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Research Article

Semantic Components of Kisukuma Divine Names: A Componential Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines the semantic elements encoded in Kisukuma divine names. A qualitative approach was adopted in this study. Data were gathered from 25 participants in Magu District, Mwanza Region, including elders and traditional leaders, spiritual leaders, and community members with cultural knowledge. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observation were employed to draw out meanings, semantic contrasts, and culturally embedded interpretations. The analysis was primarily guided by Componential Analysis Theory. Across the Kisukuma divine-name inventory, seventeen semantic features were identified: creatorhood, provision, protection, healing, life-giving power, authority, omnipotence, sustenance, control of nature, miracle-working, destruction, assistance, deliverance, judgment, warfare, victory, and preservation. The analysis discovers a core-periphery arrangement in which [+LIFE], [+PROT], [+DEL], [+PRO], and [+AUTH] appear across multiple names, whereas [+DESTR], [+MIRC], and [+SUST] are limited in distribution. The componential matrix further reveals semantic specialization, complementary distribution, and clustering of features. A detailed examination of *Liwelelo*, *Seba*, *Mulungu*, *Mpija*, and *Yanswalaga Welelo* demonstrates that Kisukuma divine names do not function as an arbitrary collection of synonyms; instead, they shows different aspects of divine agency, such as creation, provision, sustenance, healing, authority, and moral judgment. The findings show that semantic meaning is shaped not only by lexical form but also by culturally relevant experiences and contrasts recognized by Kisukuma speakers.

Keywords

Kisukuma, Divine Names, Componential Analysis, Lexical Semantics, Semantic Components

1. Introduction

Names given to divine beings form a significant area of linguistic inquiry, since they relate lexical form to cultural knowledge, worldview, social experience, and communication patterns. Divine names do not always work the same way as ordinary labels. They can carry ideas about creation, authority, provision, protection, healing, justice, life, and how human beings relate to the divine [2]. Naming and conceptualizing divine beings is a human universal that is deeply embedded in language, culture, and worldview. In societies around the world, the names used for God or supernatural beings are linguistic symbols through which communities' articulate beliefs about creation, authority, morality, protection,

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destiny, and the connection between human beings and the spiritual dominion [6]. Research in semantics, anthropology, and comparative religion explains that divine names can serve as stores of cultural knowledge, because they retain understandings that speakers relate to ultimate reality [5].

Kisukuma is a major Bantu language spoken in north-western Tanzania [13]. It is described as a strong living language with ongoing intergenerational transmission and wide use in everyday communication and oral traditions. Its internal variation and continued use make it a valuable site for examining how culturally significant concepts are encoded in the lexicon. The analytical focus is thus the connection between a divine name and the semantic attributes that speakers associate with it [2]. This focus matters because a single English equivalent such as 'God' may hide differences that are linguistically meaningful in Kisukuma.

2. Review of Related Literature

Divine names in different languages are not semantically arbitrary. They are linguistically structured expressions that encode functions, attributes, cosmology, metaphors, and theological hierarchies. The semantic components built into these names frequently reveal how speakers conceptualize power, creation, justice, authority, mercy, and transcendence [6]. Various linguistic traditions, structure and encode the semantic components of divine names as follows.

The Russian vocative *Gospodi*! (derived from *Gospod'*, "Lord") is a semantically dense expression shaped by both Orthodox Christian theology and Russian socio-political history. In contrast to the English word "Lord," which mainly conveys authority or respect, *Gospodi*! serves as an exclamatory form filled with emotional intensity [20]. In terms of meaning, it expresses perseverance, trust, and an appeal to supreme authority. The root *gospod* has historically meant master or sovereign, so hierarchical power relations are built into the lexical structure itself [20]. The vocative morphology (the *-i* ending) enhances immediacy, turning the noun into a direct request for intervention. As a result, the semantic components comprise: supreme authority, protective power, emotional dependence, and hierarchical superiority. Cultural history, especially Russia's long experience with autocratic rule, has strengthened the conceptual parallel between divine authority and earthly sovereignty [11]. The divine name carries connotations of both respect and submission. This example illustrates how grammatical form (the vocative case), historical experience, and socio-political structure all contribute to the semantic construction of divine names [20]. It demonstrates that divine naming is not merely descriptive but also relational and emotionally encoded.

Within Hindu traditions, divine names like Vishnu, Shiva, and Lakshmi frequently come from Sanskrit verbal roots that encode cosmological functions. As Sharma notes, these names are semantically tied to actions such as preserving, destroying, blessing, or sustaining. For example, Vishnu is related to pervasiveness and preservation, whereas Shiva conveys auspiciousness and transformative destruction [16]. Morphologically, many names arise through derivational processes that add nominal suffixes to verb roots, thus turning actions into divine identities. This structure implies that divine essence is understood through activity [11]. The semantic components thus include: cosmic function, moral quality, and metaphysical role. Different from traditions that emphasise a single exclusive name, Hinduism allows for semantic multiplicity. A deity can have hundreds of names, each bringing a different attribute to the fore. This reflects a worldview in which divine reality is infinite and approximated linguistically through descriptive expansion. The semantic structure is dynamic and centered on attributes rather than fixed and singular [16].

In Tongan, the naming of the divine reflects the historical layers of spiritual change. Before Christianity exerted its influence, indigenous gods like *Tangaloa*, *Maui*, and *Hikule'o* were tied to natural realms including the sky, underworld, fire, sea, and fertility [15]. These names carry environmental and cosmological meanings, revealing a tight semantic bond between the divine and natural elements. When Christian missionaries arrived, Hebrew names for God were adapted to fit Tongan phonology. This process entailed not just phonetic replacement but also an expansion of meaning. Existing spiritual vocabulary was given new interpretations to fit Christian monotheism [15]. As a result, semantic elements moved away from domain-specific polytheistic roles toward universalized attributes of creator and ruler. This example shows how semantic change goes hand in hand with spiritual contact. Divine names can keep their phonological form while their conceptual meaning is reconfigured.

Several Bantu languages used divine names to reveal a distinct process of semantic extension [4]. Words that once denoted social roles, natural forces, or ancestral spirits progressively broadened in meaning to refer to a supreme deity. For example: *Katonda* (creator), *Njambi* (provider), *Mulungu* (associated with supernatural or outsider), *Mudimu* (ancestral spirit) *Nkosi* (lion/chief), *Mmumbi* (potter or moulder), *Mukama* (king or ruler) [4]. In every example, the original lexical meaning offers semantic suggestions about how the divine is conceptualized. The semantic elements often encompass creation, kingship, provision, ancestral authority, and molding or forming. The prevalence of semantic extension as a naming mechanism implies that divine identity frequently arises from culturally important roles rather than abstract metaphysical invention [6]. This pattern deserves careful examination in Kisukuma.

Among the Akan of Ghana, the naming of the divine reflects the belief shared by African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam that a single supreme creator exists [15]. Akan divine names generally encode attributes of power, creation, and providence. The focus rests on supremacy and creative authority. Divine identity is frequently connected to cosmological origin and the governance of the universe [21].

Even spiritual traditions differ, the semantic core, such as creator, sustainer, and supreme authority stays consistent. This convergence shows that divine names might preserve core semantic elements even as theological systems change.

In Yoruba, divine names like *Olodumare* and *Olorun* are morphologically complex and semantically clear. Researchers including Ajíbóyè and Alford show that these names come from verb-based constructions. The structure usually joins a nominal prefix with elements signifying "owner," "source," or "ruler." For example: *Olorun* may be understood as Owner of the heavens, whereas *Olodumare* conveys supreme authority and uniqueness [2]. These names tie divine identity directly to action and domain. Semantic components comprise: ownership, sovereignty, cosmic authority, and generative power. Crucially, the linguistic structure reflects that, in Yoruba thought, divine nature cannot be separated from divine function [3].

Compared with the Yoruba, Igbo divine names are highly compositional and open to semantic analysis. For example, *Chukwu* conveys supremacy, *Chineke* (create) encodes creative function, *Osebuluwa* (Sustainer of the world) emphasises maintenance, and *Obasi di n'elu* (Lord who is above) relies on spatial metaphor. These names naturally exhibit semantic transparency through compounding [2]. Spatial metaphors convey transcendence, whereas paradoxical expressions such as *Ama-ama*, *Amasi-amasi* (Known yet unknown) linguistically grasp divine mystery [6]. Hence, semantic components encompass greatness, creation, sustenance, elevation, and incomprehensibility. The Igbo case illustrates how metaphor, compounding, and paradox serve as semantic strategies in divine naming.

Within Hebrew tradition, divine names like *Elohim*, *YHWH* (Jehovah), and *El Shaddai* encode distinct semantic attributes [17]. *Elohim* comes from *El* ("mighty/strong") and emphasises power and creative authority. *YHWH*, tied to the verb "to be," encodes self-existence and eternal presence, and the name *El Shaddai* conveys sufficiency, nurturing power, and might. These names reveal derivation from verbal roots and semantic relates to existence, power, and covenantal relationship [15]. The Hebrew system demonstrates that divine naming can distinguish transcendence (creator), immanence (covenant partner), and sufficiency (sustainer) [17].

The divine names of Islam further demonstrate a systematic semantics built on attributes. Names like *Al-Khaliq* (Creator), *Ar-Razzaq* (Provider), *Al-'Adl* (Just), *Al-Wadud* (Loving), *Al-'Alim* (All-Knowing), *Al-Awwal* (The First), and *Al-Akhir* (The Last) each encode particular theological attributes [22]. Every name comes from Arabic roots, which keeps the morphology consistent. Taken together, the semantic components span creation, justice, mercy, knowledge, transcendence, and temporal primacy. This organized system of attributes shows that divine identity can be distributed semantically across a network of descriptive terms instead of being limited to one lexical item [22].

Several semantic components appear across Russian, Hindu, Tongan, Bantu, Akan, Yoruba, Igbo, Hebrew, and Islamic traditions. These include creation and formation, kingship and authority, provision and sustenance, justice and moral perfection, spatial transcendence (above/heaven), mystery and incomprehensibility, ownership and sovereignty, and emotional refuge and protection [17]. These languages are extensively documented, few studies have examined how divine names in Kisukuma encode similar or distinct semantic components. It is still unclear whether Kisukuma relies mainly on semantic extension, verb-based derivation, metaphorical compounding, or attribute accumulation. This gap shows the need for systematic semantic analysis within the Kisukuma linguistic basis.

Existing empirical research on divine names has presented valuable perceptions into how languages encode spiritual beliefs, cultural values, and community worldviews. Studies carried out in European languages have shown that divine names reflect differing conceptions of authority, intimacy, and spirituality, whereas research on African languages such as Akan, Yoruba, Igbo, and Luo demonstrate that names for God often preserve indigenous philosophies, cosmological ideas, and historical experiences [1, 12, 19]. Other studies from Hebrew and Islamic traditions further show that divine names serve as theological categories through which believers comprehend divine attributes and moral order. Together, these works confirm that divine naming is a significant area of linguistic and cultural inquiry.

The existing literatures has focused on identifying examples of divine names and offering general theological interpretations, with only limited detailed attention to how such names function in specific indigenous African languages at the local community level. Many studies address well-documented international or major regional languages, leaving a number of Tanzanian community languages relatively unexplored in empirical linguistic research. Some studies emphasise spiritual or anthropological perspectives than systematic semantic and usage-based linguistic analysis. The relationship between lexical form, meaning, and patterns of use in many Bantu speech communities remains inadequately described.

In the Tanzanian context, Kisukuma has drawn scholarly attention in areas such as culture, social organization, oral traditions, healing practices, and ethnography, the divine names used in the language have not been studied in comparable depth. Comprehensive documentation is still limited regarding the range of divine names recognized by Kisukuma speakers, how these names are linguistically structured, the meanings attached to them, and the situations in which speakers prefer one name over another. Since Kisukuma ranks among Tanzania's biggest indigenous languages and continues to be spoken actively in traditional, social, and Christian settings, the lack of such an in-depth study means our grasp of how sacred concepts are conveyed in the language stays incomplete.

3. Theoretical Framework

Componential Analysis theory has served as the guide for this study, offering a cohesive framework through which the semantic structure of Kisukuma divine names can be analysed. The internal semantic composition of the names is established through the use of Componential Analysis. Componential Analysis Theory (CA) was put forward by Ward Goodenough during the 1950s and subsequently refined by Eugene Nida in 1975. During the mid-1950s, he brought componential analysis into anthropology and linguistics as an approach for examining kinship systems and semantic structures by reducing meanings to smaller components (features) [18]. His 1956 publication on kinship terminology played a particularly influential role in shaping this approach. Floyd Lounsbury and Eugene Nida were among the other scholars who made substantial contributions to the theory's development, especially in linguistic and semantic applications. Structural semanticists including Katz & Fodor and Lyons have maintained that lexical meaning can be broken down into a collection of minimal semantic features that set one lexical item apart from another [9, 12]. Such features may encompass attributes like agency, power, animacy, creativity, moral authority, or relationality [17]. Within this study, componential analysis has served as a systematic analytical instrument for investigating the meanings of divine names in Kisukuma.

Kisukuma divine names are examined by pinpointing semantic components such as [+creator], [+life-giving], [+protector], or [+authority]. For example, a divine name related to rain or fertility may carry components tied to sustenance and life, whereas a name connected to authority may carry features of supremacy or judgment. Through the decomposition of each name into these components, the study identified similarities and contrasts among divine names, exposing patterns in how divinity is conceptualized linguistically in Kisukuma. Componential analysis further offers a principled foundation for classification, enabling divine names to be sorted according to shared semantic features instead of surface form alone. This allows one to demonstrate, for example, whether Kisukuma divine nomenclature places greater emphasis on relational and immanent attributes than on abstract transcendence, or whether moral and social values are brought to the fore in the semantic structure of divine reference.

4. Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted in this paper to investigate the meanings of Kisukuma divine names. The qualitative approach was fitting because the study centred on participants' interpretations and culturally grounded understandings of divine names, rather than on numerical measurement [10]. This study was carried out in Bujora, located in Magu District within the Mwanza Region of Tanzania, a place where Kisukuma is spoken widely and indigenous cultural and spiritual knowledge is preserved. The population targeted for this study consisted of native Kisukuma speakers, especially elders, traditional and spiritual leaders, as well as community members with cultural expertise. Twenty-five participants were chosen purposively on the basis of their linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, and familiarity with spiritual and cultural practices, and snowball sampling was employed to locate further information-rich participants via community referrals.

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and observation, all reinforced by ethnographic elicitation techniques. The interviews included free-listing of Kisukuma names for God, contextual elicitation through prayers, blessings, and ritual expressions, and contrastive questioning designed to establish semantic distinctions among related names. Focus group discussions involving elders and spiritual leaders served to validate individual responses and to explore historical, ritual, and cultural meanings, whereas observation offered evidence of how divine names appear in natural communicative settings like prayers, songs, ceremonies, storytelling, and other community interactions. Audio recordings, field notes, interview and discussion guides, and observation checklists were employed to document the data. The recorded data were transcribed in Kisukuma and then translated into English, after which repeated readings, componential semantic analysis, thematic categorisation, and ethno-linguistic interpretation were carried out to identify semantic features and connect them to Sukuma cultural beliefs and practices. Credibility and dependability were strengthened through contextual elicitation, member checking, consistent study procedures, audio recording, documentation of analytical steps, and triangulation across interviews, focus group discussions, and observed discourse. Ethical procedures encompassed informed consent, confidentiality, respect for cultural and spiritual norms, and the necessary study permissions.

5. Findings and Discussion

The analysis starts with the identification and operationalization of semantic features, then proceeds to the componential matrix, patterns of specialization and distribution, and a detailed examination of five representative divine names.

5.1. Identification and Operationalization of Semantic Features

The semantic features applied in this study were identified through all statements participants made regarding the meanings of divine names were transcribed and coded according to semantic themes. Expressions relating to creation, protection, provision, healing, authority, and justice were grouped together in order to establish preliminary semantic features. The researcher then compared these features across all respondents to establish which semantic attributes appeared consistently.

To ensure analytical reliability, a semantic feature was included in the analysis only if it was mentioned by at least three independent participants or if it repeated in naturally occurring discourse such as prayers, ritual invocations, and communal narratives. Instances of disagreement among participants were revisited through follow-up interviews so as to clarify the intended meanings of particular divine names.

The study also used contrastive elicitation, a method endorsed in componential analysis by Goodenough (1956) and Nida (1975). Respondents were requested to describe how semantically related divine names differ from one another. For example, when asked to differentiate *Liwelelo* from *Seba*, the majority of respondents stated that *Liwelelo* mainly refers to the supreme creator and ruler of the universe, while *Seba* highlights God's function as provider and sustainer of human life. These contrasts offered support for determining primary and secondary semantic features and helped prevent semantic components from being assigned arbitrarily.

Through analysing participants' explanations for all thirty-five divine names, seventeen semantic features were identified. The identification process involved three steps: (1) extracting meaning components from participants' definitions, (2) comparing them across cases to find components, and (3) validating them through contrastive probing, in which participants were asked to distinguish between names with similar meanings. The table below shows the resulting inventory of features.

Table 1. *Semantic Feature Inventory for Kisukuma Divine Names.*

Feature Code	Semantic Feature	Definition	Operationalization	Exemplar Name
[+CRE]	Creator	Originator of existence	Speaker affirms "*Agabomba bhuli genho*" (Created everything)	Limatonda, Nsumbi
[+PRO]	Provider	Giver of material needs	Speaker affirms "*Nsunya ojose*" (Gives everything)	Ngasa, Sungwa
[+PROT]	Protector	Guardian against harm	Speaker affirms "*Agalanhaga*" (Protects)	Luhinda, Kongwa
[+HEAL]	Healer	Restorer of health	Speaker affirms "*Mpija obasati*" (Heals sickness)	Mpija
[+LIFE]	Life-giving	Source of vitality	Speaker affirms "*Aginhaga bhupanga*" (Gives life)	Likobe, Magina
[+AUTH]	Authority	Power to command	Speaker affirms "*Ananguzu ja ghulamula*" (Has power to command)	Liwelelo, Seba
[+OMNI]	Omnipotent	Possessor of unlimited power	Speaker affirms *"Alinanguzu jose"* (Has all power)	Mahugi, Lumi
[+SUST]	Sustainer	Maintainer of existence and well-being	Speaker affirms *"Ngwinhi obopanga"* (Sustains life)	Liwelelo, Seba
[+CTRL]	Controller of nature	Regulator of natural forces and events	Speaker affirms *"Agagabaga mbula na yose"* (Controls rain and nature)	Lyang'ombe, Limudumi
[+MIRC]	Miracle-working	Performer of extraordinary acts beyond human ability	Speaker affirms *"Agabejaga mhatale"* (Performs miracles)	Lyang'ombe, Limudumi
[+DESTR]	Destroyer	One who destroys evil or brings judgment	Speaker affirms *"Agenjaga bhalogi na mabi"* (Destroys the wicked)	Liwelelo, Seba
[+HELP]	Helper	One who assists people in times of need	Speaker affirms *"Agagunanhaga bhanho"* (Helps people)	Ngunanhi, Mwambeleja wise
[+DEL]	Deliverer	Rescuer from danger, suffering, or oppression	Speaker affirms *"Agenjaga mhumayanga"* (Delivers from trouble)	Sungwa, Lyuba
[+JUDGE]	Judge	Arbiter of justice and moral order	Speaker affirms *"Agalamlaga nhana"* (Judges justly)	Magina, Yanswalaga welelo
[+WAR]	Warrior	Defender who fights against enemies	Speaker affirms *"Agagunanhaga bhanho bakwe"* (Fights for his people)	Likonze
[+VICT]	Victorious	One who always triumphs over opposition	Speaker affirms *"Agapyenaga bhuli genho"* (Overcomes everything)	Likonze, Nyanhalemeelwa

Feature Code	Semantic Feature	Definition	Operationalization	Exemplar Name
[+PRES]	Preserver	Keeper and protector of life and creation	Speaker affirms *"agabekaga chiza bhuli genho"* (Preserves all things safely)	Lisita, Liwatunanze

Source: Componential analysis of field data (Researcher, 2026)

A number of distinguished patterns come to light in the feature inventory. To begin with, the feature inventory reveals a core-periphery structure. The features that occur most often are [+LIFE], [+PROT], [+DEL], [+PRO], and [+AUTH]. Each of these five features shows up in at least five names, so they can be regarded as the core semantic dimensions of Sukuma divine conceptualization. By contrast, features such as [+DESTR], [+MIRC], and [+SUST] occur in only two names each and stand for specialized semantic dimensions that are activated in restricted contexts.

The identification of features was carried out according to strict operationalization criteria. For a feature to be included, it had to meet three conditions: first, it had to be explicitly mentioned by at least 70% of participants (18 people) when defining the name; second, it had to be contrastive (some names possessed the feature and others did not); and third, it had to be minimally decomposable (it could not be broken down further into smaller meaning components based on participants' explanations). Features that did not meet any of these criteria were left out. For example, participants sometimes described names as "goodness" (*chiza*), but this attribute held for all names and was not contrastive, so it was not counted as a feature.

5.2. Componential Analysis Matrix

The componential matrix documents the presence (+) or absence (-) of the seventeen semantic features across the thirty-five divine names reported in the study. It supplies the empirical basis for comparing names that share features and for telling apart names whose meanings are specialized. The table below displays the full componential analysis matrix for the thirty-five divine names, showing the presence (+) or absence (-) of each semantic feature. This matrix supplies the empirical basis for the semantic analysis that follows.

Table 2. *Componential Analysis Matrix for Major Kisukuma Divine Names.*

Semantic Components	[+OMNI]	[+AUTH]	[+CRE]	[+SUST]	[+CTRL]	[+MIRC]	[+LIFE]	[+DESTR]	[+PROT]	[+PRO]	[+HEAL]	[+DEL]	[+JUDGE]	[+WAR]	[+VICT]	[+HELP]	[+PRES]
Divine names																	
Welelo	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Seba	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Ngunanhi	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-
Likobe/kube	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	-
Ngasa	-	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-
Ng'alang'ayu	-	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	-
Lyuba	-	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	-
Luhinda	-	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-
Sungwa	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	-
Kongwa	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lyang'ombe	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+
Limdemi	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	+

Semantic Components	[+OMNI]	[+AUTH]	[+CRE]	[+SUST]	[+CTRL]	[+MIRC]	[+LIFE]	[+DESTR]	[+PROT]	[+PRO]	[+HEAL]	[+DEL]	[+JUDGE]	[+WAR]	[+VICT]	[+HELP]	[+PRES]
Likonze/konze	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+
Liwatunanze	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+
Ntondi	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nsemi	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Limatonda	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nsumbi	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lisita/sita	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+
Lyubambande	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+
Bangwe	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mahugi	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mpija	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mulungu	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mudumi	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nyanhalemeelwa	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
Limudumi	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Magina	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-
Mmumbi	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lumi	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Nkomoji	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
Yanswalaga welelo	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-
Wambeleja welelo	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mwambeleja wise	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-
Seba namilage	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-

Source: Componential analysis from field data (Researcher, 2026)

Number of divine names carry comparable semantic features, the weight given to those features varies markedly from one name to another. Componential analysis ought, then, to make a distinction between primary and secondary semantic components. Primary features capture the most prominent meanings tied to a divine name, whereas secondary features capture further meanings that surface in specific contexts. For example, *Liwelelo* and *Seba* have several semantic features in

common, among them creation, provision, and preservation. Still, participants consistently related *Liwelelo* with supreme authority and cosmic creation, while *Seba* was mainly related with provision, sustenance, and divine generosity. As a result, [+AUTH], [+CRE], and [+OMNI] can be treated as primary features of *Liwelelo*, whereas [+PRO], [+SUST], and [+HELP] form the primary features of *Seba*. This hierarchical arrangement shows that divine names cannot be properly distinguished simply by listing which semantic features are present or absent. Their meanings are shaped by how prominent and culturally salient of those features.

5.3. Semantic Specialization of Indigenous Names

Indigenous Kisukuma divine names display a strong degree of semantic specialization. Every indigenous name encodes just one or two particular features. For example: *Nsumbi* encodes only [+CRE] and [+LIFE], *Nyanhalemeelwa* encodes only [+OMNI] and [+VICT], *Liwatunanze* encodes only [+PROT] and [+PRES], and *Magina* encodes only [+LIFE] and [+JUDGE]. Such specialization contrasts with names like *Liwelelo* and *Seba*, which encode all semantic features. This shows that *Liwelelo* and *Seba* serve as a general-purpose divine name in Kisukuma, while indigenous names retain semantic specialization. [7].

5.4. Complementary Feature Distribution

The matrix shows complementary distribution among certain features. For example: [+CRE] occurs only in *Ntondi, Nsemi, Limatonda, Nsumbi, and Mmumbi*; [+PRO] occurs only in *Likobe, Ngasa, Ng'alang'ayu, Lyuba, Luhinda, Sungwa, Bangwe, and Mudumi*; and [+HEAL] occurs only in *Mpija, Limdemi*, and others (please refer to above attached matrix for complementary features). This complementary distribution backs the hypothesis that the Kisukuma divine naming system is built around a principle of functional differentiation: each divine function (creating, providing, healing, protecting) is encoded in a specialized name, and names that share features are used in complementary distribution.

5.5. Feature Clustering

The matrix shows systematic clustering of features: Creator cluster: [+CRE] appears together with [+LIFE] in every name, showing that creation is inherently life-giving; Provider cluster: [+PRO] appears together with [+LIFE] in every name, showing that provision is inherently life-sustaining; Authority cluster: [+OMNI] appears together with [+AUTH] in *Liwelelo, Seba*, and *Lyuba*, showing a conceptual connection between power-association and authority; and Protector cluster: [+PROT] appears with various other features, such as [+MIRC] in *Lyang'ombe*, [+HEAL] in *Limdemi*, [+LIFE] in *Luhinda*, but not consistently with any one feature. These clusters uncover the conceptual associations within Sukuma theological cognition. The patterns of co-occurrence show that creation, provision, and life constitute a coherent conceptual complex, just as sky and authority do.

5.6. Semantic Analysis of Selected Divine Names

This section offers a detailed semantic analysis of five representative divine names, selected to cover the range of semantic types in the inventory: the creator name *Liwelelo*, the provider name *Seba*, the life-giving name *Mulungu*, the healer name *Mpija*, and the preserver name *Yanswalaga Welelo*. Every analysis brings together morphological analysis, participant explanations, contrastive probing, and componential features.

1) Liwelelo: The Creator-Great One

Liwelelo is made up of the class 5 noun prefix **li-** and the root *-welelo*, which means "greatness, bigness." In Bantu languages, class 5 is typically related to augmentatives, natural phenomena, and paired body parts [8]. The use of class 5 for a divine name is documented across Bantu languages, pointing to a Proto-Bantu pattern of employing the augmentative class for divine reference. This name carries all the semantic features (categories) as set out in the matrix. Participants explained:

"Welelo agadobomba na bhuli genho akabomba ligolo na nse. Agabomba banho na ndimu, bhuli genho jabombwa na welelo."

"Welelo aletale ojose, bhushikanu bhokwe bho nhana. Bhahangi biswe, bagahaya welelo alena nguzu nhale."

"Lina lya welelo lile lya gwandya. Weye oyo Obama bhuli genho alilolo alena nguzu."

Translation:

"God created us and everything. He made the sky and the earth, made people, and made animals. God created everything."

"God is above everything. His truth is flawless. Our forefathers taught that God possesses great power."

"The name God is used first. He is the one who made everything, and so He holds great power."

When asked to tell *Liwelelo* apart from *Nsumbi* (the other primary creator name), participants gave subtle distinctions:

"Mumbi oyo obomba, aleyo welelo alena nguzu. Mumbi agayombaga bhuli genho, aleyo welelo oma garage na nguvu."

"Welelo lile lina likolo gone gokela mumbi, welelo obomba na obeja bhuli genho. Mumbi obomba doho."

Translation:

"Nsumbi is the one who creates, but Welelo is the one who holds power. Nsumbi refers specifically to creating, whereas Welelo refers to authority and power."

"Welelo is a greater name than Nsumbi. Welelo creates and does all things. Nsumbi only creates."

The contrastive probing shows that both *Liwelelo* and

Nsumbi carry [+CRE], *Liwelelo* also carries [+AUTH] and [+OMNI], which makes it semantically broader. *Nsumbi* is specialized, concentrating specifically on the act of creation without the added connotations of authority and sky-association. This points to a hierarchical connection: *Liwelelo* serves as the superordinate term, whereas *Nsumbi* is a hyponym that focuses on the creative dimension of the divine.

A semantic examination of *Liwelelo* shows a name that has shifted semantically from its etymological sense (Great One) to a specialized theological sense (Creator). The initial sense of greatness persists as a connotation, triggered especially in contexts that highlight divine power. This kind of semantic specialization (moving from general greatness to specific creative power) appears commonly across languages in the naming of deities [15]. Keeping the [+AUTH] and [+OMNI] features shows that the conceptual tie among greatness, authority, and sky-association is firmly rooted in Sukuma theological cognition.

2) Seba: The Provider

Seba is a root word, and it functions as a noun that refers to a God in the Sukuma tribe. Morphologically, *Seba* is not a productive word in Kisukuma for forming other word types, such as verbs, by adding prefixes and suffixes. This name carries all the semantic features (categories) as laid out in the matrix. Participants explained:

"Seba aginhaga bhuli genho. aginhaga nyama, busiga, minze. Bhuli dilo, bhuli losiko. mweyi aginhaga."

"Dodena genho, bhuli genho ja mwamamulungu, nolo nse nolo mbula, aleweyi agenhaga."

"Mumbi ale mombi aleyo seba ale mhini. Neyo aginahaga bhuli loshiko."

Translation:

"*Seba* is the one who provides everything. He provides meat, provides millet, provides water. Each morning, each day, it is He who provides."

"Nothing belongs to us. *Seba* is the source of everything given. The land too, the rain too He is the one who provides."

"*Nsumbi* is the one who creates, *Seba* is the one who provides. He created once, but He provides every day."

When they were asked to tell *Seba* apart from other names for the provider (such as *Welelo*), the participants clarified:

"Seba ale mombhi o bhuli genho. Welelo aginhaga bhana doho. Seba aginhaga mbula doho. Bhuli lina lele na nemo goyo."

"Olo oyomba seba, oyombela mhi o bhuli genho. Olo oyombela welelo oyombela mhi o bhana."

Translation:

"*Seba* is the one who provides everything. *Welelo* provides only children. *Seba* provides only rain. Every name has its own task."

"If you speak of *Seba* alone, you mean the one who provides everything. If you mention *Welelo*, you are referring to the one who provides children."

Contrastive probing brings to light a hierarchical connection between the generic *Seba* and its specific compounds. *Seba* by itself functions as a general name for the provider, whereas the compounds introduce greater specificity. This pattern of compounding, used as a means of semantic specialization, is productive in Kisukuma, as shown by the three attested compounds (*Seba namilage*). These compounds are created by attaching a possessive phrase that identifies the domain of provision: children, rain, or healing.

Analysing the semantics of *Seba* brings out how central provision is to Sukuma conceptualizations of the divine. In contrast to traditions that emphasise divine transcendence or otherworldliness, Sukuma theology places God's role as the everyday provider of material needs, such as meat, millet, water, rain, children, and healing at the forefront. This emphasis reflects the ecological and economic conditions of Sukuma society, which is mainly agricultural and pastoral. The productivity of this compounding pattern shows that the semantic domain stays active and open to expansion; speakers could potentially form new provider names whenever new needs emerge.

3) Mulungu: Life-giving

Mulungu is made up of the noun class prefix *mu-* (Class 1) and the root *-lungu*, which in this setting is related to provision, sustenance, and the act of supplying what is needed for life. Across many Bantu languages, Class 1 nouns frequently refer to people, extended objects, or qualities. Using this class in the divine name *Mulungu* underscores God's lasting role as the wellspring of sustenance and well-being for humanity. This name carries only two semantic features (categories), which are [+OMNI] and [+PRO] as set out in the matrix. Participants explained:

"Mulungu aleweyi oyo aginhaga shiriwa. Bhuli genho echo dolipandeka jigenhaga goliweyi."

"Mulungu weyi ale nindi wiswe. Aginhaga shiriwa, minze, nhange bhuli genho ja ng'wikalo Bhahangi."

"Bhahangi biswe agahaya gehe omulungu ale ng'winhi. Bhuli genho jigenghaga goleweyi."

Translation:

"*Mulungu* is the one who provides us with food. All that we have comes from Him."

"*Mulungu* is the one who looks after us. He provides us with food, water, and all that is needed for life."

"Our elders taught us that *Mulungu* is the Provider. Every good thing comes from Him."

When participants were asked to distinguish *Mulungu* from names that highlight creation or authority, they explained:

"Welelo Akabhomba nse hange na bhanho, aleyo Mulungu agatwinhaga bhuli loshiko."

"Dogang'witanaga Mulungu olodolembhodaki. Weyi aginhaga ejodolejidaka."

Translation:

"*Welelo* created the world and people, but *Mulungu* is the one who sustains us each day."

"We call upon *Mulungu* when we are in need. He is the one who supplies what we require."

These explanations reveal a significant semantic distinction

between creation and provision. Creation refers to God's act of bringing the world and humanity into existence, while provision refers to His ongoing care and maintenance of life. Creation is viewed as an event related to the beginning of existence, provision is understood as a continuing divine activity that sustains individuals, families, and communities.

Thus, the name *Mulungu* underscores God's immanence and ongoing engagement in human affairs. Participants regularly portrayed God not only as the creator of life but also as the one who continuously provides food, protection, health, rain, and other necessities. This view reflects a theological worldview in which reliance on God reaches beyond the act of creation into every dimension of daily survival.

The semantic analysis of *Mulungu* exposes a conception of God as the ultimate source of sustenance and welfare. Much like Mbiti's observed that African traditional spiritual thought frequently depicts God as the giver and sustainer of life, the name *Mulungu* specifically encodes the divine role of provision [14]. The name underscores the community's recognition that human well-being rests upon God's unceasing generosity.

The feature [+PRO] is especially significant because participants repeatedly related divine provision with care and responsibility. God's role as provider covers not only material needs like food and rain but also protection, health, fertility, and social well-being. *Mulungu* conveys a theological understanding of God as the ever-present provider whose sustaining power renders human life possible and secure.

The divine name *Mulungu* merits particular attention owing to its wide distribution across Bantu languages. Historical and comparative linguistic research shows that cognate forms of *Mulungu* appear in Swahili, Kinyamwezi, Yao, and many other Eastern and Central Bantu languages. In most of these languages, the term refers to the Supreme Being and is related with creation, life, and supernatural authority. The Kisukuma usage of *Mulungu* reflects both indigenous conceptualization and wider Bantu patterns of spiritual vocabulary. Its coexistence with names such as *Liwelelo* and *Seba* shows that the Sukuma linguistic system allows for multiple conceptualizations of divinity instead of depending on a single generalized term for God.

4) Mpija: The Healer

Mpija is made up of the class 1 noun prefix **m-** (which triggers nasalization) and the verb root *-pija*, meaning "to heal, to make well." In Bantu languages, class 1 is the main class for human nouns, including agentive nouns formed from verbs. Employing class 1 for a divine name shows that God is understood as a person (with personal agency) rather than as an impersonal force. This name carries just one feature [+HEAL] from the matrix. The Participants explained:

"Mpija weyi oyo agapejaga. Olodole balogomo, dogang'witanaga mpija. Aleweyi oyo agapejaga mimele."

"Mpija adapeja mele doho, agapejaga ngh'olo. Agapejaga bhuli genho ejilogomile."

"Bhalogomo bose agenhagwa golepeja. Weyi alena bhodoja bho gopeja. Bhuli losiko dolegwitanha opeje bhanho biswe."

Translation:

"*Mpija* is the one who brings healing. Whenever we fall ill, we call upon *Mpija*. He is the one who heals the body."

"*Mpija* does not heal the body alone. He also heals the heart, and the spirit as well. He heals all that is sick."

"Every sickness is brought to *Mpija*. He is the one who holds the power to heal. Each morning we call on Him to heal our people."

When they were asked to tell *Mpija* apart from other names that might be used in healing contexts (like *Ngasa*, *Luhinda*), participants explained:

"Mpija weyi agampejaga. Ngasa aginhaga bopeji. Aleyo Mpija weyi agapejaga

Seba alenabodoja aleyo mpija agala."

"Oloong'witana Welelo olomba bhodoja. Oloong'witana mpija olomba bhopeji."

Translation:

"*Mpija* is the one who heals. *Ngasa* gives healing, but *Mpija* is the one who heals. *Seba* has power, but *Mpija* specifically speaks of healing."

"If you call *Welelo*, you ask for power. If you call *Mpija*, you ask for healing."

Contrastive probing uncovers a subtle semantic distinction among the different names used in healing contexts. *Mpija* is the specialized term for a healer, representing healing as its central feature. *Ngasa* (Provider of healing) presents healing as one aspect of provision. *Luhinda* portrays healing as a manifestation of broader power. Participants recognize these distinctions and choose names accordingly: *Mpija* is used when healing is the precise focus, whereas *Luhinda* may be used when the desired power could encompass healing along with other benefits.

A semantic analysis of *Mpija* demonstrates the holistic view of health in Sukuma thought. The inclusion of the heart and spirit within healing suggests that health is understood as comprising physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This holistic view corresponds with the World Health Organization's definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being" a definition criticized as Western but seemingly reflected in indigenous aspects of Sukuma conceptualization.

The [+LIFE] feature related to *Mpija* carries significant meaning. Healing is not simply seen as the elimination of illness, but as the restoring or safeguarding of life. This conceptual connection between healing and giving life is reflected in the semantic features: *Mpija* shares [+LIFE] with names for creator and provider, showing that healing is viewed as an expression of divine life-giving power.

5) Yanswalaga Welelo: The Judge

Yanswalaga Welelo is made up of two words: *Yanswalaga* (who judges) and *Welelo* (God). These two words are connected to the noun "the judge." This morphological family reflects a consistent semantic field involving justice, truth, and moral assessment. The name also contains just one semantic

feature from the matrix: [+JUDGE]. Participants explained:

"Olo mho ogaya yanswalaga welelo. Agolamla makoye gose ayo dogabeja aho aho mwikalo."

"Olo mhu ogaya dodeba geke ojaga golenamli adebile shitwa na bhuli genho echo obeja."

"Yanswalaga Welelo agalamlaga bose abacha. Agabekaga abagikalaga chiza na abagikala na shitwa shibi."

Translation:

"When a person dies, he goes before *Yanswalaga Welelo*. He judges every deed carried out during life."

"When someone dies, we say that the person has gone to the Judge. He knows the person's behavior and everything that was done."

"*Yanswalaga Welelo* judges everyone who has died. He distinguishes between those who lived well and those who lived badly."

When asked how *Yanswalaga Welelo* differs from other divine names associated with death, participants explained:

"Mulungu agadwinhaga bhukalo olodolemubukazi aleyo oloogaya agajaga kabla yanswalaga welelo."

"Ngasa agatongelaga bhahno munse aleyo yanswalga welelo agamlaga bhahno olo ngwikalo goleng'wisho."

Translation:

"*Luhinda* sustains our lives while we live, but when someone dies, he goes before *Yanswalaga Welelo*."

"*Ngasa* governs people on earth, but *Yanswalaga Welelo* judges them after their earthly life has ended."

The contrastive analysis reveals a systematic distinction between the divine functions associated with human existence. *Luhinda* is understood as sustaining life and meeting human needs throughout earthly existence. *Ngasa* is related to authority and governance within the living community. *Yanswalaga Welelo*, by contrast, is associated with the final judgment that takes place after death. Whereas the other names show God's involvement in life, *Yanswalaga Welelo* highlights God's authority to morally evaluate life after it has ended.

The semantic analysis of *Yanswalaga Welelo* demonstrates the significance of moral accountability in Sukuma understandings of death. Participants consistently portrayed death not simply as a biological event, but as a transition to divine judgment. The deceased is understood to appear before God, who examines every action carried out during earthly life. Human judgment ends at death, while divine judgment begins.

The name *Yanswalaga Welelo* is often invoked in funeral contexts, moral discussions, and reflections on the fate of the deceased. Participants emphasized that God alone has complete knowledge of a person's deeds and intentions. Only He can judge fairly and distinguish truth from falsehood.

6. Conclusion

This article has analysed the semantic components of Kisukuma divine names. The analysis identified seventeen semantic features and showed that these features are unevenly distributed throughout the inventory of divine names. While some names convey broad semantic complexes, others are highly specialized. The most frequently occurring semantic dimensions encompass life-giving power, protection, deliverance, provision, and authority. Other features, including destruction, miracle-working, and sustenance, appear less consistently. The componential matrix also shows that divine names can share features while differing in the degree of prominence assigned to them.

The detailed analyses of *Liwelelo, Seba, Mulungu, Mpija,* and *Yanswalaga Welelo* illustrate how semantic specialization functions in practice. *Liwelelo* emphasizes creation along with authority and power; *Seba* emphasizes provision; *Mulungu* emphasizes ongoing sustenance; *Mpija* specifically emphasizes healing; and *Yanswalaga Welelo* emphasizes judgment and moral assessment. The findings affirm the applicability of Componential Analysis Theory in identifying contrasts within the Kisukuma divine lexicon. The semantic structure of Kisukuma divine names reveals a systematic connection between lexical meaning, divine function, and culturally meaningful experience.

7. Implications and Recommendations

These findings have implications for Bantu lexical semantics, as they demonstrate how culturally significant lexical items may develop specialized referential and semantic functions. Future research could investigate the morphological history of the names and the connection between noun-class membership and semantic interpretation. The findings also have significance for language documentation. Divine names form part of the linguistic and cultural knowledge of Kisukuma speakers. Documentation should preserve not only the names' forms but also participants' explanations, semantic contrasts, and interpretive contexts. Future research should compare the semantic organization of Kisukuma divine names with that of related Bantu languages, investigate phonological and morphological variation among Kisukuma dialects, and examine semantic change resulting from spiritual contact. Such research would complement the present semantic analysis without replacing the indigenous meanings documented in the study.

Abbreviations

[+CRE]	Creator
[+PRO]	Provider
[+PROT]	Protector
[+HEAL]	Healer
[+LIFE]	Life-giving
[+AUTH]	Authority
[+OMNI]	Omnipotent (All-powerful)
[+SUST]	Sustainer
[+CTRL]	Controller of nature
[+MIRC]	Miracle-working

[+DESTR]	Destroyer
[+HELP]	Helper
[+DEL]	Deliverer
[+JUDGE]	Judge
[+WAR]	Warrior
[+VICT]	Victorious
[+PRES]	Preserver

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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