

# Naming and Linguistic Africanisms in African American Culture

Lupenga Mphande  
Ohio State University

## 1. Introduction

Shakespeare once asked, “What is in a name?” The answer to this age-old question depends on the particular culture from which it is framed: among many African cultures a name tells a lot about the individual that it signifies, the language from which it is drawn, and the society that ascribes it. A name may indicate the linguistic structures and phonological processes found in the language, the position of the name’s bearer in society, and the collective history and life experiences of the people surrounding the individual. African cultures have various ways of naming a child, ranging from the Akan naming system based on days of the week to the Egyptian more cosmic one. Slavery, colonialism, and globalization have all contributed to the exportation of the African systems of naming into the African Diaspora. Among the various endeavors that African slaves made in becoming African American in culture, orientation was the culture of resistance involving the process of re-naming themselves, constantly reverting back to their African cultural forms, such as spirituality, burial rites, and naming for inspiration and guidance, and thus reasserting themselves and reaffirming their humanity in a hostile world. Through re-naming themselves, African Americans have continued the process of cultural identity formulations and re-claiming of their complex African roots in the continuing process of redefining themselves and dismantling the paradigm that kept them mentally chained for centuries.

How has the African naming system been retained and modified in the African Diaspora, and how has it adapted to the black experience in the Americas? More specifically, what influence have African languages exerted on the American naming system in the United States of America? What are the historical and cultural traits and origins of African language practice that can be said to motivate or influence contemporary African and African American cultural reality? How does a name contribute to discourse and interlocution in the African and African American societies? These are some of the questions we will discuss in this paper.

What are Africanisms in American and other diasporic cultures, and how were they introduced into the New World? Joseph Holloway defines Africanisms as “those elements of culture found in the New World that are traceable to an African origin” (1990:ix). As part of their politico-cultural struggles, African Americans have endeavored to construct their identities partly by reclaiming those features that speak to their African heritage. In recent years perhaps the most pronounced form of claiming African identity has been the adoption of African names by people of African-American descent. Thus through the naming system African Americans are re-claiming their complex African roots in the continuing process of redefining themselves and dismantling the paradigm that kept them mentally chained for centuries. The purpose of this study of Africanisms is not only to help confirm the survival of African traditions in America, but also reveal the presence of a distinct African American cultural enclave in the United States.

## 2. Literature on Africanisms in American Reality

Melville Herskovits pioneered the study of Africanisms in American culture in his seminal 1941 publication, *The Myth of the Negro Past*. But although Herskovits spoke of Africanisms in the United States in a global sense, his evidence was drawn exclusively from the Caribbean and South America, and his insistence on an exclusive West Africa base as the origin of the Africanisms further limited the

scope and application of his concepts. Further studies intimated a broader continental African cultural base that includes the Bantu. The 1926 publication of *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (1926), by Newbell Puckett, was the first anthropological study of African carryovers found in Southern society. It presented 10,000 folk beliefs of southern blacks that revealed African traits in African American burial customs, folk beliefs and religious philosophy, including beliefs in ghosts, witchcraft, voodoo, and conjuration. Other early studies examining African carryovers were those by Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois. In *The African Background Outlined* (1936), Woodson listed technical skills, arts, folklore, spirituality, attitudes toward authority, and generosity among the African carryovers. He also drew attention to African influences in religion, music, dance, drama, poetry, and oratory. After the publication of Du Bois' 1939 *Black Folk, Then and Now*, consequent studies veered back to focusing on the Caribbean, Suriname, and Brazil where there is a more abundant living African culture that is still visible. However, current studies by scholars like Michael Gomez (1998) and Walter Rucker (2001) have re-centered the study of Africanisms back on the United States.

Within the United States the most direct remnants of African culture are found in isolated communities in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. *Drum and Shadows* (1940) by Guy Johnson examined African retention in the Georgia Sea Islands and the nearby Gullah communities as part of the Federal Writers Project that recorded the testimonies of ex-slaves. This was the first study to use oral history as a methodology in analyzing Africanisms in North American culture. But it was the publication of linguistic *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949) by Lorenzo Turner that truly transformed the study of Africanisms in America by not only documenting African American speech patterns, but also examining African linguistic retentions. He recited numerous derivations in African American speech and linked them to the speech patterns of the Niger-Congo and Bantu family of African languages. However, it was Winifred Vass' 1979 *The Bantu Speaking Heritage of the United States* that brought a new dimension to the study of Africanisms by analyzing the African content in various aspects of American language and culture, and tracing them to the Congolese language Tshi-Luba, and thus providing the thesis of a Bantu origin for black American culture (Kubik, 1979; 2000).

### 3. Language and Social Behavior

The relationship between language, social structure, and behavior has fascinated researchers for a long time. Language is part of the culture; it is the primary means of communication (Salzmann, 2004:48). But so too are customary acts of behavior. Taboo, (an inhibited expression), for example, can be either behavioral (such as incest taboo) or linguistic (such as the Zulu *hlonipha*, or speech avoidance), and the protective sanctions are much the same. Language is a guide to social reality, and human beings at times seem to be at the mercy of the language that has become the medium of expression for their society. Therefore, from this perspective, experience is largely determined by the language habits of the community, and that each separate structure represents a separate reality. Juri Lotman states that language is a modeling system and that "No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language" (1978:211-32). Although such views are a source of much debate, nonetheless they seem to suggest that people are prisoners of language because it determines the way they think. This view of language is apparent in the study of vocabulary and the semantics of words.

#### 3.1. Words

Only words have semantic content, and pragmatic processes affect every level of interpretation. The semantic value of an expression is determined by the speaker's intentions, together with features of context, in accord with the standing meaning of that lexical item (1997). The vocabulary of a language plays an important role as a window into the universe of knowledge of its speakers and their view of the world around them. Words are taken as a label of aspects of culture, and are thus an index of the cultural world of society. If a language does not have a term for something, it may mean that thing is probably not important in that culture. On the other hand, if a language has a set of names for something then perhaps that thing reflects some cultural essence of the people. Clearly, from a relativist point of view, there is no particular language or culture that names everything or catalogues the whole compass of knowledge of the world (Nettle & Romaine, 2000:50-57). Underlying a word,

therefore, is its relationship with other words, and the goal of analysis is to discover vocabulary sets that carry the underlying semantic components of the language and a people's culture.

### 3.2. *Names*

Names, as words by which reality is known and spoken of, are the most meaningful lexicon in the vocabulary of any language, and they are an important part of the language inventory as they not only name the environment, but also store all the distinctions about the fauna and flora. When slaves were captured on the African continent and brought to the New World, they brought with them *names* as the means to identify their environment and themselves. Although many studies have catalogued African names in America, no study has examined the processes that go into linguistic name construction and encoding of its semantic import. There has been no study, therefore, that has discussed the process that leads to the creation of names, other than just as a cataloguing of the forms themselves. In this paper I will examine the linguistic remnants of the African naming practice in American culture, and interrogate the imaginative processes African Americans have deployed in retaining their African cultural heritage. Since many slaves are reported to have originated from Central and West African cultures (Gomez 1998, Rucker 2005), I will describe the Zulu naming practice as an example of the Bantu naming culture that such slaves were acquainted with before they arrived in the Americas and the Caribbean. I will then examine the contemporary naming practice in the African American community with a view of suggesting similarities between them, and therefore attempting to trace specific linguistic processes as part of the African carryovers in African American culture. This study will thus fill an existing gap in our knowledge of the mechanisms in the naming practice in African languages and its importation into the African Diaspora. The study further hopes to serve people, particularly African American students, who have expressed a desire to adopt African names for self-identity, a desire encouraged by the adoption of African names by famous celebrities, such as the writer Paulette Williams who changed her name to the Nguni *Ntozakhe Shange*. The task of the linguist, therefore, is to inform the name consumers about the language derivational processes that go into the naming practice so that they can make informed choices, or engage in the exercise with better knowledge.

### 3.3. *African Names in African American culture*

Because of the large human migrations of Africans to the New World predicated on the dynamics of history and global capital, there is a preponderance of Bantu vocabulary in South and North America and the Caribbean, including vocabulary for cultural forms as diverse as culinary, music, literature, and place, as can be seen from the following examples of vocabulary from speech dialects in Gullah of the Georgia Sea Islands, and Brazilian:

(1)	<u><i>Animal names</i></u>	<u><i>Slave Names</i></u>	<u><i>Culinary Names</i></u>
	/kambaboli/ "a gray bird"	Kato	banana
	/kandi/ "rabbit"	Tshituba	coffee
	/kanka/ "a large fish"	Zango	cola
	/kekele/ "a marsh bird"	Zingo	gumbo
	/kilombo/ "a black and white"	Zinka	okra
	/kimbi/ "a hawk"	(Puckett, 1936)	sesame
	/kimbimbi/ "quail"		sorghum
	/kinkwawi/ "partridge"	Tenah	cucumber
	/kulu/ "a blue and white marsh bird"	Mima	akee
	/kusu/ "parrot"	Cutto	congo beans
	/kuta/ "tortoise"	Mahala	(Holloway & Vass 1993:137-160;
	/kuti/ "small pig"	Juba	and Harris 2001:170)
(Turner, 1949: 196-197)		Mimbo	
		Mango	
		Mingo	

<u>Place Names</u>		<b>Music</b>
Angola	Quash	banjo
Angila	Quaco	Jam
	Quomo	Jazz
	Vigo	Jive
	Sambo	Lukelele
	(Gutman, 1976:242)	

These are clearly African-origin names, and it is interesting that Turner's list of small animals and small birds above have similar characteristics to the diminutive in Bantu languages. The /ki-/ prefix of the noun class marker in Bantu seems to have been retained and incorporated into the African Diaspora linguistic borrowing. Margaret Washington Creel (1990 *Africanisms in American Culture*) reports that quite a significant number of the Gullah slaves probably originated from Central Africa (the Congo-Angola), which is a Bantu speaking region. She says that after the 1739 Stono Rebellion "when African-born Angolans rose up against Carolina masters.... The postwar years witnessed another period of massive importations, and the Congo-Angola region once again supplied the majority of African slave coffles" (69). She then gives linguistic evidence to show "that the dominant African presence in the Sea Island region derives from the Kongo-Angola and Windward Coast. There is thus a clear Bantu connection in the Gullah dialect.

There are many other sources documenting African names in American history and culture, including slave documents, ship logs, court records, historical accounts, and accounts of slave rebellions and witch trials. Most of these names have either a West African or Central African origin, and some have since changed their linguistic forms, although many have retained their African forms. Okra, for example, was grown by slaves in Brazil from the sixteenth century, and was at various times called *quiabo*, (current use) or its variations of *gombo*, *quigombo*, *qingombo*, *quingobo*, *quimbombo*, *quingongo*, and *quibombo*. All these forms are derived from the Bantu languages of the Angola region, and were brought to the New World through the Portuguese. Okra has retained its West African linguistic origin in English, but it has also retained its Bantu root in the Romance languages – for example, in French it is /gombo/.

### 3.4. *The process of obliteration and retention of African names*

Unlike culinary names, African slave personal names have disappeared, replaced largely by the Anglo-American names of their owners. But the African definition of "name" is different from the European one, and Gutman says that in 1783 some slaves' surnames differed from their owners', displaying a social identity independent of slave ownership (Gutman, 1976:250). Those slaves who could read and write, he says, "wrote their names in the copy of the Bible that they carried to church on Sunday" (230). This contradicted the widely held belief among whites that slaves had neither history nor culture, and that they could not have legal right to a name. The Hudson River Valley college president, C. C. Gaines, for example, claimed that "A name is no name unless the bearer has legal right to it," and that "No slave could have a surname because he could not have a *legal sire*" (231). This attitude reduced slaves to namelessness, and thus made them available for name re-assignment by their owners. Many slaves, however, kept their African names and used them among themselves. Mr. Gaines above later admitted that the name a slave claimed for himself revealed a "mark peculiar to the person or incident to his history... You will find many negroes today who do not retain the surname of their last owner, but are known by that of a remoter ancestor" (231). But many more slaves were re-assigned names by their master or government official. During trials, for example, court officials assigned names based on the appearance of the accused, or the region in Africa where they came from, e.g., Paul d'Angola, Simon Congo, Anthony Portuguese, etc (Rucker, 2005:32). During the *Witch-Hunt: mysteries on the Salem Witch trials*, three of the accused slaves from the West Indies were recorded as: Tshituba Tony, John Indian, and Mary Black, but the records later show that these surnames referred to the skin complexions of the accused (Aronson, 2002).

Gutman described, "a native African [who] had discretely kept a surname different from that of his master" (1976:236), and that such hidden names came to light immediately after they were freed. But such names subsequently disappeared again as part of the acculturation process where, as part of their survival strategy, African Americans strived to assimilate to Anglo-American religion and culture

by adopting Christian or English names. Similarly, some of the ex-slaves claimed double heritage by adopting both their African and Anglo-American names; hence “Moses Mahala or Mahala Rose ... may have taken a parent’s given name” (Gutman, 1976:250). However, many of the African names faded and disappeared because of (a) the threat of repatriation, and thus those who did not want to go back to Africa had to claim that they were not Africans; (b) slave rebellions, particularly in South Carolina: slaves did not want to be identified as “rebellious” because of their name-identity with Africa; (c) some slaves were coerced into changing their names to that of their masters by the slave owners; (d) although the Garvey brand of the back to Africa movement encouraged many to identify with Africa, there were still some slaves who wanted to distance themselves from such close identification with the continent. However, changing a personal name to suit the prevailing socio-cultural or political environment is nothing new in African and African American history. Because they are social commentary, names can be changed to indicate contemporary socio-political situations – *Johnstone Kamau*, for example, changed his name to *Jomo Kenyatta*, to match the prevailing atmosphere of his political activism in Kenya. In fact *Jomo Kenyatta*, who took himself as a political messiah or liberator of his people, went a step further: he named his first born son ‘Peter,’ with obvious biblical implications of “On this rock I build my church!” Is the ‘rock’ referred to here the ‘stone’ in his European name, *Johnstone*?

### 3.5. Identities and Cultural Reformulation

In America, African names were reconfigured for retention into new shapes more suited for survival in a hostile environment, and the plantation was the site where Africa cultures were forged into a new African American reality, reformulated on the prevailing experience. Hair styles, oration, hand shake/hand clapping being perhaps the most obvious examples of this process that Henry Louis Gates (1988) calls “signifying” and “troping.” The troping process, he says, involves reinterpreting or “repeating previous existing texts with a difference” and hence reinventing and transforming them, a process fundamental to African American culture. As part of this process, after Emancipation in the 1860s, many slaves named themselves or their children after political ancestors: Benjamin, Jackson, Jefferson, Washington, etc. The movement for re-naming and self-identification among African Americans started at the very dawn of American history. African Americans had to re-name themselves for various reasons, including: (a) repatriation – some of those sent back to Africa reclaimed African names, others stuck with European or slave-master’s names, and still others hyphenated their names to claim both heritage, notably in Sierra Leone (Fyle, 2004); (b) in the back to Africa movement of Marcus Garvey; (c) the Pan African movement that encouraged some to identify more closely with African culture; (d) the Civil Rights movement and the need for a distinct African identity; and (e) African American cultural nationalism and the rise of cultural activism and institutional building, such as Kwanza and June Teen. The most visible outburst of African name reclamation came with the Civil Right movement in the 1960s, and the high profiles of the people involved in this naming exercise gave the process prestige:

(2)

**institutional: – June Teen & kwanza!**

Nguza Saba (7 principles)  
 Umoja (unity)  
 Kujichangulila (self determination)  
 Ujima (collective work 7 responsibility)  
 Ujamaa (cooperative economics)  
 Nia (purpose)

Kuumba (creativity)  
 Imani (faith)

**Personal names:**

**Kwesi Mfume** (Akan & Swahili)  
**Kwame Ture** (formerly Stokely Carmichael)  
**Jawanza Kanjufu** (Swahili)  
**Karim Abdul Jabal**  
**Molefe Asante** (Sotho & Akan)  
**Ntozake Shange** Nguni (formerly Paulette Williams)  
**Malik El Shabbaz** (formerky Malcom X/Little)  
 Cassius Clay became **Muhamad Ali**

While surnames may refer to collective and more historical experiences, first, or given, names comment on more temporary social issues and are thus more relevant in deciphering the social atmosphere at a given time. Apart from indicating an individual’s relationship with a physical and

social environment, names are also statements about religion and the beliefs of the speakers and their relationship with the supernatural. Personal names thus provide a barometer for measuring changes in attitudes and moral codes at specific historical epochs.

### 3.6. Present trends in cultural reconfiguring

What is the present trend in the African American naming practice? In her *Proud Heritage: 11,001 names for your African-American Baby* (1990), Dinwiddie identifies *da, de, la, le, sha,* and *ja* as the most common affixes that African Americans use to create new names, and that these account for 75 per cent of all new African American names (1990:16). Similar to Bantu languages such as isiZulu, these affixes have gender implications, so that *Leshandra*, for example, can only be a woman's name. She also writes that African American families use certain Latin stems in creating new names, as illustrated in the chart below:

(3)

**Stem:** Dante, Latin 'durans' – lasting, enduring

D'ante	danatay	dant
Dantereus	Danutaye	Danute
Dauntay	Dauntrae	De Ante
*Deante	Deaunta	Deonta
Deontae	Deontay	Deonte
Deontee	Deontia	Deontie
Deontre	Deontrea	Deontae
Deyonte	Diante	Diontae
Diontay	Dionte	Dondi
Donta	Dontae	Dontal
Donta	Dontae	Dontay
Dontaye	Dontea	Dontee
Dontei	Donterius	Dontez
Dontrell		

In creating names, people take the forms with which they are familiar, and play with them in a creative way to formulate new structures that fulfill their needs in a more satisfying and meaningful way. Thus, they take a name-stem and give it a prefix such as "Le-," or "La-" that evokes for African Americans their historical connections, or contains the flavor of their French or New Orleans roots. The fact that they are adding a French prefix to an English word is of little concern.

## 4. Name construction in African societies

The discussion so far shows a clear need to account for not only the historical occurrence of linguistic Africanisms in America, but also the processes behind the naming exercise, or the deconstruction of the rules of the "naming game." If the African American naming practice is an instance of African retentions, then the question we have to ask ourselves is: what are the social and linguistic constructs of names in African societies? In other words, how are the African names morphologically and semantically constructed, what are the linguistic processes involved, and how do those morphological processes relate to the African American exercise in name creation? To answer these questions, we will now examine the naming practice in Nguni, a Southern African group of Bantu languages of which isiZulu and isiXhosa are members.

### 4.1. The morphology of names in Bantu

Of all Bantu languages, Nguni has perhaps the more elaborate and overt morphological and derivational semantic processes for naming, and therefore offers an interesting opportunity to adequately describe and account for the morphological and semantic processes involved in naming. The emphasis in this paper is on the construction of proper names, particularly the process involved in

naming children. There are many ways in which names in Nguni are constructed, depending on the semantic import that the name-giver wants to convey, but here we are interested only in three that involve some form of derivational affixation – a very distinctive feature of Bantu languages. A morpheme can be defined as the minimal unit having meaning associated with a constant form. In Nguni, affix morphemes appear as either prefixes, as in noun class markers, or as suffixes, as in verbalizers. Stems are fully formed "independent" words at the lexical level. However, some stems can be turned into verbal stems by affixing verbal suffixes, and some verb stems in turn can be turned into names by suffixation. Therefore, there are two types of name formation: lexical and derived.

#### 4.2. Name construction in Nguni, the case of isiZulu

In Nguni, an agglutinating language, the process of naming is largely based on the deployment of a network of affixes that are harmonized by the relevant phonological rules. In the morphological processes, the noun or verbal conjugation is the main source for deriving meaning, and this poses an interesting question of how meaning can be best implicated through the linguistic process. Context affects the interpretation of linguistic items such as names, and therefore there can be no semantic systematic theorizing because context determines what can be intuitively said about a lexicon in a natural language. Names are thus like implicatives, and we need a declaration to provide the input to implicatives which are pragmatic. You do not just draw from the lexical parts. Thus in a name like *Thandeka*, "the loved one," it is not clear who is loved: the child, mother, or ancestor? The morphology of names also has fundamental implications for syntax because names tend to be both words and sentences, for example: *Thembinkosi* is "We trust in the Lord," or *Bonangani*, "How do you see?"

#### 4.3. The morphological process of name construction in isiZulu

Most of the names in Zulu culture result from the process of verbal conjugation, where derivational affixes turn specific categories of morphemes into corresponding morphemes in another category. These affixes can be as small as a single vowel:

(4) /themb + a/ → *Themba* (trust, hope)

Typically, all verbs in Bantu languages end in a final vowel [a], which is a default absolute tense feature in verbs. In Nguni languages this is a common source of proper personal names. But names are also morphologically related to other grammatical categories, and in the following example the derivational process affixes [o] or [i] as a final vowel to verb stems:

(5)  
 /vusa/ (revise) → *Vuso* (revival)      /hlaza/ (embarrass) → *Hlazo* (disgrace)  
 /zonda/ (hate) → *Mzondi* (hater)      /thakatha/ (bewitch) → *Mthakathi* (witch)

Derivational affixes thus change the syntactic category of the lexical morphemes to which they are attached, turning verbs into nouns, which then become another source for personal names. As indicated in the last two examples in (5), there is another process that prefixes the nominal nasal morpheme to the verb stem as shown in (6):

(6)  
 thakatha (verb, bewitch) → thakathi (noun) → *Mthakathi* (witch, wizard)  
 zonda (verb, hate) → zondo (noun, hatred) → *Mzondi* (the hater)  
 bonga (verb, thank, praise) → bongo (noun) → *Mbongi* (praiser)

In the cases in (6), nasalization, as a linguistic process, is a typical part of the Bantu noun class system. Plural appeal is also indicated by either prefix –*si*, as in *Sibongile* (we are thankful), or suffix –*ni*, as in *Bongani* (be thankful). Using this process of affixation, name-givers take the verb forms with which

they are familiar, and play with them in a creative way to re-create new names that convey a meaningful reflection on what the new birth means to the community.

#### 4.4. The verbalization process in name construction

The overwhelming majority of names in Nguni, however, are derived from the process of verbalization by which a verbalizer suffix is attached to the verb stem to indicate the state of the action denoted. The three most popular suffixes used in Nguni languages are the causative extension [-se], the applicative extension [-le], the simple passive suffix [-we], and passive suffix [-ka]. There are two observations to be made about verbalizers. First, each verbalizer behaves uniquely and second, some verbalizers are more frequent than others. Note also that although both [-se] and [-ka] are causative extensions and are used to name or define a quality in the individual bearing the name, there is a qualitative semantic distinction between them in the way they indicate capacity or potential for something. All the four suffixations are very common in the Nguni naming practice.

(7)

thanda (verb, love) → thando (noun) → *Thandeka/Thandwa/Thandiwe* (the loved one)

lungaa (verb, correct) → lungo (noun) → *Lungile* (the one set right)

nhlanza (verb, purify) → *Nhlanzo* (noun) → *Nhlanzekile* (the cleansed one)

linda (verb, wait) → lindo (noun) → *Lindiwe* (the awaited one)

dinga (verb, need) → dingo (noun) → *Dingile/Dingase* (the needed one)

These suffixes not only convert the stem into different phonological and grammatical realizations, but also impart different semantic impulses of the social meaning. It is these semantic impulses that help interpret the related activity implied in the verbal extension, i.e., applicative, causative, intensive, passive, etc. The {-ka} extension, for instance, indicates a stative condition with respect to social space, as in *Bongeka* (be thanked), or *Thandeka* (the favorite one). The name with a {-le} suffix indicates a semantic element of persistence: *Hlanzekile* (purified, continuously cleansed), or *Lungile* (be righteous, consistently well behaved). The {-se} suffix indicates a cause-and-effect intensity, causing or being caused, as in the forms *Dingase* (cause to need), and *Mzondwase* (the one caused to hate). The intensification can be further reinforced by the affixation of another pronominal suffix {-yo} onto the causative one, as in *Dingiswayo* (the needy one), or *Sunduzwayo* (the one made to be pushed aside, forced out). The plural suffix {-ni} is also used in Nguni names as an appeal or form of command: *Bongani* (be thankful), *Kholwani* (be faithful), *Them bani* (be trusting), and *Tholani* (give birth, adopt, offer shelter). The {-ni} suffix also indicates collectivity, an appeal to a group rather than to a single individual, and should not be confused with the locative of the same form. Thus, while /mzonde/, “hate her/him,” refers to a single addressee, in *Mzondeni* more than one addressee is referred to. Although there are several morphemes in Nguni languages that can be attached to various verbal stems to turn them into different types of words of different categories, only a few can be used in this way to form verb-based names.

## 5. The Morphophonology of Names

The preceding discussion of the process of affixations in name construction raises several questions for Nguni languages. For example, how are these types of verbal extension suffixes represented in Bantu languages? The traditional and accepted view is that these suffixes are typically of the VC-shape, and that what in this study we call the final vowel suffix (FV) should not be regarded as part of the verb morpheme. On the other hand, the suffix must be represented in a way that enables us to interpret the derivation of name from verbal stems as a morpho-phonological process that is executed in accordance with the vowel harmony rules of the language. The implication for the latter interpretation is obvious – since this is a feature-changing process, the question then is: can phonological processes perform a semantic function? Or is this the exclusive function of morphology and syntax? Words have semantic content, but not sentences, and this is enough justification for studying names.

Because of the agglutinating nature of Nguni morphology, monosyllabic words tend to be unstable, resulting in a constraint on monosyllabic names. Monosyllabic forms can be manipulated in



size through the process of expansion, i.e., by reduplication or triplication, under specific morphological requirements. Monosyllabic stems have a tendency to replicate before they can be acceptable names in the language, hence a form such as /sho/, “mean,” can be extended to three syllables to form the name *Shoshosho* (the stubborn one). For disyllabic forms, a name can be formed simply by reduplicating the syllables:

(8)		
Verb stem:	{ [ x x x ]word/name ... }	
/ho/ “hollow”	→ <i>Hoho</i> (place name)	
/swa/ “rustle sound”	→ <i>Swaswa</i> (place name)	
shoba (tail)	→ <i>Shobashoba</i> (restless one), also <i>Mashobani</i>	
shanga (roam about)	→ <i>Shangashanga</i> (one who roams about), also <i>Shangani</i>	

Four syllables seem to be the maximum name, and two the minimum, and hence the monosyllable form /ho/ above is extended to the maximum. In reduplication of a monosyllabic form, the first CV is targeted as a base, reduplicated, and then re-attached to the original base: This means that in monosyllabic forms with a long vowel the syllabification seems to behave like a CVC.V type where the final vowel is extrametrical and therefore the final C attaches to the previous syllable, forming CVC. But in Nguni every word must end in a vowel, which means either adding a vowel at the end or deleting the final C. There is a maximal limit to the length of a word that a name affix or verbal extension can be attached to, and that limit is three syllables. Therefore, although the forms above can replicate endlessly, this process is limited by the phonological rules.

There is also a constraint on the minimum word template that is relevant on the construction of nicknames in Nguni. Just as a short/monosyllabic name can be extended, a long name can be reduced in order to conform to the restrictions on the word size and other morphological rules in the language. As McCarthy and others have noted, truncated words are not chopped to fit by leaving off prosodic units, but “instead, starting at some designated point, the melodic elements of a word are associated with a template” (McCarthy 1986, p. 56). In Nguni this process of truncation is employed to form nicknames:

(9)		
Morpheme:	[Verb stem]	fi [ x x x ]word/name + [suffix (+ truncation)]
<b>Full name</b>		<b>Short form or nickname</b>
<i>Sibongile</i>		<i>Bongi</i>
<i>Thandeka</i>		<i>Thandi</i>
<i>Them bani</i>		<i>Themba</i>
<i>Dingiswayo</i>		<i>Dingi</i>

Two syllables are the maximum stem size in the language to which a name can be truncated to form a “nickname.” Therefore, forms like *Vuso* or *Chitha* are not truncated because they are already minimum foot size since the shortened name has to be bi-moraic. This is evidence of the enforcement of a foot/minimal word template that results in systematic patterns of shortening input words. This also supports a CVC syllable structure in Nguni, which corresponds to vocative truncation or nickname abbreviation. It should also be pointed out, however, that the nickname is not culturally accepted as a substitute for the full (or ‘real’) name, so that with a man who is called “Dingi,” everybody knows that his formal (or ‘real’) name is *Dingiswayo*, just as if a woman is called “Thandi,” then her formal name is *Thandeka* or *Thandiwe*. This is different from English where the name Tony does not necessarily mean that the person’s real name is *Anthony*, *Antonio*, *Antonia*, or *Antonette*.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I have demonstrated that African and African American cultures share similar rhetorical strategies in verbal exposition in creating new personal names reflective of their socio-political environment. I have shown that the coining of new names from old morphological roots is an

element of syncretism, which is very characteristic of both African and African American cultures. I have argued that African Americans have retained in their speech African linguistic roots used in naming, as well as the ability to fundamentally manipulate the base name-stem of a language to construct new names and encode them with the relevant semantic import through the affixation process. I hope this study will help develop a more adequate paradigm to explain the process of cultural orientation and the presence of cultural retention and presence in America through naming than has been attempted so far.

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