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## Decolonising Teacher Identity: An African Teacher's Reflection on the Use of English Names Instead of African Names by African Students and Teachers in the UK

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### **Abstract**

The adoption of English names over indigenous African names by students and teachers of African descent represents a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon that warrants critical examination. This paper engages in a reflective analysis to shed light on the motivations, implications, and broader societal influences shaping this linguistic and cultural adaptation. By reflecting on language, identity, and acculturation, I seek to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted dynamics underlying the choice to anglicise names among individuals of African origin within the UK educational context through this paper.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Research in linguistics and sociolinguistics has long recognised the significance of names as essential components of identity construction. The adoption of English names by individuals with African heritage has been explored in various scholarly works, offering insights into the intricate interplay between language, cultural identity, and social integration. Scholars such as Smith (2017) and Johnson (2019) have delved into the impact of colonial histories and globalisation on naming practices, emphasising the enduring influence of historical processes on contemporary linguistic choices.

Furthermore, the academic literature provides a foundation for understanding the role of names in education. Brown (2018) and Garcia (2020) underscore the connection between names and educational experiences, highlighting how names can shape perceptions, interactions, and educational outcomes. In the specific context of African names in the UK, there is a need to explore the reasons behind the preference for English names and the potential consequences for individuals navigating the educational landscape.

This paper aims to contribute to this academic discourse by offering a reflective lens on the anglicising of names among UK students and teachers of African origin. Through a synthesis of existing research and a critical examination of personal narratives, the paper endeavours to unpack the motivations, challenges, and implications associated with the adoption of English names within the educational sphere. Therefore, this paper addresses the following research question: *How does the anglicisation of names among African educators in the UK impact their cultural identity, sense of belonging, and professional interactions within educational settings?* As we delve into this exploration, we seek to foster a deeper understanding of the sociolinguistic complexities surrounding the naming practices of individuals negotiating their identities within the diverse cultural tapestry of the United Kingdom.

## 2.0 The Author as a Case Study

Drawing on personal experiences and reflections as a Nigerian currently training as a teacher in West London, the author's journey provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding the choice to adopt an English name over his indigenous African name. Upon relocating from Nigeria first to Southwestern England, I initially found comfort in using my English name rather than my African one, which was long and had sounds lacking in English. This decision was influenced by a perception that it would ease communication with teachers

and fellow students in schools, reflecting a common experience noted by scholars like Banks and Banks (2019) regarding the impact of linguistic assimilation on individuals' sense of belonging in educational settings.

However, a pivotal moment occurred during my teacher training in West London when a fellow trainee pronounced my African name effortlessly. This seemingly small interaction sparked a significant shift in my perspective. It triggered a profound reflection on identity, prompting a reconsideration of my teacher identity and its intersection with my cultural heritage (Jenlink, 2014). I began to question the assumptions that had led me to favour my English name, realising that my African name was not the linguistic obstacle I had initially perceived it to be.

As I grappled with questions about my teacher identity, several key aspects emerged for consideration. First, the question of authenticity arose, reflecting on whether using an English name compromised the authenticity of my cultural identity as a Nigerian. Scholars such as Holliday (2013) highlight the significance of authentic identity construction in teaching, arguing that educators who are true to their cultural selves can create more inclusive and respectful learning environments.

Second, I questioned the impact of name anglicisation on my relationships with students and colleagues. Studies by Agrahari (2024) and Eden, Chisom and Adeniyi (2024) underscore the importance of educators' cultural competence in fostering positive interactions with students from diverse backgrounds. These internal deliberations prompted me to initiate discussions with teachers, fellow trainees, and students of African origin. As stated by Sleeter and Milner (2011), these conversations provided me with a platform for exploring shared experiences, challenges, and perspectives on the anglicisation of names within the educational landscape.

The process of integrating my African name into my professional identity proved to be a transformative experience. Contrary to my initial assumptions, I discovered that many individuals, both within and outside the educational setting, were receptive to and capable of pronouncing my name. This realisation not only challenged preconceived notions about the linguistic challenges of non-English names but also sparked a commitment to understanding and preserving the cultural richness embedded in African names.

In this research, drawing from my journey, I aim to contribute a personal and introspective dimension to the broader academic discourse on language, identity, and cultural adaptation.

The evolution of my perspective serves as a microcosm of the larger societal dynamics at play, emphasising the importance of embracing linguistic and cultural diversity within educational spaces.

### **3.0 Background of Study**

The anglicisation of personal names is the change of non-English-language personal names to spellings nearer English sounds, or the substitution of English personal names in the place of non-English personal names. The anglicisation of names among individuals of African descent in the United Kingdom has emerged as a noteworthy sociolinguistic phenomenon, reflecting the intersection of language, culture, and identity in a multicultural context. This practice is rooted in historical and contemporary factors that have shaped the linguistic landscape of the African diaspora. A comprehensive understanding of the background of this research necessitates a critical examination of the historical legacy of colonialism, the impact of globalisation, and the complexities inherent in navigating identity within the UK educational system.

Colonial histories play a pivotal role in shaping naming practices among the African diasporas. The imposition of European languages and naming conventions during the colonial era has had a lasting impact on the linguistic choices of individuals with African heritage (Smith, 2017). The legacy of colonialism, marked by the erasure of indigenous languages and naming traditions, continues to influence the linguistic preferences of individuals within post-colonial societies. Scholars such as Nzegwu (2001) have explored the historical dimensions of naming, shedding light on how the colonial encounter has contributed to the anglicisation of names among African communities. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Fanon (1963) provide valuable insights into the lasting effects of colonialism on language and identity, setting the stage for examining the anglicisation of names as a postcolonial phenomenon.

Moreover, the academic literature on language and identity underscores the significance of names in shaping individual and collective identities. Pennesi (2017) argues that names are not only linguistic markers but also powerful symbols of cultural affiliation and belonging. The act of adopting English names by individuals of African descent can be seen as a negotiation between cultural heritage and the societal pressures of integration, a theme explored by scholars like Yazan and Lindahl (2020) in the context of language and identity.

Globalisation further complicates the dynamics of naming practices, as individuals navigate an interconnected world where linguistic and cultural exchanges are frequent. The globalisation of English as a dominant language has led to its symbolic significance, influencing individuals' choices in adopting English names (Johnson, 2019). The pervasive influence of English in various spheres, including education and employment, creates a context in which the adoption of English names can be perceived as a pragmatic choice for social integration and mobility.

In the educational context, names carry significant weight in shaping individuals' experiences and interactions. Brown's (2018) research highlights the importance of names in educational settings, demonstrating how names can influence teachers' perceptions and expectations, ultimately impacting students' academic experiences. For individuals of African origin in the UK, the decision to anglicise names may be motivated by a desire to navigate potential biases or challenges associated with non-Anglican names in the educational domain (Garcia, 2020).

Against this backdrop, there exists a need for a nuanced exploration of the motivations and implications of anglicising names among UK students and teachers of African origin. This research aims to contribute to the existing body of literature by employing a reflective lens to unpack the multifaceted dimensions of this linguistic adaptation within the specific context of the UK educational system. Through an integration of historical perspectives, global influences, and educational dynamics, the study seeks to deepen our understanding of the intricate interplay between names, identity, and cultural assimilation within the African diaspora in the United Kingdom.

#### **4.0 Research Methodology**

This paper examines how the anglicisation of names affects African educators' identity and integration in UK educational settings. Through a blend of personal narrative and academic literature, the author uses autoethnographic methods to explore naming practices and their influence on teacher identity and cultural assimilation.

#### **5.0 Motivations and Rationale for Anglicisation of Names by Africans**

The decision to anglicise African names, opting for English names instead, is a complex phenomenon rooted in a confluence of sociocultural, linguistic, and pragmatic considerations.

Understanding the motivations behind this practice requires an exploration of the multifaceted factors that influence individuals of African origin in making such a choice.

### 5.1 Linguistic Accessibility

Individuals often adopt English names, motivated by the perceived linguistic accessibility they offer in English-speaking contexts. This motivation is particularly driven by the desire to facilitate smoother communication, especially when original names contain phonetic nuances or sounds uncommon in English. Scholars, including Banks and Banks (2019), have noted that people modify their names to align with the linguistic norms of the dominant culture, viewing this adaptation as a strategic move to enhance a sense of belonging in educational and professional settings.

The adjustment of names to conform to English linguistic norms becomes crucial when original names possess sounds that might pose challenges for English speakers. As Banks and Banks (2019) suggest, this linguistic accommodation serves as a means for individuals to navigate and integrate into environments where English is the dominant language. The experiences of individuals further illustrate this practice, as evidenced by the account of a Ghanaian student who shared,

*When I told my fellow students my name... they could not pronounce the 'kw.' Therefore, I allowed them to pronounce it the English style.*

The sentiments expressed by the Ghanaian student highlight a practical consideration regarding the pronunciation challenges posed by certain sounds in non-Anglican names. A student of Igbo origin who moved to the UK recently with her parents also emphasised this pragmatic aspect, asking rhetorically,

*How do you think these people can pronounce that long name? You don't want to spend the whole day teaching them how to.*

This practical perspective is further exemplified in a YouTube video featuring Uzo Aduba, who disclosed that she did not always like her name. In one instance, she approached her mother and requested to be called 'Zoe' because, as she put it, "*no one can say Uzoamaka*" (Olorisupergal TV, 2017). Aduba's experience adds a personal dimension to the broader

trend of individuals opting for English names for the sake of convenience and effective communication in various social and professional settings.

In essence, the anglicisation of names serves as a strategy for individuals to navigate and integrate into environments where English is the dominant language, contributing to a broader discourse on identity, language, and cultural assimilation within multicultural societies.

## **5.2 Social Integration and Belonging**

The phenomenon of anglicising names as a means of fostering social integration and a sense of belonging within English-speaking communities has been observed and documented in academic literature. This practice is often driven by individuals' perceptions that adopting English names can lead to smoother interactions with peers, teachers, and colleagues, as highlighted in studies on linguistic assimilation (Banks and Banks, 2019).

Banks and Banks (2019) in their research into the dynamics of linguistic assimilation, shed light on how individuals may strategically choose to adopt English names to navigate social spaces more comfortably. The desire for a seamless and effortless communication experience appears to be a significant motivator behind the decision to anglicise names.

Uzo Aduba's experience provides a poignant illustration of this phenomenon. In her reflections on her school years, she expressed that adopting the name 'Zoe' instead of her given name 'Uzoamaka' could have facilitated smoother conversations and interactions with her teachers and peers. Aduba's perspective underscores the challenges individuals may face when their names are perceived as difficult to pronounce or unfamiliar within certain social contexts.

Moreover, the impact of name anglicisation on social interactions is not limited to a specific cultural or linguistic group. A case in point is the experience shared by a German Pakistani colleague who faced difficulties in the pronunciation of his full name 'Mohammed,' and chose to adopt the abbreviated version 'Mo' to simplify communication with his friends. This anecdote aligns with the broader theme of individuals modifying their names to enhance ease of communication and foster a sense of camaraderie within their social circles.

The academic literature suggests that the decision to anglicise names is a complex interplay of individual agency, societal expectations, and the pursuit of social integration.

Apostolovski (2023) recounted how she decided to change her name from 'Marija' to 'Mia' due to tensions she had with her teacher. As individuals navigate diverse linguistic and cultural landscapes, the adoption of English names emerges as a strategy employed to overcome potential barriers in communication and forge connections within English-speaking communities.

The recognition, remembrance, acceptance, and correct pronunciation and spelling of one's name are critical elements that contribute significantly to a sense of belonging. Pennesi (2013) emphasises that immigrants frequently express their sense of belonging in contrasting terms – they often feel a lack of belonging when their names are mispronounced, misspelt, avoided, forgotten, or become the subject of ridicule. This sentiment underscores the profound impact that the treatment of one's name can have on an individual's identity and sense of inclusion. João Pina-Cabral (2015) further elucidates the consequences of names that deviate from the norm, asserting that individuals whose names fail to conform are incomplete, or absent in significant ways are susceptible to being pulled out of ordinary personhood and may even experience stigma. The struggle for belonging is particularly pronounced among immigrants who grapple with the tension between the desire to fit in, driven by external pressures to conform, and the simultaneous desire to preserve their unique identities, rooted in linguistic and cultural origins, amid current social circumstances.

However, my interaction with a Rwandan Uber driver provided a nuanced perspective on the relationship between names and belonging. Despite living in the UK for twenty-three years, the driver, who consistently introduced himself as 'George,' revealed that anglicising his name did not significantly impact the way others perceived him or facilitate his integration into society. Interestingly, his experience challenges the conventional understanding that name anglicisation is a crucial factor in fostering a sense of belonging. This revelation prompts a reconsideration of the complex dynamics at play in the relationship between names and belonging, suggesting that individual experiences may vary. It opens the door to exploring the contextual factors that influence the significance of name anglicisation in different immigrant communities. While some may find it necessary for assimilation and acceptance, others, like the Rwandan driver, may not view it as a pivotal factor in shaping their sense of belonging.



### 5.3 Identity Negotiation within Religious and Colonial Influences

The process of identity negotiation plays a pivotal role in the anglicisation of names, as individuals grapple with the complexities of dual identities, aiming to strike a balance between preserving their cultural heritage and assimilating into the cultural milieu of their adopted country (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). While the recognition of African Traditional Religion (ATR) predates the arrival of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, it is only recently that Nigeria officially acknowledges it as a distinct religious entity. According to Ekeopara and Ekpenyong (2016), despite this recognition, ATR is often perceived more as a set of cultural and traditional practices than as a religion, leading to a dual religious identity among many Nigerians who identify as both Christian or Muslim and traditionalist. This duality is reflected in the practice of parents giving children two names – a native name and a 'baptismal' name. However, the so-called baptismal names, ostensibly linked to biblical names, often turn out to be English names, raising questions about their authenticity as Christian names. I once asked my father,

*How is 'Victor' a Christian name?*

He tried explaining that it was because God had given us victory. I accepted the logic then but during my reflection, the disconnect became apparent prompting the realisation that my Igbo name 'Yahwegozirim' (meaning 'God blessed me') may be more rooted in traditional Christian values than my 'baptismal name.' A question was then framed in my mind:

*So Yahwegozirim is not a Christian but a traditional name?*

The same goes with many other names given to children during baptism in the church such as 'Alexander', 'Frank', 'Basil', 'Fred', and 'Harry' to mention a few. These are simply English names which relate to the British colonisation of Africa and have no link to the Bible.

The historical imprint of colonialism, with its imposition of European languages and cultural norms, continues to shape naming practices in former colonies. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Rosa and Flores (2017) illuminate how colonial histories have influenced perceptions of language and identity, leading individuals to adopt names and cultures aligned with the colonial legacy. For example, a lady on Facebook once posted her picture with her husband and wrote:

*Traditional marriage done and dusted... closer to being 'Mrs' on the altar.*

Comments to the post were a mixture of supporting and dissenting opinions, reflecting a fusion of indigenous customs and colonial-era traditions. The debate surrounding the significance of traditional and church weddings further underscores the impact of colonial legacies on naming practices. While some Africans view traditional marriage as a preliminary step, with the church wedding being the culmination, scholars like Onwuka (2002) argue that the British, through their missionaries, strategically integrated their traditions with religion to gain acceptance within their colonies. Howard (2006) asserts that the white wedding, characterised by specific attire, oral promises before a priest, and the exchange of rings or Bibles, is essentially a manifestation of British traditions.

When asked her Christian name, a Kenyan lady narrated how her answer 'Carrie' was found strange by her Kikuyu people, who then asked her where her *cucu* (maternal grandmother) got the name from (Commentary and Kimeria, 2022). "Missionaries" came her answer. She had thought that the name was a Christian name that would lead her to God but in her reflection, she mentioned Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta (among many other figures), as credited with saying "When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us how to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible." As the name was not biblical, the only time she learned the correct pronunciation of 'her name' was when she watched the movie *Sex and the City*. Consequently, the adoption of English names alongside native names can be seen as a continuation of this colonial influence, with African traditional names potentially embodying Christian values more authentically than the Christian (English) names themselves. In essence, the negotiation of identity, intertwined with naming practices, reflects a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and historical forces.

## **5.6 Perceived Professional and Educational Advantages**

The adoption of English names is often intertwined with the perceived notion that it can confer professional advantages, potentially opening doors to increased opportunities for employment and career advancement. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of linguistic capital, a term introduced by Bourdieu (1991), wherein proficiency in the dominant language is regarded as a valuable asset in various social, cultural, and economic spheres. The idea of linguistic capital emphasises the strategic use of language as a means to gain social and

economic advantages, with English names serving as one manifestation of this linguistic strategy.

Brown's (2018) research delves into the impact of names on teachers' perceptions of students, revealing the potential biases associated with non-English names. The study suggests that adopting an English name can be perceived as a pragmatic decision, driven by a desire to mitigate potential biases and navigate through societal expectations. In educational and professional settings, individuals with non-English names may encounter preconceived notions or biases that could affect how they are evaluated and treated. Therefore, adopting an English name becomes a strategic manoeuvre to align with prevailing norms and potentially enhance one's chances of success in academic and professional pursuits. As a teacher, I have always thought introducing my name as 'Victor' rather than 'Yahwegozirim' made it easier for me to pursue my career as a teacher within the classroom environment. A fellow Nigerian teacher told me that his English name 'Fred' makes it easier for him to interact with the students and fellow teachers who had similar names. His thoughts bring up the concept of "name discrimination" studied by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), which relates to racial discrimination in the labour market. Their findings suggest that individuals with names perceived as ethnically or racially distinct may face discrimination in hiring processes. In such contexts, adopting an English name can be viewed as a pragmatic strategy to mitigate potential biases and increase the chances of securing job opportunities.

The complex interplay between language, identity, and socioeconomic outcomes is underscored by research conducted by Flores and Ong (2017), which examines the experiences of bilingual individuals in the workplace. Their study sheds light on how language choices, including the adoption of English names, can influence career trajectories and access to opportunities. The strategic adoption of an English name becomes a tangible expression of linguistic capital, providing individuals with a tool to navigate the linguistic landscape of professional domains.

Thus, the adoption of English names is a multifaceted phenomenon also influenced by the concept of linguistic capital and the recognition of potential biases associated with native non-English names. Bourdieu's framework and empirical research reveal that this practice is positioned as a strategic decision aimed at enhancing professional prospects and mitigating biases in educational and employment settings. The intricate dynamics between language,

identity, and socio-economic outcomes highlight the nuanced ways in which individuals negotiate their names within the broader context of linguistic and cultural capital.

## **6. The Wealth of African Names**

Naming is a linguistic universal. Every known human society distinguishes and individuates its members by their names. In the context of Africa and beyond, names are not just ordinary labels for the identification of their bearers; they mirror the culture, tradition and worldview of the people.

Essien (1986: 5) argues that ‘naming is not an arbitrary affair, it is at once a mental, an emotional, a linguistic and a cultural matter’. It is widely believed that names and naming can influence the personality development and behaviour of their bearers. This claim justifies Camden’s (1984: 43) admonition that ‘names should be chosen with good and gracious significations to inspire the bearer to good action’. This implies that people are assumed to live according to the message contained in their names. Significantly, names also embed deep cultural insights that reflect their bearers’ social lives, philosophy, religion, emotions and worldview. African names, for instance, are important cultural and symbolic resources that reflect the peculiarities of the African people and capture their beliefs, values, identity and personality.

For whatever reason we, people of African origin, tend to assume new personal identities through the Anglicisation of our names, and we must understand that, unlike the English names, African names bear something deeper. Africans do not just bear names which are ‘mere tags’, as someone mentioned in my hearing many years ago. Instead, Africans carry a whole generation, culture and society within their names and surnames. When a baby is born, the community celebrates and bestows a name that holds generations of stories. In some African countries, like Nigeria, this ceremony takes seven days after the child is born. During the event in Western Nigeria, a priest or a custodian of the family ancestral oracle will be available to preside over the ceremony. In my culture before our generation, all important members of the extended family take part in giving names to the new baby because they see the child as a bearer of the future of the family. Just like my grandmother narrated to me, she has four names:

- Her surname, 'Onwuneme' meaning 'death occurs' (because her grandfather was the only surviving child among ten children.

- 'Mgbafor' meaning 'lady of Afor' meaning she was born on one of four Igbo weekdays 'Afor'
- 'Adaeze' meaning 'daughter of the King' because she was the first daughter.
- 'Agatha' which is her English (baptismal) name in the honour of St Agatha of Sicily. Till today my grandmother does not know the meaning of her 'baptismal name' though I have told her many times.

We see from the above the richness of African traditional names. All the names connote an event in the life of my grandmother which English names do not. I once asked my secondary school classmate who answered 'Jackson' if his father was 'Jack'. Of course, the answer was negative. Let us have some insights into African names and the generational stories, culture and society they carry:

### **6.1 Events surrounding birth:**

Many African names are given based on the events that happened during their birth such as 'Ayodele' because the baby brought joy to the family, 'Ajuji' after many children did not survive childhood, 'Kgomotso' and 'Pumza' after tragedies occurred in the family, 'Lindiwe' after the parents have waited for a girl-child for a long time, 'Kiptanui' and 'Cheptanui' if the mother experienced extreme difficulties during childbirth.

### **6.2 Emotional warnings:**

Names are not always positive in Africa. They could carry an emotional warning about/to death, spirits and people alike. Such names include 'Nhamo' tells of misfortune, 'Onwudiegwu' warns that death is terrible, 'Maidei' asks the question 'What did you want?', 'Manyara' tells an enemy that they have been humbled, while 'Bamidele' wants someone to 'follow me home'.

In Ghana's Volta region, a couple belonging to the Ewe ethnic group had decided to stop having children, but their last daughter unexpectedly came along. To show that the child was somehow a mistake, they decided to name her 'Melevevio', which translates as "not necessary".

### **6.3 Order of birth:**

In most of Western Africa, the order of birth is taken into account, sometimes to show seniority among twins or to honour first- and lastborn children. If you meet a Ugandan boy or man called Kakuru or Wasswa, he is likely to be an elder twin. The younger male twin is usually called Kato. These are names specially reserved for twins. Similarly, the Kalenjins in Kenya refer to the firstborn as 'Yator' (first to open the way) and the last born 'Towett' meaning last. The Yorubas call the first twin 'Taiwo' (taste the world) and the second 'Kehinde' (came after). In Ghana, the unisex names 'Panyin' and 'Kakra', which mean older and younger, are used for twins. In Igboland, 'Adaume' is for the first daughter and 'Obi' is for the first son.

### **6.4 Birthday.**

In Nigeria and Ghana, names like 'Mgbafor', 'Okoye', 'Kwame', 'Yaw', 'Kofi' and 'Efua' represent the day the person was born. In Kenya, a person answering 'Juma' was born on Friday, 'Kibet' and 'Kiplagat' were born during the day and night respectively, while 'Mumbua' and 'Wambua' were for boys and girls born during the rainy season. A Hausa person born during the time of famine was named 'Yunwa' while among the Luos, 'Olweny' was born during a war and 'Anyango' was a girl born around mid-morning.

### **6.5 Religious names:**

When discussing the issue of 'baptismal names,' what Africans call 'Christian names,' as I mentioned earlier, most of our African names have connoted deep Christian/Islam traditional values more than our English 'baptismal' names. A significant aspect of naming in African is the use of names to reflect spiritual beliefs. African names are also bestowed to mirror the religious identity of name givers. Adherents of Christianity and Islam select African names for their children based on their beliefs and faith. For example, my father is a Christian, which is why I answer 'Yahwegozirim' or 'Chukwugozirim'. Others include 'Eriifeoluwa' meaning 'The evidence of God's love', 'Adea' meaning 'gift from God', and 'Omari' meaning 'praise God'. 'Chimamanda' meaning 'my God won't fail'. Some other names are related to the African Traditional Religion, such as 'Nwaedo' meaning 'Child of Edo', and 'Nwani' meaning 'child of Ani'.

## **6.6 Meet our Ancestors.**

Finally, Africans do not joke with their ancestors. Children are named after their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Respected elders of the family may be dead but they continue to live on through the children. Some ethnic groups in Ghana name children after their dead ancestors only while in Nigeria, living ancestors are still honoured. In Yoruba society, Babatunde and Yetunde mean father and mother have returned respectively, while 'Babajide' and 'Yejide' are the images of their father and mother respectively. In Igbo society, 'Nnamdi' means 'my father lives on, while 'Nneamaka' means 'my mother is beautiful'.

## **6.7 Wealth and Royalty:**

Many African names represent wealth, crown, and jewellery, and settlement of issues of homecoming. In Yoruba, 'Adewunmi' loves the crown, 'Adebola' is a prince or princess born with a silver spoon, while 'Adewale' is a prince returned to his people. In Igbo, 'Obi' is a king, 'Ezeafulukwe' is a legitimate king, 'Adaugo' is a beautiful princess, and 'Nwakaego' is a child that is worth more than money. 'Nolwazi' in Zulu and 'Akila' in Egypt are knowledgeable ones, while 'Imamu' in Eastern Africa will be the spiritual leader. Many other names represent jewellery, ideas and things that are upheld in the African culture. Some include 'Zola' in Southern Africa means 'calm', 'Abeba' in Eastern Africa means 'flower', 'Edo' in Western Africa means 'gold' and 'Taraji' means 'hope' in Swahili.

## **7 Impact on Teacher Identity**

While the practice of adopting English names by African students and teachers in the UK may seem innocuous on the surface, it carries profound implications for their teacher identity and cultural well-being. Research within the field of education and psychology suggests that the adoption of Western names can lead to a range of consequences, impacting not only the individuals directly involved but also the broader educational environment (Berry, 2005).

### **7.1 Cultural Alienation:**

One crucial aspect of this phenomenon is the potential for feelings of displacement and cultural alienation. Feeling disconnected from one's cultural identity can negatively impact a teacher's sense of self-worth and belonging in the educational community. According to

scholars such as Berry (2005) and Kunst and Mesoudi (2024), individuals who experience a misalignment between their cultural identity and the expectations imposed by the dominant culture may undergo acculturative stress. When asked about how she felt about using her English name instead of her native name, a Ugandan cover teacher told me:

*I will tell you frankly, some students still don't believe that that is my name... they believe I am ashamed of my name... and they ask me what it is*

As Carrie mentioned, the Kenyan dropped her English name because she felt like a 'stranger' in the name (Commentary and Kimeria, 2022). Imagine the profound stress associated with attempting to conform to societal expectations while simultaneously experiencing a sense of estrangement from oneself. This stress can manifest as a sense of being out of place or disconnected, which, in an educational context, may hinder effective teaching and learning interactions. The Ugandan cover teacher noted that sometimes she feels like she does not even belong anywhere. Looking at the wealth carried along by African names, it is evident what is being lost: a wealth that we are being alienated from as we try to claim what we cannot connect to.

## **7.2 Teacher Identity and Inclusive Education**

The adoption of English names by teachers not only limits their professional identity but is likely to pose challenges to the broader goals of promoting diversity and inclusion within educational settings. The struggle for diversity and inclusion is intricately tied to the preservation of cultural identities, and the adoption of Western names can inadvertently contribute to the erasure of non-Western backgrounds. This phenomenon, as highlighted by scholars like Nieto (2000) and Osebor (2024), perpetuates power imbalances and reinforces dominant cultural norms. Nieto's concept of Orientalism emphasises how the imposition of Western norms marginalises non-Western cultures.

The implications extend beyond the individual teacher to the entire educational environment. When teachers adopt English names, there is a risk of losing cultural diversity within the classroom. The richness of different perspectives and worldviews that could be brought into the learning space may be compromised. This underscores the importance of recognising names as symbolic representations of cultural identity, echoing Mensah, Inyabri and Nyong's (2021) emphasis on the significance of names. In this context, a teacher's name becomes a



tangible representation of their cultural background, offering students a valuable opportunity to learn about diversity and foster cross-cultural understanding.

Moreover, the lack of connection to one's roots resulting from the adoption of English names can hinder a teacher's ability to address the needs of diverse student populations. Culturally responsive teaching, a pedagogical approach advocated by Gay (2010), is compromised when educators feel detached from their cultural roots. The teacher's name, as a cultural marker, becomes essential in incorporating diverse perspectives into the learning process.

Despite introducing myself as Victor, students approached me outside the classroom, expressing scepticism about whether it was my real name and associating it with a lack of connection to Nigeria. One student's remark, "Nigerians don't answer Victor. I'm sure of this," highlights the disconnect students may feel when a teacher's adopted name does not align with their expectations. Although many Nigerians answer Victor, the students still see it as an English name. These encounters underscore the challenges teachers of African origin may face in reconciling their adopted identities with students' perceptions and expectations. It prompts reflection on the broader implications of such choices and the potential impact on building meaningful connections within the educational setting.

### **7.3 Challenges in Connecting with Students:**

Establishing a meaningful connection between educators and students is a pivotal aspect of effective teaching, and the choice of names plays a crucial role in this dynamic. The inability to share similar names with students can pose challenges to educators, hindering their capacity to forge a deep connection and nurture a sense of belonging among their students.

The impact on meaningful connections is a critical consideration, echoing the sentiments of educational theorist Freire (1970). Effective teaching, according to Freire, necessitates a genuine understanding and respect for the cultural backgrounds of both teachers and students. Names, as symbolic markers of cultural identity (Zuvalinyenga, 2021), become crucial components in facilitating this understanding. However, the adoption of English names creates a noticeable barrier, depriving educators of a powerful tool to convey their cultural experiences and perspectives.

The absence of shared names can result in a communication gap where teachers may find it challenging to relate to students of diverse backgrounds and vice versa. Shared names often

serve as cultural touchpoints, fostering a sense of familiarity and mutual understanding. When teachers adopt English names, they may inadvertently distance themselves from a potential avenue for connection with their students, especially those of similar backgrounds and origins. Sometimes this leads to these students following suit as they see their teachers as role models.

Moreover, from my experience, students may perceive the use of English names by their educators as a departure from cultural authenticity. This perception can affect the credibility and relatability of the teacher, potentially influencing the students' engagement and receptiveness to the educational experience. In instances where teachers are unable to share names that resonate with their students' cultural backgrounds, the risk of a disconnect between the two parties becomes more pronounced.

In navigating these challenges, educators must reflect on the potential impact of their naming choices on the student-teacher relationship. Consideration of the cultural significance of names and the role they play in shaping identity can guide educators in fostering an environment where meaningful connections can flourish. Ultimately, the recognition of names as more than mere identifiers, but as conduits for cultural understanding, is essential in bridging the gap and creating a classroom atmosphere where both educators and students feel seen, understood, and connected.

## **8 Reclaiming My Personal Identity**

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) contends that language serves a dual purpose, functioning both as a tool for communication and as a carrier of culture. This assertion resonates with the experiences shared by Carrie, who, influenced by the Kenyan writer's perspective, grapples with the cultural implications of her name. Thus, I sometimes ask myself the same question, "Which culture am I carrying by answering Victor and which one was I letting go of." Reflecting on the cultural significance of her name, Carrie decided to write an email to all my friends and family:

*From this moment henceforth, I am Ciku.*

In response to her claim that no one could pronounce Uzoamaka, she narrated that her mum replied that if the British can pronounce names like Tchaikovsky, Michelangelo and Dostoevsky, they can learn to say Uzoamaka. This resonates with Okoroba (2021) who

emphasises the importance of Africans reclaiming the pronunciation of their names, drawing parallels to the ability of English speakers to articulate complex names from other cultures. He asserted that just as the British instructed Africans in pronouncing complex English names through colonisation, it is now the responsibility of Africans to reciprocate and educate the British on the correct pronunciation of our names.

As an enthusiastic football fan, I found myself resonating deeply with his surprise concerning the proficiency of English football commentators in articulating, thereby navigating the linguistic intricacies inherent in names of football stars such as the Spanish goalkeeper 'Kepa Arrizabalaga,' the Greek defender 'Sokratis Papastathopoulos,' and the Polish captain 'Jakub Błaszczykowski,' among others. In contemplating this, I ask a critical question to myself: "If English football commentators can adeptly pronounce names from various linguistic backgrounds, why can't people learn how to pronounce 'Yahwegozirim Onwuneme'?"

A former prime minister of the UK is Rishi Sunak. The diverse British community till today have always found it easy to pronounce that traditional Indian name. His name did not stop him from becoming the prime minister of an English-speaking society. Proper pronunciation not only acknowledges individual identities but also contributes to a more inclusive and respectful representation of diverse cultures in public discourse (Charles, 2019).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's passionate narration of how she came by the name Chimamanda which was not her name from birth is a story centred on the search for a unique personal identity (The Guardian Life, 2021). It is a story that culminated in changing the English name 'Amanda' into an Igbo name 'Chimamanda' thereby generating a strong personal identity unique to her. Thus, she Africanised a Western name effectively. Today, under her unique identity, she has become a celebrated writer with the name, published six critically acclaimed books, and won multiple awards.

Halfway into these reflections, I had made up my mind to embark on a quest for self-discovery and cultural reclamation. I started introducing myself at the university and my placement schools as 'Yahwegozirim Victor Onwuneme'. I discovered that most of my colleagues were able to pronounce the name without the anticipated difficulty. Many even got the right pronunciation at the first instance.

Yahwegozirim Onwuneme

During the initial introduction of my name, one of my colleagues at my placement school, Chris, found difficulty in pronouncing the name. Out of concern, I tried to ask him to use 'Victor' as an alternative. To this, he replied:

*I like Yahwegozirim... it is different from what I am conversant with. What's the meaning?*

As I told him the meaning of the name, Chris replied excitedly,

*I knew it... African names always had special meaning.*

This positive encounter encourages me to continue my journey of reclaiming my identity, reflected in the gradual removal of 'Victor' from my full name in emails and applications.

## **9 Conclusion**

The trajectory of my exploration towards self-discovery serves as a poignant illustration of the profound transformative potential inherent in embracing one's cultural identity. This journey is intricately interwoven with the broader societal narrative, emphasising the importance of fostering mutual understanding and actively contributing to a more inclusive and respectful discourse. McLaughlin (2012) underscores the pivotal role of lived experiences in illuminating the positive changes that can transpire when individuals and societies wholeheartedly embrace linguistic and cultural diversity, recognising it as a rich tapestry that enhances our global heritage. One compelling aspect of this narrative is the realisation that retaining and celebrating unique Indigenous names plays a pivotal role in shaping individual destinies. In essence, the narrative advocates not for forsaking one's aspirations, but rather for pursuing them with a profound sense of belonging and pride rooted in one's cultural heritage (Weedon, 2004) This perspective encapsulates the notion that success need not be divorced from cultural identity; rather, it can be achieved with a deep sense of connection to one's roots.

Transitioning from the personal to the societal sphere, the use of English names instead of African names among African students and educators residing in the UK emerges as a multifaceted issue with profound implications for teacher identity. A nuanced exploration of this phenomenon necessitates an acknowledgement of its complex nature and the far-reaching consequences it holds. Lindsey, Robins and Terrell (1999) and Obodaru (2017) underscore

the importance of recognising the substantial impact that the relinquishment of indigenous names can have on teachers' sense of cultural belonging and professional identity.

By acknowledging this impact, we can collectively strive towards cultivating more inclusive educational environments that genuinely value and celebrate diverse cultural identities. The integration of cultural sensitivity into educational practices becomes imperative, as it paves the way for a paradigm shift that encourages the use of African names. In this context, teachers of African origin, assuming the role of influential role models, can play a pivotal role in creating spaces where both students and educators can fully embrace their identities and flourish academically and personally. This transformative approach, aligned with the Teachers' Standard One, holds the promise of positively influencing the well-being, motivation, and behaviour of students, thereby fostering an enriched and vibrant educational landscape.

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