The Significance of Names to Christians in Africa: a preliminary investigation

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Introduction

In their book, Issues in Christian Theology, Ndewga et al. (1998) aptly describe the three worlds that African Christians have to contend with, as follows:

There is, first of all, the world of Christian faith represented by the Bible, he studies the church where he worships and a special religious vocabulary filled with words with personal meaning, words like “born again,” “justified,” “spirit filled” and, above all, “saved.” But there is a second world. It is the world of African culture represented by the name he bears, the ancestry to which he belongs, and the headlines of the daily newspaper, alive with political, economic, intellectual, and social pulsations.... Mumo’s third world is the world of modern culture. His Levy jeans, his Sony cassette player and his Michael Jordan poster pasted to the wall of his dimly lit room....

This paper attempts to describe an aspect of the first two worlds, represented by the names of the African Christians. My interest in this subject started as early as when I was baptized into the Church of England, now known in Kenya as Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK). It was during the “Emergency”, a period during which movement was restricted, due to the fight for independence in Kenya, in 1952.

Since my parents had not been married in church, I was required to go for baptismal classes. Members of the Mau Mau movement, called “terrorists” by the British Colonial government but “Freedom Fighters” by the local people, threatened to kill those who attended the classes. These were seen as betrayers of the national cause by following the religion of the enemy. All the others stopped attending and so I was baptized with small children who did not have to attend the classes. Although the threat was not carried out on me, I wondered why both the Christians and the members of the Mau Mau movement considered baptism so important.

Moreover, the missionaries insisted that one chose a Western name for baptism, “in order to radically cut oneself from traditional values and identify oneself with the new community of Christians.” It was rumoured that the white missionaries thought that African names were associated with evil spirits, something that no Christian would like to be holding on to.

There was no place for questions, one had to do what was required. So I chose the name “Mary” (the mother of Jesus) because I had always been fascinated by her story, especially her faith in God. Many of my friends discouraged me saying the name was too common, (gacanga býryí, in my Gíykýyí language), but I stuck to it. After all, she was the Mother of God and a very special person in the history of the church. Later, I met a girl who had kept her African name after baptism and I learnt that people were now able to use African names for baptism, but this was after Kenya got her political independence.

When I joined the Alliance Girls High School in 1960, my name was given from the previous school as “Mary Nyambura Jimnah”. Nyambura was my personal name, given to me after my maternal grandmother, and Jimnah was my father’s baptismal name. Soon after arriving at Alliance, I was informed that I had to use my “family” name. None of us were used to that concept, so I decided to use my father’s African name “Kimori”. Later I discovered that that was not his real name, it was a nick name given to him when he was young because of his big body, which was like a big banana tree mori, with the added prefix “ký” to indicate a big one, the opposite of “ka” meaning small. His real family name was Mýthyíita and he also had an age set name Macharia. This refers to the age of those who search for wealth.

When I changed my name on the exercise books, I forgot to change in one. It had been taken by a teacher for grading, and when it came back I had already changed the others. The next time I handed it in for grading, the
teacher called me to find out why I had two different names. I tried to explain, but she said that only thieves use different names. The comment made me very angry, but also made me interested in finding out more about the meaning of names.

The main objective of this paper, therefore, was to find out from as many African ethnic groups as possible, but within a very limited time of three weeks, what their naming systems are, and what significance each of the names has for the individual and to the community. I was especially interested in finding out what changes are taking place with regard to the choice of baptismal names, now that African countries have become independent of the colonial powers, and the missionaries are no longer in control of the African Church to the same degree as they were during the colonial period.

The exploratory research reported in this paper was done as part of a course on “The Gospel and Culture”, at Tangaza College in Nairobi, Kenya. Since there was very little time for the fieldwork, a properly structured interview was difficult to administer, so the informants supplemented information from the works cited with answers to the following basic questions. What are all your names? How and when did you acquire each of those names? What value does each of the names have for you?

As an African
As a Christian
As a young/older person
As a member of your denomination
As a man/woman
As a member of your ethnic group
As a member of your profession

What other comment do you have on the issue of names? A further limitation was that within the available time it was not possible to interview representatives of most of the African ethnic groups. Yet, though it may not be appropriate to generalize my findings, this is a significant first step in trying to understand the cultural significance of names among the African people. The analysis also points to the underlying African philosophy. The method of analysis was mainly an attempt to categorize African names according to meanings attached to them. Seven categories were arrived at, as described in the following section of the paper.

A Description of the Results of the Field Work
A total of seventeen (17) people from different linguistic groups were interviewed as per the summary found at the end of this paper. Nine of these were women and seven were men. They were all confessing Christians from different walks of life. Most of them, except four, had some university education. Two were young, one elderly and the rest were middle aged. The following denominations were represented: Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, African Independent Church, Legio Maria, and a number of mainstream Protestant Churches. Following is a summary of the main findings.

Seven types of names were identified as follows:
Personal
Family
Baptismal
Age group
Wedding
Euphemisms
Nick names

Personal Names
Everyone interviewed said she or he had a personal name. These normally differed according to the sex of the person and the different linguistic groups had various ways of generating the names. The main ways were:

Using family or national events
For example among one group in Tanzania, it is common to give a child a name related to the events that took place in the family during the mother’s pregnancy. An example is the name Kokuhumbya. It was given to one of my informants because her father was attacked by thugs and stayed in hospital for three months. The day after he was discharged from the hospital, their daughter was born. She was given the name, which means, “to rescue.” It was believed that her innocence, and his desire to see his child were what rescued him from death. Another example is Kokugonza, which means to love, and is given to the child of a couple that had a good relationship.

Among the Dinka of Southern Sudan, a name such as Agot which means “to quarrel” is used. The name is given to a child if the parents had a quarrel before the child was born. Also among the Amhara of Ethiopia, a name like Semeret, which means “success”, is given to a girl if her parents succeed in business or in other ways during pregnancy. Belete or Hivet means “greater” or “great life” and is given to boys to denote a national event such as the Communist occupation of Ethiopia.

**Names that denote the child’s position in the family**

Among the Basaar of Togo, the first boy in the family is called Kpapu and the girl is Walim. The second boy is Tchandikou and the second girl Agbassi. The Nandi of the Congo also uses the same system. Kanyere means the first-born girl and Paluku/Zanzu/Mumbere the first-born boy. Kavila is the second born girl and Kabale the second born boy. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria the first-born boy is usually named Majisola, meaning, “wake to honour.”

**Names that denote one’s Clan**

This is a system used among the Agykyyi of Kenya. The personal names among the girls are those of the ten clans. These, according to a creation myth, were given by the mother and father of the clan, Gikyyi and Mymbi, to their ten daughters, referred to as “nine full” because mentioning the real number may bring a bad omen. Since they did not have any sons, they prayed and Ngai (God) brought to them ten handsome young men who married their daughters. So the name Wambyi gives the Ambiyi clan its name and so do the others; (Wachera, Wairimyi, Wanjikyi, Wangaryi, Wanjiryi, Wangyi, Warigia and Warithya).

**Names after a relative who has recently died or a good friend**

Among the Kisii of Kenya, most of these names are given to children at birth, however, among some groups in Tanzania, the child is called Mwana until the first tooth appears and then the grandfather gives the name. Among the Yoruba, the naming ceremony takes place on the eighth day, after consultation among family members.

**A new trend**

A girl from the Luhya language group of Kenya told me she was given the name Violet. She came from a mixed marriage and because her mother liked the colour by that name, she gave it to her daughter as her personal name. This is a new trend, which was exemplified in other types of names as will be seen in the ensuing discussion.

**Family Names**

Every one of those interviewed said that in addition to a personal name she/he had a family name. Most groups use mother, father, grandmother, or grandfather’s name as a family name. In some cases they use great or great grand parents’ names. Among some of the groups, for example the Kisii of Kenya, the relative has to be dead. However, the trend is changing and some people may be named after living relatives. My informant said he named a child after his mother who is still alive to make sure her name continues, since he was not likely to have any more children.

Among the Agykyyi of Kenya, children are named after both dead and living relatives. The first girl is named after the father’s mother, while the first boy is named after the father’s father. The second girl is named after the mother’s mother and the boy after the mother’s father. After that the names of mother’s and father’s brothers and sisters are used alternately. It is considered a great insult not to name one’s children after one’s parents. However, this tradition is also changing and a few people choose other names for their children.

Groups that do not use parents’ or grandparents’ names include the Nandi of the Congo, who may use the name of a loved relative. My Yoruba informant also said this often happens among her people, for example, her name
Olajumoke was given to her after her great auntie, who is still alive, because she is very highly respected. The name means, “Together we shall look after/spoil her”. The Amharic-speaking people may also give names according to what the parents wish for their children. For example, Tiyyale means “my shadow” or “you will be my future.” The Nandi may also use “meaningful” names such as Matabisi, which means, “A gift from God.”

**Baptismal names**

As mentioned earlier, most of those who were colonized had to take a Western name at baptism. Those not colonized, as in Ethiopia, were not forced but some chose to do so. For example, those converting from Islam, in order to distinguish themselves as Christians chose new names after baptism. Most of these do not belong to the Orthodox Church, for example the Dinka, but they normally use their Western names only on official occasions, rather than on a daily basis.

An exceptional case is that of the Congo where, according to my informant, when Mobutu Sese Seko became president, he banned Western names for everybody, whether they were Christians or not. This was in line with his philosophy of “Authenticity.” So, although the churches gave their converts Western names, these were never used officially. Other Africans have also questioned the use of Western names and some churches now even encourage the use of African names for baptism. However, a few such as the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church still insist on Western names. One of my informants said he had to leave an SDA to join a Catholic church because he did not want to use Western names for his children.

I have used the term “Western” deliberately because I do not think there is anything inherently Christian in a Western name. A useful distinction that might be made is between Western and “Biblical” names. It would make more sense to me if Africans had been asked to take on Biblical names. It is not that those are inherently Christian, but people would at least know something about the people who had used those names. It would make sense if one chose the name of a character she/he admired and gave it to his or her daughter. Such a system, I was informed, has been used in the Catholic Church where one is given a list of names of Saints to choose from.

**Age Group Names**

Some groups have additional names for all those who are initiated into adulthood at the same time. Among the Agikyy, most men’s names are for those who get circumcised at the same time. A common name is Mwangi, which, according to tradition, means “those who are scattered” because they went to different parts of the country to look for wealth. Other such names include Maina and Irungu.

**Wedding Names**

I was only able to get one example of such names. My Dinka informant explained that the family of the bridegroom gives such names to a prospective bride. If they like her they give a beautiful name like “different gold” and if they do not like her, they give her an ugly name such as, “he is greater than you.” It is clear that the name is likely to cause a lasting enmity between the two families, if the man decides to go ahead and marry a bride that his family does not approve of.

**Euphemistic Names**

Euphemism is a characteristic of most cultures. Such names among Africans are meant to “cheat death.” They are used when one child dies and another is born. The family feels that by using a different, and often an ugly name, death will not be interested in the second child and it will therefore survive. Among the Agikyy, a girl child is named Njoki, “The one who has come back” and a boy is called Kariuki, “The one who has risen from death.” If yet another child dies, animal names are used such as Ngary (Leopard) or Ngatia (Lion). A similar system is found among the Nandi of Congo, where the name Yalala means “rubbish” and Kaburi Kamangoya means, “The grave is waiting.” The same system is found among the Luhya and Embu groups in Kenya.

**Nicknames**
Africans, like many other people in the world, use nicknames for their children. For example, my father had a nickname for each of his four children, such as \textit{Wamýgoto} and \textit{Nyaitýrýrý}. The \textit{Dinka} people use mainly animal names for those thought to have similar characteristics. \textit{Agok} means monkey, \textit{Majok} means black and white bull, \textit{Akol} means the sun and \textit{Koor} means a lion. The \textit{Gykyy} name \textit{Mycai} also started as a nickname to mean “the one who sighs.” Such names are then integrated into the language and sometimes people do not even remember how they started.

**Other Origins of African Names**

In addition to those already mentioned above, there were other origins:

**Time of birth**

Among the \textit{Luo} of Kenya, a boy born at midday is called \textit{Ochieng} and a girl \textit{Achieng}. Also among the \textit{Akamba}, a boy born at night is \textit{Mutuky} and a girl \textit{Nduky}. Another group with a similar system are the \textit{Embu}, who name one born at night \textit{Nduku} or \textit{Nduma} and one born during the day \textit{Muthenya}.

**Dreams**

In some groups, dreams are used to decide names. These are supposed to indicate the wishes of the ancestors, some of whom dictate the specific names to be used. According to my informant, this happens when there are problems, for example when a child is deformed and the ancestor rejects the name, or a child cries all the time after birth. In such circumstances, the diviner revokes the name already given to the child.

**Famous people**

Among the \textit{Luo}, children are named after famous people like Kenyatta, the first Kenyan president or Mandela, the first black president of South Africa.

**Meanings Attached to African Names**

Although there were slight differences among the informants, the following interpretations were common.

**Personal names**

Personal names are for individual identity. Each person is unique and must be recognized and respected. There is, therefore, the tendency to identify him or her with specific characteristics, events, position in the family and so on.

**Family names**

Family names, on the other hand, link the individual with the community, clan, or linguistic group. An individual does not exist alone; he is part and parcel of her or his forefathers, through the family name.

**Baptismal names**

These names signify the initiation to a new community of faith. However, the requirement to choose a foreign name has now come to be seen as unnecessary, even cruel. It forced people to “cut off their roots” without offering a valid alternative, since an African will always be one and never become an American or a European. However, a few informants, especially Roman Catholics, said they were grateful for their “Saintly” names because they give them the motivation to be holy. One informant even believes that whenever she prays through her “namesake” saint she gets answers to those prayers.

A few people felt that choosing an African name for baptism does not clearly distinguish a person as a Christian. One informant said that the Western name strengthens his personal identity in that there are very many people in his area with the same African name but very few with his baptismal name.

In some groups women do not have to change their names after marriage. In such cases the baptismal name does not affect the woman’s status. In other groups, however, the situation is very complex, in that if she wants to keep her father’s name, she may have to drop her baptismal name legally in order to have three legal names. A case in
point is of one of my informants whose name was Janet Wambíyi Mýchiri. After marriage she became Wambíyi Mýchiri Mwagýru, the last name being that of her husband. Some felt that dropping a name is like losing a part of yourself. One informant said she kept her baptismal name because her husband liked it and another because it had become part of her identity.

An interesting case is that of one who disliked her name Rebecca. When she read the Bible story of the mother with this name, who showed favouritism to her children. Rather than drop it, she prayed that she would become a better mother to her children. This was mainly because she did not want to show disrespect to her parents who had chosen it for her. All the women interviewed said it was unfair to expect women to change their names after marriage because they lose part of their identity.

**Age group names**

These names were a way of forging unity among members. The name also gives a general description of their characteristics. The names are valued because they mark an important stage in life, that of becoming an adult.

**Wedding names**

Wedding names are an expression of the attitude of the new family towards a prospective bride, to let her know whether she is liked or not. Interestingly enough, bridegrooms are not given any names. Depending on whether the name is good or bad, a bride is expected to change her behaviour accordingly and live up to expectations.

**Euphemistic names**

Euphemistic names are used to protect the new born from death. According to my Nandi informant, for example, when a child is called Yalala, meaning “rubbish”, one is telling Death that she is not worth coming for. Among the Agykyyi, names like Ngary may mean the child has the power of a lion to fight death or that he is not a human being, so not worth Death’s efforts.

**Nicknames**

Nicknames may be used to tease, for example, Agok in Dinka means, “monkey.” They may be used to express love and endearment, for example Kanini Kega, which in Gikyiy means “small but good.” Other nicknames express the observed characteristics of the individual, for example Nyachae, which among the Kisii of Kenya means the “one who drinks a lot of tea.”

**A Discussion of Findings**

In this section, my aim is to integrate the findings from the field research with the theoretical aspects encountered, both in class and in the literature on the Gospel and African culture. It is therefore an attempt to compare the concepts learnt with the specific experience in the field.

Gyekye (187-194) summarizes African cultural values through the use of “maxims” or proverbs. I have chosen ten of his maxims to illustrate some of the values. It would be easy to find equivalent proverbs in other language groups, but I have only given examples from my own group, the Agykyyi.

1. Nothing is as painful as when one dies without leaving a child behind.
2. When a person descends from heaven, she/he descends into a human society or human habitation.
3. Because God does not like evil, he gave each person a name.
4. All human beings are the children of God; no one is a child of the earth.
5. When a person dies he or she is not really dead.
6. The fingers of the hand are not equal in length.
7. The lizard does not eat pepper for the frog to sweat.
8. In the extremes of need, a human being will live in the forest (like an animal).
9. The judge has no preferences.
10. Wisdom creates well-being.
The first five maxims are very relevant to the topic of names, while the other five illustrate general values of African societies. The first is the great love of children. As described in the foregoing sections, parents in the African communities go through a lot of trouble to get appropriate names for their children. The reason, according to one of my informants, is that the name is believed “to bear the spirit of the person after whom the child is named.” This is what is generally known as “nominal reincarnation.” In fact among many groups, the expression used to refer to the person whose name is given to the child is “so and so has been born by her or his son or daughter”.

Moreover, the relationship between the child and the wife or husband is described in adult terms, for example, “Your daughter or son has given you a wife or husband”. Consequently, many African societies have naming ceremonies, some very simple and others very elaborate. Through these ceremonies, the spirit of the ancestor is expected to inhabit the newborn baby. To illustrate the importance of children, are the many taboos that are put on pregnant women or those who have just given birth. It must be remembered, however, that a boy is always more important than a girl in many African societies, as will become evident in the ensuing discussion. For example, according to my Luo informant, these are some taboos that surround pregnancy and birth:

• If the first wife does not give birth to a boy, the second wife of the same man has to deliver in a neighbour’s house.
• No man should be present during birth.
• The mother of a newborn baby does not cook. The co-wives cook for her.
• Midwives have to be given a chicken. They bury the placenta where it can be found if it is needed, for example, if no baby boy is born, the placenta is buried in another place.

Among the Embu people, on the other hand:
• The payment of the bride price has to be completed.
• All curses have to be neutralized by slaughtering the necessary number of goats.
• The pregnant woman must not eat eggs.
• She must not carry fire at night.
• She must not get into contact with a barren woman.
• She must not eat meat of an animal caught in a snare.
• She must not touch a corpse.
• The husband must not go hunting.
• The couple may not have sex.
• She must go through purification rights.

There are many other taboos among other African people. A modern person may dismiss these taboos as simply superstition. But a closer look will reveal an underlying theme, the protection of the child from harmful influence. There is almost a parallel with the Jewish Nazarine laws recorded in the Bible. At baptism, therefore, when one is given another name that is supposed to replace the one given by the community, “Giving that name up was social death”, according to Oduyoye (1995). She goes on to explain that at baptism.

The African Christian did literally receive a new name. Not only was it new, it was also strange, but pronounced to be the “best.” But the same name also brought the “stigma” of being a renegade from one’s primal groups.

According to the second maxim, each person belongs to a human society. One enters the society through birth and leaves it at death. The naming ceremony ushers the child into his or her society. Baptism also ushers the individual into the family of God. A difficulty arises in that there is no such a thing as a Christian society but Christians belong too many and varied social groups. How are they to reconcile the two societies? According to Oduyoye, some African Christians have sought to reconcile the two naming ceremonies by asking a Christian priest to baptize the child in the context of the traditional naming ceremony. But are the two covenants coterminous? Theologizing our baptism as African Christians means examining the implications of our two names, African and Christian, and the two covenants involved in the ceremonies that incorporate us into the two communities.

The Yoruba people of Nigeria have tried to solve the problem described above by recognizing that some of the African names are dedicated to African divinities and so should not be used for Christian baptism. For example, Oguntade, which means the God of iron. These so called “fetish” names have been changed for Christians to Olutade in which Olu means Lord as in “the Lord Jesus.”

Another way of dealing with the problem has been to recognize that the so called “Christian names” are not all good or meaningful. So Christians try to make up names that have meaning for them, hence the saying among the
Yoruba, ‘You look at a house before you name the child’. An example of this is the Shambala name Eliapenda, which means “God loves”, and the Kenyan Kiswahili names Imani and Pendo, which mean “peace” and “love”, respectively.

The third maxim points to the individuality of each person, though still a member of the community. Each person has an individual identity and responsibility, although all are the children of God, according to the fourth maxim, this arises from the belief that each person has a personal spirit, “Chi” or “Kra”, and so can, to a large extent, map his or her destiny. This was clearly demonstrated by my informants by distinguishing the role of the personal name as that of individual identity while that of the family name was to make them belong to their specific communities, the two, therefore, complementing each other.

The fifth maxim shows that Africans believe in life after death. That life is not divorced from the current life, because before one is born, she/he belongs to the unborn members of that community and returns to it when she/he dies. Immediately after death they are the “living dead” and later they become the “ancestors.” The family name maintains that relationship by perpetuating the values and characteristics of the ancestors. Christians, especially the Roman Catholics seem to have a similar system through the concept of “The Saints.” Many informants said they were named after saints so that they can emulate their character. Others also said that their names were chosen based on the character of the person, whether a member of the family or not.

According to the sixth maxim, all people are not equal; some are richer or poorer than others. This was used in some societies to conclude that people should be content with what they have and not aspire to a different social status. The Church has been accused of exploiting a similar concept, for example by Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1982):

The white man had arranged it all
To completely soften our hearts.
To completely cripple our minds with religion!
And they had the audacity to tell us
That earthly things were useless.

However, the same maxim could be interpreted as pointing to the diversity of the human race, in which everyone has a unique role. This would compare well with the Christian idea of a God who deals individually and differently with different people and gives them unique gifts for the building of the Body of Christ, the Church. Though with many parts, it is still one.

The seventh maxim follows logically, in that individuals should be responsible for their actions. This, however, did not happen all the time in the African society where some people, especially women, suffered for other peoples’ sins. A case was narrated to me where, among the Kisa of Kenya, a woman is blamed for giving birth to twins, as if she alone was responsible for it. She is abused by the community and given Manyasi, that is a herbal drink to cleanse her and she is shaved by a hired person, because she has brought a bad omen to the community. There are many instances, even in the Bible, of female oppression, for example the woman caught in adultery was to be stoned, but not the man she committed it with. Jesus clearly showed which side he was on when he asked anyone who had not sinned to cast the first stone. Unfortunately, the African societies continue to oppress women in the name of culture and the church has not done any better, whenever it has failed to speak out against such injustices.

Moreover, the attitude that women are inferior to men seems to be supported by some interpretations of the creation story. Eve sinned by eating the fruit of knowledge, between good and evil, and by giving it to her husband, Adam. The issue that such an interpretation seems to avoid is that Adam was the one given the command not to eat and so should have explained it to Eve, rather than eating without question. Moreover, he was not forced to eat it but did it voluntarily. Also in the New Testament, wives are supposed to submit to their husbands, which is interpreted as a sign of inferiority, rather than the two being complementary, as I believe it is meant to be. The issue of women being as fully human as men, is yet to be faced by both traditional and current religious and civil authorities.

One example of the discrimination against women narrated to me was the requirement that African women should renounce their maiden names and adopt those of their husbands. It was, however, heartening to learn that some women are defying this demand and keeping their father’s names and either adding those of their husbands or leaving them out completely. Unfortunately, some of us did not have that choice.
The *eighth maxim* refers to what happens when people face problems like exploitation, violence, or extreme poverty. This is the theme of Ngugi’s play referred to earlier. It hints at the potential evil found in every human being. This may manifest itself through witchcraft, according to African Traditional Religion. On the other hand, it is attributed to the original sin committed by our first parents, Adam and Eve, or the devil, among Christians.

The *ninth and tenth maxims* point us to issues of justice, and the need to live a good happy life here and now. Injustice and prejudice are main themes in the encounter between the Gospel and African culture. For example, Pobee (1996) discusses the issue of syncretism, which reveals much prejudice against Africans. He says, “An obsession with rooting out superstition and syncretism is in fact typical of many discussions of the relation of Christian faith to African cultures.”

There seems to be a conflict between Christianity and African Traditional religion on the matter of “wellbeing.” Christians are urged to persevere in life until they get to heaven, which is in opposition to the “abundant life” promised by Jesus. The Africans, on the other hand, believe in making the best of life here and now. This was manifested through the love of feasts and the significance of sharing meals as a way of promoting unity and reconciliation. Goats, chickens, and even cows are slaughtered at various ceremonies, including those of naming. Any attempts of enculturation of the Gospel must, therefore address issues of justice and not mere charity as well as ensure a good life.

A major problem that many African Christians have not yet understood is the discrepancy between the message of the missionaries and their lifestyles. For example, they preached that Christians should not be concerned about material wealth while they lived comfortably among the poor. They also preached that drinking alcohol was sinful but those who worked for them found alcoholic drinks in their fridges. This had a very negative effect, especially for those who were educated in Britain. When they came back they renounced their “Christian names” and said they did not want to have any association with “hypocrites.”

My personal reaction when I went to the United Kingdom was that the missionaries had not made much distinction between Western culture and Christianity. Many times what they passed on to the African was not “Christian” but Western. Of course the African had no way of distinguishing the two. On the other hand, because they did not understand African culture, they damned everything as “pagan.” This has made many Africans want to go back to “their roots” and find out what they can still salvage from their culture and integrate it with “Biblical Christianity.”

Oduyoye (1995) has coined what I think is a very appropriate metaphor for the situation just described. She says that Christianity in Africa is “a potted plant.” The African may continue watering it but it will never grow to the full potential until the Western cultural pot is broken and Christianity is planted in the African cultural soil. This will take many years, but I believe it is a task worth doing. A study such as this is a tentative step in that direction. Understanding that a problem exists is the first step towards finding a solution.

**Conclusion**

This paper is an attempt to describe, analyse, and synthesize information obtained from fieldwork with what was learnt in class and through reading. The whole confusion about names was a major effect of the evangelism among Africans by Western Missionaries as part of colonialism. As Fredland (2001) reminds us:

*Contact with Europeans transformed Africa and Africans, in ways that are at once profound, complex, obvious, and difficult to comprehend,….The African was in many ways made a stranger in his own land.*

The issue of names is one that continues to confuse African Christians even today. As we have seen, some have tried to resolve it personally, but it seems to me that this is one issue that the church could help to clarify for its members. Unfortunately, as in many other issues, the church is still divided. The individual Christian cannot divorce himself or herself from the society, and I do not think that the teaching of the Bible expects it. All Biblical characters, including our Saviour Jesus Christ, participated in their culture, as long as it was not in opposition to their faith.

My main conclusion, therefore, is that there is nothing wrong with African names. Though the African Christian continues to be “a child of two or three worlds,” he is still an African. Faced with all these forms of globalisation of cultures, the African is therefore being drawn back to his original culture, about which he does not always understand. This is evident from the many independent churches that are coming up in a bid to leave the mainstream churches that are normally associated with the missionaries. The way forward seems to me to be one of honest soul
searching and trying to root the gospel in the African soil. The time when African cultural values were either rejected indiscriminately or ignored is over.

References

Appendix: Field Research Summary
Tangaza College, Karen, Kenya. May 31, 2000. Interviewed a man about the naming system of the Kisii people of Kenya. Being young, he was not able to share much and suggested that I should speak to an older person.
Near Holy Basilica, Nairobi, Kenya. June 3, 2000. Interviewed a Gikuyu woman. As a lawyer, she pointed to the cultural as well the legal significance of names. As a woman, she said names affect one’s self-image and identity in a very significant way.
Karen, Nairobi, Kenya. June 4, 2000. Interviewed a Meru man. As a gardener, he had not thought much about the topic but when probed had interesting insights. According to him Western names help in establishing individual as opposed to community identity.
Daystar University, Nairobi, Kenya. June 5, 2000. Interviewed a Yoruba lady. She was willing to share about her complex but interesting system that has been changing with time. Christians, while abandoning Western names, are creating new ones by translating Christian concepts into Yoruba.
University of Nairobi, Kenya. June 5, 2000. Interviewed a lecturer on the naming system among the Kisii. As a member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA), he said that Africans should not be required to use Western names, which are culturally foreign to them. African names are very important for group identity and continuity.
Tangaza College, Karen, Kenya. June 6, 2000. Interviewed a Togolese man. Being a pastor in a Roman Catholic Church, he showed keen interest in the Topic and shared with much insight what he thinks the Church should do to encourage African Christians to respect their traditions that do not conflict with the teaching of the Bible.
Tangaza College, Karen, Kenya. June 6, 2000. Interviewed a Tanzanian woman. Her name that means “the rescuer” has great significance to the whole family, especially her father, who believes she has powers to protect him and others.
Nairobi Evangelical School of Theology, (NEGST), Kenya. June 6, 2000. Interviewed a Dinka man. As a former Moslem, he contrasted the significance of names between Christians and Moslems. He stressed the fact that names are individual and women should not be required to change names after marriage.
NEGST, June 8, 2000. Interviewed an Ethiopian Woman and an Eritrean man. Though their two systems are similar, there is a difference depending on whether one belongs to the Orthodox Church or to one of the newer ones. Both were eager to share their ideas on the topic of names.
NEGST, June 8, 2000. Interviewed a Congolese woman. There are very striking similarities between her group and the Agikuyu of Kenya, both being of Bantu origin. For example, there are a number of names used to “cheat” death after a number of children die in a family.

NEGST, June 8, 2000. Interviewed a Gikuyu woman. She was happy to share about the names of her three girls, one of whom bears a Zimbabwean name. She was also eager to share her views on the use of Western names, especially by Christian women.

Tangaza College, June 15, 2000. Interviewed a man on the Embu naming system. As a student of Anthropology, he was eager to share extensively and with great insight. Particularly interesting was the information about children born with deformities and how they were thrown into the forest to be picked up by neighbours because they were a bad omen.

Daystar University, June 15, 2000. Interviewed a lady from the Luo community. As a researcher, she was well informed, not just about her group but also her neighbours, the Kisa, a sub group of the Luhya of Kenya. Of special interest to me were the various taboos related to childbirth and the role of the co-wife in a generally polygamous society.

A hotel in Nairobi, June 16, 2000. Interviewed two girls, one from the Idakho people and the other a Gikuyu. One was given the name Violet because her mother likes the colour, while the other is proud to be called Mumbi, after the mythical mother of the Gikuyu tribe. She also likes the way her baptismal name “Gladwell” is pronounced, as opposed to Gladys.

Karia Village, Kiambu, Kenya. June 18, 2000. Interviewed an elderly Gikuyu woman. As a staunch Roman Catholic, she has investigated the meaning of her baptismal name, Teresia. She told me that it refers to “Saint Teresia of Jesus the child.” She believes that praying through her makes her prayers to be answered by God. She has devoted herself to prayer and was even healed of asthma through prayer. She had a statue of the saint as well as that of “Jesus the King” and many other artifacts of religious material culture.