (him). In the popular imagination of the seereer people, this name is a way of recognizing the power of God. God is the One who creates everyone and decides everything. As a result, the newborn is entrusted to God, who is considered as the best protector. It is a way for seereer to express their gratitude to God (Roog in Seereer), Creator of the universe, for receiving in return his mercy, blessing and protection, especially for the newborn. This name is created from a composition of the common noun Roog (God) and the verb wuus / waas (to leave / to let) to which we add the suffix **-i**, the marker of the imperative. The Roogwaasi / wuusi statement presupposes an imploration towards God to give long life to the baby. As for the name Ñoowi!, it is a prayer addressed to the newborn. Ñoowi means Live! Stay alive! This name is given to the child whose elder siblings are all dead. Ñoowi is an exhortation for the child to stay alive, that is, not to die early as his older brothers and sisters did.

First names expressing father's death

These are undesirable names and are two in number Kuut and Maadaan. The first is given to a male child and the latter to a female one. These first names are attributed to the child whose father died when the mother was pregnant. These first names are borne by orphaned children. The child named Kuut or Maadaan lost his or her father before he was born. Everyone who bears the name Kuut or Maadaan does not know their father during their lifetime. The name kuut comes from the verb guut (to miss something) and maadaan is derived from the verb maad (attend) combined with the suffix -aan. Here, it means "Who does not know her father during his lifetime". In other words, these first names are announcing the death of the father, for that reason they are socially undesirable.

First names of conjuration

The seereer people believe in the supernatural phenomenon of reincarnation and metamorphosis. Such beliefs are the origin of the creation of conspiracy first names. These names are way of sabotaging, mocking at and being indifference to the child life. According to seereer tradition, some people are able to reincarnate after death, they are called in seereer a ciif. According to traditional beliefs, a ciif is a troubling character, who has the power to be reborn after his death. Some ciif are considered as very harmful characters (a ciif paaxeer) for the society, because they disturb the family tranquility when they are reborn several times in the same family. In this case, they end up installing psychosis in the concerned family. The problematic of a ciif is that it dies most of the time very early, and under painful circumstances. The ciif generally die when they are in "golden age" or a few weeks or months after birth. And what is more shocking for the ciif character are the circumstances in which he/she prefers to die (annual event, ceremony, etc.). When the wise men discover or recognize mystically a ciif, they take strict measures to settle accounts against him/her. Among the measures taken, there are the names of conspiracy, sabotaging given to the ciif child. These include, among others Gaskel (who is "already" buried), is formed from the verb gas (dig) and the seereer passive marker **-el**. From the semantic point of view, the name Gaskel means someone who is already dead and buried. We have also Xonik (Go to die), this name is composed of the verb root xon (die) and the suffix -ik which indicates the movement of remoteness. Xonik presages the near death of the child in near future. There is also Soxar, it is the gathering of the verbal radical sox (to pound the millet) and the privative suffix -ar. The name Soxar presupposes the death of Soxar (the one bearing the name) before she is old enough to pound millet.

Liir, is a name of disinterestedness, Liir means rags. The baby who bears this name is likened to the shreds of clothing, that is to say that it is not useful. We sabotage his birht, and we lose interest in him. They gives no importance to the baby itself; its birth leaves indifferent his/her parents and relatives. These types of names express feelings of despair and their vocation is to protect bad luck, to ward off evil. Parents are cleverly disinterested in the birth of the baby to ward off evil, but in reality this is not the case. The negative connotation of these names is a strategy for "implanting" the ciif that is to say to push the ciif to stay alive very longtime. For Becker and Faye, this is an "avoidance strategy for the child to avoid fate" [3].

From the semantic point of view, the name Gaskel means someone who is already dead and buried, we have Xonik (Go to die), this name is composed of the verb root xon (die) and the suffix -ik which indicates the movement of remoteness. Xonik presages the near death of the child in the near future. There is also Soxar, it is the gathering of the verbal radical sox to pound the millet) and the private suffix -ar. The name Soxar presupposes the death of Soxar (the one with the name) before she is old enough to pound millet.

Oxymoron first names
The origin or creation of this category of names is related to the circumstances in which the child is born. It is the result of a coincidence between the birth of the child and something like the death of a village chief, etc. In case of coincidence between the death of the village chief and the birth of a child, the child bears the name of the deceased even if they are not of the same sex. Such a situation creates what we call here oxymoron names like:

Waa-tew (Waly the female)
Samba-tew (Samba the female)
Maalik-o-tew (Malick the female)
Kumba-koor (Coumba the male)
Maye-koor (Mayé the male)
Njuma-Koor (Diouma the male)

Waa is the diminutive of the full name Waali. Waali and Samba are names for men but this time they are attributed to women hence the use of the adjective tew which determines the sex of the child. Tew means woman. Waali, Samba and Maalick are men's names. They sound masculine. The adjective tew seeks to give them a feminine consonance. It is the same function that the adjective koor (which means man) plays, it determines the sex of Kumba, Maye, Njuma (Diouma) because these names are borne by women; if they are

attributed to men (as here) they are accompanied with the item Koor to specify the sex. Their oxymoron characters consist of giving a name of a man to a woman or vice verso and that can bring about misunderstanding for some foreign people that is way they are put together with the adjective Koor or tew to indicate the sex of the child.

Coincidence can result in what we call here season names such as Seek (winter), Ndiig (rainy season). A child who is born in a particular winter (good or bad) can be called Seek to mark the particularity of that winter and this is the case with the name Ndiig. As for the name Mbel o xiid, it is the name given to a girl whose year of birth is fantastic and unforgettable, a year fullof joy, happiness, peace, etc. because of the abundance of crops. This name is formed with the name mbel which is derived, by consonant alternation, from the verb fel (to be well, to be pleasant) and lhe name xiid which means season. To remember always the day of birth of the child, the seereer give the child the name of the day he is born. Thus, we have names such as:

Tening (Monday)
Diboor, (Sunday)

All these names are attributed to girls. In short, Tening is given to a baby born on a Monday and Diboor is given to a child born on a Sunday.

First names indicating geographical origin and filiations
The informational content of this category of first names are related to the geographical origin of the child or to his /her links to his parents. These first names are zonal localizers. These are composed nouns, and the adjective plays the role of localizing. We have Ngoo-jurup which means Ngoor from the village of Jurup, San-joyin, that means Sanu from the village of Joyin.

There are first names that indicate also the father's name. They are also first names composed of the name of the child and that of the father. For example Fat-njoogu, which means Fatou of Njoogu / Faatu is the daughter of Njoogu. This name clearly shows that Njoogu is Fatou's father. This type of names denotes a relation of filiations to the other.

CONCLUSION
At the end of this study on seereer first name, we noticed that the system of naming the child is part of a highly ritualized process. The typology of first names is dictated by social considerations, traditional beliefs and mystical practices. The seereer name is full of meaning whose interpretation requires some knowledge of the seereer environment and how it perceives the universe. By this article, we managed to decipher the

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[3] Becker, C., & Faye. W. (1991) « La nomination seereer » in *Ethiopiques* : La civilisation sérère d'hier à demain. (Actes du colloque des journées culturelles du Sine) Fatick : 10-12 mai. Translation mine.

informational content from a social and semantic angle. We consider through this study that the names seereer hide information from. And this study helped us to realize that the seereer outdoor ceremony is a social practice that strongly contributes to the choice of the first name. We have also succeeded, through the categories of names analyzed in this article, to discover that the first name in seereer traditional society delivers a message or messages, either to the child himself, or to the whole community. We meticulously dissected the social dimension of the first name and then identified and analyzed its particular aspects related to its creation or origin. Everything is an act of language and the act of language is a linguistic code, to be decoded and interpreted in relation to the cultural realities of the concerned society.