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Naming Africans: On the Epistemic Value of Names, Oyeronke Oyewumi and Hewan Girma (eds.) Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillian, 2023. 237 pages. $129.99.

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My name is *Olúwábùnmi Tèmítọ́pẹ́* which means "God has given (this child) to me, I am grateful (to God)." Both of my names were given to me by my mother, who had me through a Caesarean Section[1] (CS). So, my first name came from her experience during pregnancy and my second name was her way of showing gratitude for surviving her near-death childbirth experience. She told me she was grateful that she regained consciousness almost four (4) weeks after my birth. Like me, all my siblings had names that marked important, memorable events in our parents' lives. Our names tell our parents' stories, stories about circumstances surrounding our births, rather than our stories as may be found in many brief personal *oríkì* (praise names) among the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá. For many of us whose parents are from Ondo and Ekiti States of Nigeria, we do not have brief personal oríkì as noted by Ladele, et. al. and quoted by Oyeronke Oyewumi, p.21, but parents still gave very specific *Àmútọ̀runwá*[2] names "whose chief distinction is that they are based on the observed biological facts attending the birth of that child" (Oyewumi, 2023:17) which is a common phenomenon in Yorùbá culture. African names reveal a lot about the bearer's background and carry "a wealth of historical information"(Oyewumi, 2023:3).

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1. Caesarean sections or Caesarean deliveries are surgical procedures by which babies are born through incisions in their mothers' abdomen and uterus. Even though the technique dates to 1480 CE, it has since then evolved and has been improved on to reduce mother and child mortality rate. Still, in the early 80s at the time of my birth, the Caesarean technique was still very risky and many things could and do go wrong. In my mother's case, things went wrong with the procedure. Because of that, she was unconscious from the procedure for almost a month.
2. There are very few *Àmútọ̀runwá* (brought from *ọ̀run* (invisible realm)) names among the Yorùbá. They are Táyé, Kẹ́hìndé, Ìdòwú, Àlàbá, Okẹ́, Ìgè, Àìná, Ọ̀jó, and a few others. These names have not changed. Some of them are gender neural while others are gender specific. For example, *Táyé* and *Kẹ́hìndé* are gender neutral names for twins regardless of their genders. En caul births are called *Ọ̀kẹ́* and breech babies are called *Ìgè* regardless of their genders. *Àìná* and *Ọ̀jó* are examples of gender specific names. Àìná is a female child born with nuchal cords while Ọ̀jó is a male child born with the same condition.

The reoccurring questions in the ten (10) chapters including the Introduction of *Naming Africans,* are "what is in a name, what is *not* in a name, and why we need names, new and old? The chapters critically discussed naming practices in African cultures. From Oyewumi Oyewumi's gendering of Yorùbá names, and Herwan Girma's religious influence on Ethiopian naming practices and its masculine power dynamics, to Bertrade Ngo-Ngijol Banoum's discussion of the morphological structure and semantics of ancestors' names among the Basaa of Southern Cameroon. They present names and naming as not only serving nomenclature purposes. They claim that the meanings behind name and naming play critical roles in the performance of old and new religious identities (Achebe, 1999) and gender power politics. *Ergo*, names contain information about the past that informs the present, and preserve the future and relevance of names in modern (postcolonial) Africa.

Martha Ndakalako's position on Owambo Naming Practice of *Mbushe* in Neshani Andrea's The Purple Violet of *Oshaantu* must like Ngo-Ngijol Banounm's discussed extensively the influence of Christianity and Colonial history on the performance and gendering of names in Namibia. Since the advent of Christianity in Africa, the nature and structure of names have changed to not telling familial stories but reflecting the new religions they have adopted. Ndakalako's position about the performance of names is in tandem with Abimbola Adelakun's argument in her book, *Performing Power in Nigeria: Identity, Politics, and Pentecostalism.* Adelakun explained that

> when colonial missionaries began to propagate Christianity, existing African names was one of their targets because they understand the power to irrupt the social configuration of a place. For example, colonial modernity used inscriptive processes of identifying, labeling, and differentiation to rename people, either by giving them new "pronounceable" names to facilitate interaction with European missionaries or because they thought African stemmed from their pagan heritage that had to be scrubbed off to make the conversion project complete. (Adelakun, 2022:222)

Apart from the subjugation, identification, religious affiliation, and pronunciation purposes as argued in the above, the Owambo naming practices according to Ndakalako, were used by women, mothers to "unsettle monolith patriarchal power" (Ndakalako, 2023: 86) in postcolonial Namibia.

Besi Brillian Muhonja's "Mother-Agency and the Currency of Names" brings to mind how the Yorùbá challenge the *àbíkú* (born to die children) phenomenon through names. They (Yorùbá) hoped that through the names given to these children who live for a short time, they may put a stop to the reoccurrence of Àbíkú. In other words, Àbíkú names are not only a form of lament but also a plea for an end to the unpleasantness. Likewise, many àbíkú names are given to ridicule the child into not wanting to return and be reborn (Achebe, 1996). Konadu's chapter on Akan "Soul Names" gives insight into the influence of gender, colonialism,

and religion on the naming culture among the Akan in the current life and the afterlife. Speaking about how naming is performed in sacred spaces, Zethu Cakata, Tushade wa Tushabe and Florita Cuhanga Antonio Telo in their separate essays discussed how names link Africans to their ancestors (forebears, past), themselves (present), and their children (future). There, they posit that name and naming represent the very core of the African lived experience and identity even in a fast-changing global space. Girma argues that even though the politics of naming, *dis*naming, and *re*naming may empower or disempower a people, African names have survived and remained powerful (even through slavery) outside the African continent.

While the volume mostly focused on how naming is performed in Africa by and for humans, it also discussed how naming is used for non-humans and more-than-humans. Ngo-Ngijol describes how people's names are linked to the animals they encounter during their hunting expenditures and Konadu's linked the sacred to non-humans like animals. As a scholar of environmental studies, this piqued my interest. In one of the chapters of my book currently under review, I make an argument that the politics of naming among the Yorùbá is complex and it serves many purposes. I posit that apart from using names to demean humans and non-humans, naming may be used as a show, plea and a means of stopping an event from reoccurring.

The demeaning of humans and non-humans through the politics of naming may be traced back to one of the myths of origin of the Yorùbá in *Odù Ọ̀ṣẹ̀tuá,* an *ẹ̀ṣẹ́-Ifá,* (sacred orature, poems of the Yorùbá deity of wisdom and divination). The ẹ̀ṣẹ́-Ifá documents the myth of seventeen (17) deities (sixteen males and one female) that descended from *Ọ̀run* (the invincible realm) who were tasked with reviving and populating *ayé* (the visible realm, earth) by Olódùmarè (Yorùbá supreme deity). But when they arrived in ayé, the male deities failed to acknowledge the only female among them, *Ọ̀ṣun* (Yorùbá deity of river and fertility). They went about their business without involving her like she was not part of the group. However, no matter what they did, they could not achieve their task. Out of frustration, they returned to Olódùmarè to report their futile effort at restoring order to ayé. While Olódùmarè was addressing the concerns of the male deities, he noticed that their female counterpart was not present with them. So, he asked them why she was missing from the group and the meeting. The male deities responded that Ọ̀ṣun's presence, opinion, input were not needed because she is "just an ordinary female" (Abimbola, 1975). In that context the reference to Ọ̀ṣun as "a female" is derogatory and condescending. They were not referring to her gender but playing the politics of naming, which is very crucial to understanding power relations and, in this case, gender power relations. "Naming people and places is a politically significant, universal activity, which has a crucial impact on power relations within families, communities, regions, and nations" (Alia, 2007:457). How a name is given or used in a particular context either diminishes or amplifies the power of the bearer. In this context, the term "female" was used to undermine Ọ̀ṣun's presence and power.

The same has been argued about the gendering of natural disasters. Liz Skilton posits that in 1970, the US National Weather Bureau was served a cease-and-desist letter by the National Organization for Women (NOW) for giving natural disasters only female-only names. The letter accused the US National Bureau of associating women with disasters which NOW felt was unsettling. They claim it was a patriarchal attempt to humiliate and suppress females and the female bodies. Carolyn Merchant made similar argument in her book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and Scientific Revolution*. In the book, she holds that the patriarchal system has always seen nature, the environment the way it sees females, as wild and disorderly that needed to be tamed. She says, "the image of nature that became important in the early modern period was that of a disorderly and chaotic realm to be subdued and controlled. Like Mother Earth…, wild uncontrollable nature was associated with the female… [and] disorderly women, like chaotic nature, need to be controlled (Merchant, 1980:127). In line with Merchant's arguments, the patriarchal structures of human societies see the connection between female bodies and the environment as nurturing but also wild, disorderly, chaotic, and destructive that need to be subdued. Therefore, Skilton argues that giving only female names to hurricanes shows an extremely derogatory attitude toward women (Skilton, 2018).

The failure to give proper acknowledgment to women where and when due is one of the causes of gender oppression as argued by feminist scholars. It would then seem that even though cultures like the Yorùbá (of Southwestern Nigeria) are aware of how powerful women are (and their powers are well documented in many Yorùbá orature), still, women are still presented as deceitful, ignorant, simpletons, disorderly, lazy gossips, dirty (Abimbola, 1975), and treated as subordinate, as wild creatures that need to be tamed like nature. Today, the National Weather Service still gives male and female names to hurricanes in the USA. However, it has been reported that hurricanes with female names "cause significantly more deaths, apparently because they lead to lower perceived risks and consequently less preparedness" (Jung, et.al. 2014: 8784). At the same time, it may be argued that these hurricanes with higher risks and tendencies to cause more destruction are so-named to promote the patriarchal ideology and foreground the patriarchal argument about the similarities between wild nature and female bodies; *give a dog a bad name and hang her*. That is the argument of Skilton, NOW, and Merchant.

Naming Africans brings fresh and insightful approach to the interpretation of names in postcolonial Africa and African diaspora. It delves deeply into the discussions about the richness and complexities of naming in Africa. It argues that the performance of naming in Africa is very intentional because it connects the past to the present and makes enough space to accommodate the future. Names are dynamic, adaptive, and flexible. They allow bearers to be creative to fit into new contexts or stand out. Names are also tools for activism, to refute political, religious, and cultural oppression as argued by Ndakalako. African names have epistemic values and they tell stories, reveal information that may not be possible through other means.

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