

Title: Names and Naming, African

Author(s): Joseph E. Holloway

Source: *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*. Ed. Colin A. Palmer. Vol. 4. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. p1572-1574. From *U.S. History In Context*.

Document Type: Topic overview

Macmillan

Reference USA™

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2006 Gale, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

Full Text:

Page 1572

NAMES AND NAMING, AFRICAN

Africans arriving in the American colonies and later the United States continued to give their children African names well into the nineteenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries African-American slaves retained Africanisms in their naming practices. The highest percentage of African names was found among male slaves in the eighteenth century, when the majority of the black population was still unacculturated. During the colonial period the practice of naming children after the days of the week, the months, and the seasons was retained. Such names as January, April, May, June, September, November, March, August, Christmas, and Midday were popular. Numerous examples exist of Akan day names (sometimesPage 1573 | Top of Article modified or anglicized): Cudjoe (Monday), Cubbenah (Tuesday), Quao (Wednesday), Quaco (Thursday), Cuffe (Friday), Quamin (Saturday), and Quashee (Sunday). Many took on varied forms. Quao became Quaro and later Jacco, Jack, and Jackson. Other African names common in the eighteenth century were Sambo, Mongo, and Juba.

NAME CHANGES

In western and central Africa names are given at stages in an individual's life, and—as happens among all people for whom magic is important—the identification of a name with the personality of its bearer is held to be so complete that the person's real name (usually the one given at birth) must be kept secret lest it be used by someone working magic against the person. That is why among Africans a person's name may change with time, a new designation being assumed on the occasion of some striking occurrence in life. When one of the rites marking a new stage in the person's development occurs, a name change also occurs to note the event.

Likewise, African Americans changed their names to correspond to major life changes. Take the case of Frederick Douglass, for example. His original last name, Bailey, had an African origin. He was descended from Belali Mohomet, a Mande-speaking slave from Timbo, Futa Jallon. (Bailey is a common African-American surname along the Atlantic coast. In Talbot County, Maryland, the records list no white Baileys from whom the slave name Bailey could have been taken.) Belali was owned by Richard Skinner, a wealthy tobacco planter near the Miles River. Belali's granddaughter Betsy belonged to Skinner's granddaughter Ann Catherine. Frederick Bailey was born in 1817.

Soon after escaping slavery, Bailey changed his name to Douglass. In similar fashion, Sojourner Truth was known as Isabella Baumfree until she had a dream that told her about her new name and mission. Malcolm Little, at different stages of his life, was variously known as Malcolm X, Homeboy, Detroit Red, Big Red, Satan, and el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz.

MULTIPLE NAMES

Almost every black person is known by two names: a given name and a name used only within the family circle. Lorenzo Dow Turner (1895–1972), a leading scholar of African retentions in American English, found a dual naming system among the Gullahs in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. This system (which still exists) involves an English (American) name given at birth and a more intimate name—sometimes called a "basket name" or a "day name"—used exclusively by the family and community. Slaveholders recognized this dual naming practice among enslaved Africans in the eighteenth century. In advertisements of runaways, owners always included "proper" (given) names and "country" names, which were the African names.

Among enslaved Africans the use of nicknames was also widespread. Pie Ya, Puddin'-tame, Frog, Tennie C., Monkey, Mush, Cooter, John de Baptist, Fat-Man, Preacher, Jack Rabbit, Sixty, Pop Corn, Old Gold, Dootes, Angle-Eye, Bad Luck, Sky-up-de-Greek, Cracker, Jabbo, Cat-Fish, Bear, Tip, Odessa, Pig Lasses, Rattler, Pearly, Luck, Buffalo, Old Blue, Red Fox, and Coon are some of the most common.

GULLAH NAMES

A few examples of Gullah basket names that are unchanged from their African roots are Ndomba, Mviluki, Sungila, Kamba, Anyika, and Sebe. Ndomba is the name given to a breech-delivered Gullah child whose hand protrudes first at birth. It means "I am begging (with outstretched hand)." Mviluki means "a penitent." Its Luba source word is *mvuluki*, "one who doesn't forget his sins." The basket name Sungila means "to save, help, deliver," while Kamba, a very common Luba name, comes from *munkamba*, meaning "ancestor." Anyika, a Gullah name meaning "she is beautiful," is related to a Luba word meaning "to praise the beauty of." Sebe, a Gullah name meaning "a leather ornament," comes from the Luba word for hide or leather, *tshisebe*. Others—Tulu ("sleep"), Tuma ("send"), Pita ("pass by"), Mesu ("eyes"), Kudima ("to work or hoe"), and Kudiya ("to eat")—are all Gullah day names, exactly the same in Gullah and Luba.

In the Sea Islands children sometimes have not only given names and basket names but also community names. The community gives the child a name that characterizes the individual, such as Smart Child or Shanty ("showoff"). This practice parallels Bantu naming practices in Zaire. The name of Georgetown University's former basketball center Dikambe Mutombo (he is from Zaire) illustrates this point. His full name is Dikamba Mutombo Mpolondo Munkamba Diken Jean-Jean Jacque wa Mutombo. In order, these names are his uncle's name, his family surname, his grandfather's name, his village nickname, his name given at birth, and his hometown village, wa Mutombo (which means "from the village of Mutombo").

Other creolized Gullah nicknames typical of Bantu naming practices are names of animals or fish: De Dog, Doggie, Kitty, Fish, Yellowtail Croker, Frog, Spider, Boy, Page 1574 | Top of Article Gal, Jumper, Tooti, Crocki, Don, Cuffy, Akebee, Dr. Buzzer, and Dr. Eagle.

In Gullah naming practices, as in African naming practices, children are named after parents because it is believed that the parent spirit resides in the children. The same name might appear in several generations of a family. In the Sea Islands the name Litia appeared in four generations of female children.

AFRICAN REVIVAL

By the time of the Civil War and the emancipation of four million African-American slaves, African personal names had almost completely disappeared. It was not until the 1920s, when the early black Islamic revivalist Noble Drew Ali began to use Arabic and Islamic names, that the practice was revived. These practices were followed by Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. They used African and Arabic words and names to instill in their followers a sense of racial pride.

By the 1960s and 1970s African names had gained respectability in the wake of the civil rights, African independence, and Black Power movements. Movements such as Kawaida of Maulana Karenga stressed the use of Swahili and Yoruba names. African names such as Dashanaba, Tameka, Kwame, and Maat again became common.

African names have come full circle. Their use reflects many changes in attitude, from strong African identification to nationalism, from integration and assimilation back to cultural identification.

See also Africanisms ; Black Power Movement ; Civil Rights Movement, U.S. ; Douglass, Frederick ; Gullah ; Karenga, Maulana ; Kawaida ; Malcolm X ; Truth, Sojourner ; Turner, Lorenzo Dow

Bibliography

Dillard, J. L. *All-American English*. New York: Random House, 1975.

Dillard, J. L. *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States*. New York: Random House, 1975.

Dillard, J. L. *Black Names*. The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1976.

Dillard, J. L. *Lexicon of Black English*. New York: Seabury, 1977.

Haley, Alex. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove, 1965.

Holloway, Joseph E. *Africanisms in American English*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Holloway, Joseph E. *The African Heritage of American English*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

McFeely, William S. *Frederick Douglass*. New York: Norton, 1991.

Mencken, H. L. *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*. New York: Knopf, 1936.

JOSEPH E. HOLLOWAY (1996)

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Holloway, Joseph E. "Names and Naming, African." *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*. Ed. Colin A. Palmer. 2nd ed. Vol. 4. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. 1572-1574. *U.S. History In Context*. Web. 12 Jan. 2016.

URL

<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?>

id=GALE%7CCX3444700902&v=2.1&u=mlin_b_blatshl&it=r&p=GPS&sw=w&asid=66823d9e048772c3461d935318ebbcc2

Gale Document Number: GALE|CX3444700902