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Naming chimpanzees: Not an easy task

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Inspired by the essay by McGrew (2023), which discusses the naming system of chimpanzees, I would like to make some comments on the naming in Mahale. I emphasize that finding and deciding on "good" names is not always an easy task. I say "good" in the sense of easy to remember for researchers and assistants, and easy to pronounce for people with different linguistic backgrounds.

Naming Rules?

As summarized in McGrew's essay, the Mahale researchers use two-letter codes as abbreviations for chimpanzee names (such as NT for Ntologi). The main rule shared by the Mahale researchers is that this two-letter code should, of course, be unique to an individual. However, there has already been some overlap of codes, probably due to a lack of sufficient information sharing in previous years.

Another current naming rule is that the first letter of the offspring's code should be the same as the mother's. For example, RJ's son is coded as RM and her daughter is coded as RF. Since they share the first letter, we can easily recognize the R family. I say "current" because this was not always the case until the 1990s (so WX's son was coded as AL).

We also have a consensus that we wait to name the infant until it is three years old. For recording purposes, we add the last two digits of the year of birth after the mother's code (if a mother PF had a baby in 2023, the baby was recorded as PF23 until it was named). This is mainly to "save" two-letter codes, since infants under three years of age are more susceptible to death. Infants under three are rarely separated from their mothers, so researchers usually have no difficulty identifying the infant.

In addition to these rather strict rules, there are a number of non-manifest and non-mandatory conditions. For example, no one would want to use bad words like "dung," "stupid," or "evil" (or their Japanese and Swahili equivalents) to name a chimpanzee. Another is that the name should be easy to remember and pronounce for the everyday users, in Mahale's case mainly Japanese researchers and Tanzanian assistants. For this purpose, naming from short Swahili or Japanese words is often useful (because Swahili and Japanese are similar in pronunciation and much easier to pronounce than some English words). Below are some examples that I think are "good" in this regard.

Ayu: Based on the name of a top-grade Japanese sake. But some might think it is based on the nickname of a famous Japanese pop singer, Ayumi Hamasaki.
Azam: Named after an ice cream shop in Tanzania. In the 1990s, the Azam sold ice cream bars on the street using a bicycle equipped with a cold box. Now the Azam group has become very big and they even have a TV company (the Azam TV).
Enju: Japanese common name for the *Styphnolobium japonicum* tree.
Ituri: After the name of a forest in the Congo that is famous for the anthropological studies of the Pygmy people.
Mao: Named after Mao Asada, a Japanese figure skater and an Olympic medalist.
Neema: A common female name in Tanzania.
Omali: A common male name in Tanzania.
Omo: The name of a famous paleoanthropological site. However, Tanzanian assistants may think it is derived from the name of a washing powder commonly sold in Tanzania.
Yuna: Named after Yuna Kim, a South Korean figure skater and an Olympic medalist.
Zuhura: A Swahili word meaning the Venus.

We must also be careful when naming a newly immigrated female from another group. Since such a new female will have a number of offspring, we should keep in mind that the first letter of the female's name will also be used for her future offspring. Thus, ideally, the new female should have the first letter that is not currently used by any other females. When two mothers have the same letter at the same time, there is sometimes some confusion. Let me give you an example.

Two females born in the M group, AB and AK, happened to have the same first letter, although they were not maternal sisters. They were close in age (born in 1982 and 1981 respectively), and both did not transfer but remained in the M group. Unexpectedly, they gave birth quite synchronously. In 1998, AB had a daughter, AQ, and AK had a daughter, AC. In 2004, AB had a boy AZ and AK had a boy AG. In 2010, AB had a second daughter, AY, and the following year, AK had a daughter, AH. Currently they both have a female baby, AB22 and AK21. To make matters worse (for the researchers), AB and AK are good friends and often range together. This means, for example, that AQ, AC, AZ, and AG play together while AB and AK

groom with each other. In a single reading, you may not remember who is whose child. Only if the two mothers had had different first alphabets, things would have been much easier.

Therefore, for example, we named a new female Hadija, noting that we did not have a female beginning with H at the time, and another Ituri, after losing a long-lived I-family mother, Ikocha. The son of Ikocha, Ichiro, is still present in the M group as an adult male. Ichiro and Ituri have the same first letter, but this does not seem to have caused confusion.

Problematic Cases

Now I would like to move on to some problematic cases that we have actually encountered with names.

One is the problem of pronunciation. Names that are easy for some to pronounce are not always so for others. A good example of this is the name Fawn. In 2015, when I heard the news that a young female had immigrated to the M group, I asked a student who was in Mahale at the time to use the first letter F. There was a female named Fatuma, but I thought she was too old to have the next birth (in fact, she died at the end of the year). I also asked the student to use a Swahili word if possible, but gave her the privilege of choosing her favorite name. Since the student was more fluent in English than Swahili, she named the new female after an English word, Fawn. Because the name is short and simple, English-speaking readers may not see a problem at all. But it soon turned out that many of the Japanese researchers and Tanzanian assistants could not pronounce "Fawn" correctly. The pronunciation of Fawn is [fɔ́n] or [fɔ́ːn]. But because "ɔ" is not a part of Japanese vowels, whenever I tried to say "Fawn," the student claimed that the pronunciation was wrong. Finally, I decided that, although the written name "Fawn" would remain as it was, we would call the female with a pronunciation similar to [fóun] (which is easier for Japanese and Tanzanians to pronounce) instead.

Another pronunciation discrepancy occurs with the name Orion, a name of Greek origin. Anglophones pronounce it as [əráiən], as they do in English. In Japanese, however, the name is pronounced as [órion], perhaps closer to the original Greek sound. Thus, both the Japanese researchers and assistants pronounce it as the latter. Similarly, for the name Cynthia, the Japanese rarely pronounce the "th" sound, instead using "s" or "sh." Names of Japanese origin are also sometimes difficult for others to pronounce. For example, in the name Mitsue, Tanzanians cannot pronounce the "ts" sound. So they often use "s" or "ch" instead. Now we avoid using the "ts" sound for names.

The Remaining Codes

Alphabets have only 26 characters. This means that two-letter codes are limited to 676. In the past 58 years of research at Mahale, we have already used 327 codes (this does not mean that we have only had 327 chimpanzees, as we have also had more unnamed infants who died before the age of three). We still have 349 codes available (so they will last another 50 years or so).

However, some first letters are in crisis. For example, there are only 5 codes left for A and M (for A, we would soon use two more for AB22 and AK21), 6 for S, 7 for W, and 8 for K (so we should not use these alphabets for new females). On the other hand, some letters have a lot of codes left. There are 22 codes left for Q, 21 for V and X, and 20 for U and Y. Among these, X, U, and Y have active and young mothers, and Q has an adolescent female who may remain in the M group, so we would rather not use them for new females. So the next time a new female immigrates to the M group, her name should start with V.

Not all the alphabets are easy to use for names. Q and X are particularly difficult to use because neither Swahili nor Japanese have these letters (even English does not have many words beginning with them). For Q, we first named a female Qanat (QA) and her first daughter Quilt (OL), both words found in an English dictionary (the former name was taken from the name of a shopping mall in Kyoto, though). However, other English words starting with Q, such as Quadragesima or Quadrantid, are too long and difficult. So, recently we use Q as a substitute for K: Quinoko (QN) (instead of the Japanese word kinoko, which means mushroom) or Qwale (QW) (instead of the Swahili word kwale, which means francolin).

For X, the first female was named Christina (as can be written as Xtina, her code is XT) and her son Christmas (Xmas, so his code is XM). Christina's daughter was named Xantip (XP) (more commonly written as Xanthippe in English). Although Christina appears to have reached menopause, Xantip has remained in the M group and continues to give births. We looked for words beginning with X like Xanthosiderite or Xenocrates, but they are not ideal either. So we named her daughter Xyla (XL) (a composed name, read as [záilə]) and her son Xavier (XV) (found in an English dictionary). Xantip now has another unnamed male infant (XP21) who will be three years old next year. Maybe we should think about composing another name starting with X.

As such, finding appropriate names for three-year-old infants and new immigrant females is no easy task. But of course, naming them is also fun. At some point in the future, we may have to think about introducing three-letter codes (so there will be 17,576 codes), so that there will be more freedom in naming.

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