

M y n a m e i s a m o n u m e n t
The archival and memory keeping function of the name

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During one of my visits to my 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, and comments about the Dutch Naamwet, 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 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 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, according to 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 this paper, I want to explore this natural and cultural record-keeping mechanism in the light of existing memory theories. I will discuss first the name as a memory-archiving tool, then as a bridge connecting the past to the future, and finally as a crucial part of one's identity.

Archiving memory

I should say that the most afflicting thing was that by naming my daughter after me, I was ending the most natural and spontaneous archiving work that has been going on for centuries. In fact, the name is – I now have to say was - part of any family's collective memory as it related a portion of the past of that very family. Let's consider a family of three children called 'I-live-among-enemies' (Ndimubanzi), 'He-is-braver-than-fugitives' (Murutampunzi), and '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.

It should be noted that naming is a memory act *par excellence*, that is, a ‘meaning-making activity’ by individuals (Zelizer 1995: 228). To the meaning-giving function of the memory process, Irwin-Zarecka (1994: 145) adds the notion of ‘giving order’ to the past. This infers that circumstances surrounding birth are scattered here and there and that taking them together indiscriminately would yield no intelligible sense of the time of birth. The family and the region might be suffering simultaneously from an epidemics, [caused by] a war, and drought. At the minute M when the baby saw the day, it started raining. This salutary and long-awaited rain most likely will retain the father’s attention and push him to raise a monument that best reflects and immortalizes that end of the tunnel in the family’s and region’s memory. This means that the father has weighed the various events against one another before putting a certain order in them. Ordering is deciding which element comes first, which one follows, which one is relevant or not, and so on. Lowenthal (1985: 216) remarks that ‘everything we see is filtered through present-day mental lenses’. So is it – was it – in the naming process. This fundamental feature of memory is commonly referred to as presentism, understood as the [distorting] influence of the present on the reconstruction of the past (Le Goff, 1988: 195 ; Bloch, 1949 : 13-14 ; Lowenthal, 1985: 215).

Far from my country, precisely in The Gambia in West Africa, similar memory-based naming traditions existed especially in the seventeenth century. In his attempt to dig up his African origins in the 1960s, Alex Haley went to the Juffure village in The Gambia, where a *griot* - a man serving as ‘living, walking archives of oral history’¹- told him the story of the birth and name-giving ceremony of his seventh great-grand-grand father Kunta Kinte:

By ancient custom, for the next seven days, there was but a single task with which [Kunta Kinte’s father] Omoro would seriously occupy himself: the selection of a name for his firstborn son. It would have to be a name rich with history and with promise, for the people of his tribe –the Mandinkas - believed that a child would develop seven of the characteristics of whomever or whatever

¹ Alex Haley, *Roots*, (London : Hutchingson & Co, 1977), pp. 674; 678-679 and 686

he was named for... ‘The first child of Omoro and Binta Kinte is named Kunta!’ cried Brima Cesay. As everyone knew, it was the middle name of the child’s late grandfather, Kairaba Kunta Kinte, who had come from his native Mauretania into The Gambia, where he had saved people of Juffure from a famine, married Grandma Yaisa, and then served Juffure honourably till his death as the village’s holy man (Haley, 1977: 2-3).

This long but meaning-loaded quote from Haley’s *Roots* brings to light another important function of the name: it gives a sort of past-inspired mission for the future.

Bridging the past and the future

By naming his son after a hero who saved the tribe from a famine, Omoro was assigning his son the task of repeating the ancestor’s honourable actions. This explains why Kunta Kinte, once deported to America and auctioned as a slave, refused to renounce his name, preferring multiple whipping rather than the imposed, memory-empty name of Toby. It should be stressed that seventeen-year old Kunta Kinte was much more haunted by the new strange name than by his new slave condition, as ‘all he could think of was the name “To-by” he had been given’ (Haley, 1977: 217). Back to Rwanda, the mission assigning aspect is also often observed. Let me consider the names already used above to illustrate this point: the name ‘I-live-among-enemies’ (Ndimubanzi), later draws the bearer’s curiosity as to who those enemies are or were. If the father has decided to anchor or durably archive that enmity in a name, it means that that enmity is meant to be hereditary for generations. The bearer is invited to remain vigilant, not to eat or drink any where, as he is surrounded by enemies. As for Mr. ‘He-is-braver-than-fugitives’ (Murutampunzi), he is told by his father to never run away, that is, to fight or die. Finally, Mr. ‘The-saviour/rescuer’ (Mutabazi), like Kunta Kinte, is expected to prevent catastrophes or, when they take place, to never ‘entertain the thought of giving up’ (Haley, 1977: 216). The memory name, like collective memory in general, therefore, ‘not only reflects the past but also shapes present reality’ and behaviour, and provides ‘frames which can influence and organize both our actions and our conception of ourselves’ (Misztal 2003: 13). Since the name contains the mission of the bearer, the latter becomes confused when the name changes. Reflecting on his new name, Kunta Kinte wondered ‘if he would ever grow up to be a man like Omoro’ (Haley, 1977: 217), thereby inferring that the name was serving as a signpost and navigation tool assisting him on his

way to a certain destination - manhood. Kunta Kinte failed to decipher the mission assigned to him by the new name, even after consulting, in dream, the holy-man after whom he had been previously named (Haley, 1977: 225).

At this level, two aspects of the name as a memory mechanism can be distinguished: firstly as a record keeping tool, the name is by nature presentist, as it is shaped by the present vision and intentions of the father; and secondly as a mission-assigning mechanism, it is futuristic, since assigned tasks can only be accomplished when the child has grown up into an adult. In his *Everyman His Own Historian*, Carl Becker suggested that 'to be prepared for what is coming to us it is necessary, not only to recall certain past events, but also to anticipate...the future'(Becker, [1931] 1960:7), and that without this historical knowledge, Mr Everyman's to-day would be aimless and his tomorrow without significance (Becker, [1931] 1960:3). As suggested above, the name is a summary of a certain historical knowledge. It bridges the past and the future and, as such, presents two major aspects: on the one hand 'remembering', and, on the other, 'projecting' past experiences (Van Dijck, 2007: 8 and 21). While remembering takes place in the present and directs the remembering subject or the name-giver to the past, projecting, which equally takes place in the present, turns the remembering subject to the future.

The starting point for the naming/memory process, therefore, lies in the present, which emerges as the meeting point of two eternities – the past and the future (Thoreau, [1854], 1983: 59). Philosophizing about the past-future bridging by archives – which he calls 'the consigned memory' and to which I am suggesting to add the name – Jacques Derrida stresses that instead of, and 'more than a thing of the past...the archive should call into question the coming of the future'. For him, the 'question of the archive is not...a question of the past...It is a question of the future...of a promise and responsibility for tomorrow' (Derrida 1996: 33-34 and 36). Instead of projection, Bernard Lewis (1975: 55-56) prefers to use 'prediction' and 'control' of the future in which communities might have conflicting loyalties or clashing interests.

Remembering and forgetting

The above point raised by Lewis about conflicting loyalties or clashing interests and how memory is used to exacerbate them takes me to the next stage of my exploration of the name.

First all, I should stress that the name, like memory, as a sense-making process, combines two seemingly contradictory aspects: remembering and forgetting. Memory is not only remembering but also forgetting, and, as Lowenthal (1985:204) suggests, for it ‘to have meaning we must forget most of what we have seen.’ Although opposites at first sight, these processes that make the name are not mutually exclusive, but are rather ‘two sides of one process’ - the memory process (Brockmeier, 2002: 21). Anyway, one omits or forgets what he has retained in the first place, and thus, as Léon Michaux proposes, the memory process is a matter of absorption and indigestions.²The naming, then, is the process of remembering haunted by forgetting (Huysen, 2000: 38), which it encompasses rather than opposes.³

Let’s go back to our three names and suppose that many children were born under the same circumstances. The name of Mr. ‘I-live-among-enemies’ (Ndimubanzi) supposes other people in the community and a misunderstanding or conflict. While this name emphasizes prudence and caution and somehow ignores, forgets, excludes, and neglects possibility for reconciliation, the other side could pretend to forget that enmity and call their child ‘Know-it-but-don’t-pay-attention-to-it’ (Byumvuhore). The latter name stresses a form of reconciliation, or at least invites the bearer to be tolerant, to work on better relations with enemies. In other words, the bearer is requested to remember any positive, uniting sign and forget any dividing development. As for the name ‘He-is-braver-than-fugitives’ (Murutampunzi), it infers that other children were born in exile. In the latter case, a name like ‘The-traveller’ (Serugendo or Mugenzi), will be given to the child, if the father prefers to remember the distance he walked to reach his place of exile, and to forget the reason why he left his home country. Lastly, the name ‘The-saviour/rescuer’ (Mutabazi) puts emphasis on the act of saving, forgetting the nature of the catastrophe.

The above brings to light one important point, namely the frameworks of collective memory. Naming takes place in a quite private setting, as the father exclusively decides what

² - Léon Michaux, *La mémoire*, (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1974) p.9 : ‘ Encore faut-il avoir retenu pour omettre. La mémoire a ses absorptions, voire ses indigestions...’

- Daniel Shuman and Alexander Mc Call Smith, *Justice and the Prosecution of Old Crimes: Balancing Legal, Psychological, and Moral Concerns* (2000) p. 123

³ Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire I- La République*, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984), p. VIII : “ la mémoire, au sens où elle est ici entendue, ne s’oppose pas à l’oubli, qu’elle englobe, et ne s’identifie pas au souvenir, qu’elle suppose.”

the name will be. Moreover, the name is given to an individual, not to a community. Can we then conclude that names are private memory? While no one disputes that individuals ‘always use social frameworks when they remember’ (Halbwachs, [1925] 1992: 40), there is still divergence of views as to who, between the individual and the collectivity, is the prime remembering subject. On the one hand, it is suggested that remembering is an interactive process, and can thus not be just individual, since it ‘is determined through a supra-individual cultural construction’ (Misztal, 2003: 82). The examples provided above have shown that though naming is the father’s exclusive prerogative, it has ‘a social quality’ because it is ‘interactively constructed, and, therefore, always connected with the memories of others’ (Assmann, 2006: 10-11). On the other hand, other memory scholars consider memory as ‘wholly and intensely personal...most of our remembering is done in private.... The content of what we remember likewise makes it uniquely personal’ (Lowenthal, 1985: 194-195).

Like Lowenthal, Antoine Prost suggests that despite the apparent public and collective character of certain forms of memories, it is up to each individual to ruminate about the sorrow or pride they convey.⁴ This means that the only thing that is collective and shared in memory is the external manifestation, while its interpretation or rumination is profoundly personal.

Identity

Naming is also crucial to personal and collective identity in an era of ‘identity obsession’ (Citron, 1987: 7), marked by ‘the growing need for spatial and temporal anchoring’ (Huysen, 2000: 30). The Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) observes that the government enacts laws and regulations to define what belonging to the nation means, and funds initiatives like the Canon of the Netherlands and the national historical museum for that end (WRR, 2007: 42). In this respect, the Naming Law, could be considered as another way of homogenizing identities, and by doing so, repressing certain memories that are not compatible with that pattern.

⁴ Antoine Prost, ‘Les monuments aux morts : Culte républicain ? Culte civique ? Culte patriotique ?’, in Nora, Pierre, *Les lieux de mémoire I- La République*, (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984) p. 201 : ‘C’est affirmer à la fois la soumission au devoir civique et le devoir de souvenir: libre à chacun, ensuite, de laisser libre cours à sa tristesse ou à son orgueil patriotique. Le monument ne préjuge pas des opinions des citoyens...’

Kunta Kinte refused the pattern imposed by his master John Waller but later gave up and accepted the meaningless name, confining his repressed identity in the family narrative that survived seven generations. Haley writes: ‘Grandma and the others drilled the family story into me’, part of which being about the ship that sailed ‘from the Gambia River, with her human cargo including ‘the African,’ who would later insist that ‘Kin-tay’ was his name, after his massa John Waller had given him the name ‘Toby’ (Haley, 1977: 682).

Malcolm Little’s story is another illustration for the identity-reflection role of the name. His 1965 autobiography with the assistance of Alex Haley could be summarized as a pure work of remembrance, where the author repeatedly uses phrases like ‘I [can/not] remember’ ([1965] 2001: 82; 85; 89; 91 etc.), but also ‘my memories are’ ([1965] 2001: 82), ‘My two other images of my father’ ([1965] 2001: 83), ‘I have never/not understood why’ ([1965] 2001: 85; 92), and ‘Thinking about it now’ ([1965] 2001: 86), among many others. The latter memory phase is the most interesting for the sake of this presentation. Malcolm is digging up the past not for the sake of exhuming past experiences but to think about them and take action. Having realized that his [ancestors’] identity had been forced to change, especially by the imposition of the slave master’s name, he renounced that identity and the name that perpetuated, replacing it with an X, as many of his fellows in the newly adopted Islam had done: ‘The Muslim’s ‘X’ symbolized the true African family name that he never could know’ (Malcolm, [1965] 2001: 296).

In a report published in 2007 under the title *Identificatie met Nederland*, the WRR discussed the meaning of identity in a multicultural society like The Netherlands from the theoretical, historical, and empirical perspectives.⁵ The WRR advocates the consideration of ‘identification’ with the nation, of which national identity would be just one manifestation among others (WRR, 2007: 46). Identification is defined as a dynamic ‘process of creating, maintaining, and breaking links’ connecting an individual in social contexts. This is to say that Mr. ‘I-live-among-enemies’ (Ndimubanzi) identifies himself with his home land through the small community he was born in while there were some misunderstandings. This is one among many other ways that he identifies himself with his ancestors (Citron, 1987: 175).

⁵ WRR (De Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid), *Identificatie met Nederland*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), pp: 30 and 37

Although bearing the same name, his daughter born abroad will not have the same identification with the homeland.

Philosopher Henry David Thoreau viewed things differently. He opposed any form of identification with past experiences or figures: 'Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new', he wrote, stressing that the past has no lesson or advice to give to the present (Thoreau, [1854], 1983: 51). For him, society and its structures as well as memory have a rather corruptive and enslaving influence, and individuals should free themselves from their grip. Shuman and McCall Smith (2000: 119) adopt a slightly different position. They recognize that states and individuals have to be aware of their pasts in order to share a sense of community. However, they remark that

If people allow the past to dominate, they may find that it has an immutable agenda of its own...An individual dominated by the past would be condemned to dwell on old issues and arguments and make little moral or psychological progress.

This point is worth reflecting on in the particular case of Rwanda, where each painful period leaves a bunch of new names archiving and thus perpetuating feuds and conflicts for generations. It could be argued that conflict-inspired names are likely to keep hatred in their bearers' mind, and to keep the flame of violence burning by constantly and irreversibly pouring more oil on it with new names.

Conclusion

To sum up the above, the name is much more than syllables put together to identify someone and differentiate him or her from others. While in the West in general, and in The Netherlands in particular, the name is a tracking mechanism that 'indicates to which family one belongs',⁶ in Rwanda and some other African countries, the name is the visible peak of an iceberg, that is, as an icon hiding a story about the past and giving a sentiment of identity and belonging to a group. A name gives the bearer a reference he or she can identify with

⁶ Netwerk naamkunde: 'De familienaam, ook wel achternaam of geslachtsnaam, geeft aan tot welke familie een persoon behoort. Doorgaans gaat het daarbij om de familie in de mannelijke lijn'. http://www.naamkunde.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=28 (Accessed 6 January 2009)

both in time and space. A popular saying goes: ‘Such name, such man’,⁷ to mean that the name also has a futuristic connotation, a sort of mission for the future, for its bearer. Another saying completes it: ‘Receiving a bad name from your father does not mean he hates you’,⁸ to infer that however ridiculous one’s name could appear, it is never the father’s intention to harm the bearer.

The above has shown that the name serves as the most spontaneous and natural way of fixing, storing, and perpetuating the memories of the name bearer, of the family he or she is born in, of the village, the town, or even the country he or she is born in. The name is a *lieu de mémoire* to use Pierre Nora’s terms. It is a verbal monument that connects the bearer to his or her ancestors with whom he or she identifies him/herself. That monument also serves as a bridge between the past – after which the bearer was named – and the future in which he or she is called to live and play a certain role. It was stressed that naming is far from being objective or neutral, as the father’s sometimes egoistic interests, intentions, and even manipulation play a crucial role in the naming process.

I think that by now, most people will 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...grand fathers’ names, but, unfortunately, it will be hard for them to accept that the family narrative and its archiving stopped with me and thus excludes them. This means that they are not connected to their forbearers, simply because they have entered a new naming system. They will learn, probably with nostalgia, about that lost archiving tradition, and conclude that they have been victimized by a certain legal amnesia.

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