





STREET NAMES AND STREET NAMING IN MASERU: NAVIGATING THE LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE


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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the naming of streets in the areas around Maseru town. It examines the street names in use, the processes by which these names were selected, and the thematic patterns that emerge across key locations. Employing a qualitative methodology within a multiple case study design, the research draws on both primary and secondary sources. Initial data were obtained through interviews using a snowball sampling technique, involving one official from the Maseru City Council and two local councillors. These interviews provided insights into the procedures and community involvement in the street-naming process. Additional perspectives were gathered through informal interviews with randomly selected community members, who shared stories about how their streets came to be named. To compile a comprehensive list of street names, the researchers conducted fieldwork that involved driving through the areas, photographing visible street nameplates,



and recording names through field notes. This approach allowed for a wide and representative collection of data. Through a triangulated framework that combines Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis and onomastics, the study reveals that local communities played an active role in the naming process. The street names reflect strong elements of cultural heritage, identity, and environmental context, all of which contribute to the linguistic landscape and express the unique character of the Basotho people. The study concludes by recommending the standardisation of street names and the formalisation of naming regulations in Lesotho, to enhance consistency and preserve cultural identity.

Keywords: Linguistic landscape, minority languages, Maseru City Council, onomastics, street names, street naming

1. INTRODUCTION

Before Lesotho gained its independence in 1966, public signs and street names in particular bore the names of colonisers or referred to events of importance during colonial rule. This situation compromised dissemination of indigenous knowledge from one generation to another, resulting in Basotho youth lacking awareness of the culture and history of their own country and nation. The significance of naming for conveying the culture and identity of a nation is highlighted by Cooper *et al.* (2011) who explain that “the names we choose symbolise a great deal about our culture and view of the world.” In contrast to the existing wealth of research on naming in various aspects of life in Lesotho, there are very few studies on street names and the processes of street naming that promote knowledge of the culture and history of the Basotho (the main ethnocultural group of Lesotho). The current study investigates the naming of streets in the areas around Maseru, the capital of Lesotho. It examines the street names in use, the processes by which these names were selected, and the thematic patterns that emerge across ten key areas. The study intends to inform the development and planning sector of Lesotho of the guidelines to be considered when naming territories, creating street-name databases, and encouraging maintenance of street names.

The Maseru City Council (MCC) is the only municipal council in Lesotho. The Council is responsible for local governance in Maseru, including developments such as infrastructure and urban planning, which would encompass street naming (Lebentlele 2000, International Labour Organisation 2014). However, the MCC does not have a policy that governs street naming. To carry out the process of naming streets where

streets have not been named before, or of renaming streets, the MCC either proposes street names to the community (in order to ease access to their location in terms of formatting the physical addresses) or the community itself proposes the street names to the MCC. The Council is always ready and flexible enough to consider any name that might be suggested, although they always encourage the communities to name according to themes, memorable events, or cultural influences to avoid the chances of subsequent generations replacing the existing names. Moreover, the Council discourages naming after living persons or current organisations as they may be controversial. Naming of streets in Lesotho has not been popular except for commemorative and administrative areas that were named by colonisers for administrative purposes. This study presumes that the city seemed too small to warrant the naming of places, particularly streets, but since independence, Maseru city has grown rapidly and a need to identify places could not be ignored (Gill 1993, Lebentlele 2000). What triggered the current study is an observation that street names in and around Maseru town bear Sesotho names that seem to be reviving the history and culture of the Basotho, though whether the names reflect concerted planning is open to debate.

While the country of Lesotho has promoted visibility of places by distinguishing them by name, the present study has seen an opportunity for research on the naming process and the given names themselves. It is also observable that the nation is uplifting the use of Sesotho in a number of ways, including by naming products, businesses, brands, and streets in Sesotho. While in the past Lesotho was dotted with English street names (Caledon Road, Hilton Road, Kingsway, Pioneer Road, Lancers Road), there is currently an obvious shift away from the foreign names to Sesotho names, marking a significant transformation in street naming in Lesotho.

It is worth mentioning that even though there are other indigenous languages in Lesotho, Sesotho is the language spoken by the majority of Basotho (Kolobe & Matsoso 2021). The Sesotho language is a mixture of language variations spoken by different clans under the leadership of Moshoeshe I, who is the founder of the Basotho nation. The Sesotho language played an important role in unifying various clans during King Moshoeshe I's reign. The language enabled him to rule a united nation with one medium of communication. In this context, the Sesotho language can be seen as the Basotho's "deep identity" (Gilbert 2010:40) – it is the medium through which they share a history, customs, beliefs, values, and practices as a nation. At present, "apart from being an official language, along with English, Sesotho is also a national language, that is, it is ... a language of political, social and cultural participation [and] a language

that offers speakers an identity” (Moloi & Motsau 2011:68-69). This study argues that the naming of streets in Lesotho should be considerate of its culture and history and be standardised. Mokala (2020:220) concurs that the “Naming system among Basotho follows certain processes which reflect their belief systems and cultural heritage among other things.” Rusu (2020:1) underscores the value of street names that encapsulate broader and intersecting issues of memory, belonging, language, and space. In the same vein, Mulaya and Siame (2025) add that street naming reflects environmental affinity, which fosters cultural identity. This implies that a study such as this one is significant as a first step towards standardisation, sustainability, and visibility of street names in Lesotho.

The aim of this study was to examine street naming and street names in Lesotho in order to analyse the themes of these emerging names and develop an understanding of the motivation behind the given names. The study attempts to address the question of how street naming is done in Lesotho. The study focused on ten areas around Maseru town, namely Katlehong, Mohalalitoe, Thetsane (Lower, East, and West), Thamae (Lower and Upper), Moshoeshe 11, Hoohlo, Hillsvie, Maseru East, Maseru West, and Seapoint. All these locations are within walking distance of Maseru town. The selection of the areas was influenced by the researchers’ linguistic landscape observation that names given to streets in these areas are in Sesotho language and they seem to follow a certain pattern.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The premise of this study is that street naming is attributive of the linguistic landscape associated with a certain area. Blommaert and Ico (2014) affirm that research on the linguistic landscape (LL) has become of more interest to researchers for several reasons. They highlight that LL serves as an ambassador of an area by giving a picture of a language or languages spoken in that particular area. It also provides a platform for research on the language in public spaces. The present study finds that the current trend in Lesotho is that streets are named in the Sesotho language, reflecting the culture and history of Basotho. A study by Cenoz and Gorter (2006) asserts that “the linguistic landscape contributes to the construction of the sociolinguistic context because people process the visual information that comes to them, and the language in which signs are written can certainly influence their perception of the status of the different languages and even affect their own linguistic behaviour” (p. 68). Nonetheless, the importance of street identification cannot be ignored. As a result, the present study underscores the relevance of the LL in exploring street names in Lesotho, particularly those which are given in Sesotho in the areas around Maseru town.

According to Alderman (2023), nameless places are disorientated places that lack social and cultural particularity, while Rui and Othengrafen (2023) clarify that distinguished streets offer better visibility of such factors by, for example, promotion of their liveability and environmental footprint for decades and centuries to come. Besides the traditional, primary function of aiding navigation, street names have acquired other values, such as transfer of a nation's cultural information from generation to generation (Hough 2016, Matiza & Dube 2020, Heng 2020, Mushati 2013, Majola & Lemeko 2024, Kareem 2025), as turned out to be the case in this study.

Kallen (2023) explains that the linguistic landscape is a fundamental aspect that enhances social uniqueness and effective communication. As a way of conveying a condensed message, the Basotho name a street to represent the culture and history of the Basotho who live in that particular area. Where the streets are named in Sesotho, the linguistic landscape reflects the power of language to inscribe Basotho culture in a public space. The critical role of street names in evoking cultural memory is well described by Ferguson (1988) and Heng (2020), who state that such names are significant cultural indicators. In other words, street names are a fundamental element of the linguistic landscape, serving as a pervasive and enduring form of public textual display. Legère and Rosendal (2018) underscore the omnipresence of linguistic forms in everyday environments. The current study argues that the act of naming streets becomes a linguistic practice that reflects the broader values and stories of a community. Shen (2022) confirms the link between the linguistic landscape and street names as a symbolic construction of identity by explaining that language is everything that we see (as we see with street names in this case), since we are able to infer or attach meaning to everything that meets the eye. The linguistic landscape illustrates how public spaces such as a street can communicate a society's uniqueness and can reveal the social position of people who identify with particular languages (Dagenais *et al.* 2009:254).

Landry and Bourhis (1997) describe the linguistic landscape as constituted by street names and street signs. According to them, the linguistic landscape encompasses "the language of public road signs ... place names, street names ... and public signs on government buildings, of a given territory, region or urban agglomeration" (p. 25). In other words, it is through the linguistic landscape that society is informed about the territory in question. A visible unit of the linguistic landscape such as a street name or a street sign is understood to mediate between a sign instigator and a sign viewer. The sign viewer is often a passing stranger whom the sign instigator will try to engage as an interlocutor (Kallen 2023).

Cenoz and Gorter (2006) attest that the linguistic landscape contributes to the construction of the sociolinguistic context. In order to understand the meaning behind the Sesotho names of streets in Maseru, one attaches the name given in Sesotho to the culture that connects Basotho people and the history they share. UNGEGN (2015:17) posits that every place names tell a story that is relevant to the culture that bestowed the name. Moreover, Chabata (2012:23) observes that, when it comes to place naming, “the socio-cultural aspect cannot be left out of consideration and it is commonly agreed, that toponyms belong to the immaterial cultural heritage of mankind.” The same sentiment is shared by Guma (2001) and Ntshangase (2025) who underscore the significance of names and naming process as historical and cultural in that they remind inhabitants of who they are and where they come from. Toponyms enable people to look beyond the name but also to delve into the original reasons why a particular name was given under certain socio-cultural conditions. It is against this backdrop that the current study shares Loth, Kotzé and De Lange’s (2022) view that the linguistic landscape is an essential aspect of language visibility. Because of the use of Sesotho in street naming in Maseru, the language has become more visible than before. Basotho are likely to relate more to their places because they are named in their native language, which contributes not only to Sesotho language visibility but also to sharing the richness of Basotho culture and history.

Letsoela (2015) conducted a study to examine the naming system of bus stops in Lesotho, focusing on what motivates the name given to the bus stop. The findings of her study reveal four categories of names. The first category of bus stop names is descriptive, i.e., names that reflect physical features that are visible in the vicinity of the bus stop. The second category of bus stop names is the metaphorical. Other names are considered experiential because they reflect historical events. The last category is mythological and represents local beliefs.

Using a questionnaire given to students in one university in Lesotho, the study collected bus stop names from all the districts of Lesotho and the explanations of why a particular name was given to a certain bus stop. Letsoela’s study concluded that bus stop names are ambassadors of cultural, historical, and social information and reflect the Basotho’s experiences, emotions, and beliefs. Letsoela’s study aligns with Snodia *et al’s* (2010) view that toponyms, besides labelling things for the purpose of differentiation, have sentimental, religious, and cultural significance. These authors explain that “... because toponyms bind societies to the setting, they provide a vital comprehension into the society’s traditional way of life thus their culture” (p. 15). Chauke (2015) shares the

same view as the above authors that societies give names to their settings in order to offer a distinctive source of evidence about a society's history, beliefs, and values.

Another study was conducted by Khanyetsi in 2022. Her study foregrounds creativity in place naming among the Basotho. In her study, she demonstrates the importance of creativity when naming places in order to avoid name duplication. Her study reveals that the Basotho duplicate place names not only at inter-district level but also within districts themselves, hence it is advisable to use names which ensure the possibility of the chief name being extended to other places where that chief's sons might settle. According to Khanyetsi, name duplication is due to the naming processes practised by Basotho, such as renaming of a place after a chief. Khanyetsi's finding is relevant to the focus of this study as it enhances the researchers' understanding of the motivation behind place names, particularly street names, and offers us insight into the motivation behind the naming process. Khanyetsi proposes a solution to the problem of name duplication in the form of the creative approach used by miners in *lifela tsa litsamaeana*, that is, "migrants' (mine workers') chants" (Tsiu 2008:1) Her study highlights that while these miners walked miles and miles, they invented various names drawn from the environment and circumstances they encountered. As a result of this, the places that they passed have diverse names. The naming of streets can also be influenced by experiences of the Basotho as a nation, such as world wars and plagues that the country endured. Jordan (2012) concurs with Khanyetsi that place names reflect how people perceive and build their environment. Khanyetsi's study relates to the research question posed in this study about how the naming of streets in Maseru is done.

In another vein, Matsetse (2023:93) asserts that names indicate the area's "specificness". As Matsetse proposes, elders and other persons knowledgeable about the history of an area to be named need to subject naming of streets to a thorough evaluation to ensure appropriateness of names. Matsetse's argument aligns with the present study's appreciation of indigenous knowledge as reflected in the street names given by knowledgeable members of the community living in a specific area. In this study, the MCC invited the community to engage in naming their streets in recognition of the shared knowledge of the culture and history of the Basotho.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study applied the principles of two theories, the Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA) (Blommaert & Maly 2014) and onomastic framework (Clark 2005). ELLA emphasises the multi-layered meaning of signs (in this case, street names) and their

connection to time (past, present, future) and space (social and cultural landscapes). In the colonial past, English street names were imposed, reflecting power dynamics, colonial occupation, and cultural erasure. In the present, the shift toward Sesotho street names is a form of identity reclamation – a visual and symbolic assertion of Basotho heritage and language in public spaces. The future axis invites reflection on how naming practices might evolve, especially in light of Lesotho’s multilingual reality, urban development, and cultural shifts. ELLA allows for a nuanced analysis of how names operate beyond language – as social, political, and historical texts inscribed into the urban landscape. It highlights naming as a practice shaped by a community’s power and agency.

Onomastic theory enhanced the identification and analysis of street names in Maseru. Onomastics helps to explore the semantics, structure, and cultural significance of street names. This includes investigating the principles and patterns behind name selection – whether names commemorate historical figures, local heroes, cultural symbols, or reflect geographical/topographical features. Onomastics provides a systematic way of evaluating how names function as markers of identity, as Mokala (2020) states. Onomastics complements ELLA by zooming into the names themselves, examining their etymology, meaning, and cultural associations. While ELLA is more macro (social and temporal meaning), onomastics offers a micro-level linguistic and cultural analysis.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach using multiple case studies of the areas surrounding Maseru town. This qualitative approach aims to identify the names of streets, particularly those given in the Sesotho language, to understand how street naming is done in Lesotho, and to describe the themes of the street names found in the areas around Maseru town.

Our interest in this study was two-fold. We wished to understand how streets in Maseru are named and thus the processes involved in naming. As such, we approached the Planning Department at Maseru City Council and councillors in Maseru to explain how the naming process was done. We also wished to identify Sesotho street names in the areas around Maseru town. The street names were captured using a smartphone while other names were recorded on a notepad. The following sections explain the two phases of data collection.

Using snowball sampling, the researchers interviewed three respondents: one officer from MCC, who is the head of the planning department, and two councillors from one

of the research areas that were asked to describe how street naming was done. We also randomly picked five community members, as we were collecting data in their areas and asked them how the streets acquired the names that they have. It should be noted that the sample for this study was not based on statistical procedures because the study was qualitative. This position is supported by Du Plooy (2001), who explains that the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative design have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected than with the sample size. The information that was provided by the selected respondents was sufficient to generalise the ideology behind street names and street naming in Lesotho, particularly in Maseru.

Furthermore, the researchers collected data through LL observation. They drove around areas surrounding Maseru town and, using a cell phone, took snapshots of street names that they could see as they were driving. The linguistic landscape observation method was found appropriate for this study because it allowed the researchers to collect data as they were driving along the streets. The method ensured validity and reliability of the data. They also made field notes on the street names to maximise their collection of data. The data was collected from the ten areas around Maseru town, namely: Katlehong, Mohalalitoe, Thetsane, Thamae, Moshoeshoe 11, Hoohlo, Hillsvie, Sea Point, Maseru East, and Maseru West. This selection of areas was done to minimise biased data. In addition, this context called for research on toponymy, because even though Maseru town is a multiracial place, the researchers observed that the surrounding areas have street names in Sesotho instead of English, which is the language of commerce.

5. DATA PRESENTATION

The study collected data in two phases. In the first phase, interviews were conducted with a Maseru City Council (MCC) officer and with community councillors to understand the street-naming process in Maseru. When asked how the naming of streets is done in Maseru, the MCC officer explained that community councillors were actively involved in the process. As the support body of the MCC in the communities, the councillors were informed about urban landscape development and the necessity of naming streets as part of this initiative.

The councillors were tasked with mobilising their communities and working collaboratively with local chiefs to facilitate the naming process. Community members were invited to propose street names that resonated with their local identity. They were given autonomy to suggest names, providing they adhere to the clear guidelines provided by the MCC. The purpose of these guidelines is to ensure that names remain culturally

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relevant, neutral, and inclusive. Instead of political affiliations or personal preferences, the emphasis is on names that reflect environmental elements, cultural heritage, and the historical background of the Basotho people.

Although community participation in the naming process was generally low, councillors were able to identify and select themes that reflected the character and values of their respective areas. Both councillors and community members contributed names they felt best represented their spaces.

The second phase of data collection involved compiling and analysing the proposed street names (see the figures below). The findings revealed that the chosen names were largely descriptive of Basotho culture, encompassing themes such as traditional leadership, indigenous flora and fauna, celestial elements, and historical references. These names serve as important cultural signifiers within the urban linguistic landscape of Maseru. Figure 1 below shows street names in Katlehong.



Figure 1: *Katlehong streets named after geographical affinity (Source: Authors)*

The above figure shows streets that are named after shrubs found in Lesotho. The names include Lekhala, Mohloare, Mohalalitoe, and Monokotsoai. Streets in Thetsane East show names of Basotho blankets, such as Motla Le Khosana, Seanamarena, Malakabe, and Qibi (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Streets named after Basotho blankets at Thetsane East (Source: Authors)

Figure 3 below shows streets in Thetsane West named mostly after Basotho clans and grass, for example, Koenaneng, Taung, and Tloung. In the same area of Thetsane West, data revealed that other streets predominantly follow the names of grasses such as Tšinabelo, Shoeshoe, Qhawhaoe, and Molula (Figure 4).



Figure 3: Streets named after clans of Basotho at Thetsane West (Source: Authors)

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Figure 4: *Streets names reflecting geographical affinity at Thetsane West (Source: Authors)*

Streets in Moshoeshoe 11 are named after Basotho chiefs such as Maama and Sekonyela, as shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5: *Street named after Basotho head chiefs in Moshoeshoe 11 (Source: Authors)*

Maseru West shows mixed themes. There are instances of renaming which evoke history (Lancers Road, Caldwell Road), mountains, rivers, animals, plants, clans, and creativity, including Moseeka, Tona-Khoho, Caledon, and Maluti (see Table 1 and Figure 6 below).



Figure 6: Street names in Maseru West (Source: Authors)

Maseru East is symbolic of geographical affinity. There are streets named after cardinal points, stars, and rivers, such as Bochabela in Figure 7 below.



Figure 7: *Street names in Maseru East (Source: Authors)*

Figure 8 below shows a street that is named after birds in the Hillsvie area, i.e., Maeba.



Figure 8: *Streets named after birds in Hillsvie (Source: Authors)*

6. DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analysed thematically to show the different categories of street names in the areas around Maseru town. Siame and Banda (2012) contend that thematic analysis is prominent in qualitative research as it allows researchers to classify the collected data into specific themes. The researchers presented the street names on a table showing the area where the names were collected, and the identified theme. It is important to mention that the established themes matched our observation that naming of streets was influenced by Basotho culture and the environment that the communities are situated in. Reflection on the location of the street enhances our understanding of what influenced the community to choose a certain theme for the street. The table below presents analysis of street names in the ten areas around Maseru town.

Table 1: Street names in Maseru which depict history and cultural heritage of Basotho

Area	Theme	Street names
1. Katlehong	Shrubs	<i>Mabelebele, Morobei, Lelothoane, Sehalahala, Cheche</i> <i>Monokotšoai, Tšinabelo</i>
2. Lower Thetsane	Rivers	<i>Malibamatšo, Makhalaneng, Sebapala, Senqu,</i>
	Chiefs	<i>Senqunyane, Khubelu, Mohokare</i> <i>Mohato Ring</i>
3. Thetsane West	Grass	<i>Leloli, Molula, Qhaqhae, Seboku, Tšaane, Moseeka</i>
	Animals	<i>Pulumo, Nkoe</i>
	Mountains	<i>Qiloane, Thaba-bosiu, Qhoali</i>
	River	<i>Koma-Koma</i>
	Clans	<i>Taung, Kubung, Phuthing, Rolong, Tlounge, Tlokoeng</i>
	Creativity	<i>Boiketlo, Bolepeletsa, Bo-ala-Thapo, Bofula-Tšepe</i>
	Plants	<i>Bobatsi</i>
4. Thetsane East	Blankets	<i>Maapara-Kobo</i> <i>Lilala, Pitso, Malakabe, Sefate, Seanamarena, Qibi</i> <i>Setsoto, Lehlaku, Lefitori</i>
5. Hillsvieiw	Birds	<i>Mohololi, Manong, Motjoli, Maeba, Tjobolo, Molepe</i> <i>Thaha, Matlaka</i>

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Area	Theme	Street names
6. Moshoeshoe 11	Chiefs	<i>Lerotholi, Majara, Mopeli, Maama</i>
	Prominent figure residence	<i>Kolonyama</i>
7. Thamae	Plants	<i>Tsikitlane, Tika-Motse</i>
	Creativity	<i>Phatlalla, Tabola</i>
8. Maseru East	Cardinal points	<i>Bochabela</i>
	Trees	<i>Moluoane</i>
	Dams	<i>Maqalika Mejametalana</i>
	Stars	<i>Mphatlalatsane, Naleli</i>
	Tradition	<i>Mokorotlo</i>
9. Maseru West	Rivers	<i>Qoqolosing</i>
	Mountains	<i>Maluti, Mathebe</i>
	Chiefs	<i>Moorosi, Lerotholi, Lepoqo, Sekhonyana</i>
	Prominent figures	<i>Tona-kholo, Moshoeshoe, Senate, Mohlomi, Mafatle, Khaketla</i>
	Clans	<i>Taung</i>
10. Mohalalitoe	Birds	<i>Pikoko, Seroebele, Leebe, Khoale</i>
	Shrubs	<i>Cheche, Shoeshoe, Mohalalitoe, Kharetsana, Mabelebele, Tsinabelo, Molokotšoi, Morobei</i>
	Trees	<i>Mohloare</i>
	Rivers	<i>Mohokare</i>
	Plants	<i>Lekhala, Mabele, Seruoe</i>
	Animals	<i>Tau, Kubu</i>

These results are analysed from an ethnographic linguistic perspective, as well as an onomastics theoretical approach

6.1 Ethnographic linguistic analysis

Ethnographic linguistics examines how language reflects and shapes social and cultural life. In this context, the street names are not just functional labels; they carry rich cultural

meanings and collective memory, as shared by several researchers mentioned in this paper like Mokala (2020), Rusu (2020), and Letsoela (2015). From the collected data, it was noted that each area around Maseru town reflects a cultural domain tied to Basotho heritage, as described below:

Katlehong has the theme of **shrubs**. Names like Mabelebele, Morobei, and Sehalahala refer to indigenous flora deeply embedded in rural Basotho life and traditional medicine. According to Snodia *et al.* (2010), the presence of these names preserves knowledge of the natural environment and affirms eco-cultural identity.

Lower Thetsane has **rivers** and **chiefs** as a theme. Water sources like Malibamatšo, Senqu, and Mohokare are crucial to Basotho livelihoods and spiritual beliefs, such as river spirits and ancestral cleansing. These river names (and the name of Mohato Ring) are also tied to chieftainship boundaries, symbolising authority and social structure.

Thetsane West has **mixed themes**. This area demonstrates the richest variety, with some names representing nature (grass, mountains, rivers). Qiloane and Thaba-Bosiu are sacred mountains, associated with the country's founding history and Moshoeshe I, the Basotho king. Another theme is animals and plants, which may symbolise clan totems (Nkoe, Tloug). It is important to note that when place names are derived from nouns, the name usually ends in -ng, thus Tlou will be Tloug. The use of clan names directly embeds kinship and lineage into urban space, keeping oral traditions and social organisation alive. Thetsane West also has creativity as another theme. Names like Boiketlo reflect Basotho creativity and values.

Thetsane East has the theme of **blankets**: Street names refer to Basotho blankets such as Seanamarena, Lilala, and Malakabe, which are central to Basotho identity and status. These names honour material culture and signify modern symbols of tradition.

Data shows that the Sesotho language is predominant and demonstrates linguistic pride. The use of these names in urban areas implies that urban spaces are linguistically ruralised, reflecting cultural continuity despite modernisation. As shared by Guma (2001) and Ntshangase (2025), street names are an unwavering reminder of the history shared by the inhabitants of such areas.

6.2 Onomastic theory perspective

Onomastics focuses on the study of names, including toponyms (place names) and their origins, meanings, usage, and social functions (Bright 2003).

The collected data shows names classified into various onomastic categories, including topographical names like Thaba-Bosiu (mountain) and Senqu (river) and anthroponymic names showing clans or chiefs like Mohato, Taung, and Rolong. Another category comprises floral and faunal names, as in Cheche, Tšaane, and others. The last category comprises cultural objects such as blankets (Seanamarena, Pitso). It is worth mentioning that such names show the inclusivity and communal spirit that characterise the Basotho nation.

This typological range shows that Basotho intentionally name their streets to commemorate, preserve, and honour the various natural, social, and symbolic aspects of Basotho life. Naming streets in Maseru according to these different natural topologies is a move towards preserving the language, even for generations to come.

In addition, the collected data demonstrate symbolic and social functions such as commemoration, social stratification, and didactic and cultural branding. For example, names like Thaba-Bosiu evoke national memory, as the place was the stronghold of Moshoeshe I, the founder of the Basotho nation. In addition, Thaba-Bosiu is a sacred place for Basotho and is symbolic of their foundation (Gill 1993). Reference to chieftainship and clans (Mohato, Taung) in street names mirrors socio-political hierarchies and kinship affiliations, acknowledging the important role they play in governing their communities. Other names may serve as transmitters of Basotho moral and cultural values, as in the case of the street name Boiketlo, which teaches the value of peace, prosperity, and relaxation. It is also observable that by naming streets after culturally significant items such as blankets, Maseru affirms its identity against the backdrop of globalisation and Westernisation while preserving the Basotho's national identity and culture.

7. DISCUSSION

The analysis of street names in selected areas of Maseru – Katilehong, Lower Thetsane, Thetsane West, and Thetsane East – reveals a deliberate and culturally resonant naming system that reflects and reinforces Basotho identity, history, and worldview. The finding aligns with the findings of Ferguson (1988) and Heng (2020) that street names, especially on city streets, evoke cultural memory. Through the application of ethnographic linguistic analysis and onomastic theory, the findings suggest that street-naming practices function far beyond simple geographic labelling; they serve as a repository for cultural memory, ecological knowledge, social structure, and national pride.

7.1 Cultural continuity in urban space

One of the most prominent findings is how traditional rural and oral knowledge systems are preserved in the urban landscape. The names of plants (Sehalahala, Morobei, Cheche), rivers (Senqu, Mohokare), and mountains (Thaba-Bosiu, Qiloane) bring historically and ecologically significant landmarks into everyday urban discourse. This reflects an intentional act of cultural continuity, where indigenous ecological and geographical literacy is embedded in the infrastructure of modern life. Such naming practices highlight an urban-rural interdependence, where the city does not erase the countryside but rather reflects and remembers it. This reinforces a sense of place and identity for residents, especially in a postcolonial context where reclamation of indigenous space is both symbolic and political. These findings echo Cenoz and Gorter (2006) as well as UNGEGN (2015), who affirm the fundamental role of street names as ambassadors that tell a story of the people found in that area. In the same vein, Mulaya and Siame (2025) contend that place naming fosters cultural identity.

7.2 Language as a tool of identity and resistance

The use of Sesotho names throughout the dataset points to a conscious embrace of linguistic heritage. At a time when many African urban areas are dominated by colonial or globalised naming systems, Maseru's Sesotho-based toponymy resists erasure of indigenous language. It reflects an assertion of Basotho identity, rooted in language, land, and lineage. Othengrafen (2023) clarifies that street names promote liveability and environmental footprint for generations to come. Names like Boiketlo ("comfort") and Bolepeletsa (possibly "ingenuity" or "creativity" in a metaphorical sense) express core cultural values. These are not merely poetic expressions; they function as public affirmations of what it means to live in a space that is Sesotho in essence.

7.3 Clanship and social structure

The incorporation of clan names such as Tlounge, Phuthing, Rolong, and Taung reflects the enduring relevance of lineage and kinship systems within contemporary society. Clans are fundamental to Basotho identity, determining social roles, totemic affiliations, and relationships. Their presence in street names indicates that these systems are still influential enough to warrant public acknowledgement. This finding is corroborated by Gilbert (2010) and Moloji and Motsau (2011), which shows that language offers identity.

This aligns with the view of onomastic theory that names not only label but reflect and shape social realities. By mapping clans onto the cityscape, this study argues that Maseru reinforces social memory and maintains the symbolic geography of kinship and belonging.

7.4 Material culture and symbolism

The findings of this study also reveal that the area of Thetsane East, in particular, emphasises material culture through blanket names like Seanamarena, Lilala, Qibi, and Malakabe. These are more than household items; they are icons of cultural identity, as opined by Chabate (2012), and often worn with pride during ceremonies and rites of passage. Their inclusion in urban naming celebrates the visual and symbolic identity of the Basotho people. This affirms the theory that names serve a semiotic function (UNGEEN 2015, Mokala 2020): they are signs pointing to deeper cultural meanings. In this case, we argue that a street name that refers to a blanket serves as a metaphor for warmth, dignity, heritage, and status within the community.

7.5 Place names as pedagogical tools

Another key finding is the didactic function of street names. They act as everyday lessons in history, language, and environment. Names like Thaba-Bosiu and Qiloane teach about Basotho resistance and leadership, while plant names (Cheche, Morobehi, Monokotšoi) serve as informal ethnobotanical education. Even creativity-themed names, such as Boiketlo, found in this data set, encourage reflection on cultural values and practices of the Basotho. This aligns with ethnolinguistic perspectives that view language not only as communication but as a means of transmitting knowledge and cultural ethos across generations. These findings are also evident in the works of Matiza and Dube (2020), Jordan (2012), Guma (2001), Letsoela (2015), and Khanyetsi (2022), who also underscore the multi-layered role of names besides merely labelling.

8. CONCLUSION

The conclusions drawn from the findings are that the street names of Maseru offer a rich linguistic map of Basotho cultural heritage. Through the lens of ethnographic linguistic and onomastics, we see how language is used as a tool to preserve traditional knowledge, affirm identity, celebrate cultural pride, and embed historical consciousness into everyday space. Moreover, themes like chiefs, tradition, clans, and prominent figures show a deep respect for heritage and leadership, while names like Moshoeshoe,

Mohlomi, and Senate reflect historical or political importance. It is also conclusive that areas associated with birds, trees, rivers, and animals suggest a strong connection to the natural world (see Hillsview and Mohalalitoe, Maseru East). Maseru West leans toward historical and geographical features while Thamae stands out for linking plants and creativity, implying a possible artistic or symbolic identity.

The study also concludes that there is overlap of street names as illustrated on the table and graphics data presentations. For instance, Lerotholi appears in both Moshoeshoe 11 and Maseru West, which could suggest a broader influence or legacy. There are further instances of name duplication of plants and shrubs, such as Cheche, Mabelebele, and Mohloare found in Katlehong, Mohalalitoe, and Maseru East, perhaps indicating the importance of such names in Basotho culture and history. Generally, the study concludes that by converting oral, rural, and symbolic traditions into written urban signage, Maseru's street names act as living museums, sustaining Basotho culture in a changing modern landscape.

Based on the ethnographic and onomastic analysis of naming patterns across urban areas, the following recommendations are proposed to preserve, promote, and utilise cultural naming practices as part of heritage, education, and urban development initiatives.

The study recommends that cultural naming be integrated into urban planning and that the use of indigenous names, in Sesotho and other minority languages spoken in Lesotho, be continued for new streets and other public facilities. This may be enhanced by including the meaning, origin, or symbolism of the name to educate the youth and visitors. It is also recommended that the MCC establish a digital or physical archive of place names, which includes oral histories, meanings, and thematic groupings (trees, rivers, clans), as these will facilitate future naming activities and ensure standardisation.

This study further recommends fostering community involvement. Local communities may be engaged in naming projects through consultations or participatory mapping. In particular, the youth may be encouraged to participate in collecting and preserving names from older generations.

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