The Evolution of Personal Naming Practices among American Blacks

P. ROBERT PAUSTIAN

MOST AMERICAN NEGROES ORIGINATED in the countries of western Africa. A large number of their names have been derived through or influenced by residual traditions brought to the Americas from Africa. Thus, tracing the development of black personal naming practices in America necessitates a brief survey of African naming customs. Black American names have seldom retained the overt phonetic manifestation of African names. But though Afro-American names do not often sound African, they definitely display the same themes and patterns as those popular in the West African region.

A Genesis of American Names in Africa

West African naming practices vary somewhat from group to group, but many appear common to the entire area.[1] Indeed, despite the language diversity of West Africa, certain general naming themes exist throughout the many social and linguistic groupings, as a sort of West African *Sprachbund* of personal naming practices.

Names are extremely important to the West Africans and are given at various stages in life.[2] The choice of a name can be determined by the time of birth, i.e., whether the child is born in the morning or evening, at night, on a weekday or marketday. Names are used to memorialize

---

[1] Contrary to the opinion of Elsdon C. Smith, in his book *Treasury of Name Lore* (New York: Harper, 1967), p.4.

[2] Keith E. Baird, in his "Commentary" appended to Ogonna Chuks-orji's book *Names from Africa* (Chicago: Johnson, 1972), pp. 75-86, gives a general summary of African personal naming customs, as does Takawira Mafukidze's article, "The Origin and Significance of African Personal Names," *Black World*, 9 (1970), 4-6. For names in Ghana, see R.M. Connolly, "Social Life in Fantiland," *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland Journal*, 26 (1896), 140-41, and Kwaku Adzei, "The Meaning of Names in Ghana," *Negro Digest*, 12 (1962), 95-97. Information on the Yoruba can be found in Samuel Johnson, *History of the Yorubas* (London: Routledge, 1921), pp. 79-89. The following deal with Ibo naming: Heinz A. Wieschhoff, "The

special circumstances surrounding birth. Often a child is given a name referring to the happiness which his family feels. Although names conferred at birth are sometimes amended or replaced at maturity, the birth-name remains the single most important West African appellation. Among some peoples this birth-name has to be kept secret, for fear it could be used in working magic against the person to whom it belongs.[3] Because the rate of infant mortality is very high, names often express hope for a child's longevity, as well as notions of fate or resignation, reflecting the parents' fears for the child's welfare. Names are applied according to the order of children's births and their sex. Twins receive special names depending on whether they are of the same or a different sex in combination with their order of birth. Africans, being extremely religious, often treat a birth as a sign of divine favor or blessing, and name the child accordingly.

Conventionally a few West Africans change their names on different momentous occasions or in honor of some singular event. Africans can take many names besides birth-names in later life, but usually there are no family-names by which everyone in a particular family can be identified. West African personal names can be made up of a single element, especially in the smaller social groups, where there is no need for a larger name. Among the more populous groups, however, a second name based on a totem, family-name, place, or descriptive characteristic may be added.[4] Events important to the family or tribe occasion the addition of extra names comparable to English nicknames. Africans can have several clan-names, taken from familiar animals. Having been profoundly influenced by Islam, some tribes adopted and continue to use Arabic names.[5] Others, particularly on the coast, adopted European names, with the result that numerous old names fell into disuse. A few Fanti and Ibo names, Anglicized while still on the coast of West Africa, include Duke, which was derived from Orek, Cobham from Akabom, and Becky from Beke.[6] These applications

---

Social Significance of Names among the Ibo of Nigeria," *American Anthropologist*, 43 (1941), 212-22, and Victor D. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965). Names in Dahomey and among the Hausa are examined in Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey* (New York: Augustin, 1938), I, 263-64, and Percy G. Harris, "Some Conventional Hausa Names," *Man*, 31 (1931), 272-74.

3 Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper, 1941), p. 190.

4 This second name was once thought to be a recent innovation; see F.W.H. Migeod, *The Languages of West Africa* (1913; rpt. London: Gregg International, 1971), II, 339.

5 See Dawud Hakim's book *Arabic Names and other African Names with their Meanings* (Philadelphia: Hakim, 1970). The Moslem religion is a significant factor in black Africa, and is actually considered a part of the indigenous culture.

were brought to America by those sold into slavery along with some tribal names which had also been Anglicized and made into personal names, e.g., Anthony came from the tribe named Andoni, and Ginny or Jenny originated in Ginneh.

Although differing slightly from place to place, black naming ceremonies are actually fairly consistent throughout Africa. The formal conferral of a name does not just serve to distinguish one individual from another, but rather is a ceremony of welcome for the newborn member of the community. During the festivities the good luck of the parents is touted and the child's fortune is predicted. The final naming is thought of as the formal completion of the act of birth. It must be remembered that a child is not considered a human being until named, and that often no name is given unless the parents are certain that the child will survive. Thus, before the final naming ceremony, a child may be formally referred to as "It" or "Thing." Occasionally this type of appellation is retained for a considerable length of time if the health of the child is in question. Sometimes the temporary name is deliberately bizarre, e.g., "I Am Ugly" and "I Am Dead." In this way the parents try to avoid losing the child to dead ancestors, who naturally would not want a baby so named. If an infant dies before the real name is assigned, it has never really been born.

Many of the names through West Africa evidence an interesting onomastic phenomenon in respect to the composition of phrases or aphorisms. These names have been dubbed "anthroponyms,"[7] but in this essay will go under the rubric of ***phrase-name***. They serve the dual purpose of both personal identification and the expression of attitudes, sentiments, and historical facts.

Since American blacks came mainly from western Africa, it would seem that one need not be concerned here with onomastic developments on the rest of the sub-Saharan continent, but names from the southern and eastern parts of Africa often reflect the same expression of happiness and hope for the future by parents as do those in West Africa.[8] Automatically names are given under particular circumstances of birth, and events occurring at the time of birth are chronicled in names. Indeed, throughout Africa parents take into consideration their

---

6 M.D.W. Jeffreys, "Names of American Negro Slaves," *American Anthropologist*, 50 (1948), 571-73.

7 Mataebere Iwundu,"Igbo Anthroponyms: Linguistic Evidence for Reviewing the Ibo Culture," *Names*, 21:1 (March, 1973), 46-49.

8 See Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Handbook of African Names* (Washington: Three Continents, 1976).

general situation in life when naming their children.

Black Names Cross the Ocean

Not many of the earliest Negro American names, given before the eighteenth century, could have originated in Africa.[9] There were rather rare exceptions, e.g., Mookinga, Sambe, and possibly Anthony, the lattermost mentioned earlier as having come from the name of a tribe. Some partially Anglicized names, like Edward Mozingo, were exported directly to America from West Africa, where European given-names had been added to the fathers' African given-names. Thus, a complete given-name and a patronymic surname were formed on the European model. Surnames have been, by and large, a strictly European development, and have passed only recently into the naming practices of other nations.[10] The introduction of surnames seems to be entirely dependent on the complexity (both governmental and commercial) of the society in question. Most early Afro-American given-names were of the customary English variety, e.g. William,Edward, Frances, and Margaret. However, a number of these are thought to have been Anglicizations of earlier Spanish names, some of which, like Angelo and Isabella, continued in use.

Lorenzo D. Turner estimated that approximately 100,000 African slaves were carried directly to South Carolina and Georgia from the West Coast of Africa during the 100 years before 1808, when the Slave Trade Act made the importation of any more slaves illegal.[11] Nevertheless, this law was effectively ignored and the number of African slaves arriving in Charleston actually increased in the mid-nineteenth century.[12] Many of these blacks resided in the Gullah region of the Carolinas. There, because of isolation and the reinforcement provided by new arrivals, some African speech habits including naming practices were retained. This was especially true in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. The phonology, morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and

---

9 Newbell N. Puckett, "Names of American Negro Slaves," in *Studies in the Science of Society*, ed. George P. Murdock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), pp. 471-94.

10 See Leslie G. Pine, *The Story of Surnames* (Rutland, Vt.: Tuttle, 1965), p. 11. Cf. John E. DeYoung, "The Use of Names by Micronesians," *Anthropological Working Papers*, 3 (December, 1960).

11 Lorenzo D. Turner, "Notes on the Sounds and Vocabulary of Gullah," *American Dialect Society*, 3 (1945), 13-28.

12 Joey L. Dillard, *Black English* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 133.

intonation of this area all exhibited a strong West African influence; i.e., this speech displayed a strong linguistic substratum from the Niger-Congo (e.g., Akan or Twi, Ibo, Yoruba, and Swahili) and Afro-Asiatic (e.g., Hausa) language families.

One naming practice of African origin maintained in various parts of the Americas was that of giving day-names.[13] Both in their original African form and in English translation, day-names continued in use. English translations of the day-names were also common in West Africa.[14] Of course, the names assigned slaves everywhere were determined by their owners. In Jamaica a few slaves were allowed to keep their day-names, but the necessity of distinguishing among all the slaves on a large plantation required a modification of the single given-name, which was the only name familiar to the owners. Appellations like Juba's Quasheba and Phibba's Quashie were utilized. Escaped slaves living in remote areas in the mountains of Jamaica usually gave their children day-names. The Jamaican practice of day-naming continued throughout the nineteenth century. Though day-names are still widespread in West Africa, e.g., Kwame ("Saturday") Nkrumah, the use of day-names in their original African forms tended to die out in both America and Jamaica when they acquired a pejorative connotation. The masculine day-name most prevalent in America was Cuffie or Cuffy (Kofi) "Friday." Other popular ones were Quaco "Wednesday" and Cudjo "Monday." Most outsiders were inclined to view the day-names as corruptions of ordinary American names, while actually the African day-names themselves were being folk-etymologized, e.g., Cubena or Cuba (feminine) "Wednesday" was thought to have come from Venus or the island of Cuba, Phibbi or Pheba (fem.) "Friday" from Phoebe, Abba (fem.) "Thursday" from Abby, and Quasheba (fem.) "Sunday" from Sheba; while the masculine names Cudjo "Monday" and Cuffie "Friday" were erroneously derived from Cousin Joe and the beverage coffee, respectively. Thus, a number of the African day-names, probably because of their homonymity with American names, continued to be employed rather frequently.

The Gullahs, besides giving names based on the time a baby is born, also name children according to their place of birth, physical condition, appearance, and mental ability, just as their West African ancestors

---

13 Herskovits, *Myth*, p. 192; Turner, "Notes," p. 23; David De Camp, "African Day-Names in Jamaica," *Language*, 43 (1967), 139-47; Joey L. Dillard, "The West African Day-Names in Nova Scotia," *Names*, 19:4 (December, 1971), 257-61; and Dillard, *Black English*, pp. 124-29.

14 Lists of the day-names are to be found in several works, viz.: Connolly, p. 140; Jeffreys, pp. 571-72; De Camp, p. 139; and Dillard, *Black English*, p. 124.

had done. In addition they derive names from religious notions, magic and certain types of greetings, commands, and exclamations.[15] Recurrently, these aphoristic interjections appear as phrase-names or story-names, being formulated in aggregates of African or English words describing some circumstance connected with the child at the time of its birth or later.

Despite the situation existing among the isolated pockets of blacks, most Africans were unable to keep their original names when they were brought to America. In general they were completely under the control of slavers, none of whom cared to know anything about the slaves' former names. To the traders, slaves were a kind of merchandise and, since they did not require names, were not usually accorded them until they were bought. To the plantation owners what their servants called each other was of little consequence. But, slaves who were to be used as domestic servants were immediately named by the owners.[16] These appellations on the American model were rather arbitrarily given. Most slaves were known by simple given-names, of which some of the most popular were John, Henry, George, Sam, Jack, Tom, Charlie, Peter, Joe, Mary, Marcia, Nancy, Lucy, Sarah, Harriett, Hannah, Eliza, Martha, and Jane. Often an epithet, e.g., Big, Little, and Old, was added to the single simple given-name to distinguish one Mary from another, or the owner's or a parent's given-name, as was done in Jamaica, was prefixed as a possessive, such as Henry's Tom, but not Tom Henry. These secondary names were conferred for purely practical reasons, i.e., to be better able to differentiate among several people with the same names as well as to ease bookkeeping problems. An analogous situation had existed in mediaeval Europe when stewards of manor houses assigned names to their lords' vassals in order to improve record maintenance.[17]

Among their peers slaves were known by a more intimate name, perhaps of African origin, which was not the name given to them by their owners. Though day-names existed in the American South prior to the nineteenth century, after 1800 the number of African names rapidly declined, as did all other non-English names.[18] When dealing

---

15 Turner, "Notes," pp. 23-25.

16 Smith, *Treasury*, p. 145-46; and Puckett, "Names," pp. 473-80.

17 See W.O. Hassal, *History Through Surnames* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1967).

18 For American slave names of African origin, one should consult Newbell N. Puckett's book, *Black Names in America* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1975), pp. 347-469; Puckett, "Names," pp. 474-92; and Henry L. Mencken, *The American Language*, abridged edition (New York: Knopf, 1965), pp. 523-24, n. 1.

with their owners and overseers, slaves would almost always use their English names. Gullahs, when talking to whites or any outsiders, would invariably utilize their American names if they had any; thus, onomastic field workers experienced considerable difficulty eliciting names other than American ones, which, consequently, were almost the only names ever recorded, although African names were used among family and friends at home.[19] This inclination to hide the real name from all outsiders, including other Negroes, obscures the early history of black naming in America. Certainly such a tendency resembles the way in which Africans would keep their birth-names secret from all but their most intimate associates, with the idea in mind that, if someone possessed your real name, he had power over you.

When large numbers of slaves were purchased and then placed in some isolated section of a huge plantation, the owner or overseer sometimes would not bother to grant them American names.[20] These people could preserve their African names and also acquire new names from their fellow workers. Some of these new names were nicknames, e.g., Fat Man, Pop Corn, Luck (cf. Sudi "Luck" in Swahili), and Pearly. Various appellatives which later became formal names were based on occupations or physical characteristics, just as European as well as African names had once been, e.g., Tinker Jack, Isaac the Potter, Fleet Elmus, and John Driver. Biblical designations were just as popular among slaves as they were among the slave owners. One will note that religious names, both Christian and Moslem, had been quite common in West Africa among the Yoruba, Ibo, and Hausa.

A few slave names have been attributed to the combined efforts of both the owner and the slave community, e.g., Apple White Scarlet and Pyree Sylvanee Poke. For a time it was fashionable among plantation owners to give their slaves names from classical antiquity, e.g. Caesar, Pompey, Cato, Hector, Jupiter, and Agamemnon. Most slaves in Louisiana were bestowed with either French or Spanish names, which those people tended to retain somewhat conservatively, even in post-bellum America.

After the Emancipation Proclamation and the American Civil War, many former slaves felt that, since they were changing their condition in life, they should also change their names, not considering themselves

---

19 Lorenzo D. Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 12.

20 Elsdon C. Smith, *The Story of Our Names* (New York: Harper, 1950), pp. 111-15; and for the following discussion: Mencken, p. 523-24 and Newbell N. Puckett, "American Negro Names," *Journal of Negro History*, 23 (1938), 35-48.

completely free until they had done so.[21] In this way some slave names, the phonetic shapes of which imply an African derivation, e.g., Ginny, Becky, Mima, and Sukey, fell completely out of favor. A number of people took on new family names, though only rarely those of their erstwhile owners. Most new Negro surnames were grounded in general American naming models imported from England. Those blacks who had been living for some time as free men in the northern parts of North America, had adopted general American surnames copied from the people around them. Nevertheless, freshly emancipated Negroes showed individualism and imagination in their choice of given names. A great number of these new given-names were based, whether consciously or not, on naming themes from Africa. Distinctive given-names have remained popular among American blacks down to the present time.

Just as the Yoruba and other West Africans would derive names from legendary heroes, American blacks who wanted status and a sense of history in their names frequently chose the names of famous and important people, e.g., Walter Raleigh, Daniel Webster, Washington, Napoleon, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Douglas, William McKinley, and Lindbergh.[22] Even female names were patterned after the names of well-known men, e.g., Willie Jennings Bryant and Georgie Washington. The choice of popular cinema stars as models for names continued this practice, even much later, e.g., Gary Cooper, Myrna Loy, and Mae West. Sometimes, "empty" middle initials were used to lend prestige to a name, existing solely as alphabetic characters. All illiterate Americans tended to folk-etymologize any unfamiliar-sounding name. Thus, for example, when combined with the above mentioned desire for middle initials, this folk-etymologizing tendency enabled one to derive Romey O. Jones from Romeo Jones. The interesting phrase-name Walk A. Round seems to have been formed in this way, as were S. Peculiar and Piece O. Cake Johnson.

Many black names of possible African extraction have had their etymologies irretrievably blurred by approximate but incorrect transcriptions done by well-meaning clerks and parsons, comparable to the earlier corruption in the spelling of European names.[23] Some American names bear a definite phonetic similarity to African names, though listed by various researchers as unusual, non-African black names,

21 Henderson H. Donald, *The Negro Freedman* (New York: Schuma, 1952), p. 149.

22 Smith, *Treasury*, p. 146. Many of the names throughout the remainder of this essay were taken from Puckett, *Black*, pp. 471-525.

23 See Pine, pp. 14-15.

e.g., Bannaka, Caffa, Cogie, Quarry, Quash, Odie (all masculine names); and the feminine names Femba, Quessie, and Kizzie (in all its permutations: viz., Kisie, Kissie, Kiszie, etc.). Even remnants of Islamic naming, e.g., Rahad, are extant in the older literature. Antiquated onomastic studies noted that black American traditions showed "surviving African habits," which were mingled with the general American.[24] It was thought that the retention of African names during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was due to the prestige associated with things African, and, therefore, African names continued wherever the slave owners allowed them. Free blacks, since they chose their own names, had African names more commonly than did slaves. In fact, numerous traces of the attitudes and trends of African personal naming were apparent in America.

The need to change a name after emancipation would seem to be a straightforward attempt to discard memories of an unpleasant past, but could also have been due to a survival of the African tradition of taking new names in recognition of important happenings affecting the whole community. To be sure, the Gullahs granted certain names in honor of significant events. Whole Negro families would sometimes change their names when one family member was married, some having two or three complete names used in different situations.[25] For example, one school child, who was known to his parents as Joseph Black Thomas, invariably went by the name Marshall Black in the company of his playmates and in school was called Joseph Marshall. Negro children would frequently modify their names in school, some having a new one every day. Appellations conferred on blacks by outsiders were considered simply as temporary nicknames, or even less. It must be remembered that nicknames were quite fluid among various groups in Africa. Naturally some American blacks felt comfortable assuming names spontaneously. But in America as well as Africa the treatment of the real or birth-name, which was used only by family and close friends, was a serious matter.

The West African custom of chronicling current events in names has been well documented in America:[26] two babies born during a flood were named Highwater and Overflow (cf. the name Mvula [masculine] "Rain" from the Ngoni tribe); one girl bore the name Icy Blizzard. The

---

24 An example is Naomi C. Chappell, "Negro Names," *American Speech*, 4 (1929), 272-75.

25 See Turner, *Africanisms*, p. 12; Donald, pp. 50, 151; Herskovitz, *Myth*, p. 193; and Puckett, "Names," p. 475.

26 Puckett, "American," pp. 40-44; Mencken, p. 524; Chappell, p. 274; Smith, *Story*, pp. 112-14; and Dillard, *Black English*, p. 134.

two American phrase-names Predecessor Lincoln Destruction and Emancipation Freedom both record significant landmarks in history, while the appellations Pleasant Times and Hard Times bespeak the parents' state of affairs. Such naming served as a record-keeping device among illiterate peoples, as it originally had in Africa, especially among the Ibo. American names also memorialized circumstances or emotions intimately associated with the act of birth, e.g., Bleda, Born Young, Twenty Year, Never More, Wee Baby, Only Boy, Welcome Payne, Young Old,[27] Ouch Edwards, and Unexpected. Except for the feminine names Nauseous and Lonely, these names were predominantly masculine. Girls were frequently named for the time of their birth, especially if it was a pleasant or joyous occasion or holiday, e.g., Grace Thanksgiving Day In The Morning, April, Easter Glory Simpson, July, and Merry Christmas. Occasionally, boys also got such names, although not always for happy events, e.g., Sunday Night Supper Jones and War Baby. Day-names obviously fit into this same general onomastic *schema* based on time and current happenings.

The African praise or attributive name expressing hopes for the child's future, so common among the Yoruba, was also popular in the New World. Some examples are Fortune, Redemption, Refuge, Resolution, and Self Rising Taylor (all masculine); and the feminine names Altrue Lamar, Blessed B. Truly Blue, Esteem Mareem, Mercy (which is also a masculine name), Joy (cf. Aye "Joy" in Yoruba), and Precious Allgood. There appear to be more women's names than men's in categories of desired and religious characteristics. These American attributive or gift-names, describing developed qualities, were sometimes conferred later in life, e.g., Faithful Mary, Silky Love, Beautiful Love, and Blessed Life, taking the form of appellatives or epithets.[28] But this type of given-name was also bestowed on the very young. One baby from a set of twins remained completely unnamed for several months (cf. the recorded name Female), although his brother had already been named after their father. Noticing that the nameless baby was always laughing and smiling, the parents called him Pleasant Smiley.[29] A few other specimens of names derived from physical

---

27 Cf. the Yoruba belief that the very young and the very old are intimately related, since the young have just come from the place to which the old will soon go.

28 See Puckett, "Names," p. 485, n. 1.

29 The description of this incident, cited in Francis Gaither, "Fanciful Are Negro Names," *New York Times Magazine*, February 29, 1929, p. 19, sounds vaguely unconvincing. Perhaps the parents' real motives were not understood, another illustration of the care taken to conceal the real or birth-name.

characteristics are Two Bites, Pussy Face, Real Dimple, and Tiny Small. One little girl born after the death of her father was given the phrase-name Lucy Never Seen Joe, which seems to parallel the Ibo name Azunna "Back of Father," given to a baby born into the same unfortunate situation. Another feminine name, Neversene Naudena, may have arisen in the same manner.

Negroes took names from places, presumably memorializing the area where they were born or grew up, e.g., Atlantic City Joe, Boston Green, Dewey Meadows, City Baby, Indiana River, Lettuce Fields, Charlotte County, and Florida. Some American names were patently reminiscent of West African totems or clan names, despite their being thought of as nicknames, e.g., Frog, Bear, Catfish, Squirrel, Toad, Rat, Badger, Duck, Rabbitt, Raven, and Rodent, all of which are masculine names.[30] One of the only feminine appellations even remotely resembling a totem was Bee Attress, a clear folk-etymology derived from Beatrice. Indeed, though clan names appear to be almost exclusively masculine, women did have names relating to flora and fauna, e.g., Sweet Blossom, Love Bird, and Juniper. Just as twins were accorded special prescribed birth-names in Africa, e.g., the Yoruba names Taiwe and Kehinde, certain pairs of names for twins were formerly popular among American blacks, e.g., Pink and Chip, Cleola and Theola, Brick and Bat, and Avery and Ivory. Some of these may have been Anglicizations of earlier African names. Not surprisingly, a few American Negro given-names are direct translations of popular Ibo and Yoruba names, e.g., Mercy, Wealth, Law(yer), and King. African naming rites, such as those briefly mentioned previously, were brought to America. These ceremonies, which originated in Dahomey, Ghana, Nigeria, and Zaire, were once prevalent in the Sea Islands (South Carolina), Mississippi, and Haiti.

Suggestive of the African practice of giving the most unique names possible and attaching considerable prestige to the most memorable, blacks in America have often preferred romantic and unusual given-names, and continue to do so. A number of these romantic names have a foreign sound, as if they were taken from books or maps, e.g., Asia Minor Stone, Arabia Schribner, Cleoporia Manilla Turner, Roumania, Ophelia, Brazil, Lancelot, London Sistrunk, Lorenzo, and the phrase-name Ulsee Germany. This calls to mind how the Ibo once adopted the foreign-sounding English names and the Dahomians French names. Some of these alliterative and euphonic appellations, most of which

30 Herskovits, *Myth*, pp. 190-92; Mencken, p. 524; and Puckett, "Names," p. 486.

were feminine, came from the Bible, e.g., De Word of God, Prophet Ransom, King Solomon, Virgin Mary, Queen Esther, the phrase-name I Will Arise And Go Unto My Father, the three brothers Jonah, Judah, and Jubilee, Mizrach Shadrach Abednago, Ephesians, Hosannah, and Revelations. The deep religiosity of American blacks has been expressed in certain birth-names, which at times sounded more African than Biblical, e.g., God Be There and Gift of God (cf. Nyamekye [masculine] "Gift of God" in Akan, and Okechuku "Gift of God" in Ibo).

American Negroes retained phrase-names or story-names, sporadically recorded in Alabama and North Carolina. They could be quite long, in some extreme instances containing more than 50 elements.[31] Whether these were truly used as names is not certain. Story-names can be compared with "phrase-words" like forget-me-not. The terms "phrase-name" and "story-name," the latter being a lengthy version of the former, as well as most of the other types of naming themes discussed here, are merely cover terms used to describe particular naming constructions. They can be categorized simultaneously as other forms. It is noteworthy that so many of the Afro-American names can fit into several classes of naming customs coincidentally, almost as if purposefully conceived to do so. American phrase-names, like their West African counterparts, consist of groups of abstract concepts, aphorisms, epigrams, clichés, and maxims. A few examples of American phrase-names are Try And See; Who'd That It; George Washington American Life Ready To Fight Come Brave Boys The British Are About To Land Taylor; Tellsee; Let's Stay Here; Moses Locates Moody; and No More Cross. Some phrase-names were so formed that they were hardly recognizable as such, but examples are, by nature, hard to come by, e.g., Please Hyde and Izear Freeman may or may not be phrase-names.

Some American Negro names appear to have been taken from labels or packages, as Yoruba and Ibo nicknames were sometimes derived from inanimate and familiar objects, e.g., the male names: Iodine, Taxee, Thyroid, Vitamine, Wrigley Moon, and X.Y.Z. (cf. the woman's name Alpha Omega Campbell). Most representatives of this type of appellation are feminine, some apparently being taken from objects around the kitchen or house, e.g., Oleomargarine, Sylvania, Mazola, Listerine, Florida Orange, Kotex, and Superior Calculator. Product or brand names are very commonly found.

---

31 Smith, *Story*, p. 112.

Ancillary and Later Developments

Afro-American naming practices, particularly in the southern part of the United States, are often termed "fanciful." However, unusual names have been almost as common among southern whites.[32] A few examples of full names of white southern men include the brothers Glad and Merry Tydings, Vineyard Ballinger, Void Null, and Richmond Flowers; and the curious given-names Early Bird, Romeo, and Halley's Comet (cf. the memorializing of events in names of illiterate blacks). Some given-names for white males could have been derived from Negro names of African extraction, e.g., Dink, Duke, Cobie, Kope, Law (or Lawson), Obie, and Odie. Given-names for white women, like Capitola, Fredanna, Isophine, and Mountain Bird, were common enough in the South, but some also had an overt phonetic structure reminiscent of African naming, e.g., Chebis, Chebie, and Eafee. Many white names were taken from place-names, as were numerous black names, apparently memorializing the place of birth or upbringing. In a study carried out on the naming practices among rural whites of Virginia, it was found that often a given-name was the only name.[33] Patronymics were used when narrower description became essential: a father's name would be combined with his son's, e.g., Newt's John, or a mother's with her daughter's, e.g., Minnie's Lilie. This was the same pattern that one found in the plantation-names throughout the Western Hemisphere. Perhaps the blacks and whites in parts of the United States are showing parallel development of universal naming practices, a distinct possibility; but it is also conceivable that the influence of black naming on white naming has been more profound than previously recognized, particularly in the American South.

Although many Negroes in the mid-nineteenth century were concerned with giving themselves elegant and distinctive full names, some, like the whites in rural Virginia, never did acquire surnames. This fact has been attributed to loosely organized family structure, more or less based on a matriarchial system.[34] Indeed, names were transmitted

---

32 See Urban T. Holmes, "A Study in Negro Onomastics," *American Speech*, 5 (1930), p. 464; Puckett, "American," p. 36; and Puckett, *Black*, pp. 525-53.

33 M.M. Sizer, "Christian Names in the Blue Ridge of Virginia," *American Speech*, 8 (1933), pp. 34-37.

34 Smith, *Story*, p. 116. Relating to the following discussion, see Oran W. Eagleson, "Comparative Study of the Names of White and Negro Women College Students," *Journal of Social Psychology*, 21 (1945), 57-64; Puckett, "Names," p. 493; Smith, *Treasury*, p. 147; Holmes, p. 463; and Puckett, "American," pp. 37-39.

recurrently through the female line. Maternal descriptions continued to be employed in forming surnames, for instance, Walton son of Lindsey became Lindsey Walton. Seemingly feminine names belonged to men, probably due to the process just illustrated, e.g., Ethells, Dixie Bell, Ferdinia, Shirley, Nancy Crosley, Ruby, and Watsie Jeane. Negro women occasionally had masculine names, being named after their father or a male ancestor, for example, Richard Arthur Jackson, Jr., and the feminized Richardine (cf. names from famous men).

When large numbers of blacks began moving to the northern industrial areas during the First World War and afterward, surnames became a necessity. Service in the armed forces and work at jobs, where Social Security numbers later became obligatory, contributed to a stabilization and regularization of personal names. Increasingly, Negro names conformed to general American naming practices as blacks became more a part of the mainstream of American society. Many more black names, even in remote sections of the country, were patterned after the names of whites. Familiar given-names like Tom, Sam, and Joe, which had once been used as formal appellations, were replaced by more dignified, full given-names, *viz.* Thomas, Samuel, and Joseph. Popular surnames adopted by numerous Negroes who moved to the North during the early part of the twentieth century included Johnson, Williams, Williamson, Harris, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson, Jones, James, Thompson, Thomas, Davis, and Robinson. Some of these surnames had already been common among blacks for a long time.

There was a definite tendency toward disuse of non-English names by American blacks. Currently, however, corresponding to a growing awareness of the Afro-American cultural heritage, some black African names are being given. Those American Negroes subscribing to the Moslem religion customarily adopt Arabic names, e.g., Mohammed Ali, Ahmad Jamal, and Kareem Abdul Jabbar. Several popularly conceived books and articles have recently been written to aid American blacks in choosing an African name for their children or to substitute for or append to their American names.[35] But despite the

---

35 Among them are Bektemba Banyika, *Know and Claim Your African Name* (Dayton, Ohio: Rucker, 1975); Aleck H. Che-Mponda, *Soul by Name: Book of African Names* (Gary, Ind.: N.I.M.M. Educational Media, 1973); the anonymously produced article, "Some African Names for Your Baby," *African Progress*, 1 (June, 1971), 36-37; the Chucks-Orji book already mentioned, and a useful bibliography by H. Dwight Beers, entitled "African Names and Naming Practices," *Library of Congress Information Bulletin*, 36 (March 25, 1977), 206-07.

marginal popularity of African name borrowing in the United States, the personal naming practices of the vast majority of American Negroes still appear to be merging with the general American patterns.

University of Toronto

PLACE-NAME SYMPOSIUM

Readers of *Names* are reminded of the Connecticut Place-Name Symposium, which is held annually in early October under the auspices of the American Name Society in Willimantic, Connecticut. Those interested should write to Arthur or Gina Berliner, Mountain Road, Mansfield Center, Connecticut 06250.