

Amnesia and Nostalgia: The End of Home Memory

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During one of my visits to the local municipality of Haarlemmermeer (not far from Amsterdam) in March 2005, prior to the birth of my daughter, I discovered one folder that particularly drew my attention. The folder was a summary of the Dutch Naamwet (Name Law), the 1998 law governing the naming of new-born children. I understood that children must have either the last name of the father or of the mother. I already knew this, but I thought the law left some flexibility to those from other cultures to keep on with their traditions. I even asked the present civil servant whether there were other options, but she answered me by merely quoting from the same folder I was holding.

This may be a small detail for most people, but for someone coming from tradition-bound Rwanda like me, it was a shock. It was a point where the past and the future broke off. I was getting ready to put a sudden and unwanted end to an age-long tradition, in which the father names children according to their gender and circumstances surrounding their birth. These circumstances could be glorious (won battle), painful (death, defeat, famine), socially-descriptive (employer-servant relationships), and so on. Whatever the case may be, the name is formulated in such a way that the gender of the bearer will be self-evident. The reality now is that my daughter bears a male name, simply because she was born far from home.

In Rwanda and neighbouring countries, a name has a huge social function, as it briefly defines who the bearer is. A saying from Rwanda summarises my point: 'Name is man'. Another one completes it: 'Receiving a bad name from your father does not mean he hates you'. The latter suggests that you can have a ridiculous name because the circumstances surrounding your birth were ridiculous. However, this does not mean that your father wanted to hurt you. He could not have done otherwise. One good example is the naming of a child who is fathered outside of the marital framework. The father will most likely refer to the mother's infidelity in the choice of the name. He will probably call the child: 'The dog-born-from-elsewhere' (Mbwayahandi), or This-is-another-Jesus (Twagirayezu), inferring that the father is not the mother's husband.

It is within this tradition that my brothers and I were named, each with a different and original name that my father explained to each of us. I should add that in the 1970s some of my countrymen adopted the systematic transmission of their father's name, which created confusion in society. I remember one illuminating example dating back to my primary school years in the mid-80s. A classmate bearing his father's name had wetted himself, and we spent the whole day chanting in chorus his (father's) name, saying: 'X has peed in his shorts'. The father was a teacher in that school and the mother worked at the parish 100 meters further.

I should also say that the name is part of any family's collective memory as it relates the past of that very family. Consider a family of three children called 'I-live-among-enemies' (Ndimubanzi), 'He-is-braver-than-fugitives' (Murutampunzi); 'The-saviour/rescuer' (Mutabazi). These names describe a certain situation that one specific generation went through. By interpreting these names over ten or twenty generations, one has the story of his whole ancestry, which does not necessitate written records or a library. Suddenly breaking this chain made me understood, with some bitterness, the thought of cinema icon Luis Buñuel that:

“You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all (...) Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing...”^[1]

Given all of the above, I think most people would understand the shock I felt when I heard that I was becoming the end of a process and a beginning of a new one. Certainly I will explain to my children the meaning of their (my) name, of my father's name, of my great-great...fathers' names, but, unfortunately, they too will have to explain why they did not get their own story-telling names. They will discover by themselves, probably with much nostalgia about that lost tradition, why this legal amnesia was imposed upon them.

Note

1. [1] Luis Buñuel quoted in Andreas Huyssen (1995), *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York: Routledge, p.1.