The Evolution of Naming in the Amistad Incident

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Abstract

The impetus to claim a gnosis of otherness in the study of the origin, history, and use of names and naming (onomastics scholarship) has largely guided the analysis of the Amistad incident in this essay. Although Amistad scholars have paid much critical attention to the social and political outcomes of the Amistad incident, especially in the last two decades, they are yet to address, in depth, the socio-linguistic ramifications evident in a key component of the Amistad story, namely, the fact that the Spanish slaveholders on the Amistad ship used the ship's manifest, listing false Spanish names for their African captives. This essay argues not only that the act of claiming through naming was an integral part of the imperial acquisition of African peoples and their lands by the Western powers of the modern world, but also "the conversion" of some African people groups to the dominant ideological narratives of the West met resistance, collusion, as well as manipulation, especially since the politics of naming were already complex dynamic in African social systems.

Keywords: Amistad case; politics of naming; identity; socio-linguistics; knowledge systems; onomastics scholarship; Atlantic Slave Trade; colonialism.

Introduction

In the essay "Names and Naming in Afro-Caribbean Cultures," the author Richard Burton reports on the astounding decision by a Jamaican cricket fan of the national team to name his son after "a team representing the former colonial 'masters,'" a team that "had just *defeated* 'his' team for the first time in sixteen years" by an unexpected and "decisive margin of nine wickets" (36). Naming one's child after an admired personality or sports team is nothing new.

What struck Burton was the fact that this avid fan of the national team celebrated Jamaica's decisive and disappointing loss by memorializing it in his son's given name. In a careful examination of Afro-Caribbean culture, a culture he describes as deeply playful in its preoccupation with names and naming, Burton concludes that the practice of stripping people of their names during the long history of enslavement led to the counter practice by the enslaved and their progenitors of creatively revising these names or even coming up with new names that were European sounding. Over time, the enslaved in the Caribbean adopted European or European-style names, but the motivations behind the practice were often based on the pragmatic desire to fit in, to elevate their social status, and in some cases even to seek protection they inferred resided in Christian baptismal names against obeah practices in the enslaved community (39). The deep psychological complexities of such naming practices certainly carry over into modern times, as in the case of this Jamaican fan that seemingly crossed sides by adopting the opposing team's name for his son. The pragmatics of naming his son for an opposing team will first, identify the historical circumstances of the son's birth (positive or negative) and second, identify with the *qualities* of a winner. Such identification in the case of the latter does not have to be synonymous with admiration for the history or race of the individuals on the opposing team. Burton demonstrates in his essay that there is "an artfulness" and a deliberateness attached to the Afro-Caribbean politics of naming. Likewise, in Africa and other African diasporic centers around the world, the act of naming can be deeply complex and multidimensional.

Importance of Personal Names in Africa

The literature on onomastics scholarship continues to reveal the multidimensional complexities of naming, as various scholars explore the importance of personal names in different cultural contexts in Africa. In most African cultures, names have been crafted to embrace both individual and/or communal history. Such naming practices can be considered psychic markings that carry the trace of collective history and individual life experiences from generation to generation.

Naming a child is therefore imbued with great significance, and the names chosen by the child's parents or the community often reflect historical events, environmental circumstances, such as seasonal cycles or even extreme weather patterns, local animals and birds, the ancestors, or the living dead as some call them, and heartfelt dreams or prophetic wishes for the future. For example, Nelson Mandela was named at birth "Rolihlahla," which means "trouble maker," a name he later lived out to the letter (Names - Nelson Mandela Foundation). Reverend Josiah Tyler in *Forty Years among the Zulus* found that many Zulu names bear the mark of the immediate circumstances surrounding the birth. "For instance if a small snake happens to be seen or killed when a boy is born he is called Unyokana, 'a little snake.' If a child is born in a season when honey is plentiful, the child is called Unyosi" (33).

Zulu names have historical importance in the life of the family because they refer to some "event or recall to memory different ancestors," as Eileen Krige notes in *The Social System of the Zulus* (74). Evangeline Bonisiwe Ngidi in her dissertation, *The Use of Personal Names in Respect of the Living-dead*, further supports this claim to ancestral significance in African life. Ngidi claims that through names "language meets culture (daily living routines) and religion (beliefs regulating people's lives). There are usually stories behind names, and through these stories one learns about the power that the living-dead have over their living relatives" (1). Members of the culture can learn of the link between the individual and the ancestors simply through names.

Equally, as Tshimpaka Yanga observes in his essay, "Language Planning and Onomastics in Zaire," names operate as "linguistic indicators of socialization," thus locating social webs in a family (241). Jonathan Musere and Sheila Byakutaga in *African Names and Naming* also illustrate that most African names are based on circumstances surrounding the birth of a child, and proper interpretation of these circumstances involves careful philosophical insights and specific cultural applications of the selected nomenclature. Names function as signifiers of identity, indicating "an occupation or implements used in this occupation," inferring genealogical descent or geographical location, and even signifying "modes of production" of a specific habitat. "African names often reflect negative or positive opinions of the names of the givers toward the child or other people…" (Musere and Byakutaga 1). Their claims are supported by Kofi Agyekum who demonstrates in "The Sociolinguistic of Akan Personal Names" that unlike Western societies where names are often predetermined, Ghanaian names are decided on only after the child is born (208), especially since the circumstances surrounding the child's birth—temporal, physical, sociological, historical, and religious—are essential to the ritual of naming (212). F. Niyi Akinnaso, in "The Socio-linguistic Basis of Yoruba Personal Names," believes that "in all cultures the basic purpose of naming is to provide a symbolic system of individual identification." He argues that besides the obvious function of differentiation of individuals, personal names provide structural mappings that help us make sense of, store, and process information about our experiences in the world (277).

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Mthobeli Guma, in "The Cultural Meaning of Names Among Basotho of Southern Africa: A Historical and Linguistic Analysis," finds that among the Basotho of Southern Africa the naming process is a socio-cultural interpretation of historical events. It embodies "individual life experiences, social norms and values, status roles and authority, as well as personality and individual attributes" (266). Justin Willis, in his book *Personal Names and the Construction of Social Identities among the Bondei and Giryama*, agrees with Guma that names are highly significant in African cultures. Names "situate the named socially, locating them in terms of one or more social constructs through which their rights and obligations are defined, through which they can make claims, and claims may be made upon them" (Willis 2). Individuals are crucial in locating the processes involved in social identities within a culture.

The scholarship on names and naming clearly indicates that personal names "among Africans serve as a communication tool and an oral tradition storehouse for the culture and history of the society" (Musere and Byatukaga 1). In short, naming carries mnemonic relevance. Indeed, African names constitute an important "means of conveying the cultural values and traditions of everyday life," as Peter Itani Mandende states in his dissertation, *A Study of Tshivenda Personal Names* (1).

Enslavement and Colonization

We can therefore understand the overwhelming trauma experienced by African people groups during slavery and colonization when Europeans imposed their own rituals of naming on them. By the seventeenth century it had become "customary for slaves in Africa to be baptized before their departure" for European territories, Hugh Thomas notes in *The Slave Trade*. Thomas traced this ritual to an edict of King Philip III of Spain (II of Portugal) in 1607 and 1619 (398). The conversion ceremony involved "a perfunctory christening" in which captives were assigned new names. For example:

> In Luanda, the captives would be taken to one of the six churches, or assembled in the main square. An official catechist, a slave, say, who spoke Kimbundu, the language of Luanda, would address the slaves on the nature of their Christian transformation. Then a priest would pass among the bewildered ranks, giving to each one a Christian name, which had earlier been written on a piece of paper. He would also sprinkle salt on the tongues of the slaves, and follow that with holy water. Finally, he might say, through an interpreter: Consider that you are now children of Christ. You are going to set off for Portuguese territory, where you will learn matters of the Faith. Never think any more of your place of origin. Do not eat dogs, nor rats, nor horses. Be content. (398)

In an attempt to suppress African identity, experiences, and memories, Europeans assigned new European names to their captives even before the crossing. They were also often marked (branded) with the ship's logo, or a series of numbers, or the name of the owner of the specific slaving enterprise. For example, Thomas recalls the comments made by one Captain Thomas Phillips who had remarked on rituals of branding in his era: "we mark'd the slaves (whom) we had bought on the breast or shoulder with a hot iron, having the ship's name on it, the place being before anointed with a little palm oil, which caused but little pain, the mark being usually well in four or five days" (396). Such rituals of branding and naming were meant to objectify the captives. Slavers showed indifference and blatant disregard for African histories, memories, and identities; the goal was in fact to rewrite their captives into a sub-human category.

In *Deep Talk: Reading African American Literary Names*, Debra Walker King quotes Edward Manning, who, in 1860, gave his rationale for name selection of African captives. Manning was part of the crew on the slave ship *Thomas Watson*: "I suppose they…all had names in their own dialect, but the effort required to pronounce them was too much for us, so we picked out our favorites and dubbed them mainstay, cat-head, Bulls eye, Rope-yarn, and various other sea phrases" (49). Once the enslaved disembarked and acquired a new master on the other side of the Atlantic, the naming ritual became "an integral part of the act of taking possession, as one planter, the aptly nicknamed Robert 'King' Carter of Chesapeake Bay recognized in 1727: 'I name'd them here & by their names we can always know what sizes they are of & I am sure we repeated them so often to them that everyone knew their names & would readily answer to them…'" (Burton 41). In general, the enslaved were refused surnames, as "surnames betokened generational continuity and adulthood, both of which owners were anxious to deny" (Burton 41).

The wave of colonization that followed on the heels of centuries of the Atlantic Slave Trade did not change the trend toward name change for the conquered. In *A Study of Tshivenda Personal Names*, Mandende notes that colonization forced African people to change their African personal names and replace them with European ones, especially if they wanted to attend mission schools or when they sought employment. It was not surprising that some began adopting foreign names as a sign of prestige, a sign that revealed their educational status and their Westernization. Guma also touched on the influence that the missionaries had on Basotho naming practices. He noted that English names became identified not just with Christianity, but also became a measure of one's claim on civilization and a status symbol of one's economic and social mobility (271). The implications tenable in the 17th and 18th centuries also influenced the naming circumstances of the Amistad story in the 19th century. This paper explores closely the Amistad incident and the ways, conscious and unconscious, in which actors in the incident use naming as a tool of subjugation (on the part of the slavers) and as a sign of both resistance and survival (on the part of the victims).

The Amistad Case

By 1839 it was a well-established fact that European enslavement of Africans had evolved into an institutional exploitation based on race and color. The violation of the human rights of African people and the ascendancy of the dominant class's faith in property rights made any challenge to the peculiar institution nearly impossible. The Amistad case of 1839 afforded Northern abolitionists an opportunity to put a chink in the armor of slavery. The Amistad story began in the forts of Dombokoro, in the Gallinas area of West Africa, known today as Southwest Sierra Leone in the border area with Liberia (Jones 50).

It is believed that Pedro Blanco, a formidable Spanish slave dealer had purchased about 600 captives from Dombokoro and shipped them on board a Portuguese slave ship, *Tecora*, in the spring of 1839; the captives were destined for Cuba. Once in Cuba the enslaved were auctioned in the open market and slave dealers Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montes purchased some of them and headed for Camagüey (Barber 9-15). Ruiz had 49 men with him and Montes had four children, three girls and one boy (Barber 7). They boarded their human cargo on a ship called *La Amistad*, owned by Captain Ramon Ferrer. The ship never made it to Camagüey because a number of captives on board revolted, killing the Captain and his cook and taking possession of the ship. Sengbe Pieh emerged as the leader of the revolt. Both Ruiz and Montes survived the rebellion because they needed men with navigational skills to help them back to Africa. This dependency on the part of the African captives gave the two slave buyers an opportunity to steer the ship North and West, away from the Africans' desired eastern direction. In the end the ship strayed into United States waters, in the Long Island area, and the ship was taken into custody and towed to New London, Connecticut, on August 27, 1839, some two months after the mutiny. Thus began a series of judicial hearings, from the district courts all the way to the Supreme Court, culminating in the acquittal of the African muntineers, who had been on trial for murder and piracy.

In the end, the success in the case was achieved precisely because it was not primarily about slavery, an institution legally secure within the borders of the United States at the time. The legal ramifications of the Amistad case, Earl Maltz comments in his book, *Slavery and the Supreme Court*, had no real impact on "the domestic institution of slavery" or even on "the balance of political power between the North and the South" (67). Justification rested on the clarification of the specific genealogy of the mutineers with the goal of ascertaining their place within the treaties that had been signed by the super powers of the day, Spain, Portugal, and England, in conjunction with the United States. Proponents of slavery focused on Pinckney's Treaty of 1795, arguing for the return of property to their owners (Barber 16). Advocates for the Amistad Africans focused on the English-led treaty of the abolition of slavery in 1808 on the high seas, as well as Portuguese and Spanish laws that equally regulated the terms of slavery on the islands in the Caribbean. An 1817 Anglo-Spanish treaty made any enslaved person introduced on the island after 1820 a *bozale*, an illegal entry, rather than a *ladino*, a legal resident who is enslaved (Barber 18).

So the *status* of the Amistad mutineers had much to do with the outcome of the case. Ruiz and Montes, their supposed owners, had forged documents changing their African names to suit the existing laws, thus passing them off as natives of the island (Martin 32). The three little girls, Margru, Teme, and Kagne, for instance, were renamed Juana, Francisca, and Josepha, although it remains unclear which name belonged to whom (Lawson 4-5). The Amistad Africans were eventually able to reveal their African names and the history of the journey that brought them to Cuba and to America, with the legal and humanitarian support afforded them by American abolitionists and the services of a Mende language interpreter, James Covey.

It was evident that the African people on the Amistad ship did not at all speak Spanish and were recently brought from Africa (Barber 20). To compound matters, no one could pretend that the four children with them on the ship, all under the age of 12, were born in Cuba. When the Amistad Africans were declared to be free, with the right to self-defense by the United States Supreme Court in 1841, it was because the argument had hinged on the nomenclature of their status as freeborn or as an enslaved (Jones, *Mutiny* 189).

This landmark civil rights case that brought triumph and momentum to the cause of abolitionism can easily overshadow the fact that it was indeed a partial victory that trampled on the rights of African people in a myriad of ways. For instance, the abolitionists used the Amistad mutineers (they were seen as providential) to promote the abolitionist cause, which was waning by the 1830s: First, they insisted on keeping the Amistad Africans in jail because the situation helped them in their attempt to galvanize sympathy and money to fight the case. Second, after eighteen months of incarceration the United States government refused to compensate the Amistad Africans for throwing them in jail in the first place. Third, the lawyers for the defense were easily satisfied with the larger victory and not with the details that had to do with the comfort of or personal justice for Amistad Africans. Would this have been the case had they been white? Howard Jones seems to answer this question in the negative when he notes that the "irony in the *Amistad* case is that even though the captives were never slaves, both southerners and northerners treated them as such, primarily because of their color" (Jones, "Impact of the Amistad" 15). This is an important observation because the appellation of "slave" hung over their heads throughout their ordeal, even in the case of the well-meaning abolitionists who fought on their behalf. We know also that it suited the larger plans of the abolitionists to take the gospel to Africa using the Amistad Africans as their providential anchor. When they finally left in 1842 it was on the hasty decision that more of the Amistad Africans might die of disease or suicide (as was suspected in the case of Foone, one of the freed captives) if they did not outfit a ship to take them home quickly as they had long promised (Osagie 18).

Such issues can be overlooked easily, and today's readers can misrecognize the ways in which the appellation of slavery typified Northern attitudes toward the Africans. For example, it needs to be remembered that while in jail the Africans were often on display for a fee (although this was at the behest of the jailer).

This specular attraction led to further displays once they were set free. For instance, to raise funds to return to Africa they visited many churches and performed for the audience, especially in reciting scriptures and demonstrating how well they had acquired the English language (Osagie 17). So while their human rights were being touted at some abstract level by Northern sympathizers their personal rights were being violated at every turn. According to Nguigi wa Thiongo, the "effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves" (12).

By the time they left America many had been christened with new names or the names that they had acquired on board the slave ship *Amistad*. Christopher Martin, in *Amistad Affair*, puts it succinctly when he states that after the legal victory for the Africans in the Supreme Court, the Africans arrived to new names at Farmington, Massachusetts—the transition point before going back to Sierra Leone (204). Margru, one of the little girls, was christened Sarah Kinson. Sengbe Pieh, known as Joseph Cinque, a slight variation of the name that had been imposed on him in the Cuban enslavement market, was probably able to retain that name because of his popularity. Some of the Africans were named after the very men who met them at their arrival in Farmington: Lewis Johnson (Kinna), George Lewis (Kali), Henry Cowles (Sokoma) and Alexander Posey (Fabana) (Martin 204). So the horror of Spanish imposed names were systematically replaced by the names of their benefactors. Their changed status, both psychologically and physically, was most evident in the change of names (DeBoer 106). Sterling Stuckey rightly points out that once the slave system imposed a name, it mattered not how resolutely an enslaved person stuck to his/her native born name, "the imperatives of the slave system won out" (197). That the "free North" acted under the same imperatives is quite telling. In examining the politics of naming in the slave culture of the New World, Stuckey explains, the "most poignant evidence of the loss of authority of African names is the deceptive use of them in the new environment" (197). In other words, African names often take a backseat as "pet names," names recognized and circulated within the enslaved community but not used or acknowledged in front of the white master's family. And so the old names became private, whereas the new names introduced under the cast of slavery became primary and represented their public personae.

In any case, with the passing of time these new names have been known to take on their own appeal (Stuckey 197). In the case of the Amistad story, one would have thought that the unique circumstances surrounding the incident should have afforded a different set of circumstances concerning the issuing of names to the Africans, especially when the abolitionists discovered that they were in fact kidnapped out of Africa and fitted with false names. Instead they threw out the Spanish names and Anglicized the Africans. The exception, as mentioned earlier, was Sengbe Pieh, whom they continued to call Cinque, and in time he himself accepted and signed off on it as his primary appellation, using it to correspond in his letters even after he reached Sierra Leone.

In time, some of the Africans seemed comfortable with their outfitted names. For instance, at one point during Sarah Kinson's (Margru's) studies at Oberlin college, she seemed incensed at the suggestion by Lewis Tappan (the key philanthropist in the Amistad case) that she reverse her name to Margru because the association of her "old" name to the famous Amistad story would continue to boost the AMA brand in America. Margru, now Sarah, was appalled at the request and refused to drop her Anglicized names (Lawson 22).

What are the processes that bring such institutional and individual acquiescence about? What indeed compelled Margru to resist being rechristened by her "old" name, whereas she was accepting of her "new" names that seemed to solidify her identity as a "Sister Missionary"? Is it possible that she questioned Tappan's rationale for her to reclaim the name Margru? Did she recognize its "deceptive use," as Stuckey puts it (197)? Is it possible that the name Margru was part and parcel of who she thought she was and was rejecting its commodified recuperation? What are the compelling concerns in negotiating the ritual of naming?

It is more productive, perhaps, to think of the ritual of naming in terms of the familiarity of the process in African spaces. We know for instance that in many African cultures a baby might be given a secret name separate from the names by which he or she would be known by people outside the immediate family. We also know that in many West African cultures, the Mende people among them, boys and girls who go through the initiation process into adulthood, through the *Sande* or the *Poro* societies for example, often take on a different name as part of the emergence into their new status as adults, dropping their "baby names," so to speak (Bellman 9). In other words, we could make the case that the Amistad group, mostly of Mende ethnicity, was already acclimated to the possibility of multiple names, thus implying multiple contexts as a cultural reality. Therefore to find themselves in the West under a branding alien to the past they knew supplied yet another codification that they could, in essence, "handle," although, of course, the trauma of this form of naming was in no way diminished. Sengbe Pieh could wear his Western name when the situation called for it and just as easily don one of his own native names when the occasion demanded it. It is well known that members of the *Poro* have names that are kept secret from non-initiates. Reports sent home by the missionaries with whom the group traveled back to Africa indicated that once they arrived in Sierra Leone, many of the men stripped their Western clothing and abandoned the missionaries to their own devices (Owens 303). Although these reports often made it sound as if shedding their clothes meant that some had reverted into heathenism, the point has been cleared up by recent scholars that some took off their clothing to show their *poro* marks, or "country marks" as they are often called, to the locals they met, thus authenticating their native identity, an identity that they never dispelled of in the first place (Rediker 219). The *poro* marks have been credited with the unity that allowed the men on the *Amistad* to conspire against their captors, trusting each other on the basis of their common identity as members of the same brotherhood society (Rediker 8).

Though the *poro* marks were always in plain sight during the Middle Passage crossing, thanks to the humiliating state in which the slave traders transported captured Africans, this process of naming was often lost on the white crew who in fact routinely put their own branding on the enslaved even before the Middle Passage crossing. By the time the enslaved made it to the New World, multiple identities were already evident on their bodies *literally*. The implications of these signs (local and global) were of course far reaching.

The Politics of Naming

In *The Invention of Africa*, Valentin Y. Mudimbe examines Western images of Africa by deconstructing Western knowledge systems and the conditions or "colonizing structure" that make possible Western epistemological claims on Africa (Mudimbe *Invention* 2). His work analyzes the transformative processes of different types of knowledge systems with which actors, such as anthropologists, missionaries and colonists, labeled and objectified the colonial other (Mudimbe *Invention* 45). Through a campaign of naming, Western claims of knowledge on Africa routinely stripped the continent of its complexity, thus locking the continent in an epistemological paralysis that was convenient to its interlocutors. Mudimbe would argue that such claims of knowing the other, the African, were of course spurious, as exemplified in his critique of Carl Sagan's mis-categorization of Dogon astronomical knowledge systems (Mudimbe *Invention* 14). The West mostly mirrored itself in Africa on the basis of its own narcissistic claims, reading otherness or alterity as "a negative category of the Same," and instituting policies that justified its imperialistic order (Mudimbe *Invention* 12). Nonetheless, colonial subjects trained in Western instrumentality responded to this colonial speculum by re-reading the West and by co-opting the system to their own advantage. For example, "educated Africans were among the most militant groups to agitate for self-rule and independence" during the colonial period (Osagie 68). That there *is* a gnosis of the other indicates that there are African ways of knowing, African ways of self-reflection, and African ways of engaging global realities.

Similarly in the New World, the crisis over names implied a crisis over identity. But it was a crisis that was reflective not just of the predicament of the enslaved but also of the master's cognitive failures. Singular claims by the slave master were often challenged by the multiple, sometimes contradictory, experiences of the enslaved. Take for instance the ritual of changing one's name as part of the realization that the enslaved was truly free. As a fugitive, Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey changed his name several times until he finally settled on Frederick Douglass (Andrews and Mcfeely 71, 72). The man we know as William Wells Brown today took on that name after he crossed the Ohio River into freedom (Brown 105-106). Although both fugitives took on new identities, they still maintained a part of their old names as a way of keeping the identities that had defined them up to that point, in spite of the horrors the memory of that past emblematized.

This liberating ritual of naming was performed by countless numbers of people seeking freedom. After the emancipation proclamation, Booker T. Washington notes in his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, blacks in the South did two things in response to their new found freedom: they walked away from the plantation to which they had been tethered all their lives (even if they returned a few hours or a few days later) and they threw off the master's name and took on a new name.

Consequently, a former enslaved man "called 'John Hatcher,' or as often 'Hatcher's John'" would most likely change his name to 'John S. Lincoln' or 'John S. Sherman,' the initial 'S' standing for no name, it being simply a part of what the coloured man proudly called his 'entitles'"(Washington 14). Although the names chosen, in almost all cases, were Western names (Christian, European, or historic), the fact remains that shedding the old was an important symbolic process. The process of making a choice rather than having the name imposed was an important step in claiming oneself. It was, at the very least, one attempt to "exorcise the demon of racism" (Stuckey 243).

For most of the Amistad Africans, maintaining their adopted Western names might have been calculated as *an accretion rather than a substitution*. In short, one identity was not necessarily mutually exclusive of another identity. All identities remained in flux, and the Amistad returnees resorted to a particular name not arbitrarily but specifically; that is, they deliberately selected names based on economic, political, or social calculations. What could possibly be the value of co-opting an alien identity, especially when that alien identity was generated through a history of conquest? During the wars that raged throughout the Gallinas region after the Amistad Africans had returned in the company of American missionaries back to the area, the Amistad Africans soon learned the significance of their Western names: that anything belonging to the white man was held in high esteem and for the most part spared the agonies other captives faced (Cable 142). When William Raymond, the lead missionary at the Mendi mission embarked on a fund raising tour of the US in 1843, he told audiences that his African charges were "living recommendations" giving positive accounts of the missionaries everywhere they went: "by their means I am known all along the coast as far into the interior as Cinque has travelled, which is probably 150-200 miles." The good name Raymond enjoyed in Kaw Mendi (Sherbro land) he credited to Sengbe (Cable 142). The narratives of fame disseminated by the Amistad returnees themselves stoked and strengthened the currency of power "the white man" enjoyed. It was not long before other non-*Amistad*s started to take refuge at the Mendi mission house for protection, safety, or even redemption (Osagie 65). Redemption, which was seen controversially as a form of buying slaves, was a necessary evil, given the reality on the ground. Raymond controversially had to buy many Africans from slavery with tobacco, a strategy that met the disapproval of the evangelical values the American Missionary Association (AMA) emulated (Osagie 65).

Once the AMA mission in Kaw Mendi was seen as a stabilizing force, many natives willingly handed their children over to the missionaries so that the children could receive a Western education; Western education had become an avenue of economic mobility. Even people not associated with the mission adopted European names or even concocted names cobbled together from various sources. It soon became difficult to ascertain who had historical or biological ties with Westerners.

The names of the conquerors were fast becoming the fad and evidence of upward aspiration. It was also standard practice for children at the mission house to take on new names to symbolize their new identities. The missionaries encouraged this naming ritual because they gained financial support by accepting the names of American donors for the children. As DeBoer wrote, church groups, such as women's missionary societies, "would support a child in Africa named after their pastor" (125). The key missionary, who replaced the deceased William Raymond, George Thompson, claimed credit for this plan, which encouraged interest in the growth of the mission, when he was stationed at Kaw Mendi from 1846 to 1856. Traditionally, donors had their names published in the AMA magazine, *American Missionary*, but having their names permanently attached to a human being seemed much more attractive, and many refused to give any donations at all if the latter was not an option (Thompson to Whipple, AMA Archives, Box 133, No. 107649, November 15, 1856). For example, Barnabas W. Root, a New England donor, offered 33 dollars to the AMA, with 25 dollars of the money specifically designated for the Mendi Mission. Root requested that his name be placed on a child at the Mission house. Root's letter of 1854 allocated the 25 dollars "for the education of a Boy, selected (or to be selected) … by the name of Barnabas Root" (Root to AMA Committee, AMA Archives, Box 9, no. 5813, December 9, 1854). The boy offered this privilege by George Thompson was called Fahma Yahny, whose maternal grandfather was a chief (Muelder 48). Young Barnabas remains one of the two most prominent African missionaries in America to have emerged from the Mendi mission. He studied in the United States and became a pastor in Alabama after the Civil War, before returning to Sierra Leone.

In spite of the ubiquity of the naming ritual during Thompson's tenure, not all the missionaries thought the naming ritual was appropriate. The Reverend Daniel Burton objected vociferously in his letters to the AMA: "If people cannot give to the mission, unless they feel that they have stock in it, as in a Rail Road company, it will, I think, as a general thing do but little good" (DeBoer 125). Burton therefore changed the rules after Thompson left the mission field. In protest, Thompson wrote a letter to Reverend George Whipple in 1856, calling attention to the relationship between donor names for the mission's children and economic success. This "important plan," as he called it, could "nearly double the money" the Mission collected for its operation (Thompson to Whipple, AMA Archives, Box 133, no. 107649, November 15, 1856). We can see here that neither Burton nor Thompson denied the relationship between naming and financial access; what they differed on was the ethical value of the tie between the two.

Naming and Amistad Scholarship

The politics of naming in the history of the Amistad has provoked some interesting responses in certain quarters. Some scholars use the Amistad Africans' indigenous and European names interchangeably, perhaps to suggest the validity of both names. This practice, however, is understandable given the fact that scholars and artists who use the widely popular European appellations bring consistency for audience understanding. This same group of scholars is also often burdened by the desire to keep the original names in play. At best, this practice highlights the scholars' level of awareness, thus creating the perception of progress. On another level the practice implies complicity with the dominant ideological systems and a consolidation of the status quo. Lawson, for instance, identifies Margru as Sarah Margru Kinson in her book, *The Three Sarahs* (3-45). In Lawson's work, Margru's native name is sandwiched between dominant European subscriptions. In *Be Jubilant My Feet*, DeBoer resorts to a slash, "Sara Kinson/ Margru," thus subordinating Margru's native name (105). In another instance, Cable acknowledges her choice of name for the Amistad hero, Sengbe Pieh, in *Black Odyssey*: "His African name phonetically spelled, appears to have been 'Singbe-pieh,' but the newspapers of the time variously called him Cinquez, Sinko, Jingua, and Cinque. We will call him Cinque, as that eventually became the most usual version" (13). The justification here is obvious. Other scholars have resorted to the African names of the Amistad actors, using the English- or Spanish-imposed names as historical referents when necessary for reader comprehension and historical contextualization. Martin and Osagie are among the scholars who subscribe to this strategy. The decision on which path to take has given artists and scholars pause, since the choices they make have political ramifications.

In her novel on the Amistad story, *Echo of Lions*, Barbara Chase-Riboud offers yet another example of the complex dynamics of naming. The glossary she offers at the end of the novel lists major African players in the Amistad incident. Next to each African name is a translation of the name in English. For instance, Margru is identified as "black snake," Kinna as "big man," Sengbe as "drummer," and Grabeau as "have mercy on me." In Chase-Riboud's attempt to ingrain in the mind of the reader the meaning of each person's name, she uses most of the names in translation throughout the narrative, rather than the name itself with its phonetic integrity intact. Thus, her politically correct use of names seems to offer her readers a curious narrative that arguably introduces alienation rather than identification with her African characters. What she fails to realize of course is that names (as signifiers pointing to persons) have a specific dynamic and cultural implication that is lost when she chooses to identify characters only within the parameters of the signified (that is, the meaning of the name). In other words, there is no one to one correspondence between sound and meaning in language, as Saussurean linguistics teaches. Thus there is an integrity that carries over in leaving a name nested in its cultural context. The singular representation of the signified (especially in translation) can and does often lack a cultural context.

For example, in Mende, the name Margru can mean not just "black snake" but also "cherished," depending on the pronunciation. The connotation implied in the nearness of the two sounds may evoke, at least, a double meaning in the ears of a native speaker. In short, the meaning of a name is not necessarily limited to one possibility in most African cultures; broader meanings are always applicable. Therefore, in sticking to a singular English translation of these African names in *Echo of Lions*, Chase-Riboud unknowingly elides the heteroglossia possibly resonant in them. Moreover, in many African societies, shortened names are based on much longer phrases and nuanced contexts that are understood within each specific society. Consequently, such unique ethnic and cultural specificity can be lost or misrepresented in direct translations into the English language. We are also unsure of the logic Chase-Riboud uses when she, for the most part, calls some leading players by the more recognizable Western version of their names, such as Cinque (Sengbe) or Covey (Kaweli), whereas she calls most minor African characters in the Amistad incident by the signified notation, such as Waterfall (Shule), Bone (Kale), and Cricket (Kimbo). Unlike this set of characters, she maintains the integrity of Grabeau (as signifier) possibly because he is second in command to Sengbe, indicating his importance. Whatever her political motivations, her choices remain confusing and inconsistent. Her conscious selection of certain names exemplifies her participation in the politics of naming, a process laden with political value. Her uneven attempt at maintaining the integrity of African names supports Stuckey's claim in *Slave Culture* that, "the imperatives of the slave system [win] out" once a name from the conqueror has been imposed (197).

In an earlier historical work written by William Owens titled *Black Mutiny*, Owens further displays the artist's investment in value-laden claims. Owens cuts to the chase by calling Sengbe, Cinque, even before he leaves Africa, thus ignoring the historical timeline of naming in the Amistad story (5). While it might make for narrative unity, it outright flattens the discourse of naming and it minimizes the significance of the African indigenous names by eliminating this complexity in the mind of the reader. Ironically, most of the other African characters in Owens' story maintain their native names in his version of the historical narrative. One more thing we should remember is that the names that some of the Amistad Africans gave to their captors as well as their protectors may not even have been their "real" names to begin with. As noted earlier, members of the *Poro* never reveal their *poro* names to non-initiates. So the names they chose to submit in American records are arguably political and politicized, with a whole host of criteria that we may never unlock.

Conclusion

Given the opacity, the multidimensionality of naming, it is important for Amistad scholars to maintain critical distance as they weigh the possible choices in the utilization of names and naming. When it comes to the issue of naming, scholars need to lay out all the possibilities related to this complex practice and be sensitive to the weighty nuance attached to their choice. In this way they can turn the political tables on complicit narratives that seem to consolidate Eurocentric hegemonies on many levels. Mudimbe's deconstruction of the politics of naming, as "a process of neutralization, re-creation, and rearrangement of a site," should sensitize us to the structures of conversion that accompany the context of narration (Mudimbe, *Idea* 134). For that reason, the vexing matter of Sengbe's name, to take one example, should draw our attention to the salient issue of micro-politics and their social implications in the selective narrative of historical construction. Is Cinque just a mispronunciation of Sengbe? Was the indigenous name co-opted into its European-sounding alias a discourse of something else, especially given the etymological origin of the word in European Romance languages? Onomastics scholarship can play an important role in unlocking the latent implication of history, especially since aspects of our collective history and life experiences often pass from generation to generation through the medium of naming. The transformations engendered by the genealogy of naming illustrate the complex identity flows circumscribing all transnational engagements. In addressing the complexities and significance of names in the Amistad story, this paper calls for a deeper critical inquiry into how socio-linguistic inflections can highlight major markers in our understanding of history.

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