

Community Bynames in the Western Isles¹

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Bynaming has been investigated to some extent amongst Celtic communities.² More particularly, bynames have been recorded in some Scottish Gaelic-speaking communities in the north and west of Scotland.³ However, a large-scale systematic study in this area is lacking. The present study aims to make some contribution towards this by investigating bynaming practices in a Gaelic–English bilingual community of over three hundred people.⁴

The community

The Western Isles are situated around thirty miles off the west coast of Scotland. Their relative geographical isolation has led to the maintenance until fairly recently of a more traditional lifestyle than that associated with mainland Britain. However, it is also partly responsible for poor economic growth and low wages, with a reliance on tradi-

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² e.g. J. R. Fox, 'Structure of personal names on Tory Island', *Man*, 63 (1963), 153–55; R. Breen, 'Naming practices in western Ireland', *Man*, n.s. 17 (1982), 701–13.

³ e.g. N. C. Dorian, 'A substitute name system in the Scottish Highlands', *American Anthropologist*, 72 (1970), 303–19; J. Ennew, *The Western Isles Today* (Cambridge, 1980); P. Mewett, 'Exiles, nicknames, social identities and the production of local consciousness in a Lewis crofting community', in *Belonging: Identity and Social Organisation in British Rural Cultures*, edited by A. P. Cohen (Manchester, 1982), pp. 222–46.

⁴ Following common practice in the anthropological literature (e.g. S. Parman, *Scottish Crofters: A Historical Ethnography of a Celtic Village* (London, 1990), which employs pseudonyms), the community has not been directly identified.

tional industries such as fishing. Crofting—or subsistence farming—has historically played an important part in community life, but is rarely practised now without the crofter having additional employment. Most of the Western Isles are undergoing a rapid depopulation, particularly among the younger generation, which may in turn contribute to the loss of the traditional culture and language.

Being located in a traditionally Celtic area of Scotland, the community studied possesses a mainly bilingual population.⁵ The remainder of the population generally speak only English and the use of the Gaelic language is decreasing, although measures such as Gaelic medium education have been introduced to try to curtail the language loss. However, the culture of the islands is very much within a Gaelic tradition, and so many of the names to be discussed are Gaelic.

The community is situated in the former MacDonald clan area and, as a result, a large percentage of the population bear this surname. In the Western Isles in general, over 52% of people possess one of the ten most common surnames, which is a far higher percentage than in other areas of Scotland.⁶ In the area being investigated, the four most common surnames account for 50% of the population (see Fig. 1). This illustrates why it needs names additional to surnames.⁷ The problem is

⁵ The 2001 census showed that around 66% of the population speak Gaelic as well as English. However, census statistics are self-reported, and not entirely reliable.

⁶ N. Bowie and G. Jackson, 'Surnames in Scotland over the last 140 years' (Edinburgh, 2003) <<http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/grosweb/grosweb.nsf/pages/01surnames>> (accessed 15/06/2004).

⁷ Modern studies describing byname use and relating to particular communities are concentrated largely in the anthropological literature (e.g. J. A. Pitt-Rivers, *The People of the Sierra* (London, 1954); R. T. Antoun, 'On the significance of names in an Arab village', *Ethnology*, 7 (1968), 158–70; S. H. Brandes, 'The structural and demographic implications of nicknames in Navanogal, Spain', *American Ethnologist*, 2 (1975), 139–48; D. D. Gilmour, 'Some notes on community nicknaming in Spain', *Man*, n.s. 17 (1982), 686–700. These generally describe names which exist alongside a system of modern surnames but still play an important part in the life of the community. Many of these societies have a limited stock of official names, and the bynaming systems are often explained as a way of identifying people within this type of situation where "official names are virtually non-functional" (Dorian, 'A substitute name system', 305).

Fig. 1 Surnames of population of study area

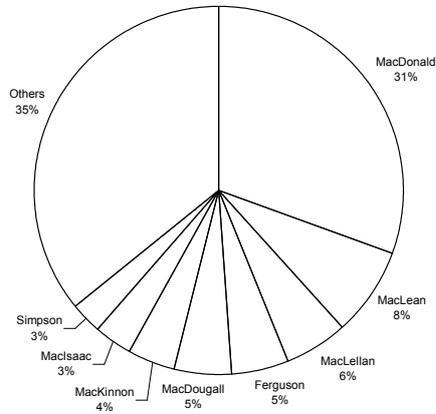
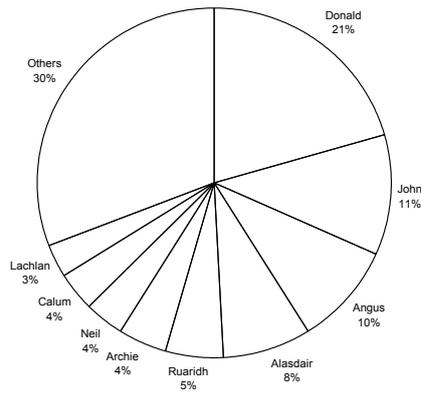


Fig. 2 Adult male forenames (first name only)



exacerbated by the relatively small stock of masculine names used regularly for naming (see Fig. 2).⁸ Something other than official names is necessary to distinguish people from each other. The additional system of naming that exists within this community is both functional and necessary to ensure clear and economical identification of individuals.

The term *byname* will be used within this article to refer to any name used regularly within the local community that does not appear in official records. Having grown up within the community itself, I have an inside knowledge of these additional names and how they are used, and therefore feel well placed to investigate them.

Methodology

The research was designed to address the questions of what happens when ‘official’ names are insufficiently distinctive to identify individuals, what types of features are used by people in a community to classify others, and what happens to this kind of naming in a bilingual situation.

As the basis for the research, I conducted detailed interviews with local residents in the area covered by the investigation. During these, I would invite the local informants to discuss whether they would refer to people in any way other than by the name on their birth certificate.

Informants

I interviewed a wide cross-section of the local community to provide a comprehensive record of name-usage. Fifteen informants (around 5% of the population) were selected to give a wide age range, a mix of bi- and mono-linguals and a mix of genders. Of the fifteen, eleven were fully bilingual in Gaelic and English and thirteen were native to the island. Three males and one female were in the age range 18–29, one male and three females were 30–49, two males and three females were 50–69 and two females were 70+.

⁸ Fig. 2 shows the first name of all adult men in the study area. A second forename (e.g. Donald *John*) can also be important for identification purposes in this community, but the chart still illustrates the lack of variety in masculine names.

Interviews

I provided visual aids to the local informants to help them to include all of the community, rather than just people who came to mind. I showed them maps of the area which marked houses, and provided a list of the names of the people in each house in every township. This was incomplete at first, as the only electoral roll data which gave names and addresses of adults in the study area was not inclusive of everyone and was out of date. As I conducted more interviews, I found that this information was volunteered by the informants, and so I was able to update my records for later interviews.

This method was effective, particularly when my names list had been fully updated. I followed the same structure with each informant, going through every adult in every house starting from the most northerly township, asking whether the informant(s) knew of any other names which were used for each person and how widely these names were known.

Results

A system of unofficial naming was widespread throughout the community. Only 24% of adults did not possess any kind of unofficial name, which means that over three-quarters of the adult population under discussion held at least one, with many possessing several.

The names collected fell into distinctive categories, though there is intersection between them. The categories can be defined as Relationship, Locative, Occupational, Characteristic, and Nickname-type bynames. For the purposes of this study, the term *Familial* is used for names which could also fall into any of these categories but which have become hereditary and identify a particular family strongly within the community. The percentage of the adult community holding each of these names is as follows: Relationship 52% (Patronymic 37%, Metronymic 3%, Marital 12%), Locative 14%, Occupational 8%, Characteristic 11%, Nickname 27%.⁹

⁹ As many people have more than one byname, this gives an indication of the popularity of each name-type and is not intended to divide exactly the members of the population who bear a byname.

Bynames denoting relationship

'Relationship' names are generally based on family relationships and include patronymics, metronymics and names based on that of a marriage partner. A shared family byname can also indicate relationship, but this section deals explicitly with bynames which identify an individual through reference to the name of a relative or spouse.

Patronymics

Patronymics are still used in this community, despite the adoption of modern surnames in the British tradition.¹⁰ Mewett states that on the island of Lewis, one of the Western Isles, "Patronymics are ... used, but only for specific genealogical purposes".¹¹ This, however, is not true of the study area. Of the adult community, 37% possess some form of patronymic which is in fairly regular use, making it the most common type of byname. It is probable that more could be collected for genealogical purposes, but the patronymic bynames in this study were all those that informants felt were in common use as identifiers. These names generally follow a standard pattern of an individual's forename or names, followed by the name of one or more male forefathers. They are known locally by their Gaelic name of *sloinneadh*, which literally means 'patronymic' or 'surname'.¹² This dual translation gives an insight into how important these names can be in establishing identity and heritage within the community.

¹⁰ Patronymics were common in the Scottish Celtic tradition before the adoption of modern surnames. Kirk cites the names "Jonn MacEwan Vic Ean Vic Charles" and "Murdo MacNeil Vic Ean Vic Duill" as having been entered into official records in South Uist as late as 1721. <Vic> is simply a semi-phonetic representation of *mhic* (the genitive of *mac* 'son of'), as <mh> at the beginning of a word denotes a /v/ sound. These names both show a record of the paternal line going back three generations before them, and establish that the practice of using patronymics was in use in the Western Isles at this time. (W. Kirk, 'Introduction to the Derivation of Scottish Surnames' (Canada, 1992) <<http://www.clan-macrae.org/documents/names.htm>> (accessed 17/06/2004)).

¹¹ Mewett, 'Exiles, nicknames, social identities and the production of local consciousness in a Lewis crofting community', p. 234.

¹² C. Mark, *Gaelic-English Dictionary* (London, 2004).

It may be expected that *mac* ‘son of’, or *nic* or *ni’n* ‘daughter of’, would be inserted between the name of the individual and his or her father, but this is not the case. Although these relationship terms are indicated in the local *Croft History* volume,¹³ no informant in this study volunteered a byname containing either of these words.¹⁴ Rather, the break between names was marked with a slight pause, with the mutual understanding that the following name would be that of the father. Without this pause, even with an intonation shift, it might be difficult to distinguish where the forename ended and the father’s name began. This is because of the common practice of giving boys two forenames, such as Donald Ewen or Calum Iain, as, effectively, one name. That patronymic names with no marker are understood as such is due to the shared knowledge that exists between members of the community using these names.¹⁵

The lack of a relationship signifier could be due to the possibility of the patronymic name being mistaken for a modern surname, as the majority of the population of this area have a surname beginning *Mac*. When speaking Gaelic, it may be difficult to distinguish whether a person referred to as Aonghas mac Alasdair was someone officially named Angus MacAllister or was Angus whose father was named Alasdair, though his surname was something else. This confusion would erode the very point of bynames as an aid to identification.

Generally, patronymic names in the area under investigation consist of the forenames of either two or three generations, including that of the name holder. Examples of this include Domhnaill Ailig | Aonghais Iain, who possesses a patronymic byname naming two generations, and Seonaidh | Eòghain | Sheonaidh, who possesses one naming three

¹³ B. Lawson, *Croft History*, 28 vols so far published (Harris, 1989–).

¹⁴ Two patronymic names contained *’Ic*, the shortened form of *Mhic*, genitive of *Mac*, as a linking word for a previous generation, but these were exceptional. This would suggest that the practice of using words to explain the links between generations in patronymic community-names is well understood but regarded as unnecessary and, for *mac* and *nic* names, as potentially confusing.

¹⁵ W. R. Davis also notes the lack of a linking element in the patronymic bynames of a nineteenth-century Welsh–American community (‘Welsh bynames on the Allegheny’, *Names*, 49 (2001), 137–210).

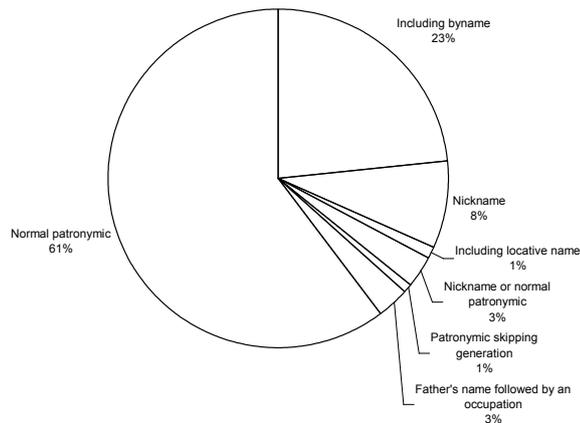
generations, including himself. It is unclear why this differs but could be because the father was known by a long patronymic name which was too cumbersome to add yet another name to. There seems to be evidence in support of this suggestion which can be accessed through examination of two generations of the same family. One community member is widely known by the patronymic byname of Ragnall Iain | Eòghain | Dhomhnaill. However, his daughter Morag is commonly known as Morag | Ragnall Iain, rather than as Morag | Ragnall Iain | Eòghain | Dhomhnaill. This latter name would be unwieldy in conversation, which would defeat the object of bynames as being instant aids to identification. Another possibility, which is compatible with the first, as to why the name is reduced to two generations, is due to the fact that Morag's father is currently the only Ronald John in the survey area. This would make him instantly identifiable with the name Ragnall Iain and would cause further identification to be unnecessary.

There is consistency in the patronymic bynames by which people are known. Siblings are known by the same length of patronymic, rather than one being known by their father and grandfather and another only by their father. This reinforces the idea of the byname as a distinguishing mark of the individual's identity and place within the community. It also reinforces the idea of it being fairly fixed as a name unit in the minds of the community. This is why siblings Morag | Chalum | Alasdair and Alasdair | Chalum | Alasdair are both known by three generational names, whereas siblings Janet | Calum Seonaidh and Uilleam | Calum Seonaidh are known by two. Especially to those who did not know their fathers well, these particular name structures become fairly fixed as identifiers of the individual. It is also clear from this example that the more unusual the patronymic, the less there is a need to extend it further, as Calum Seonaidh as a name is far more uniquely identifiable than simply Calum.

Nicknames are never given as the first element of a patronymic name; they are always converted back to the person's given forename before the names of forefathers are added. This is true even of very well established nicknames, such as Foxy, whose owner is not usually referred to as Angus, but whose name was given as Aonghas | Dhomhnaill | Aonghas Iain when his patronymic was being discussed.

Although 61% of the 98 adults who possess a patronymic byname have a simply constructed name of the type discussed above, this leaves 39% who have names which are slightly more complex (see Fig. 3). The second largest grouping consists of people who have a patronymic name which contains a byname grouped with the name of one of their forefathers. The forefather has held this forename plus byname combination as his name in his own right. It is strongly associated with this person in the minds of the community as the name by which he was known, and so it identifies his descendants. Indeed, the identification is so precise with this type of byname that the sequence of names never extends beyond this point, whether it is the father or the grandfather who was known by a forename plus byname. This illustrates the distinct identity that is possessed by an individual who is overwhelmingly connected with a byname, and this distinct identity is inherited by his descendants through the patronymic.

Fig. 3 Patronymic names



An example with this type of patronymic including characteristic byname is Eòghan | Ruaridh bheag, where *bheag* is Gaelic for ‘small’. This patronymic was given in this form by all the interviewees and never as Eòghan | Ruaridh. Further evidence that this man was known as Ruaridh bheag throughout the entire community is shown by the fact that the other siblings living in the community are also known by their forename plus Ruaridh bheag.

The nickname-type patronymic, whether used all the time or as a choice of nickname or normal patronymic, occupies 11% of the chart. These names occur when the father or forefather has a strong nickname which replaces his forename as the name by which he is usually known. This name is passed through the generations in the same way as any other patronymic name, although it does not always add the father’s name to it and can be passed on as a single unit.

An example illustrating this type of patronymic is that of a man known by the nickname ‘Puffy’. His son inherited the nickname as a patronymic and became known as Eairdsaidh | Puffy, although he is also sometimes known by the simple patronymic name of Eairdsaidh | Dhomhnaill Eòghain. Archie’s son is now commonly known as Seonaidh | Puffy, illustrating how the father’s name is not always added. His other son is occasionally known as Donnie | Puffy but, as he has his own strong characteristic byname of Donnie Chin, this is not as common.

In 3% of cases, people were known by a patronymic, but with an occupation in the place of the grandfather’s name. This follows on from an individual being known by his or her own name followed by their father’s occupation, rather than by their father’s name. These types of inherited bynames will be discussed in more detail later.

There was also one case of a patronymic name skipping a generation so that the name after the forename was that of the individual’s grandfather. It was explained, however, that the grandfather had raised him. This meant that the individual was associated with the grandfather, rather than with the father. This last example shows that, generally, patronymic names are used as an identifier of a particular individual in terms of their family, rather than as a substitute surname. This continues a line of Gaelic tradition which remains unbroken in

this area due to the necessity of using other forms of identification than merely a forename and surname.

Metronymics

Metronymic names are comparatively rare in contrast with the patronymic bynames discussed earlier, which were possessed by 37% of the adult population. Even so, 3% of the adult population of the study area were identified as having a metronymic byname.

These names retain the same structure as patronymics, i.e. forename followed by name of parent, an example being Domhnaill | Christine. In one case, the word *nighean* 'daughter of' was used as a link between the names of individual and mother, but this was exceptional. Unlike patronymics, these metronymic names did not extend beyond the name of the former generation.

Probable reasons for use of metronymics, based on information from informants, are as follows:

- unmarried mother
- father died when very young
- mother strong character compared to father.

Marital names

A wife may be known by her husband's name and byname. The study found that this applied to 12% of adults. As the number of women is roughly equal to that of men (49% of the total adult population), this figure can be stated as 24% of women being known through their husband. Not all women in the area are married, however, so the proportion of wives associated with the name of their husband will be substantially greater than this percentage.

The most common structure of these marital bynames is that of the wife's forename followed by the word *bean*, pronounced /ben/ and meaning 'wife of', followed by the husband's byname (or forename plus byname). In some cases the wife's forename is not mentioned at all and she is simply known as 'bean [husband's name]', whereas in others the word *bean* is not used at all, but the wife's name is followed by the husband's in a similar structure to a patronymic name. The latter structure relies on knowledge of the community, as it could easily be mistaken for a patronymic byname; the addressee must know that the

woman being referred to is the wife, rather than daughter, of the man whose byname is used to identify her.

Any type of male byname can be used to identify the wife of an individual. This is because the wife's identity is most easily explained through the byname by which the husband is usually known, whether it be a nickname, patronymic or any other type of name. If the husband is generally known by his surname, for example, then this will be the byname used to identify his wife, even though she has the same surname. An example of this is shown by a woman whose husband is usually referred to simply as 'Bramwell', rather than Ian, because his surname is unusual for the area and so identifies him easily. She is known as 'bean Bramwell', which illustrates how strongly particular names are associated with individuals—Ian's surname is treated as his byname and not as the surname of both marriage partners.

It is fairly common for a woman to possess one byname identifying her with her husband and another identifying her with her family. Which is used seems to depend on how well the people using the name know the woman and, more importantly, how well they know her family or her husband. Though the informants first gave the byname which they themselves used to identify a woman, they were often aware of other names that could be used to identify her which they would recognise but would not necessarily use themselves. An example is shown by one woman who is known as *Catriona | Iain bheag*, from her husband *Iain beag*, or small Iain. However, she was also identified in interviews by the metronymic name *Catriona | Leacsaidh*.

Due to a kind of verbal shorthand, the patronymic part of a husband's byname can sometimes be used to refer to his wife without his name being mentioned. This leads to bynames such as *Flora | Shandy*, rather than *Flora bean Ragnall | Shandy*. This relies on the knowledge of the addressee to identify her correctly, but makes identification much quicker in a rapidly flowing conversation. As long as the name makes her distinct from other Floras, it will usually be understood.¹⁶

¹⁶ It is also possible, though unusual, for a woman to be identified with another closely associated male who is not her husband or partner. This relies on the community's knowledge of the relationship between the name-holders.

Locative

Bynames containing a locative element are strongly identifiable. Their form takes that of the forename, or names, of an individual, followed by a place-name; an example being Gordon Paiblesgarry. These names could be fairly confusing to a stranger. They read and sound like surnames and could easily be misidentified as such.

14% of the adult population of this community hold at least one locative byname. Fig. 4 illustrates the sources of these names.¹⁷ These forty-five names originate from twenty-one separate locations. Five of them refer to the names or previous functions of buildings, rather than to place-names. However, the other seventeen are identifiable as place-names known either locally or more widely.

A surprising discovery was that six people were identified as having two locative bynames. These were not always exclusively used by different people as both names were often identified by the same interviewees. However, these cases can all be explained as one of the following:

- a person identified with a very specific local place-name by most people, but with the wider township name by some people living further away
- a person identified both with their current, and with a former, place of residence
- a person identified both with their own original locative byname, and with that of their marriage partner.

Rather than only one individual being associated with each place, it is common for members of the same family to share a locative byname. This allows for identification of closely related individuals in the same way as patronymic and metronymic names. While living in the same house, the inhabitants can be referred to collectively as ‘the [place-name]s’, (e.g. ‘the Hunas’) in the same way that if they shared a surname rather than a locative byname they would be ‘the [surname]s’ (e.g. ‘the MacDonalds’). Individually, the structure of the name is

¹⁷ Fig. 4 depicts the number of locative bynames in each category, not the number of people, so that six people who possess two bynames are included twice.

always the same as that discussed earlier; the forename followed by the location. It is extremely rare for individuals who are not of the same family to share a locative byname.

Locative bynames seem to identify their possessor very powerfully with a particular place and so with their place in the community. Their passing on by association through marriage was an unexpected finding. It makes the locative names appear more like surnames, as the wife is known by the locative name after her forename, not by her husband's name plus locative name. This begins to suggest that some bynames here behave very much like replacements for surnames.

Occupational

8% of the population of this area have a byname denoting their occupation. In this bilingual society, in which most bynames were coined in Gaelic, it is striking that almost all the occupational names are in English.¹⁸ Their pronunciation and structure is often gaelicised, but they are basically English words. The majority are jobs connected with the school, which could explain both why they exist at all and why they are in English. Pupils might begin to associate adults with their jobs within the school environment. They then refer to the adults in this way to their parents, who also begin to associate these people with these jobs. As most conversations in the playground are conducted in English, this would be the language medium with which the occupational names were initially associated.

Examples of occupational bynames connected with the school include: Morag the Cook, who worked in the school canteen; Lachie the Jannie (or Janitor) who previously worked as the school janitor and is still strongly associated with this; and Margaret the Secretary, who was well established as the school secretary. Almost all informants volunteered these names. There are other occupational names in use, however, including nurses, bakers and post office workers. These are

¹⁸ This may be connected with the low incidence of surnames derived from Gaelic occupations. Cf. C. Hough, 'Scottish surnames', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scots*, edited by J. Corbett, J. D. McClure and J. Stuart-Smith (Edinburgh, 2003), pp. 31–49 (p. 41).

all fairly distinctive positions and it is possible that this is why they have been singled out in this way.

The use of the definite article in these names (and often the use of *a'* as a Gaelic alternative to this), as in the examples above, is fairly widespread. However, it does not appear in all instances. This suggests a standard form of occupational byname including the definite article, with exceptions only in certain cases.

The inherited occupational bynames which were briefly discussed in the patronymic bynames section are far more likely to be in Gaelic. Whether this is because it is more traditional within Gaelic naming practice to use an occupational name as a patronymic than as a descriptive name, or because Gaelic was used more extensively generations ago, is open to debate. The latter may be the case, as most of these names seem to have been bestowed fairly far in the past. Two have the form [forename] [father's name] [occupation]. Both name holders are over sixty and so it must have been some time since their fathers were first known by *their* fathers' trades. Of the three identified as having bynames which take the form of [forename] [father's occupation], two are very elderly and so a similar notion probably applies.

The one more recent occupational patronymic name is the son of Lachie the Jannie, who is discussed above. His son is known either as Tearlach a' Janitor or Charlie | the Janitor,¹⁹ where a pause is used to denote a generational gap in the same way as in normal patronymic bynames. This is clearly an English occupational word and shows possible support for the theory that occupational Gaelic words are not used as extensively in naming as they were in the past.

Familial bynames denoting an ancestor's occupation also exist in the study area, but these will be discussed in the familial bynames section as their function has become more like that of a surname.

Characteristic

A characteristic byname in this study refers to a physical or personal

¹⁹ When a Gaelic name is used and, in occupational terms, Gaelic *a'* rather than English *the*, the pronunciation of the following byname is gaelicised e.g. 'janitor' in Tearlach a Janitor is pronounced with an initial /Z/.

characteristic of an individual and is used in a traditional byname structure. This structure is either the traditional Gaelic byname structure of [forename] + [descriptor] or the English structure of [descriptor] + [forename]. The Gaelic structure is the opposite of the English one to account for Gaelic word order in which the adjective follows the noun. This means that 'Aonghas beag' translates into English as 'little Angus'.

In the study area, 11% of adults are regularly known by a characteristic byname. The most common are those which denote size. These are generally constructed of a forename followed by either *beag* 'small' or *mór* 'big'. There are numerous examples of this, including Seonaidh Mór ('Big John') and Peigi Bheag ('Little Peggy').

The size given in these bynames is usually a genuine indication of the size of a person, rather than a deliberate inversion of the truth, but it can be misleading. Because of the traditional naming pattern used in this area, children are often named after grandparents or even parents. This naming practice is beginning to decline, but there are still many people with exactly the same name as close relatives. In these cases *beag* can be applied to the younger name bearer, and *mór* to the older. This can be seen in cases such as that of a mother and daughter both named Morag. The mother is known as Morag Mhór, whereas the daughter is Morag Bheag, thus avoiding any confusion between them. In cases such as this, people living nearby are more likely to know of these kinds of names than people further away, as there may be more than one person in the wider area with this [forename] + [descriptor] combination, rendering it ineffective for identification.

Increasingly, English bynames denoting size are being used. These include examples such as Wee Angus and Big Seonaidh. However, as the society is largely bilingual, there is often a choice between a byname denoting size in Gaelic and in English. The example of Big Seonaidh illustrates this, as he is equally well, if not better, known as Seonaidh Mór.

The next largest grouping in this category is that of bynames describing hair colour. There are far fewer in this grouping than in that denoting size, however. They are still almost exclusively in Gaelic in this area and include examples such as Eòghan Ruadh ('Red-haired

Ewen'), Domhnaill Glas ('Grey-haired Donald'), and Mairi Bhan ('Fair-haired Mairi'). Colour bynames can also occasionally be misleading. It would be reasonable to expect that someone with the byname 'Dubh' would have black hair, as *dubh* is the Gaelic for 'black'. Nevertheless, one case was in fact a reference to general appearance and cleanliness. This demonstrates why knowledge of the local community is essential to understanding the system of names.

Only two bynames referring to the holders' characters were discovered in the survey area. The postposed byname 'Craidhte' can be translated as 'Crazy'. Another person had the word 'Bible' inserted before their forename as a reference to their religious nature. No other types of bynames denoting physical or personal characteristics were revealed, although bynames were often combined with other types of names to create a more distinctive identifier. An example of this is Andy Beag a' Rubha, whose locative byname reinforces his more common characteristic byname to create a unique name by which he can easily be identified.

Nicknames

Nicknames are usually unrelated to an individual's original name yet, in extreme cases, entirely replace it as a label within some or most of the community. 27% of the adult population of the study area were described as having a nickname-type byname. The association of people with these nicknames ranges from recognition within their peer group to recognition by the entire community. Men are more likely than women to possess a nickname, which may be due to the smaller masculine name stock.

Nickname-type bynames are, surprisingly, almost entirely in English, even amongst people who usually speak Gaelic. This is probably because the majority of these names were bestowed at school, an environment where English is usually spoken.

This type of byname is difficult to categorise, as the names can be based on anything at all. However, the most common nicknames consist of an observation on the appearance of the possessor. Even within this group the names are extremely diverse, though most seem to use comparison with something which supposedly shares some

aspect of the person's appearance. Some randomly chosen examples from this group include 'The Killer Tomato', 'The Orang-utan', 'Gordon Owl', 'Fairy' and 'Big Bones'.

Many robust nicknames stem from the individual's inability to pronounce their name during early childhood. However, it is almost impossible to link the nicknames with their original name without specific knowledge of how the nickname came to exist. Names such as 'Dodo' (Donald Murdo), 'Nandy' (John Angus), and 'Woody' (Ruaridh) have almost entirely replaced the owner's original forename in informal situations.

Nicknames denoting fictional characters also feature in the community. The comic-strip characters 'Andy Capp' and 'Shuggy' are represented as nicknames. Though both names were most probably bestowed due to a physical resemblance between the characters and the nicknamed individuals, it was suggested that they could also have been so named due to a resemblance in character.

Past incidents can be remembered through nicknames. These include a man named 'Snooker' since birth because of a remark made by the midwife, a man known as 'Seal' because of an asthma attack at primary school, and a man named 'Fire and Theft' because of an alleged incident. These three examples illustrate the random nature of nicknaming.

It is important to remember that any of these nicknames that are closely associated with an individual could potentially become a patronymic or metronymic, or even become hereditary, as discussed in the following section.

Familial names

In some cases, names which do not denote parentage but have some other function have still grown to become associated with entire families. This can be seen when studying locative bynames, where the name can be bestowed on people through association. It refers to the family who are associated with the place, whether or not they still live at that location. It can then also be bestowed on the families of these holders who are strongly identified with the place-name, even if the holder's spouse and children have never lived at that location. This

sees the names beginning to act more like surnames.

There are other strong familial bynames, however, which originate from sources other than locative names. The nickname-type patronymic bynames discussed earlier begin to act in this way as they are passed through the generations. As the name 'Puffy' was passed on from the original bearer, to Eairdsaidh | Puffy, to Seonaidh | Puffy, it began to lose the original meaning and become a label denoting this particular family much in the same way as the modern surname. It could be argued that the identifier 'Puffy' is applied to the youngest generation to identify them with their grandfather. However, this possibility would contravene the patronymic bynaming system, where the only patronymic name to skip a generation did so because the father did not raise the individual. This is not the case here. Even when a reduced patronymic or marital byname is used as verbal shorthand, the fuller version of the patronymic was given by the interviewee alongside the reduced version. In this case the interviewees did not give a fuller version. This all suggests that the nickname itself has become hereditary.

Other nickname-type familial names include a family whose father is generally called by the community by the nickname 'Puss'. The children are commonly known as Lachie | Puss, Alison | Puss and so on, rather than by their surname. This nickname is one of several in the study area that have the potential to continue through generations and to identify the family in the future as well as at present.

Certain words denoting an ancestor's occupation have also created established familial bynames. These occupational names have become hereditary in the same way as the names discussed above. One of these names is bestowed on a family which includes a woman whose byname was identified by one person as Catriona | Angie Bhopan, her forename followed by her father's forename and occupational familial name. However, others in the community identified her simply as Catriona Bhopan. This demonstrates the hereditary nature of this occupational term. The term *bopan* was used to denote a carpenter and stemmed from Catriona's great-grandfather, who was a carpenter by trade. This was presumably passed onto his son in the form of a patronymic name which identified him by occupation rather than by

name. The subsequent generation inherited the occupational term without a separating patronymic term as a name now identified with their family, as opposed to only with their grandfather. This is the stage at which it became a familial byname, as it began to behave more like a surname than a simple identifier of an individual. In the view of the community, the familial byname has been inherited by Catriona in the same way that it was inherited by her father.

Perhaps an even more pervasive familial name of the same type as 'Bopan' is that used to describe a particular family. Their occupational name derives from an ancestor who was a cow-herd or *buachalagh*. As with 'Bopan', rather than the full patronymic name being used as an identifier, the occupational term is used as a familial byname to identify members of this family. The form is that of the forename followed by 'a' Bhuachalagh', an example being: Julia a' Bhuachalagh. This familial byname is so strongly associated with this family as a name, rather than purely as an inherited occupational term, that it has been anglicised to 'Buckle'. This anglicised version of the name is used by speakers of both Gaelic and English, though some Gaelic speakers indicated that they would probably use only 'a' Bhuachalagh' when speaking Gaelic. The anglicised version of the name would read as either Julia Buckle or Julia the Buckle, as many Gaelic speakers add *the* in the English version as an equivalent to *a'* in the Gaelic version.²⁰ This name is used, as are many other bynames, by people who have no idea of its meaning. They treat it simply as a name, as a lexically meaningless identifier. As this name identifies a whole family, it is almost surname-like. Names such as these could give a fascinating insight into how surnames originated.²¹

²⁰ Note the use of the definite article in what was originally an occupational byname. This supports the idea—discussed above with reference to other, non-familial, bynames—that the standard form of occupational bynames in this community includes the definite article.

²¹ It seems clear that contemporary studies have the potential to aid in uncovering the kinds of strategies and meanings employed by those who coined bynames in the past (P. McClure, 'The interpretation of Middle English nicknames', *Nomina*, 5 (1981), 95–104; C. Clark, 'The early personal names of King's Lynn: an essay in socio-cultural history', *Nomina*, 7 (1983), 65–89).

Conclusion

The bynames used in this Western Isles community form a complex system. This system can involve different types of names being used for the same person, different variants of the same name being used by different people, and unexpected connotations confusing how a name is supposed to be understood.

However, it is also a system in which many people living in the same community can identify the same person in the same way without reference to their surname. This is the key to bynames, as it eliminates the need to rely entirely on a surname system in which nearly a third of the population are called MacDonald and in which half the population are known by only four surnames.

The difficulty that this situation causes in identifying individuals is precisely why bynames are so important in this area. As Mewett states in a study of a crofting community on the Isle of Lewis, “Through nicknames people can express a collective view of the social identity and character of each individual in the community”.²² This allows not only for easy identification but for a naming structure which reflects on and allows for personal identity in a way that the conventional structure of [forename] + [surname] will never be able to achieve.

²² Mewett, ‘Exiles, nicknames, social identities and the production of local consciousness in a Lewis crofting community’, p. 238.