

Standardization of Ethiopian Names in the Scientific Literature

This short commentary on citation of Ethiopian names in the literature was first written as a response to a query I received from an Ethiopian graduate student in Germany in 2009. Having noticed that only so few of the Ethiopian names that he knew were correctly portrayed in the scientific literature, i.e., some use their full names (given name attached to father's name), most use (or are forced to use) their fathers's or grandfather's name as surname, and also having noticed the small note on my home page, the student asked about the "correct way" of citing Ethiopian names in the scientific literature. A reply was duly sent and a short note about it was also published on the "*AddisArt and Culture*" website. Since this website is not functional at the moment, I am also now posting it on this website, after making some revisions, to serve the broader community of authors, editors, publishers, readers, etc.

Ethiopians receive usually one name (rarely two or more) at birth. This name is attached to the biological father's name (rarely other names other than the biological father's name are also used) and, together, it becomes a "binomial," a two-name system, used to describe a particular individual. For instance, *Abebe Bikilla* is the name of an individual whose father's name is *Bikilla*. Let us assume that *Abebe Bikilla* now has his own child and he named him *Belete*. *Belete Abebe* will be the full name of *Abebe*'s child. Let us assume again that both *Abebe Bikilla* and *Belete Abebe* publish articles in scholarly journals. If these individuals use their names as is, we have no problems of telling who wrote what but how are they going to be differentiated if the journal decided to use family or surname?

In most European and American literature that we see today, *Abebe Bikilla* would be addressed as *Bikilla, A.* etc., and *Belete Abebe* would be referred to as *Abebe, B.* etc., assuming

that both *Bikilla* and *Abebe* are surnames, which they are not. There is a lot of confusion in the scientific literature concerning the way Ethiopian names have been used. The confusion would also be compounded when there are many other first names in the literature with, for example *Bikilla* and *Abebe* appended as father or grandfather names, e.g., *Afework Bikilla* would be addressed in the literature as *Bikilla, A.*, etc. How does one know whether *Bikilla, A.* is *Abebe Bikilla* or *Afework Bikilla* unless one is familiar with the work of one or both of these people?

Ethiopians do not have a family name “which is inherited from one generation to another as in most western nationalities.” They usually do not have a middle name either. What appear as middle names are usually names appended to the given names at baptism. A variant of a ‘surname’ or a prefix, often as *Ato*, *Weizero* (abbreviated as *W/ro*, for married women) and *Weizerit* (abbreviated as *W/t*, for unmarried women) [so and so], with *Ato* meaning Mr., *W/ro* meaning Mrs. and *W/t* meaning Miss, exists, however, but this is often used to respectfully address individuals in official documents or in written and verbal communications. In cases where two individuals have the same name (i.e. given and father name the same), the grandfather name would be appended to each of the names for purposes of ready identification on essential documents.

Names that look like “polynomials” may be encountered as Ethiopian names, e.g., *Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher* (correctly written as *Tewolde-Berhan Gebre-Egziabher*) is given for an individual called *Tewolde-Berhan*, whose father’s name is *Gebre-Egziabher*, *Berhane-Marcos Tadesse* is a name given to an individual called *Berhane-Marcos*, whose father’s name is *Tadesse*. Names like these are often mutilated in the scientific literature. It is not uncommon to hear Dr. *Tewolde-Berhan* addressed in scientific meetings as Dr. *Egziabher*, which chuckles Ethiopians when they hear it for the first time, as Dr. *Egziabher* is translated, in the *Amharic* language, as Dr. “God.” In names like these, the first two words are often connected by a hyphen. The hyphenated word denotes a single name. Hence *Tewolde-Berhan* is the son of an individual called *Gebre-Egziabher*. The word used as a prefix or suffix, in such names, is given at baptism, with a certain meaning attached to it.

In order to rid the scientific literature of this type of confusion, Ethiopian scientists addressed the issue in a book edited by R. K. Brummitt and C. E. Powell (1992), titled “Authors

of Plant Names,” published by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, London, wherein similar surname problems in the Cyrillic and Chinese names as well as compound names of Spanish or Portuguese origin and prefixes in Dutch, Belgian, South African and other names were also raised. As a consequence of publication of this book, for Ethiopian names, the “operative name used in the context of authorship of plant names” has now been established to be the given name. Similar attempts were made to use the given name followed by the father’s name without a separating comma or transposition of the two words in a name in the context of authorship of scholarly articles. However, there continues to appear the usual problem associated with Ethiopian names.

Finally, in order to lessen the confusion and to establish a standardized system, I would like to urge all Ethiopian authors to use their names as close to the original as possible in all their publications. The responsibility to do so and to assert the right of use rests with them. They need to correct any errors of transpositions they see in galley proofs and to point out these errors to the editors of journals. Similarly, I would also like to advise all editors and publishers to use Ethiopian names as provided by the authors themselves and not to look for a “family” or “surname” in Ethiopian names, as there are none.

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