



Book Review

Naming and Othering in Africa: Imagining Supremacy and Inferiority through Language.

By SAMBULO NDLOVU. London and New York: Routledge.
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The book *Naming and Othering in Africa* by Sambulo Ndlovu analyzes the role of names in the construction of identity and otherness in Africa. The point of the author is that names are used to express relationships of superiority, dominance, and inclusion on the one hand, and inferiority, subjugation, and exclusion on the other. The concepts of “othering” and “selfing” are central to the book. In the context of the European colonization of Africa, “othering” refers to the process of using names to portray another person, group, or culture as inferior, while “selfing” is used to present oneself as superior. With these concepts as foundation, in the introductory chapter the author argues that colonial contexts created forms of subalternity that survive beyond the colonization and postcolonial periods. Following this introduction, the book is organized into three sections.

The first section, which is titled “Global, Cultural and Ethnophaulic Nomen Othering of Africa”, runs from chapter 2 through chapter 4. This section analyses different ways in which Europe and the West use names to undermine and exclude people in Africa. The author elaborates on the concept of “othering”, the act of representing—in a derogatory manner—person or a group of people as “others” who are different and inferior, to justify domination, exploitation, and violence.

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Chapter 2 in this section discusses global onomastic othering dichotomies that continue to marginalize Africa. These dichotomies that present names as global grades of “self” and “other” include “First World versus Third World”, “North versus South”, “West versus East”, and “Left versus Right”. These dichotomies oppose a developed, civilized, superior, rich, and powerful world to an underdeveloped, powerless, inferior, uncivilized, poor one. These dichotomies based on race, colonial and postcolonial power, and wealth assume a center (self) and peripheries (others).

Chapter 3 discusses the use of names for the cultural “othering” of Africa. Africa is viewed as the Dark Continent compared to Europe, which is the center, with a superior and hegemonic civilization and culture. This hegemonic and universal view of the European is expressed in the naming of lands, people, or animals. For example, in botany, African flora is described using ecological slurs which disparage it as “useless” and “detestable” compared to European flora of the same type. Such is the case for the following common names: *snot apple*, *smelly berry*, *bush tea*, *wild grape*, and *false wild medlar*. In some other cases, African flora is named in animal or savage terms. This is the case for *monkey orange*, *monkey bread*, *bird plum*, *pig weed*, *spider flower*, and *cow peas*. For their own honor and glory, European colonizers appropriated African fauna by giving names such as *Dorcas gazelle*, *Thomson’s gazelle*, *Grant’s gazelle*, *Sömmerring’s gazelle*, *Cuvier’s gazelle*, *Speke’s gazelle*, and *Sharpe’s grysbok*. They created a traditional-modern dichotomy in naming by opposing “indigenous” African culture to “global, universal” European culture. In the same way, African religious names and concepts were “satanized” while Christian concepts were celebrated and glorified.

Chapter 4 discusses ethnophaulisms, derogatory names for groups of people, names that are basically racial and ethnic slurs. Such is the case for the divisions/classifications of Africans into North Africans versus Ethiopians/Blacks. Other derogatory ethnophaulisms for Africans include *Hottentot* and *Bushmen*. As the author puts it, “[T]he ethnophaulisms given to Africans rank them by closeness to Caucasian, Arab North Africa being the closest, followed by Ethiopia, then the rest, and at the bottom appears to be the Khoisan” (65). On the other hand, in reaction to European abuses, Africans used names such as *Mlungu*, *Khiwa*, *Bhunu*, and *Bhulu* with negative denotations and connotations as ethnophaulisms to attribute negativity to the name *White* as opposed to *Black*.

The second section of the book—from chapter 5 to chapter 7—is about how names are used to express relationships of superiority and inferiority in Africa under European colonial rule. This section analyzes how names were used to create and reinforce colonial and decolonial identities in Africa. The author begins by discussing onomastic suppression under colonial administrations and how African people reclaimed their names after independence. He believes that suppression of African names was a deliberate act intended to erase African culture and identity.

Chapter 5 discusses nuances of the African terms *Mlungu/Mzungu* and *Oborofo*, used to refer to White people in colonial and postcolonial times. The author argues that these terms have negative denotations in reference to certain characteristics of White people. These terms are ethnophaulisms that express xenophobia and represent a counter-rhetoric, a decolonial one meant to oppose that of the White oppressors. The author states that early encounters of Europeans on the African coast “involved violence and inhuman treatment of Africans, resulting in negative names so designed to capture the bad memories of Africa’s early White encounters” (87). Terms such as *uMlungu* (South Africa), *Mzungu* (Swahili, East Africa), *abeLungu* (South Africa) and *Aborofo* (Ghana) are ethnophaulisms that indicate that White people are not autochthones in Africa. However, the xenophobic and ethnophaulic etymologies and semantics of these names evolved positively under colonial capitalism and administrations to express superior social status and race-based material wealth, while these systems rigorously maintained Blacks at the bottom of the social ladder.

Chapter 6 discusses the use of toponyms to express colonial authority in Africa. The author argues that the “toponymic landscape is a reflection of power, linguistic, economic and cultural dynamics of an area” (105). The colonial masters named African spaces, political and territorial entities, countries, streets in cities, rivers, and lakes. In this context, African states were named by colonial powers using their own names to prefix African territories in names such *German-West-Africa*, *Portuguese-East-Africa*, and *French-West-Africa*. African lakes, waterfalls and rivers became *Lake Victoria*, *Stanley Pool*, etc. Colonial authority distorted African toponyms through the process of “transphonologisation” (115), creating meaningless names with significant cultural and political impacts. This colonial system (1) created an urban-rural dichotomy that “indigenized” and marginalized rural Africans; (2) introduced European currencies; and (3) established European religious institutions with European names such as the *Roman Catholic Church*, *Anglican Church*, *Dutch Reformed Church*, *Free Presbyterian Church*, *London Missionary Society London*, and *Greek Orthodox Church*.

Chapter 7 discusses colonial downgrading of African anthroponymy. African anthroponyms were downgraded through the imperial processes of slavery, colonialism, Christianity, education, and neo-colonialism that promoted the use of European given names and family names for Africans. Under those systems, African names were considered unpronounceable, inferior, and/or inadequate, while European names were forced upon Africans in schools, churches, and administrative offices. This disruption of African anthroponymy had negative impacts on African languages, cultures, and identities. Africans lost their tradition of naming newborn babies after parents and grandparents and recycling names over several generations. These renaming policies and practices created disruptions in African social organizations, families, clans, and villages.

Section three of the book—chapters 8 through 11—discusses names as cultural “othering” in Africa, the process portraying (through naming) the “other” person or culture as different and inferior. The author elaborates on discriminatory naming practices that assign “superior” names to boys and “inferious” ones to girls based on their expected social roles. He also elaborates on the use of slurs and other derogatory terms to refer to disability and homosexuality.

Chapter 8 is about marginalization through names in Africa. The author points out that the syntax and semantics of African names reveal a patriarchic system in which names for girls indicate inferior status and expectations in society while boys’ names express their expected superior social roles. In the area of business and economy, names of enterprises reveal the exclusion of women as seen through this nomenclature: *Coufman and Sons Property* in real estate; *Tanda Tavaruva and Sons Transport* and *Mavako and Sons Buses Transport* in transportation; and *Matsikidze and Sons General Dealer* in retail/grocery. In the same way, women’s presence is nonexistent or marginal in commemorative toponyms as revealed by sample names from Nigeria, Kenya, and Zimbabwe. Most streets are named after men in Abuja (Nigeria), in Nairobi (Kenya), and in Harare (Zimbabwe), as are international airports throughout the continent.

Chapter 9 discusses marginalization through names based on disability, sexual orientation, and sex in African countries. The author presents names, slurs, and terms used in African societies to refer to disability, homosexuality, and femininity. Naming authorities who are not members of these social categories express bias toward them in their naming practices. In the area of disability, several derogatory terms are used to refer to mental hospitals, including *asylum*, *chaos*, *loony*, *pandemonium*, *madhouse*, *nuthouse*, *snake pit*, and *laughing academy*. These terms are degrading and debasing for patients of the institutions. Similarly, in Malawi, degrading terms, such as *amathanyula* ‘those who engage in anal sex’, are used to refer to homosexuals.

Chapter 10 discusses socio-political onomastic exclusions in Africa. The author considers global and continental as well as national and ethnic/regional exclusions within African countries. He starts with the global (mis)use of the term *Africa* to refer to a unitary country rather than a continent with 55 countries, a unitary view that began during the colonial period. Additionally, *Africa* is regarded as an antonym for *Europe* in terms of development, modernity, culture. In this logic, Africa is a poor, underdeveloped continent with an inferior culture. Africa is also equated with Black race and Black identity. The association excludes non-Black Africans in North Africa and White minorities in other parts of the continent. Another issue is the fact that, although Pan-Africanist political leaders claim the unity of the continent, they do not show this spirit of unity in commemorative naming, notably in toponymy. Rather, they commemorate regionalism and nationalism in toponyms. For instance, in post-apartheid South Africa, toponyms commemorate local heroes (as in *O.R. Tambo Airport* and *King Shaka International Airport*), not West African or East African heroes. Even within each African country, spaces are named to exclude other languages and cultures that are not from specific regions. Such is the case in South Africa where Zulu toponyms are favored in the KwaZulu-Natal province as opposed to names from other South African ethnic or racial groups.

In Chapter 11, the book’s conclusion, the author summarizes his main arguments that names are used to (1) express otherness; and (2) illustrate different forms of colonialism, including global, continental, regional, economic, national, religious, ethnic, social, and economic. He emphatically states that terms used to refer to Africa, its people, and its cultures portray the continent in derogatory terms. He strongly believes that names are powerful tools that help express and enforce social inequalities in the African context. He recommends that the world community do more work to eliminate racial and ethnic slurs. He also recommends revisions and/or the elimination of derogatory terms to help make African cultures globally acceptable.

This book, written on a sound and solid theoretical foundation, is well researched, well documented, and illustrated with field examples from several African countries. It provides a comprehensive coverage of numerous onomastic issues resulting from European colonization and postcolonial dominance of the African continent. It is an outstanding contribution to scholarship in African studies, onomastics, and sociolinguistics.

Michel Nguessan

Governors State University, University Park, Illinois, USA