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**WHAT'S IN A NAME?:
EUROPEAN IMPERIALISM
AND THE RE-NAMING OF AFRICA**

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In July 2011 the Nile Valley gave birth to a new Republic. The old Sudan was partitioned, and a new African state was born. It was called “the Republic of South Sudan.” Was a historic opportunity missed for naming it after the River Nile?

Historically, white people have had a big say in deciding what collective names Black people should bear. In America the decision was to base the identity of people from Africa on the colour of their skin. So the enslaved Africans came to be known as “darkies,” “coloureds,” “niggers” and “Negroes” — names which were all based on skin colour. In the 1960s Afroamericans themselves chose the name “Blacks” — but they were influenced in their choice by the original paradigm of skin-colour chosen by the white masters.

All other American ethnic groups have their national origins designated culturally — by geographical ancestry. Hence, Irish Americans, Greek Americans, Ukranian Americans and Jewish Americans — all identities based on either geography or culture. But suddenly “Negro” or “Black” — an identity based on a personal physical feature.

In Africa itself the white man (self-designated racially) played an additional role in selecting names for us. He chose the names of most of our countries. The great majority of African countries have names chosen for them by the white colonial masters and mistresses. The name “Nigeria” was reportedly chosen by LADY LUGARD, wife of the great British empire builder and administrator in Africa, Sir Frederick Lugard (later Lord Lugard).

Just as in selecting the collective name of African Americans the white master chose to base identity on the physical feature of skin-colour [Negro], so in choosing the names of African countries the white man often based the names on such physical features as rivers, mountains, lakes and coastlines. The Niger was a name of a river before it became the basis of the name “Nigeria” and the name of the Republic of “Niger” — two separate countries. Indeed, half the population of Black Africa lives in countries which share names with coasts, rivers or lakes. Such countries include Ivory Coast, former Zaire, Congo, Zambia, Senegal, Gambia, as well as Nigeria.

My own country — Kenya — is named after its own highest mountain. Mt. Kenya also happens to be Africa’s second highest mountain — snow-capped throughout the year, second only to legendary Kilimanjaro in neighbouring Tanzania.

Both mountains were at one time on the Kenyan side of the border under British rule — while the Germans ruled Tanganyika (now known as mainland Tanzania). According to historical legend, Queen Victoria decided on a birthday gift for her cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany. The British Queen gave her German cousin *Kilimanjaro*, Africa’s highest mountain, for his birthday — so the story goes. And so Kilimanjaro became part of what is today Tanzania. [Not all historians agree on how Kilimanjaro came to be in Tanganyika].

Had Kilimanjaro still remained part of Kenya, it seems highly unlikely that Kenya as a country would have been named after its *second* highest mountain.

Countries do not normally name themselves after the *second* most important mountain or *second* most important river within their own borders. If the British rulers decided that Kilimanjaro was too long a name for their East African colony, they would have had to choose some other name for the country in which I was born. It would *NOT* have been “Kenya.”

In addition to rivers and mountains, the colonial powers did indeed also use the names of coastlines as a basis of the identities of their colonies. Apart from Cape Town and the Cape Province in South Africa, there was also the Gold Coast and the Ivory Coast in West Africa.

Algeria is named after Islands on its own coastline — *Al Jazaair*!

To summarize, Europeans have had a disproportionate role in choosing collective names for other people. For Africans they have chosen the names of most of our countries. For African Americans they chose the name of their racial identity (Negro) for centuries.

CONCLUSION

Europeans have also been obsessed with geographical physical features. As we pointed out, the colonial powers often named our countries after rivers, mountains and coastlines. In the hemisphere of the Americas they have used the physical human feature of skin colour.

Can the European naming decisions be reversed? Jesse Jackson successfully recommended a return to ancestry — renaming Black Americans and

calling them *African Americans* instead. This renaming has now been accomplished.

The people of the Gold Coast also took the route to the past — the country became Ghana, named after an ancient civilization. Southern Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. It is now named after an ancient African empire. Other ancient names that have been adopted include Mali and Malawi.

But what about Uganda? That is one country which could have been named after the most spectacular river in Africa — the longest river in Africa and arguably the most historically significant waterway in the world. The RIVER NILE *begins* in Uganda and then finds its way to Egypt. And yet the British missed their chance. For once the white man did not name a colony after its most spectacular physical feature. In Sudan this White Nile from Uganda is joined by the Blue Nile from Ethiopia.

Uganda was named instead after its largest cultural group — the Baganda. Europeans chose the whole country's name. For once culture was allowed supremacy and culture is, after all, a better foundation of human identity than the waters of a river, the height of a mountain, the nature of a coastline — or the colour of the skin.

What about the new Republic of South Sudan? Will it one day be re-named the Republic of the Nile? Will it share a name with the largest and historically most prestigious river on the African continent? The change of South Sudan's name should await its own 50th anniversary of independence.

Finally, a word about the impact of a British Queen on the renaming of Africa. The largest waterfalls in Africa and the world are named after the late Queen Victoria. The Victoria Falls are shared by Zimbabwe and Zambia.

Africa's greatest lake is also named after Queen Victoria. The shores of Lake Victoria are in Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya. Out of Lake Victoria emerges the River Nile from Jinja in Uganda. The lake is the biggest reservoir for the Nile.

Since Britain had such a huge role in renaming Africa we might as well finish with Shakespeare's famous quote:

“What's in a name? *That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.*” (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II, 1600)

Should Africa be guided by Shakespeare? Or by its own ancestors? The dilemmas persist.