Personal Name in Khurkhul
An approach from Sociolinguistics and Anthropological Linguistics

Dr. Louriyam Bebica Devi, Ph.D. Linguistics, M.A. Linguistics, M.A. English Literature

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Introduction

Khurkhul is the native tongue of the inhabitants of the Khurkhul village, located approximately 16 km from Imphal, the capital of the northeastern state of Manipur, India. It is said to be a variety of Meiteilon and is a part of the Kuki-Chin language family. According to 2011 population Census, the Khurkhul village has 6450 (which include the present author) of which 3300 are males while 3150 are female. The Khurkhul variety of the Meiteilon language is endangered.

The attitude towards a language, especially of the younger generation of native speakers informs whether the language is maintained or ignored. The current situation of the Khurkhul variety of the Meiteilon language is observed in my previous research. I conducted a survey on two hundred people who are mixed of the oldest generation, middle age, and youngest generation. Cent percent of the oldest generation have positive attitude towards their language. The middle age group of people have mixed result, whereas, only one percent of youngest generation has positive attitude towards their language. Based on these attitudes, the youngest speakers are especially concerning given Nettle and Romaine's observation, "The pulse of a language clearly lies in the youngest generation" (Nettle and Romaine, 2000, p. 8).

The Khurkhuls come under the community called Loi. The Lois are classified as Schedule Castes in Manipur. The population distribution of Manipur is such that the valley is inhabited by Meiteis, the majority group, whereas the surrounding hills are inhabited by various hill tribes. And the Lois are spread about thirty villages located in the foot hills. They thus live between the Meiteis in the valley and the tribes on the hills.

In eighteenth century, the Meiteis who dwell in the plain area of Manipur adopted Hinduism while Nagas and Kukis who are located in the hills converted into Christianity in the nineteenth century. On the contrary, the Lois did not embrace Hinduism or Christianity, but continued to preserve the traditional culture and religion of their own. However, during the reign of king Churachand in Manipur (1936), Usham Rupachandra of Khurkhul (the first person) converted himself to Hinduism. This can be considered as a breakthrough of Hinduism in the Khurkhul society (late Sukorsing[1]).

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Thus, the current paper focuses at Khurkhul personal name of those people who still strongly follow the Khurkhul tradition and culture and who are also less/not in contact with other language speaker.

Research Methodology

The current study follows qualitative and quantitative approach. The data is collected from both primary and secondary sources. The list of the names is collected from door to door and also from the invitation cards[2].

- Qualitative: the primary source of date is collected from the informants who are between 70-90 years old.
- Quantitative: As for this approach, a questioner is created (see below).

Personal Name in Linguistics

According to Saussure, there is no direct relation between the shape and the concept. For example, the word tree does not need to look like 'a single stem, bearing branches' etc. Therefore, a personal name is only a label that refers to a person. So, the relation between the name and the person is arbitrary. Thus, in conventional approach linguistics was mostly concerned with the question whether names have meaning or not. And most of the linguists agreed that names do not have meaning but only perform the function of denoting items once they become *inactive* (Anderson, 2007, p. 276).

However, there are many scholars who argue that personal names are attached to referents. According to Zawawi (1993), "a name constructs a person because the name one bears may create an attitude in those who hear it before they meet the name bearer" (Zawawi, 1993, p. 6). For example, in Khurkhul, when one hears the name **Tombi,** the hearer has some idea about the person who bears it even without knowing the person: 1) the name bearer is a female; 2) she must have some or at least one elder sibling; 3) she might be the youngest in her family; 4) she might be pampered by her family, etc. So, in the Khurkhul society, a name can reveal lots of features/characters of the name bearer.

The current paper is an attempt to study personal name in Khurkhul from sociolinguistics and anthropological linguistics point of view. It is based on the concept that there is a strong relation between language and cultural practice of a community. Therefore, the linguistic expression that reflects on their social and cultural context is encoded. For instance, the linguistic expression such as 'personal name' that are connected to some aspects of the sociocultural context of the Khurkhul society is analyzed in this paper.

Hence, it is observed that their personal names have sociocultural interpretation. For instance, some Khurkhul personal names refers to birth position, e.g., **Ibeton** (*ibe-* 'the term is used only for female + *-ton* from the word *mɘton* 'end of a thing (e.g., tree/hair/flower etc.)'. It is noticed that the personal name **Ibeton** has a clear interpretation of their cultural practice that

needs to differentiate different birth positions in the family. So, this cannot be treated as a label with no interface with its bearer.

Personal Name in Khurkhul

The social practice of naming a child can be considered universal cultural practice, i.e., everyone is given a name as a tag. However, the cultural practices and rituals involves and the interpretations attach to the name differ from society to society and from one culture to another (Agykum, 2006, pp. 210-211). In relation to this, Duranti (1997) rightly said that language allows and creates differentiation between groups, individuals and identities (Duranti, 1997, p. 7). The Khurkhul society also thus, stands different or unique from the other communities [the process of naming a child is a one of good examples to show their uniqueness].

In most of the western society, the parents/family has the authority to name a child even before he/she is born. It is their choice what name to be given. On the contrary, only a *maiba* 'male priest' has the right to name a child in the Khurkhul society. And, it entirely depends on his/her *pokpa pungpham*[3] 'the time of birth'. So, it is the duty of the *maiba* 'male priest' to find an accurate name of the child. The process of searching the right name of the child is considered very important and joyous task for him. The belief is, name of a child carries the reflection of him/her who is the wealth of the society.

Children are considered the real wealth of the society in the Khurkhul society. Thus, one of their proverbs says, *ichana asengba lanne* 'children are the real wealth' (Lit.). The ritual ceremony of naming a new born child is done on the fifth day of the birth of a child. This is called *angang mingthonba* (*əŋaŋ* + *miŋ* + *t^honbə* = child + name + give). It is a part of *yupanthaba/phaklokpa*[4].

After a proper study of *pokpa pungpham* of the child, the *maiba* 'male priest' gives the name to the child. This study is so painstaking that one of *maiba* 'male priest' says, "The process of finding an accurate name for a child is so painstaking. It takes days to find the name that is precise to the bearer. Because, the name should reflect both his/her inner and outer personality and match his/her *pokpa pungpham*". Regarding this one of the informants says, "In the Khurkhul society, personal name is not only a **referent** to a person; it means who he/she is in his/her family and the society. For instance, when one bears the personal name **Ibohal**: he is the eldest of sibling who is supposed to help his parents while his siblings are young. At the same time, his younger siblings are expected to respect and value his words etc. Therefore, it is obvious, personal name is not only a label in the Khurkhul society. It does contain the sociocultural function and meaning.

For better clarification, the following question is asked to forty people who are between the ages of 70-90 years old. The sex ratio is 1:1. Age is the only factor of this study, the other social factors like education, economy are ignored.

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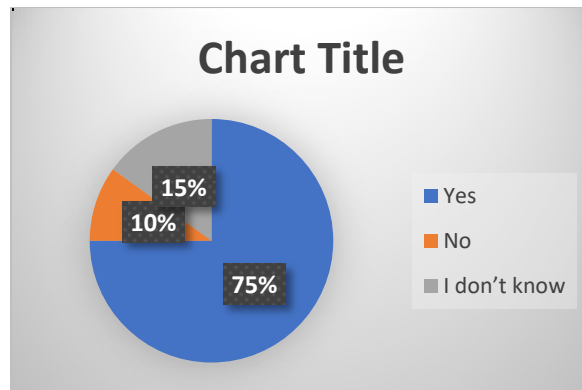(1) Do you think your personal name represent your identity?

Chart Title

Chart 1: Do you think your name represent your identity?

In the above chart 1, it is noticed that 75% of them think their personal names represent their identity; 15% of them think their personal names do not represent their identity and 10% of them are not sure whether their personal names represent their identity or not.

Related to the above question, the following question is asked to them again.
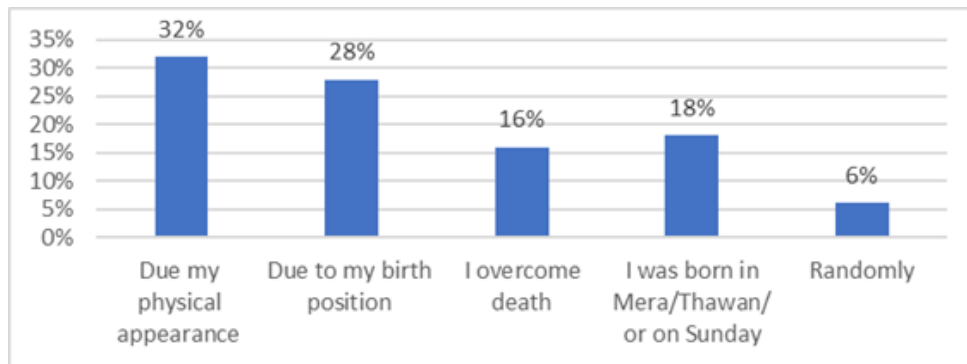
(2) Why are you given that name?

Chart 2: Why are you given that name?

From the chart 2, it is observed that 32% of them are given the name because it reflects the physical appearance of its bearer; 28% of them are given the name because it indicates birth position of its bearer; 16% of them are given the name because the name states its bearer has overcome death; 18% of them are given the name because its bearer is born in the month of *Mera/Thawan* 'August/October' or on *Nongmaiching* 'Sunday' and only 6% is given their name randomly.

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Based on the chart 1 and 2, it is noticed that majority of personal names in the Khurkhul society have relation with the person who bears it. Thus, the sign and concept are not arbitrary here. The fact that there is a direct link between the personal name and its bearer, the painstaking process of giving the name to the child is done in two ways: the *maiba* 'male priest' can give a full name (e.g., Ibohal, Tomba etc.). Secondly, he can give only the initial letter of the name (e.g., **I** in Ibohal, **T** in Tomba etc.). Here, it is the decision of the parents to choose either the full name or only the initial letter of the name. In case of latter, the parents can give any name if it starts with suggested initial. However, most of them prefer naming the full name (see chart 3). They believe, each alphabet of the name is chosen by the *maiba* 'male priest', thus, no other name can be more blessed for the child.

The following question is asked to the same forty informants in order to find out how many of them use full name or only initial letter

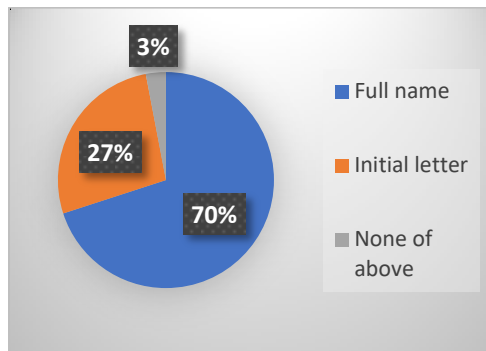(1) Did your parents/family choose full name or only initial letter of your name?

Chart 3: Did your parents/parents choose full name or only initial letter of your name?

In the chart 3, it is seen that 70% of them choose full name; whereas, 27% of them choose initial letter of the name and 3% of them did not choose full name neither initial letter of the name. During the data collection, it is found that those 3% of them are those who are given their name without associating with their social cultural function and meaning. Here, most of them grew up as an orphan or born to those parents who are boycotted by the society [who is allowed to stay in the village but restricted from having any kind of social relation with anyone in the village]. Thus, it is observed that majority of them prefer to use the full name rather than using only the initial letter of the name.

The following are some of the examples of personal name use in the Khurkhul society. They are grouped as follow

(1) Names Related to birth position: It is very important to differentiate birth positions in the Khurkhul society. Because each birth position has different responsibility towards the

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family and the society (Louriyam, 2017). The following are some of the names that are related to birth position

a) **Ibohal** is the compound word of *ibo* 'this term is used only for male' + - *həl* 'is from the word *ahan/l* 'elder/old'. This is a name given to a male child who is the eldest (first birth position) of the family.
b) **Iboyai** is the compound word of *ibo* 'this term is used only for male' + *-yai* 'is from the word *məyai* 'middle'. This is a name given to a male child who is in middle birth position of the family.
c) **Ibeyai** is the compound word of *ibe* 'this term is used only for female' + *-yai* 'is from the word *məyai* 'middle'. This is a name given to a female child who is in middle birth position of the family.
d) **Ibecha** is the compound word of *ibe* 'this term is used only for female' + *-ca* 'is from the word *məca* 'small'. This is a name given to a female child who is the last/younger to middle birth position of the family.

(2) Names Related to survival: According to the belief of the Khurkhul society, the birth of a child is the process of reincarnation of their ancestors. Thus, the child comes to the earth through the path/way of living being. If there is complication in giving birth, that means the *soiren* 'unwanted spirit' has blocked his/her way to the earth. In this kind of situation, many of children are likely to return back at *meitrapak* 'land of death/spirit'. However, some children could defeat those *soiren* 'unwanted spirit' and embrace birth. This kind of children are considered miracle who has the power to survive. Thus, his/her name is given in order to reflect his/her power to survive. The following are some of the examples,

a) **Manglem** is a compound word of *məŋ* 'graveyard' + *-lem* 'left over'. It is given to a male child.
b) **Mangki** is a compound word of *məŋ* 'graveyard' + *-ki* 'afraid'. This name is given to both male and female child.

(3) Names Related to Flower: Flower is considered a part of the Khurkhul society. Though both men and women use flower in their social context, it is limited for men. For instance, in *ukronghongba* 'a ritual ceremony related to death', the host family [the direct family of deceased person] offers flowers to elder people (both male and female). This is called *leilangba.* Each of them will take some flowers from *endai* 'a kind of flower basket' and put the flower behind their ears.

Here, the addition of flower on their bodies has nothing to do with beautification. It is only a part of their tradition. However, on the other hand, women use it as an element of

beautification. Thus, they say, "*nupidi nachom yaodrari ihang hangnge*" 'for woman it is empty without the flower (Lit.). The meaning of the above expression is 'the beauty of women is added when one puts flower behind her ear, and the beauty is reduced if she did not'. Plus, the Khurkhul society compares the life of woman and flower. They say, "*nupigee punsi leigee pangkhak*" 'the life of woman is like flower' (Lit.).

In the Khurkhul society, premarital sex is tabooed. If a woman lost her virginity before marriage, it is considered disgrace to the family. Like 'the pluck flower' that can never be attached to its stem, the lost virginity of a woman can never be regained. Thus, the Khurkhuls use flower as a metaphor to portray the life of woman. This shows that Khurkhul women have a deep relation with flower. In fact, it is only women who bear the names of flower. The following are some of the examples,

a) *Thambal* 'lotus'
b) *Tharo* 'lily'
c) *Sanarei* 'marrigold'
d) *Kaboklei* 'Cape Jasmine'

Etc.

(4) Names related to Physical Structure: Physical Structure is also another basis on which Khurkhuls give names to their children. There are two ways of practicing it. The name and the person who bears it is directly related i.e., the hearer can understand the physical appearance of the name bearer only by listening to his/her name. For example, **Piktru** 'very small', when one hears this name, the hearer knows that the height of its bearer is very small. Secondly, the name reveals the opposite physical appearance of the name bearer. For example, **Angoubi** 'white', when the listener hears the name, he/she expected the name bearer to be fair in complexion. But, she turns out to be black. However, the latter situation is rare. In fact, such type of people is often criticized by the society. It is noticed in this expression *mamingga machatka mannei* 'his/her name is liked his/her character' (Lit.). This expression carries a negative connotation. The fact that his/her name gives a false interpretation of its bearer's personality justify his/her fake personality i.e., deceiving people.

The following are some of the examples related to his/her physical appearance
a) **Amubi** 'black' is a name given to a female child.
b) **Khongnem** is a compound word of $k^h oŋ$ 'leg' + -*nem* 'short'. This name is normally given to male child.

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(5) Names Related to Day, Month: Day and month is also another element that Khurkhuls use in naming their children. However, Khurkhuls use only *Mera* 'October' *Thawan* 'August' and *Nongmaiching* 'Sunday' as personal names.

a) *Mera*: It is given to those children who are born in the month of *Mera* 'October'. The male child has two ways of using it: 1) without any suffix i.e., *Mera* 2) with suffix *-cao* from the word *caobə* 'big' i.e., *Merachao*.

On the other hand, the female child can bear this name by adding the suffixes *-caob +-i* 'big' + *-i* 'female gender marker' i.e., *Merachaobi*.

b) *Thawan*: It is given to those children who are born in the month of *Thawan* 'August'. It is given only to male child.
c) *Nongmaiching*: This name is also given only to the male child. It is mostly given to those children who are born on *Nongmaiching* 'Sunday'.

Thus, it is observed that b) and c) are used by only male child whereas a) can be used both by male and female child. However, it is the male child who has the authority to use the root form. This could relate to the fact that a male child is given preference over a female child in the Khurkhul society. Thus, in one of their proverbs, it says, "*Numitpu keina chabra nupana sagei mangbra* 'does tiger eat sun, does man loss his lineage' (Lit.).

According to the belief of Khurkhuls, moon, sun, stars, water, fire, wind, earth, are permanent elements of this universe. In a similar manner, male child has permanent identity in the society through his father's *sagei* 'lineage'. Unlike her male counterpart, a female child has no permanent identity. She is dependent on her father before marriage and then on husband after marriage (Louriyam, 2017). And also, Khurkhuls use the movement of the sun to calculate the **Day** and the movements of the Moon is used to calculate the **Month**. Thus, the possible explanation of associating sun and moon with the male child rather than the female child is 'the share of a common ground i.e., permanent positions'.

Conclusion

In the current paper it is observed that there is a direct link between personal name and its bearer in the Khurkhul society i.e., the relation between the personal name and its bearer is not arbitrary. The belief, culture, social structure, thought, ideology of the Khurkhul society is associated with their personal names. However, there are some situations in which one gets his/her personal name in erratic manner (see, p, 5). The fact, it is not appreciated by the society. They say, *mingbu pangthon thonba yabra* 'can name be given for the sake of giving name (Lit.)'.

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Thus, it can be concluded that Khurkhul personal names are chosen precisely, because, it means beyond a label/tag of its bearer. It associates with a meaning that shows a relation of its bearer to his/her family and the society.

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End Notes

[1] Sukorsing: He was a well-known *maiba* 'male priest' of Khurkhul. He was also a dedicated researcher of the tradition and culture of Khurkhul. He spent most of his life researching the old tradition of Khurkhul. He was 87 years old when he expired. I could spend some of his valuable time during my field work in 2013.

[2] Invitation cards: Khurkhuls believe that life is all about giving back what we received. Thus, they say, "*punsise khulang lamanne*" 'the life is to give back what one gets (Lit.). Therefore, Khurkhuls are very concerned on giving back the correct amount of help (especially financial) he/she gets. For instance, they follow a culture of helping the host family in occasions like marriage. This financial help is called *poyeng*. If one fails to return the *poyeng* to the concern person, he/she is judged as uncivilized. So, in order to have a correct record Khurkhuls piled up all the invitation cards in a place of the house.

And also, invitation card is one of the elements that denotes the social structure of the Khurkhul society, i.e., age is more important than gender. Every invitation of any occasion is written in the name of the eldest person of the family. Because, they represent the face of the family. It helped me while collecting the names of the eldest people.

[3] *Pokpa pungpham:* Khurkhuls directly rely on their environment when they set time. For instance, *en khong ahanba* 'first crow of rooster'; *en khong anisuba* 'second crow of rooster'; *tukhong uramdai matam* 'the time when the pores of the body hair is about to see'; *tukhong uraba matam* 'the time when the pores of the body hair is seen'; *sanpot khoiba matam* 'the time to plough'; *sanpot kaba matam* 'the time of returning from field after ploughing'; *numit thongchin youba matam* 'the time when the sun reaches at the thresh hold of the front door; *numit sumang youba matam* 'the time when the sun reaches the courtyard'; *numit waton youba matam* 'time when the sun reaches on the top of bamboo' etc. These are some of the elements Khurkhuls used to set time. However, a *maiba* 'male priest' who is more knowledgeable than common man did not limit there. One of the reason why the *maiba* needs to go beyond regular time frame unlike commoner is, it is his duty to find an accurate time of birth of a child. This could not be done base on regular time frame, e.g., *enkhong ahanba* 'first crow of rooster', it is around 2.30 am to 3.00 am. Thus, he learns the art of precise time set that is based on elements like dew drops, sands etc. Thus, the process of finding *pokpa pungpham* 'time of birth' is considered painstaking and prolong task.

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4 *Yupanthaba/phaklokpa*: On the fifth day of the birth of a child many rituals are performed. This is called *yupanthaba/phaklokpa.* For instance, the four corners of the *phak* 'mat' where the mother and the child slept since the day of delivery is purified by the *maiba* 'male priest'. This ritual is called *phaklokpa.* In yet another ritual, the mother and the child offer prayer to the *thongarel* 'the God of front door'. It is done in order to seek blessing for the baby before he/she is exposed to the world. Until this ritual is performed, the child is confined within the house, he/she is not allowed to be taken out of the house.

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