

Black Names, Immigrant Names: Navigating Race and Ethnicity Through Personal Names

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Abstract

This article explores the naming patterns of a new African immigrant group in the United States to discuss the creative ways that Black immigrants navigate their racialized immigrant identities and their positioning vis-à-vis their ethnoracial compatriots, African Americans. I argue that the significant contention around Black names and immigrant names demonstrates that personal names are a subject worthy of in-depth investigation. Through the case study of the naming practices of first generations of Ethiopian-Americans, I examine the relevance Black immigrant parents attach to first names, their various connotations, and modes of immigrant incorporation into the dominant host society. I highlight the importance of race, ethnicity, and immigration status in naming.

Keywords

Race and ethnicity, personal names, stigma, Black immigrants, Ethiopian-Americans

Personal names, which often times signify ethnic or religious identity, are useful sociocultural indicators which can encapsulate historical and social processes. Names can act positively as cultural capital in widely differing

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contexts (Fucilla, 1943; Kambon & Yeboah, 2019; Terrell et al., 1988; Turner, 1949/2002) and negatively to reinforce the status of the oppressed (Brown & Lively, 2012). In the U.S. context, distinctively African American names (“Black names”) and immigrant cultural names have been highly contested. Although the constructions of “Black names” in the United States reflect unique and creative re-appropriation of identity, there is sometimes a negative cultural association with these types of names that works to the disadvantage of the name bearers. These names are often perceived as signifiers of poverty, limited education, and questionable origin and morality (Brown & Lively, 2012). Similarly, immigrant cultural names have historically been markers of difference whereupon the name bearer is the unassimilable “other.” Thus, names are not just neutral linguistic expressions, but they constitute valuable sources of historical and ethnographic documentation.

The name of the former U.S. president Barack Obama is a good example of the challenges and negotiations that take place with the names of African Americans and those with immigrant backgrounds in the United States (Hilliar & Kemp, 2008; Obama, 2004). Barack Obama was named after his father, a Kenyan immigrant to the United States, and reflects his African Muslim heritage. The roots of his name are as follows: the Swahili word Barack means blessed, while Obama is a name from the Luo ethnic group of southwestern Kenya, meaning “crooked or slightly bending.” Obama’s middle name, Hussein, which was his grandfather’s first name, is of Arabic origin and means “good” or “handsome one.” It is widely documented (Pipes, 2012) that president Obama faced serious criticism and accusation of being Muslim and somehow consequently anti-American because of his (middle) name and (supposed foreign) origins. Personal names can thus attach social, cultural, and economic capital, which can work to either the benefit or detriment of the beholder.

Although Black immigrant names are a compelling subject worth investigating, to date, there is no body of literature that examines the naming practices of new African immigrants in the United States. The only study on African immigrant naming practices is the short ethnography from D’Alisera (1998) who studied the ethnically diverse community of Sierra Leonean Muslim migrants in Washington, D.C. While she highlights the importance that African immigrant groups attach to names, there are a couple of shortcomings to D’Alisera’s work. First, she neglects to discuss the variable of race in the experiences and naming choices of Sierra Leonean immigrants. Second, she does not parse out the difference between ethnic and religious names, although she discusses that Muslim identity supplants ethnic identity. Third, although D’Alisera states that the group she studied is ethnically diverse, this fact was not revealed as salient in the analysis.

In this article, I focus on the case study of Ethiopian immigrants and their naming practices to understand how one self-identified Black immigrant group understands, maintains, and negotiates the different layers of its identity. I seek to understand the cultural politics of naming, which provides a window into parental visions of the ethnic and racial identity of their children, thereby addressing how ethnoracial identity is directly influenced from one generation to the next. The Ethiopian case sheds new light on the debates about immigrant assimilation, with the added challenge of racialization of Black immigrants. As phenotypically Black immigrants in the United States, Ethiopian-Americans demonstrate a Black immigrant community's dilemma and decision-making processes. I particularly analyze how Ethiopian-Americans position themselves vis-à-vis African Americans, their ethnoracial compatriots or "proximal hosts" (Imoagene, 2017), as this is the comparative group which shares racial similarities. Therefore, this article examines the intersections between Black and immigrant names (each defined and discussed in the following).

In the following section, I present a brief overview of the literature on "Black" names and immigrant names before delving into an analysis of how new African immigrants in the United States complicate the existing racial narrative. I will then discuss my methods and data, followed by an analysis of the findings. Using the case study of Ethiopian-Americans, I highlight the importance parents place on names in regard to their immigrant, racial, and ethnic identities.

Literature Review

"Black Names": Naming in African American Communities

African Americans have been widely studied in the United States in regard to naming practices (Brown & Lively, 2012; Figolo, 2005; Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Kambon & Yeboah, 2019), and even the name of the ethnic group has been problematized over the years (Martin, 1991). In the late 1980s, Jesse Jackson and others successfully rallied to be called African American instead of Black American, thus identifying with the continent of Africa and a cultural identity instead of a racial one similarly to Chinese-American, Italian-Americans, and Mexican American (Martin, 1991). There are in fact several instances of group self-renaming for African Americans at different time periods (Philogène, 1999; Smith, 1992). As naming rights for African Americans has not always been guaranteed, the process of naming has been a battleground of sociocultural and political consciousness (Neal, 2001). There are two divergent trends in the naming practices of African Americans

in the United States: on one side, racial distinct names are a means of reclaiming lost identity, linking cultural connections to the continent of Africa; on the other side, real and perceived negative impact associated with racially constructed names may deter some from choosing racially distinct names.

In the 20th century, Blacks and Whites chose relatively similar first names for their children up until the 1960s (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). Over a short period of time in the early 1970s, that pattern changed dramatically as most Blacks (particularly those living in racially isolated neighborhoods) adopted increasingly distinctive names (Brown & Lively, 2012; Neal, 2001). The pattern in name choice coincides with the rise of the Black Power movement and its influence on Blacks' perception of their identities. For instance, Malcolm X, lauded leader of the Black Power movement, changed his name from Malcolm Little and was also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz¹ and Omowale (Lieberson & Mikelson, 1995). Another famous example is the world heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay who changed his name to Muhammad Ali (Finch, 2008). In an explanation of her own name change, Hartman (2007, pp. 8–9) writes that she adopted the name Saidiya to assert her African heritage and establish “solidarity with [. . .] poor black girls—Tamikas, Roqueshas, and Shanequas” (pp. 8–9). While these types of names changes are common among African Americans, they are not always accepted by the larger society.

Personal names in the African American community have become part of the putative markers of exclusion and race from the perspective of the dominant White society, which attributes negative connotations to different aspects of Black culture. Brown and Lively (2012) argue that “the negative ideas attributed to Black names are not phenomenological but rather a manifestation of the history of ‘race’ and racism in the United States” (p.669). Through an examination of the association of Black names with teachers' expectations in academic achievement, Figolo (2005) found consistency with the idea that expectations for students are often race-based and, in this case, masked through how teachers associated students' abilities to their names. Similarly, Anderson-Clark et al. (2008) found that teachers did indeed have more negative expectations for students with “more African American sounding names” when asked their value judgment on a series of vignettes with White and Black names. In another experimental study, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) found a statistically significant callback rate for resumes with White sounding² names. The effect of names on academic success and employability is thus correlated. When African Americans consider names for their children, they then have to struggle with the social, cultural, and economic capital attached to the name under consideration, or more profoundly, sociocultural approval mediated by the norms of dominant society. It is for this reason that

Brown and Lively (2012) state that naming is a cultural right that is threatened within the Black community.

“Immigrant Names”: Assimilation or Segregation?

The study of names and naming practices within immigrant communities provides us with a unique prospect to evaluate theories of assimilation and immigrants' modes of incorporation into a new society (Keaton, 2005; Sue & Telles, 2007). For immigrants and their descendants, first names can be a powerful sociological indicator of sociocultural assimilation in that they can be used to assess the competing influences of two cultures. When people of different cultures interact, a degree of linguistic and/or cultural adaptation is expected (Beidelman, 1974; Finch, 2008; Gebre, 2010). Classical assimilation theories (Brubaker, 2001) would predict that immigrants and their descendants are less likely to choose ethnic names for their children as they become more exposed to their new society. Recent theories of assimilation have argued that ethnic identity can be maintained or reemerge in the host society (Alba & Nee, 1997) and would predict that immigrant parents and successive generations may give names that maintain a connection to their ethnic origins. This newer iteration of immigrant assimilation or “segmented assimilation” recognizes that the host or receiving society is not necessarily unified, but rather pluralistic and fragmented. As such, new immigrant groups (similarly to older diasporas) can choose to maintain their ethnic identity from the homeland or assimilate into a nondominant segment of the society (Portes, 2007). For instance, in a study of naming practices of Hispanic parents who gave birth to children in Los Angeles County in 1995, Sue and Telles (2007) find that greater exposure to U.S. culture increases the chances of naming a child in English. However, Hispanic parents are able to assimilate while maintaining a connection to their ethnic origins by giving children English names that are translatable into Spanish.

There is an economic gain to be had when changing personal names to fit better with the dominant culture. In the American case, migrants who Americanized their names experienced larger occupational upgrading as opposed to immigrants who kept their names intact. In a study of Italian immigration to the United States, and their naming practices, Fucilla (1943) notes the Anglicization of Italian surnames at the turn of the 20th century as the newly arrived immigrants sought to mix within the dominant society. Immigrants either directly translated their names into English, dropped the final vowel to make it sound less Italian, clipped or shortened their names, altered the spelling, and made other similar analogical changes. The more anglicized names were seen as reducing socioeconomic barriers. Newer

waves of immigrants adopted similar patterns of name changes and assimilation into the dominant society. Biavaschi et al. (2013) show that those who changed to very popular American names like John or William experienced labor market success compared to individuals who retained their original names. Similarly, in a practice not unique to American or contemporary societies, studies have shown that Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants to the United States changed their names to American names at significant rates (Kang, 1971; Lieberman, 2000).

We can moreover draw parallels between ethnic names and religious names as conspicuous markers of stigma. The experiences of Muslim-Americans are indicative. In response to inhospitable American social context after 9/11, some recent first- and second-generation Arab immigrants preferred to mask their Arab identity by “changing their names from Muhammad to Mike and Farouq to Fred”³ and by organizing their social relations around non-Arabs (Cainkar, 2009, p. 25). Some believe that covering their Muslim identity with “neutral” names will facilitate their individual integration into society (Khosravi, 2012). Therefore, the tradeoff between individual identity and labor market success is present in different contexts. It is against this background that we appreciate the challenges of African immigrants as they negotiate their naming selection and selective cultural adaptations.

Ethiopian-Americans: A Focus on a Black Immigrant Group

Voluntary African immigration to the United States is a rather recent phenomenon, dating from the 1960s onward. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act removed the barriers⁴ for non-European immigrants seeking to enter the United States, which led to newer waves of immigrants from Asia and Africa coming into U.S. society. While being direct beneficiaries of African Americans’ struggle for civil rights and equal treatment, Black immigrants are relative late comers into America’s complex interracial (White versus Black) and intra-racial (African Americans vis-à-vis Caribbean and African immigrants) social relations dynamic (Shaw-Taylor & Tuch, 2007), perhaps to the exception of Black immigrants from racially plural societies such as South Africa. New African immigrants overall are a group that complicates racial boundaries in the United States. Positing a generalized “Black” label on all people of African descent within the United States does not account for the considerable variations in linguistic, ethnic, and national identity. The binary of White against Black offers little analysis of the relations within the Black group and implies erroneous homogeneity (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Jackson & Cothran, 2003). In the United States, more attention

has been accorded to inter-racial rather than intra-racial relations (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Jackson & Cothran, 2003; Steinberg, 2001; Waters, 2001).

The various Black groups in the United States, namely contemporary African migrants from Africa, African Americans, and Caribbean descendants are continuously vying for economic, social, and political advantages (Waters, 2001). We can identify both similarities and points of disjuncture within this diverse group of Blacks in the United States, which includes both immigrants and natives. As slavery and its historical aftermath are central to understanding race relations in the United States, newer waves of Black immigrants seek to distance themselves from African Americans, whom they consider to be loaded with the history of slavery (Jackson & Cothran, 2003). For instance, in Waters' (2001) study, first-generation West-Indians are quick to signal that they are first and foremost immigrants, thus distancing themselves from African Americans (and the associated stigma) and positing themselves as hard workers looking for opportunities in the land of plenty. However, the descendants of enslaved populations in the United States seek recognition of their unique lineage.⁵ Hence, Ethiopian immigrants would have to be cognizant of the significant racial politics in the United States while negotiating their immigrant status.

Ethiopians make up one of the largest African immigrant groups in the United States (Chacko, 2003; Demissie, 2017; Habecker, 2012; Shelemay & Kaplan, 2015). Ethiopians trace the genesis of mass migration to the United States and elsewhere to the 1970s due to the repressive government of the time. The persecution-driven involuntary migration of the 1970s and 1980s was later followed by massive economic migration in the 1990s onward, as economic conditions deteriorated and Ethiopians used migration networks established in the previous decade (Getahun, 2007). During the last decade of the 20th century, family reunions and the winning of Diversity Visa lotteries have increased the number of Ethiopians living in the United States (Getahun, 2007). Due to the absence of colonial history, Ethiopians become sensitized to race only through their migration experience. As Black immigrants, Ethiopians experience racialization when they arrive to the United States. Becoming race conscious is part of the process of assimilation for Black immigrants in the United States.

In addition to negotiating race relations in the United States, Ethiopian immigrants struggle with the ethnic divisions imported from the home country. There has been a historically and politically problematic relationship between the ethnically diverse populations in Ethiopia. The two major dominant ethnic groups in Ethiopia are the Amharas and the Oromos, representing 30 and 35 million people, respectively. The ethnic group of Oromo, although the largest group in terms of numbers, has not been culturally or politically dominant, both

historically and in contemporary Ethiopia (Bulcha, 2002). The quest for identity, recognition, and socioeconomic parity with the dominant group has been fraught with difficulties (Sorenson, 1996). Recently, the political landscape in Ethiopia is changing with the rise to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who assumed office in April 2018 and represents the Oromo Democratic Party.

Data and Methods

The empirical basis for this research is 20 sets of interviews I conducted between 2014 and 2018⁶ with first-generation Ethiopian immigrant parents who have undergone a decision-making process of naming a newborn child within the past 7 years. The parents explained the decision-making process and meaning of the names they chose for their child(ren). They were asked to reflect upon their ideas of home, sense of belonging, and the significance of the choice of names in regard to their ethnic, racial, and immigrant identities. In general, the parents were very cognizant of the consequential nature of names beyond individual preference. The parents were also mindful of the realities and challenges that come with living as Black immigrants in the United States.

The interviews took place with respondents living in the Northeast of the United States in the following three cities, each with a large Ethiopian community: New York City, NY; Philadelphia, PA; and Washington, D.C. In order to have access to a more representative sample of parents who have recently undergone a decision-making process, I used several entry points into the community, such as community centers, Ethiopian Evangelical and Orthodox churches. The sample was purposefully stratified based on socioeconomic class standing, educational attainment, and employment backgrounds. Moreover, I strived to include an even number of respondents from the Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups to control for the ethnic factor from the homeland. All of the respondents were either legal permanent residents or naturalized citizens of the United States.

The interviews were generally conducted at the home of the respondents and were about an hour long. A few of the interviews were conducted using Skype video chat. I interviewed both parents (mother and father) at the same time whenever possible. The parents talked openly about the difference of opinions they had while choosing names, but in almost all the cases, the final name of the child was chosen to both parents' pleasing. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed by the author. The language of communication used was a combination of Amharic (one of the major languages of Ethiopia) and English and similarly holds true for the transcriptions. The coding of the transcriptions, however, was all carried out in English. It is important to recognize that my sample is not representative and that the conclusions cannot be generalized due to these limitations.

Table 1. Ethiopian-American Children's First Names, Their Meanings, and Origins.

Names	Meaning	Gender	Origin/language group
Abigail	Father's joy	Female	Biblical/Hebrew
Ahadu	First or beginning	Male	Ethiopian/Amharic
Bethel	House of God	Female	Biblical/Hebrew
Bona	Summer or happiness	Male	Ethiopian/Oromo
Christian	Follower of Christ	Male	Biblical/Latin
Dansa	Joyful, Good	Male	Ethiopian/Oromo
Desta	Happiness	Unisex	Ethiopian/Amharic
Emnet	Faith	Female	Ethiopian/Amharic
Fikir	Love	Unisex	Ethiopian/Amharic
Geleni	Thanksgiving	Female	Ethiopian/Oromo
Hana	Favor/Grace	Female	Biblical/Hebrew
Hawi	My wish	Female	Ethiopian/Oromo
Hundee	Roots (importance of)	Male	Ethiopian/Oromo
Jirru	My life	Female	Ethiopian/Oromo
Jonathan	Gift of God	Male	Biblical/Hebrew
Kena	God gave her to me	Female	Ethiopian/Oromo
Kene	God gave us blessings	Male	Ethiopian/Oromo
Lelissa	Bountiful	Female	Ethiopian/Oromo
Lenssa	Fertile/abundance	Female	Ethiopian/Oromo
Mati	Growing family	Male	Ethiopian/Oromo
Meklit	Talent	Female	Ethiopian/Amharic
Michael	Who is like God?	Male	Biblical/Hebrew
Minilik	Son of a Wise man	Male	Ethiopian/Amharic
Naafi	Mine	Female	Ethiopian/Amharic
Nahom	Comforter	Male	Biblical/Hebrew
Ruth	Companion	Female	Biblical/Hebrew
Salem	Peace	Female	Ethiopian/Amharic
Seena	Deep one	Female	Ethiopian/Oromo
Senay	Good one	Male	Ethiopian/Amharic

Source: Author.

The average age for the mothers is 37 years, ranging from 27 to 44 years. The average age for the fathers is 46 years, ranging from 31 to 52 years. The families had between one and three children, all born within the past 7 years. The interviews generated a list of names parents have chosen for their child(ren). Table 1 lists 29 names of the children of my interviewees,⁷ along with their meaning, gender, and the origin of the name. The gender breakdown is as follows: there are 15 female names, 12 male names, and 2 unisex

names. From the 29 names listed here, 8 have Biblical origins while 21 have Ethiopian ethnic or linguistic origins, with 10 being Amharic names and 11 Oromo names.

Findings and Analysis

Naming practices in Ethiopian tradition is a combination of long-standing Christian⁸ and Muslim⁹ influences, coupled with naming after specific events or aspirations for the child. There is no similar practice as in the West of a family name¹⁰ that gets passed down through generations. Individuals are assigned their own proper name, followed by the name of the father, name of grandfather, name of great-grandfather and so forth, tracing patrilineal lineage (Leyew, 2003). The parents in this study are cognizant of the long-term significance of naming their child(ren). As one parent explains, “I never realized how much thought goes into naming a child until I was faced with the decision myself.” Naming is a way of imparting an identity, attaching a symbolic meaning to an individual. This decision is even more germane in immigrant communities, as immigrant parents have the uneasy choice of conferring on their child a name reminiscent of their cultural heritage, a name unique to their host country, a neutral name, or something in between.

The interviews reveal three main themes or different layers of identification that emerge in the process of naming. First, as immigrants, Ethiopian-Americans were concerned with the integration of their children in the dominant society. Consequently, parents chose names that can easily fit within American society, such as Biblical names or ethnic names that are short and easy to pronounce. Second, as phenotypically Black in the United States, first-generation Ethiopian-Americans were apprehensive of being mistaken for African Americans, whom they associate with a loaded racial history. As such Ethiopian-American parents used naming as a way to distance themselves from other Black groups, namely African Americans. Third, as members of the Amhara or Oromo ethnic groups, parents valued a connection to their ethnic origins or national ancestry. Therefore, parents chose names which reflect their ethnic identification. Ethnic identification was particularly significant for members of the Oromo group as they posit naming as a way of reclaiming a threatened identity from the homeland.

To understand each of these themes, I employ the theory of symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 2008; Stryker, 2001) whereby parents employ their children’s first names to signal different layers of identity. The linguistic tool of personal name, unavoidable in everyday social interactions, contributes to the social formation of the child as a Black second-generation immigrant with Ethiopian (Amhara or Oromo) ancestry. Carefully selected names are

therefore useful to create allegiances and differentiations. In the following section, I examine in detail each of these three themes mentioned earlier.

Hyphenated Identities

As immigrants in the United States, Ethiopian-American parents are concerned with the integration of their children into mainstream American culture. Parents recognize that culturally distinct names may present problems with integration in mainstream (White) American culture. Even though hyphenated identities have been used as tools for both inclusion and exclusion at different times, the hyphenated identity allows for a certain level of “belonging” to both worlds instead of being confined to one. This is the struggle of having to occupy a middle ground or a hyphenated identity. The parents I interviewed are very cognizant that they are straddling at least two different cultures as they shape the identity of their very young children.

A large sample of my respondents report having experienced derision or confusion with their own names as immigrants living in the United States. They similarly report high rates of apprehension at the possibility of their children experiencing the same. Overall, there is a significant concern over pronunciation. To solve this potential problem of pronunciation and integration, parents opted for one of two possible options: parents gave their child(ren) either Biblical names or ethnic names that are short and easy to pronounce.

From the list of 29 names included in this study, eight have Biblical origins and are common both in Ethiopian and American societies. As one set of parents explained,

Michael is American, a citizen, born and bred. His parents are immigrants. He is not. He will never have to worry about people telling him, ‘go back to where you came from’ Even his name, . . . I mean particularly his name will not identify him as different. He can fit in much more easily this way.

This category of parents does not wish their child to be constantly put on the spot because of a foreign sounding name while living in the United States. For parents who choose Biblical names, their primary concern is their children’s ability to fit in both the home country of Ethiopia and in the host country of the United States. Names such as Abigail, Christian, Michael, and Ruth allow the bearer to blend in or to flow easily between American and Ethiopian cultural milieus.

Some parents who chose Biblical names worried about any potential stigma attached to an “ethnic” name. One father explains, “Imagine my kid in

kindergarten having to explain his name and other kids making fun of him. No! I don't want that for him. I want him to fit in and not be different." As this parent explains, an ethnic name would mark his child as different, while a Biblical name would allow him to integrate easily. Even parents who chose ethnic names were concerned with the potential integration of their child(ren).

The overwhelming majority from the list of 29 names included in this study (21 out of 29) have Ethiopian cultural or ethno-linguistic origins. As one parent states,

My children are Ethiopian-American, and by this, I mean both Ethiopian and American. One is not somehow more important than the other. Even if they are born here [in the US] and by default will be immersed in its culture, at home I will be bringing them up within the Ethiopian culture I know and love, eating our foods, speaking our language, respecting our values.

While these parents chose cultural names, they focus on easy pronunciation and revealed a preference toward shorter names with two or three syllables at most. They express a desire of preserving cultural identity without jeopardizing the child socially, educationally, and economically by selecting short and easy to pronounce names.

The parents therefore show much concern for easy pronunciation in the naming of their child(ren). One mother explains her daughters' names as follows: "Both names of our girls, Kena and Seena, two syllables each, are easy enough to remember, easy enough to pronounce." Similarly another parent states, "There were other names we liked but they didn't make the short list because they were too long or hard for Americans to pronounce. . . yes, we tried it out. So we ended up with Bona." Yet another parent further clarifies, "Salem is short and sweet, easy to say and write" While this parent was not aware that this name existed in U.S. culture when selecting it for their child, he emphasized the short length and easy pronunciation.

Therefore, as immigrants straddling two cultures, the parents in this study were careful in selecting names that would fit within both American and Ethiopian societies. They opted for either Biblical names such as Abigail and Jonathan or opted for short ethnic names that are easy to pronounce such as Bona and Senay.

Negotiating Race as Black Immigrants

As phenotypically Black individuals, African immigrants are generally compared to African Americans as their proximal hosts (Imoagene, 2017). Even though Ethiopian-Americans may embrace a larger Black identity, they still

distance themselves from the association with African Americans due to perceived stigma (Chacko, 2003; Chacko & Gebre, 2017; Habecker, 2012). First-generation Ethiopian-American parents draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and their progeny and see naming as a way to distance themselves from African Americans. Naming is a way of imparting a racial, ethnic, cultural, and gendered identity, attaching a symbolic meaning to an individual. One father explains, “Minilik is the name of a proud Black man. He was the first king of Ethiopia, the beginning of a long line of emperors. My son should be proud we bestowed such a name on him.” This parent discusses his desire to impart a positive Black identity to his son. However, while demonstrably pro-Black, this parent does not identify with African Americans. As Minilik’s father succinctly puts it “Black does not equal African American.” This parent’s statement unequivocally rejects a monolithic Black identity, while affirming an unabashedly pro-Black stance.

The parents are adamant that their child(ren) not be confused with African Americans, historical “descendants of slaves in the US” as one parent puts it. The mother of Ruth and Nahom explains, “When people see my kids, they are obviously Black, they will grow up around other Blacks, but they are African. Not African American.” She goes on further to explain that she does not feel like she has anything in common with African Americans besides her skin color. While African Americans trace their presence in America back to the slave trade of the 17th and 18th centuries, the modern surge of Africans dates to the post-independence era of the 1960s and 1970s. In a way, Ethiopian-Americans are distancing themselves from the history of slavery, which they (correctly) interpret as the genesis of race politics in the United States.

Personal names, as lifetime labels, are therefore used to draw symbolic boundaries vis-à-vis African Americans. The father of Ahadu explains, “When people meet Ahadu, they might think he’s just another Black kid, but when they hear his name, they will know he’s not like the rest, that he comes from a good family.” This father equates the cultural name Ahadu as originating from a “good” family, to be clearly differentiated from “the rest” meaning African Americans. Here again, Ethiopian-American parents are differentiating themselves from negative images they have of African Americans and emphasize that personal names can indicate good character.

Another parent expresses thinly veiled derision toward culturally African American names: “I don’t understand why they [African Americans] name their children with all these made up names, like Shanequas or Latifas. It’s so ghetto!” Here, the parent is drawing demarcation lines between himself and African Americans. He uses the coded term “ghetto” to represent a negative image of African Americans. This parent demonstrates a lack of understanding

of the provenance of distinctly African American names and their racialized history. Another mother states, “Desta has more in common with his Nigerian and Kenyan friends than Rashonda or DeShawn” using names to highlight her child’s similarity with other African immigrants while distancing herself and her progeny from African Americans.

Parents emphasized that they chose these particular names to mark their child as primarily Ethiopian. Meklit’s mother insisted that her child is “Ethiopian first, and I don’t want her to forget that.” She goes on to explain, “I want this to be a conversation starter, people will be asking her, ‘where is your name from?’ and she will have to claim her Ethiopian identity.” Parents from my sample want their children to be intimately acquainted with and express pride in their Ethiopian cultural heritage. This parent is emphasizing that despite racial similarity, there are significant cultural differences between African Americans and Ethiopian-Americans.

Ethnic Negotiations

In addition to parents negotiating their immigrant status and race as Black immigrants in the United States, there is the added layer of ethnic identities brought over from the homeland. This was more significant with parents who strongly identify as part of the Oromo ethnic group. As discussed earlier, Oromo people in Ethiopia have suffered from a socioeconomic and political subjugation in the home country for generations (Bulcha, 2002). Oromo immigrants in the United States actively seek to correct these historically rooted imbalances, partly through reclaiming Oromo names. The naming practices of Ethiopian-Americans who identify as Oromo are thus partly rooted in their experiences in the home country. Thus, personal names are one arena where ethnic homeland negotiations take place for Ethiopian immigrants in the United States.

The Oromo parents I interviewed all experienced at one time or another a sort of ethnic re-awakening, whereby they realized their Oromo identity and their subjugated history. The Oromo parents did not take their ethnic identity as a matter of fact, but rather consciously identified as such and sought to preserve and maintain it. One Oromo parent explains,

We did not really have the freedom to name ourselves in Ethiopia. We had to take Amhara names if we were to do well, to get educated, to take up professional posts. It wasn’t really a choice. But now we’re in the United States, we can do what we want. I don’t want my child thinking that being Oromo is somehow being inferior.

Another Oromo parent explains, “My people were forced to choose Amharic names for generations. There was almost a disappearance of Oromo names

altogether. All my brothers and sisters, my cousins, my school friends all had Amharic or Biblical names.” Asserting an Oromo identity was considered paramount by parents in this group. They saw the names not only as a means of maintaining links with their ethnic identity but also as a way of reclaiming a lost identity due to what they considered a cultural erasure by the more dominant Amhara groups. One Oromo father explains,

My parents gave me an Amharic name, because that’s what they were supposed to do then, but I can give my child any name I choose, and I choose an Oromo name [. . .] because our culture and language is beautiful.

From this quote, one can gather that the father laments the loss of identity that was imposed on Oromo populations and is using the name of his child as a way of reclaiming this lost identity. Some scholars have drawn parallels between the experiences of the Oromo with those of African Americans (Jalata, 2003).

Parents in this group chose names such as Kena and Lenssa, which are common only among Oromo-speaking populations in Ethiopia. As one mother explains, “Lenssa is a common name among the Oromo. It means fruitful or fertile. That’s my wish for my people, that we become productive and rise to great heights in this new land [US].” As illustrated by this quote, this mother’s wish for her child is in line with her wish for her co-ethnic Oromos, which is to be fruitful in their land of immigration. Another parent had a similar line of reasoning, “I want Hundee to understand what we went through as Oromos. This is his identity. The name Hundee represents the importance of roots.” In this statement, the parent emphasizes the Oromo identity. Oromo parents explained their decision to give their child(ren) typically Oromo names as reclaiming a lost identity, an expression of self and even a political stand. Oromo parents from my sample were unlikely to choose a biblical name. For the few families that have an ethnically mixed marriage, the parent that is Oromo generally expressed a stronger preference for an Oromo name, and this was consequently conferred upon the child.

For parents who identify as Amhara, they showed less concern with their Amhara identity as either their national (Ethiopian) identity took center stage or Amhara and Ethiopian were considered to be synonymous. This group identifies itself with the larger category “Ethiopian” instead of using the more specific ethnic identity marker of Amhara. Albeit identifying as Amhara when prompted, this group did not spontaneously mention their Amhara heritage. The majority of the group seems to take the identity of Amhara and Ethiopian as synonymous. The Amhara parents from my sample expressed more concern with their immigrant or racial identity in the United States and

were not particularly concerned with ethnic politics in the home country. Therefore, compared to the dominant Amhara identity, the threatened Oromo ethnic identity plays a significant role for Ethiopian-Americans.

Conclusion

Migration status, race, and ethnicity significantly influence the naming patterns of first-generation Ethiopian-Americans, a Black African immigrant group in the United States. Although the sample size of this study does not lead to generalizations of the findings, it nonetheless highlights important patterns in the study of naming for a Black immigrant group. The naming practices within Ethiopian immigrant communities show divergent patterns of cultural preservation and assimilation than what the literature discusses. This case study thus demonstrates that various layers of identity can be selectively deployed within African immigrant groups in the United States.

First as immigrants, Ethiopian-American parents chose names that are perceived as less problematic for integration by selecting either Biblical names or ethnic names that are short and easy to pronounce. The “advantage” of this group of Ethiopian immigrants is their religious identification as Christian, whether it is Orthodox or Protestant. As they imagine the United States as primarily a Christian nation, they do not feel the need to navigate religious differences as might be the case with Muslim immigrants. Second, as Black immigrants, the parents chose names that would help draw symbolic boundaries between their children and African Americans. Ethiopian immigrants distanced themselves from African Americans (and what they view as the associated stigma) by identifying themselves primarily as immigrants, regardless of their skin color. Third, the parents chose ethnic names from either the Amhara or Oromo ethnic group that highlights the continued significance of the ethnic politics of the home nation in the new area of settlement. Ethnic names were seen as conversation starters and a linkage back to the home country of Ethiopia. Both Oromo and Amhara groups were cognizant of the easy pronunciation of the names they chose for their children. Yet, the Oromo parents, because of their historically subjugated identities, opt more for ethnic maintenance, fighting against homogenizing influence from both the host and home countries.

This study fills a gap in the literature by adding a crucial element to the theory of segmented assimilation and sociocultural issues around naming. Immigrant groups in the United States may choose to assimilate to the dominant society, a subordinated group or vie for ethnic maintenance (Portes, 2007). The literature neglects to consider the lived experiences of different ethnic groups in their home countries and how this influences their choices in

the host country. My study shows that even within immigrants from the same nation, there can be different types of assimilation. Naming is a particularly interesting instance in immigrant communities who are constantly attempting to balance the values of their cultural heritage from their home country with those of the new host society. My study shows that it is important to note the identities of the groups within their home nations, as different ethnic groups from the same nation can have divergent modes of incorporation.


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Notes

1. Similar to Malcolm X, all adherents to the Nation of Islam ceased using their former surnames, severing their links with the history of slavery and embracing the identity of the Muslim faith (Finch, 2008).
2. Even though the resumes were identical, applicants with White sounding names received 50% more callbacks than applicants with Black-sounding names. Moreover, the return on quality of CV (i.e., reward for high-skill level) was high for Whites but nonexistent for Blacks. This CV experiment has been well-replicated in other contexts as well; for instance, see Adida et al. (2010).
3. The authors do not specify whether these name changes were legally adopted or employed colloquially for everyday interactions, as may be the practices for some immigrants.
4. For example, in 1915, the United States passed an immigration bill known as the "African Exclusion Measure" which prohibits the immigration of African and Black populations from the Caribbean, Central and South America. Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) was among those who aggressively campaigned against this bill.
5. See, for instance, the controversial ADOS (American Descendants of Slavery) movement and associated campaigns for reparations from slavery.
6. The interviews for this study were all conducted prior to Abiy Ahmed becoming Prime Minister of Ethiopia.
7. Although I kept the name of the children as this forms the basis of my study, all the names of the parents are omitted to protect the privacy of the families.

8. Christian influences in Ethiopia date back to the first-century AD, while Islam came to the nation in the 630s AD.
9. The naming practices of Ethiopian Muslims in the United States have not been included in this study, as the naming tradition of Muslim communities in the United States has been significantly studied. See Cainkar (2009) and Khosravi (2012). Moreover, in a post 9/11 world, Muslim identity has supplanted ethnic identity for most adherents of the faith.
10. The practice of last names is also changing with Ethiopian immigrants, but as this is not the focus of this study, I leave it to future researchers to explore this area more in depth.

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