

African Names: A Guide for Editors

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I am an African from Ghana, a country in West Africa, currently attending graduate school in the United States. Recently, some friends—mostly Americans—and I played a game that required finding someone born on the same day of the week. I was born on Tuesday and needed to find someone else born on Tuesday. Everyone I asked told me: “I don’t know what day of the week I was born on.” I was shocked!

If I had played that game in Ghana—particularly in the Central, Ashanti, and Eastern regions—I could have easily found a friend born on the appropriate day. All I would need to know is some friends’ names. In Ghana, sometimes you can guess the day on which someone was born from his or her name. For example, my son’s middle name is Kwame, which means that he was born on Saturday.

But more than sometimes revealing the day on which someone was born, many African names have special significance. And the presence of multiple cultures in the 53 African nations adds to the richness of African names and the difficulty in understanding them. Even in the developed world, some people of African heritage carry African names (for example, Barack Obama).

Science editors with knowledge of African names have a better chance of appropriately attributing, citing, and indexing the many articles that people with African names have written for English-language journals. Having knowledge of African names will also help in communicating with African authors and editors.

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African Names: Before Western Influence

If you go to some African countries where Europeans settled, such as Ghana and Nigeria, you may find such surnames as Ferguson and Johnson. But Africans did not have such names before the Europeans arrived. They had their own naming system that reflected the numerous languages they spoke.

For instance, Ghana, a country of more than 22 million people, has 46 languages. Akan is the language spoken by the largest ethnic group—the Akans. In a paper titled “The Sociolinguistic of Akan Personal Names”,¹ Kofi Agyekum, of the University of Ghana, identified clusters of names. Examples included names based on kinship, days of the week, circumstances of birth, flora and fauna, and occupation.

The Yoruba naming system (in Nigeria) resembles the Akan naming system. Akintunde Akinyemi,² of the University of Florida, has listed bases of Yoruba names. For example, some Yoruba names are related to the birth of the child (often describing the physical condition of the baby at delivery, its posture at birth, or its birth order). Some indicate the family’s social status and professional affiliation, and some are intended to ward off evil spirits that could harm the child. Akinyemi has written: “Tradition allows parents, grandparents, great grandparents, relations, and family friends to give names to a newborn during the naming ceremony. Therefore, a Yoruba child may have as many as 5 or 6 names; however, one name will be used more than the others when people address him or her later in life. In the final analysis, it is the biological parents who decide on the name that a child will eventually use.”^{2, p 116}

In his book *Traditional African Names*, Jonathan Musere indicates that in African societies there is no limit to the number of names that one may have. “These names go along with various factors, so that right

from infancy this process of naming can continue throughout one’s life,”^{3, p 7} Musere notes. It is believed that as the names accumulate, so do one’s prestige and social standing within the community.¹ Such names include chieftaincy titles or appellations. For instance, the king of the Asante Kingdom of Ghana—Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu II—used to be called Nana Kwaku Dua.⁴ “Nana” means “chief or king”, so even before he ascended to the throne, his name portrayed him as king. “Otumfuo” (meaning the “all powerful”) adds another dimension to his social standing.

Science editors would not find it easy to address or cite people with many names. Luckily, Western influence has simplified the task.

African Names: The Influence of Western Culture

During the European scramble for Africa in the 19th century, there was widespread introduction of schools and foreign religions (notably Christianity). In part thereby, Europeans also influenced the naming system. For example, consider a scenario in which a child had five names. Teachers faced the dilemma of which one to enter into a class register. “At school, most people would now use their fathers’ or sponsors’ name, or combine names of these people with their own names,” Agyekum wrote.^{1, p 226}

Religion also has had a big influence on African names. For example, Akinyemi noted^{2, p 120} that many worshippers of Yoruba hero-deities who became Christians replaced the prefixes of objects of their worship with the new prefix—*Olu*. *Olu* is the shortened form of *Oluwa*, the Almighty God.

Some Western versions of African names are translations into English. For instance, in one group in Ghana, *Dua* (meaning tree or board) has been translated to *Woode*, and *Kuntu* (blanket) has become *Blankson*

(son of Kuntu), Agyekum has noted.

Because of Christian influence, such biblical names as Elizabeth, Mary, John, and Peter are also common in Africa. The male names are usually given names, but some—such as Abraham, John, and Michael—can be family names.

Islam has influenced African names, particularly in nations in which Islam is practiced. “Africa, from the Sahara Desert northwards, is almost entirely Islamic and is generally considered more a part of the Arab world than Africa,”^{5, p xx} Julia Stewart, author of *African Names: Names from the African Continent for Children and Adults*, has noted. “A heavy Muslim influence exists in sub-Saharan Africa where at least fifteen countries have a Muslim majority.”^{5, p xx} Stewart has noted that in the west African country of Senegal, *Malik* is a popular Muslim male name meaning “king”; in North Africa, *Mahmoud*—a Muslim male name meaning “fulfillment”—is popular.^{5, p 87}

An article by Beth Notzon and Gayle Nesom titled “The Arabic Naming System,”⁶ which appeared in the January–February 2005 issue of *Science Editor*, may be useful in understanding Muslim African names.

African Names: The Case of Ethiopia

Ethiopia, which has had less European influence than many other African countries, has retained a distinctive naming system.

At the 2009 CSE annual meeting, I met an Ethiopian science editor. “Hello, Dr Mitike, I am Bernard Appiah, and I am from Ghana.” No sooner had I finished than my Ethiopian colleague replied, “I am not Dr Mitike.” “I’m sorry,” I apologized. He had already told me he is a physician from Ethiopia. I had seen “Abraham Mitike” on his name tag and had assumed that the last name was the surname, but I was wrong. He took my note pad and wrote on it his full name as “Abraham Haileamlak Mitike”. “Mitike is the name of my grandfather. My father’s name is Haileamlak, but we Ethiopians do not

use our fathers’ [and grandfathers’] names as surnames,” he said. “We try to keep our ancient culture. Westernization didn’t abolish it yet.”

Dr Abraham (I’ve got it now) told me that usually an Ethiopian name follows the sequence given name, father’s name, and grandfather’s name. Thus, his daughter’s name is Asrat (*given name*) Abraham (*father’s name*) Haileamlak (*grandfather’s name*). “When we write scientific papers to international journals, they consider our grandfathers’ names as our surnames. This is not good,” Abraham said. He advises international journals to inquire of authors from Ethiopia which names they should use as surnames and given names.

African Names: When There Is No Western “Flavor”

Ghana’s first president, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, had a Western name—Francis. But his “nationalistic” agenda made him drop it. Some Africans, like Nkrumah, do not like to include any Western name. Not only are the adults with foreign names dropping them, they are refraining from giving their children foreign names.

When an African name lacks any Western “flavor”, even compatriots may sometimes find it difficult to differentiate a given name from a surname. The challenge for foreign science editors is even greater. To make it easier, some national publications in Africa list names with surnames first, followed by a comma and given and other names. Schools often use this system in the listing of students. Chances are higher that a child who is used to responding to, for instance, “Nkrumah, Kwame” is likely to introduce himself as “Nkrumah Kwame” instead of “Kwame Nkrumah.” In Uganda, this has resulted in a phenomenon that James Tumwine—editor of *African Health Sciences*—has termed the Ugandan National Examination Board Disease.

Tumwine often encounters Ugandan authors “infected” by the “disease”. He said that authors who follow the manner in which the Ugandan National Examination Board lists their names often

complain that their surnames are missing when their articles are indexed in international databases. Therefore, he has been advising authors to list their surnames last.

Editors Dealing with African Names

Author guidelines sometimes provide directions on surnames and given names. But Abraham notes that some authors don’t read these guidelines. “When you write to them [about the need to specify their surnames], some even become offended,” he said.

The *Ghana Medical Journal* has a solution for the problem. “We tell our authors to abbreviate their given and other names while maintaining their surnames,” says David Ofori-Adjei, editor-in-chief. However, that solution poses its own challenges for editors and writers. I recently wanted to quote an author of an article in the *Ghana Medical Journal* for a feature story I was writing. I had to make some calls to obtain the researcher’s given name. Another problem is differentiating researchers or authors. For example, Appiah B. could be Appiah Bernard, Appiah Barbara, or Appiah Benjamin.

Kathleen Spaltro, in her book *Genealogy and Indexing*, said that when she was indexing names of people in rural Ghana, an academician advised her to “index most of the names in direct order, saying that’s how the bearers were referred to both in speech and in writing.”^{7, p 110}

Some Advice for Editors, Authors, and Indexers

General guidelines regarding African names are necessary. The following may be helpful:

- Don’t assume that the order of an African author’s name follows Western style. If in doubt, ask the author.
- Recognize that someone’s surname may be another person’s given name. Half-knowledge may sometimes be more costly than ignorance. Again, ask the author.
- African and other journals must make

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it clear in their author guidelines how authors should indicate surnames and other names. Authors must follow such guidelines. Adopting a common guideline will help authors be consistent in writing their names.

- If you talk with someone who has an African name, ask him or her for the correct pronunciation. “Nationalistic” Africans may not take it kindly if you “Westernize” their names. I have an African friend who will even write the phonetic pronunciation of his name to help foreigners pronounce it well.
- For the name of any given African author, authors, editors, and indexers should be consistent in how they attribute, cite, and index it. ♪

References

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Some Resources on African Names

Web Sites

Behind the Name: African Names

www.behindthename.com/glossary/view/african_names

The site gives the etymology and history of African first names with their meanings. The names are grouped into Eastern, Southern, and Western African names. Although the languages of origin are stated, the countries of origin are not given.

Families Online Magazine: Baby Names—African

www.familiesonlinemagazine.com/baby-names/african.html

The site has a table of African names, their meanings, origin (language and country), and sex. Sometimes, the order of presentation is inconsistent.

The NameSite

www.namesite.com

This lists African personal names with meanings and correct pronunciation. It indicates the language, country, and region (for example, East Africa) of the names. It also includes the sex.

TLC Africa—African Names

www.tlcafrica.com/african_names.htm

The Liberian Connection—Africa is an online magazine that has entries on African names with particular emphasis on Liberia, Ghana, Zambia, and South Africa. It also features Islamic names on the African continent. Most of the names are not explained.

Books

Adebayo B. *Dictionary of African Names. Vol.1: Meanings, Pronunciations and Origin.* Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse; 2005.

This book lists African names, their meanings, ethnicity and country of origin, and English phonetic pronunciation.

Hodari AJ. *The African Book of Names: 5,000+ Common and Uncommon Names from the African Continent.* Deerfield Beach, FL: HCI; 2009.

This book has African names organized by theme from 37 countries and at least 70 ethnolinguistic groups. It gives the spiritual, social, and political importance of names.

Musere J. *Traditional African Names.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc; 1999.

This is a compilation of 6000 names and their meanings from some central, eastern, and southern African countries, such as Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia.

Stewart J. *1001 African Names: First and Last Names from the African Continent.* New York: Citadel; 2000.

This book provides the meanings of African names and shows Africa’s rich naming traditions.

Zawawi SW. *African Muslim Names: Images and Identities.* Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press; 1998.

This book discusses the social and cultural significance of African Muslim names and the values that they portray.