



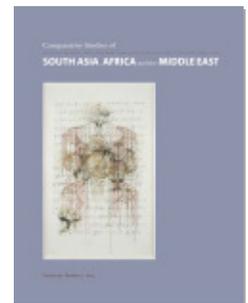
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A Name Given, a Name Taken: Camouflaging, Resistance, and Diasporic Social Identity

Leo Spitzer

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A Name Given, a Name Taken: Camouflaging, Resistance, and Diasporic Social Identity

Leo Spitzer

I begin with a brief, perhaps apocryphal, story:

At one point, early in the twentieth century in London, two Jewish merchants, partners in the same textile business, both decided to change their names. You must understand them—they were called Zoberman and Moscovi! And that combination didn't look at all well on the sign over the door! . . .

After much thought, Zoberman decided to call himself Smith. Yes, Smith! What could have been more unobtrusive?

Then Moscovi thought for a long time and had an equally marvelous inspiration: he would call himself Smith too!

"Smith and Smith!" What a happy coincidence! How could one be more sociably acceptable? Find a sign more discreet?

Only here is how it worked out in the course of their daily routine: A client called on them:

"Hello? I would like to speak to Mr. Smith!"

"Smith? Yes, he's here . . . but which one do you want? Zoberman or Moscovi?"¹

Being (Re)Named

The following is based on the life account of Joseph Boston May, Liberated African:²

He was born, probably in 1817, in a town named Iware, a few miles from the banks of the river Ogun, in the southeastern district of the Old Oyo Empire—in the predominantly Yoruba-speaking area of what is now the Republic of Nigeria. His father, Loncola, a diviner-priest (*babaláwo*) dedicated to the Yoruba god of divination, Ifá, named him Ifacayeh in honor of the deity. This name, which in translation means "Ifá covers the world," was indeed prophetic.

In the late months of 1825, during one of the many raids for slaves and ransom that became endemic during the decade of unrest and civil war now associated with the disintegration of the Old Oyo Empire, Ifacayeh, together with his mother, brother, and two sisters, was taken captive by the warriors of Ojo Amepo, a renegade Muslim Yoruba chief. Separated from his kinfolk, he was marched to "a place far from home" and sold into domestic slavery.³ But after a year of service in a situation of relatively benign subordination—a period in which Ifa-

1. Albert Memmi, *The Liberation of the Jew*, trans. Judy Hyun (New York: Orion, 1966), 51.

2. Main sources for May's life history can be found in the Methodist Missionary Archives, London, Sierra Leone box (hereafter MMA/SL); and Claudius May, *A Brief Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Joseph May, Native of the Yoruba Country, and Late Wesleyan Minister of the Colony of Sierra Leone, Read at the Service of Song*

in Zion Church, Freetown, on Sunday, October 25, 1896 (Freetown, 1896). The latter is largely based on Joseph May's oral account of his life history to his son. See also Leo Spitzer, *Lives in Between: The Experience of Marginality in a Century of Emancipation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999), especially chap. 2.

3. MMA/SL, Joseph May, 1838; Claudius May, *Brief Sketch of the Life of the Rev. Joseph May*, 8.

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cayeh continued to cherish the hope of possibly being ransomed by his father—his master took the boy to a distant town and sold him once again, this time to a merchant involved in the long-distance slave trade to the coast.

For Ifacayeh, the shock of this nightmarish experience—his forced passage from one existence into another—was profound. Later in life, he vividly recalled how bitterly he had wept during these months after being left “a helpless child among perfect strangers” and stressed the deep longing he had felt for his parents, relatives, and native country on realizing that he would never see them again.⁴ He and other slaves destined for service abroad were then marched in a guarded caravan down to the coast, to the Lagos lagoon and the port of Badagry. On the way, having quashed his fading hopes of return, his captors proceeded to strip him of the most distinctive remaining element of his past identity as well: his name. They renamed him Ojo, a Yoruba name normally given to a child born with the umbilical cord twined around his head. In Ifacayeh’s case, this was an obviously cruel joke referring to the cord of captivity with which he was tied to other slaves by the neck.

At the coast, he was sold once again, this time to a Portuguese slave trader, and for months was confined in a barracoon along with hundreds of other captives while awaiting the arrival of a slave ship for overseas transport. In January 1827, before their embarkation on the Brazilian slave-brigantine *Dois Amigos*, however, Ifacayeh/Ojo and his fellow captives suffered yet another painful indignity: they were all branded on the right arm or chest with a red-hot iron—imprinted with a burn mark that identified both their owner and their subordinate status. Ifacayeh’s letter, *T*—the first initial of the name of a person he would never meet—became visible and indelible in a few days. It remained distinct on his chest to the day of his death.

Yet Ifacayeh and the more than three hundred other captives packed aboard the *Dois Amigos* never reached Salvador, Brazil, their in-

tended destination. Instead, the slave ship was intercepted on the high seas by a British naval warship belonging to the antislavery squadron, and its human cargo was released in Freetown, capital of the British West African colony of Sierra Leone. There, having become a “Liberated African”—as slaves freed and resettled in Sierra Leone came to be known—the cultural imprint that Ifacayeh had carried with him from his land of birth began to be altered almost at once.

His transformation was multifaceted and stretched over time. But acts of naming—the occasions when he was given a name or was renamed—continued to highlight milestones along a path of change that had led from childhood in a land he would come to identify as a “heathen nation, a country full of Idolatry,” to an adulthood as a teacher and idol-smashing Wesleyan missionary in colonial West Africa.⁵ Through the names bestowed on him, he was brought symbolically into the realm of the dominant, interpellated as subject within its ideological assumptions and rules. When he was released in Sierra Leone from the slave ship, Ifacayeh was inscribed in the Liberated African registry book as “Joseph, a Liberated African male”—a change from an African to a European name that marked the start of the conversionist process into which he had entered.⁶ Upon his acquisition of fluency in English some time later, and his “wardship” residency with a British missionary couple, the Bostons, he became known as “Joseph Boston.” When he was subsequently baptized into Methodist Christianity, he was given an additional surname, “May,” in honor of John May, a British missionary who had labored and died in Sierra Leone colony a few years earlier.

Naming a person, as we know, makes him or her a part of the social world—a name gives the person a social identity. At the same time, a name stands *for* the person, it symbolizes personal identity. It indicates to members of society who the named one is and, to the named one, who he or she is expected to be. By 1847, twenty years after his arrival in Freetown, the young man who had once been named Ifacayeh

4. MMA/SL, Joseph May, 1838.

5. MMA/SL, Joseph May, 1838.

6. “Liberated African Register,” in the Sierra Leone Archives, Fourah Bay College, Freetown, Sierra Leone, document no. 238.

appeared to have rejected his earlier identity and to have become a successful member of the “black elite” in a colonial society ruled by the British. He had changed into what his white contemporaries in Europe and Sierra Leone would describe as a “civilized African”—a person distinguished from the “common African” masses by education, conversion to Christianity, and his outward conformity to a pattern of life that was Europeanized in essence, if not totally European in detail. The boy from Yoruba who had been branded and marked with a letter *T*, and whose initiation into adulthood in his native land was interrupted by the ordeal of enslavement and communal separation, was born again in Sierra Leone colony as a renamed Christian man. He had become Joseph Boston May.

The process that had led to Ifacayeh’s changes, and to the transformations undergone by numerous other Liberated Africans who had been landed in Freetown, had its ideological roots in the nature of Sierra Leone colony—in the curious combination of philanthropy, humanitarianism, idealism, economic self-interest, and cultural arrogance that defined what came to be known as Britain’s “civilizing mission” in this part of Africa until the latter half of the nineteenth century. Sierra Leone, after all, had been established not only as a haven for liberated slaves and black freed men and women from Britain, America, and the West Indies but as a social experiment as well. The directors of the Sierra Leone Company, including the noted Clapham Sect evangelicals and abolitionists William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, and Henry Thornton, conceived of the colonizing venture for which they had received a royal charter in 1790 as a means to provide “the Blessings of Industry and Civilization” to Africans “long detained in Barbarism.”⁷ They, like many of their European contemporaries, considered Africans to be deprived by their environment, the slave trade, and religious error. But they also considered Africans to be “redeemable.” Their assumption that the “heathen” should and could be converted to the benefits of European culture—based on a chauvinistic conceit that equated “civilization” with

their version of “Europeanization”—remained the primary ideological justification for the existence of the colony when the British Crown took over its administration in 1808. And it continued to be so until British ideas about Africans, and particularly about African “educability,” were modified by the rise of pseudoscientific racism in the 1860s.

Implicit in the conversionist assumption was a belief in the Idea of Progress and in faith that “civilization” could be communicated to any human being through education. In this context, the purpose of the Sierra Leone colonial experiment was to wean Liberated Africans like Ifacayeh away from the “darkness of superstition” and the evils of slavery and to change them through schooling and less direct forms of tuition into Europeanized and, whenever possible, Christian subjects of Great Britain.⁸

“Conversionism,” however, as an ideology of “transformative change” accompanying emancipation—and as a vehicle for access into the realm of the dominant, and mobility within it—had its counterparts in other areas of the world.⁹ Thus in the German states and Austrian territories of Central Europe, the stretched-out process of Jewish emancipation that began in the 1780s, and that was not completed until the 1860s, was closely tied to a notion of Jewish transformation termed *Verbesserung* (improvement). Before Jews could hope for civil acceptance in the dominant mainstream, the advocates of *Verbesserung* argued that the very character of Jews as a group needed to be transformed and modified, “uplifted” from ghetto and shtetl degradation and changed for the better. As was true in British Sierra Leone, education in the language of the dominant group (here, in German) was seen as a central vehicle to bring about cultural transformation. And, here too, it was demanded that the members of the populations undergoing emancipation—in this case, the Jews—adapt and conform in some degree to the values, outlooks, and ways of the emancipators.

Both in the Hapsburg Empire and the German lands in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the reform measures asso-

7. “Instructions to the Sierra Leone Company Directors,” in Sierra Leone Collection, Fourah Bay College Library, Freetown, Sierra Leone.

8. Elizabeth Melville, *A Residence at Sierra Leone* (London: Norton, 1849), 252–53.

9. Adapted from Spitzer, *Lives in Between*, chaps. 1 and 3.

ciated with emancipation and *Verbesserung* were engendered by a desire on the part of rulers to transform the state into a unified and centralized entity. This goal was to be achieved through the elimination of local particularisms and the barriers created by estates, corporations, and denominations. Jews, as well as other minorities, were to be *pulled* into the dominant realm through a process of assimilation. Thus the so-called Edict of Tolerance, promulgated under the enlightened rule of the Hapsburg emperor Joseph II in the early 1780s, relieved Jews of the obligation to wear special emblems and distinctive garb and of the requirement that men wear beards. It prescribed secular and civic education in German for Jewish children and compelled Christian schools and institutions of higher learning to admit Jewish pupils. Jews were also permitted to become artisans and to enter the free professions, to choose certain vocations that had previously been closed to them, and they were encouraged to open factories. Eventually, Jews were also granted the freedom to settle where they liked, to own land, and to become naturalized subjects—a precursor to their receipt of greater equality and full citizenship privileges some eighty years later, in the 1860s.

But naming—the compulsory adoption of German fore- and surnames—was an important component of Jewish emancipation. Up to the end of the eighteenth century, the majority of Ashkenazi Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, unlike their Sephardic coreligionists in Spain, Portugal, and Italy, did not have family names. In practice, Jews followed the custom of using their personal forename plus their father's or mother's forename—for example, Gershon ben Yehuda (Gershon, the son of Yehuda) or Miriam bat Leah (Miriam, the daughter of Leah). In 1787 Joseph II promulgated an edict ordering Jews within his Austrian domains to adopt permanent family names in German—the first such law in Europe. Laws ordering Jews to assume fixed family names then followed suit in various German-speaking areas: Frankfurt in 1807, Westphalia in 1808, Prussia in 1812, Bavaria in 1813, and Saxony in 1834. In 1808 Napoleon also decreed that Jews adopt family names throughout the French empire.

There were, of course, good practical reasons why authorities throughout this part of Europe compelled Jews to adopt family names. Fixed surnames made it easier to integrate persons into a centralized state—easier to levy taxes on them, to conscript them into the army, and to identify and categorize them. At the same time, these surnames were another emblem of the assimilationist process that accompanied emancipation. From the perspective of persons among the dominant who wished to change and “uplift” Jews—to convert them culturally and “make them more like us”—a surname in the dominant language symbolized transformation. And for Jews, the adoption of a new name in the language of their emancipators seemed like recognition of their entrance into a gentile world from which they had been largely excluded. It seemed to symbolize their increasing acceptance and belonging within it.

However, while the adoption of new surnames—and, in some places, new first names—became a compulsory precondition for Jewish emancipation and admission into the process of assimilation, the Jews' new names had to be officially registered, and thus they were subject to the approval of the authorities. Generally speaking, Jews were not permitted to take the surnames of existing gentile families, especially famous or illustrious families. Instead their new names were adopted from a variety of sources. Some were merely translated patronyms (e.g., *Abramson*, *Isaacson*, *Jacobson*, and *Mendelsohn*), or (like *Kohn*, *Kahane*, *Kantor*, and *Levi*) they reflected long-recognized connections to priestly lineages and religious functionaries. Others (e.g., *Berliner*, *Wiener*, *Deutscher*, *Bresslauer*, and *Jordan*) derived from place-names or from vocational designations (e.g., *Schneider* [tailor], *Bäcker* [baker], *Drucker* [printer], *Holtzer* [woodworker], and *Wechsler* [money changer]). Still others were drawn from physical characteristics and colors (e.g., *Klein*, *Gross*, *Alt*, *Schwarz*, *Weiss*, and *Blau*) or from the names of animals (e.g., *Hirsch*, *Katz*, *Adler*, and *Vogel*). In those places where a fee was charged or a bribe expected for the official approval or registration of a name, persons able to pay larger fees received some of the finer-sounding names—names

from flowers and gems, like Rosenthal, Lilienthal, Edelstein, Diamant, Saphir, Goldstein, and Silverstein. Those able to pay less or nothing were sometimes saddled with derisory names like Schmalz (grease), Ochsenchwanz (oxtail), or Hitzig (hot).

However, the very fact that the names given to Jews in Central Europe were largely invented, while the names given to blacks emancipated from slavery in West Africa generally reproduced those of white missionaries, colonial officials, or even long-ago slave owners, points to an obvious difference—but also to a similarity between the two groups and their experiences. The difference, of course, derives from a commonplace association of physical characteristics with racial definition: from the reality that no matter how similar their name to that of Europeans with whom they interacted in the West African colonial setting, the skin color and external physical traits of Europeanized Africans like the Sierra Leone Creoles remained as a badge of difference.

Thus it becomes clear that while the naming (or renaming) of Jews was a requisite change easing their administrative integration into the sphere of the dominant—and a compulsory step to enable their further emancipation—the names they were given, or permitted to take, continued to differentiate them from non-Jews into whose midst they were otherwise assimilating. In Central Europe, their names were now in German, to be sure. But these names remained peculiarly “Jewish names”—*banner* names that would continue to identify their bearers with a past from which many were hoping to move away.

(Re)Naming Oneself

On 13 August 1887, in the *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, a Freetown newspaper owned and edited by Cornelius May, the Creole (Krio) son of Joseph May, the following announcement was published:

IMPORTANT NOTICE

The Public are [*sic*] hereby informed that from and after this date

MR. W. J. DAVIS,

Senior Resident Master of the Wesleyan High School, Freetown, and 1st B.A. of the University of London, will henceforth be called and known by the name of

ORISHATUKEH FADUMA.

All communications should be addressed accordingly.¹⁰

On 16 September 1892, in Bromberg, Germany, the merchant Emil Schmul, a Jew, made an application to the Bromberg district president to change his family name from Schmul to “Goetze.” In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Schmul claimed, his grandfather, an accredited French translator, had sometimes been called “Goetze,” and now he and others in the Schmul family wished their surname to be Goetze as well. After some initial delay, this change of name was officially approved. But when it was announced in the press, as legally required, it was immediately appealed by Rudolf Goetze, senior physician at the University of Würzburg’s psychiatric clinic. In a letter signed by twenty-six additional bearers of the name “Goetz(e),” Goetze wrote: “The name Götze is a truly German Christian name. By every honest Christian German his respected name is regarded as his family’s badge of honour; he considers it to be his inherited property and it is incomprehensible to him that . . . his very name could be bestowed on [someone] with the express purpose of concealing [that person’s] Jewish descent and thereby helping to improve [his] business.”¹¹

Schmul’s change of family name and the response it elicited in Germany, as well as W. J. Davis’s change to Orishatukeh Faduma in Sierra Leone—although seemingly unrelated—reflect a trend. Among both the “educated Africans” in British colonial Africa and the Jews in Central Europe in the last decades of the nineteenth century, changing a family name previously “given” or “taken” during the process of emancipation

10. *Sierra Leone Weekly News* (Freetown) (hereafter *SLWN*), 13 August 1887. Name changing is also addressed in the 20 August 1887 issue.

11. Dietz Bering, *The Stigma of Names: Antisemitism in German Daily Life, 1812–1933* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 94.

became a widespread phenomenon. For example, in Prussia there was a dramatic increase in legal petitions to change from Jewish-identified banner names like Kohn, Levy, Hirsch, Moses, or Solomon to what the petitioners referred to as “truly German” or “Christian” surnames. From 1872 to 1881, the percentage of these petitions more than doubled over the previous decade (from 27 of 1,221 requests to 154 of 2,898), and they remained high well into the 1920s.¹² Intermarriages, in which Jewish women married “out of the faith” and took the surnames of their non-Jewish spouses, also rose during these years, as did name changing upon conversion to Christianity and baptism—a practice routinely permitted to Jews in Germany and Austria until its restriction in 1903.¹³ In Sierra Leone many of the colony-born children of Liberated Africans and early black settlers from Britain, the West Indies, and North America changed their names as well, either by shedding what they termed as their “foreign” surname to adopt one with an African “sound” or by adding an African name to their “Christian-European” one. Thus A. E. Metzger became A. E. Toboku-Metzger when he added a Yoruba name to the name that the family had taken from his father’s Anglo-German missionary pastor earlier in the century. O. T. George became O. T. Nana; Claude George, already well known as the author of *The Rise of British West Africa*, became Esu Biyi; Isaac Augustus Johnson changed to Algerine Kefallah Sankoh; and Africanus Matthew Goodman became Eyahjemi Morondia.¹⁴

In Central and Western Europe, however, as well as in the Americas, name changing among Jews—from banner or “brand” names, which immediately designated a person as a member of the Jewish minority—was not a new occurrence and had been rather commonplace throughout the entire nineteenth century. Numerous cases exist: for example, Kalmanovitch changed to Kalman, Davidsohn to David, Aron to Nora, Haim to Vidal, Kohn to Kuhn (or Krohn or Kaune), Weiss (in the United States) to White, Schwartz to Black, Bronstein to Brownstone, and Kaplan to Chaplin. But the

accelerated incidence of name changing among Jews in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and the emergence of this phenomenon at this very same time among Sierra Leone Creoles and other Europeanized Africans in British colonial West Africa, corresponded with the growth and spread of the “new,” pseudoscientific racism and of modern anti-Semitism. It was, after all, in the decades beginning in the 1870s that the conversionist/assimilationist ideology that had provided a framework and justification for the emancipation of Jews and blacks came under increasing attack. The explanations for the growing popular appeal and diffusion of new discriminatory and exclusionary practices based on racist ideology are numerous, but the very success of emancipation and conversionism is certainly one of them. When previously confining legal constraints inhibiting economic and social mobility were eased in the early 1900s, many Central European Jews and “elite” blacks in British colonial Sierra Leone had indeed taken advantage of the new opportunities offered by the emancipatory process. They conformed to the transformative goals associated with “uplift” and “civilizing” conversionism and were frequently highly successful in professional, business, and artistic fields that had previously been restricted or closed to them. For those among the dominant who perceived a danger in this blurring of boundaries between themselves and those who had been “other,” on the “outside” or on the “margins,” biological racism and racist anti-Semitism, with their impermeable barriers, became useful ideologies to turn back the clock on emancipation and establish a renewed exclusion.

It is important to take notice, however, that while the emergence of name changing among Sierra Leone Creoles and its acceleration among Central European Jews were connected with the rise of these racist ideologies, the motivations driving name changing in each place were considerably different.

Among Jews, name changing primarily reflected a desire to integrate themselves more fully and inconspicuously into the world of the

12. *Ibid.*, 83–90.

13. Marsha Rozenblitt, *The Jews of Vienna, 1867–1914: Assimilation and Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 128–46.

14. See Leo Spitzer, *Creoles of Sierra Leone: Responses to Colonialism, 1870–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), 117.

dominant—to blend in, avoid attention, and to “become an ordinary citizen.” For what emancipation and the removal of restrictions on Jewish geographical and social mobility had enabled—indeed, what the ideology of *Verbesserung* had encouraged—was the removal or modification of virtually all cultural markers by which Jews had previously been distinguished from the Christian majority. By the mid-nineteenth century it was certainly true, as anti-Semites repeatedly indicated, that within the bourgeoisie and the urban working classes, dress, language, or writing could no longer be relied on to indicate differences between German Jews and German gentiles. Over the years in which the various reform measures associated with the process of Jewish emancipation were implemented, German Jews had expanded their outlook and modified aspects of their social behavior through secular education and greater everyday contact with the culture of the non-Jewish world. They had willingly adopted the majority language, German, for business, accounting, documentation, and conversational as well as literary expression. And outwardly, in the clothing they wore, they conformed to the fashions of their gentile economic peers. To be sure, anti-Semites often attributed distinctive physical characteristics to Jews: big noses, “dark” complexions, and weak, “stooped” bodies. But in effect, stereotypes notwithstanding, was it really possible to distinguish between a German Jew and a “true German” merely on the basis of external appearances? The only identificatory marker that continued to reveal Jews *as Jews* was the Jewish banner name they still bore. Levis, Cohens, Hirschs, or Zweigs might be dressed in latest German fashions and pronounce eruditely on German art and music in elegant German prose and speech, but their name made them instantly recognizable as Jews.

For some Jews, changing from a banner name to a less conspicuous one was a “flight” indicating an effort to remove themselves from a past identity, a desire, as Stefan Zweig had observed, “to dissolve themselves in the common

life . . . [and] to integrate and become articulated with the people with whom they lived.”¹⁵ For others, it was more like an act of “camouflage” producing a verbal screen to hide their religious background and Jewish origins.¹⁶ It was a masking intended to avoid attention, to veil the name-badge of difference. For *all* emancipated Jews, however, changing a name was a *defensive* act—a reflection of their recognition that, despite emancipation and assimilation, they were still living within a potentially hostile world, one that indeed was becoming ever more dangerous as the “new” anti-Semitism surfaced and intensified.

In this respect, the motivation for name changing among Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries differed from that among Sierra Leone Creoles and other Europeanized blacks in colonial Africa. Here, name changing was a means of resistance, part and parcel of a broader manifestation of cultural nationalism that was emerging as a reaction to the spreading wave of racism and its prejudicial effects. In the 1880s it was not at all unusual for colonial officers, travelers, and resident Europeans in British West Africa to speak of Creoles and other European-educated Africans as “apes” and “niggers” and to insult and parody them in articles and books. Richard Burton’s popular *Wanderings in West Africa* and *To the Gold Coast for Gold*, G. A. L. Banbury’s *Sierra Leone; or, The White Man’s Grave*, and A. B. Ellis’s *West African Sketches* all shared a derogation of African capabilities as well as scorn for conversionism and its consequences. Racial discrimination, moreover, now permeated the colonial professional fields, commerce, and the civil-service bureaucracy, where African advance was being impeded and blocked. “It is a matter beyond controversy,” wrote the Reverend Claudius May (Joseph [Ifacayeh] May’s eldest son) in 1887,

everything today points to the fact that we are approaching a crisis in our existence as a community. . . . The successors of those who fifty years ago believed in giving us every opportunity to rise in the world, now believe that every

15. Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday: An Autobiography* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 427–28.

16. Memmi, *Liberation of the Jew*, 32.

effort on our part should be nipped in the bud or regarded with indifference bordering on contempt. . . . They treat us as puppets not as men, they look upon us as instruments which they may use when necessity requires and throw off when necessity ceases to exist.¹⁷

With the assimilationist/conversionist ideal that they had embraced under attack, many Europeanized blacks began to turn an introspective eye on themselves and their society. If the European world seemed to reject them, and their advancement within it was made difficult or impossible, was this perhaps because they did not belong there in the first place? Had they, as maintained by one of their primary intellectual spokesmen at the time, Edward Wilmot Blyden, “perverted” their “true racial personality” through indiscriminate Europeanization, thus perhaps deserving ridicule and prejudicial treatment?¹⁸ In Sierra Leone, Creoles like the Mays scrutinized everything that defined “educated Africans,” not only their mode of education and subjects learned, but also their social life and occupations, preference for European-style dress, dwellings, diet, manner of parting and wearing their hair—even *their very names*—and concluded that their community had lost “the flavor of their race.”¹⁹ Children and grandchildren of liberated slaves, they had become people of captive intellect, blindly imitating manners and customs alien to the African environment.

But having acknowledged the errors of the past, members of the Creole society in Freetown now resolved to assert a new identity that was African, not European. In 1887 they established a Dress Reform Society and a Name Reform Society to help them achieve this new transformative goal. Attracting many of the same individuals into membership—mostly men but also a small number of women—these organizations attempted to bring about practical, immediate, and long-range changes within the Europeanized African elite. Thus members of the Dress Reform Society declared the avowed purpose of their organization to be the elimination of the most obvious external badge of Europeanization

among Africans—Western-style clothing—but only as a first step toward gradual independence from all European customs. As Claudius May, one of the founding members, explained: “Dress Reform . . . would set itself as time advances to grapple with other social and local questions. Its intention is to become the line of advance of all social improvements. . . . It is a society that could become more and more the rallying point for all who long for and are zealous for the independent national existence of Africa and the Negro.”²⁰

“Name Reformers,” for their part, encouraged their fellow Creoles to “Africanize” the “foreign” surname their parents or grandparents had received, either in slavery or upon their liberation in Sierra Leone. Thus Kufileh Tubokhu justified his own name change and the aims of the Name Reform Society in an open letter that declared:

Every one of our Liberated Negro Parents had a name given him in the land of his nativity by which he was called and known from his birth up to the time he arrived in the land of his exile. He had a name full of meaning . . . preserving a tribal or racial individuality. When transported through the baneful traffic of the Slave Trade to this land, that name was exchanged for a foreign one, void of meaning, and insignificant to him . . .

It is nought but a profound and crass ignorance that thinks a man who would be civilized must forsake all that belongs and is natural to him, in exchange for what is foreign and unnatural.²¹

However, despite a wave of initial enthusiasm for these early manifestations of cultural nationalist assertiveness and resistance against racism, neither the Dress Reform nor Name Reform Societies were able to sustain themselves as organizations for very long. In large part this was prefigured by the ambivalence of their elite Creole founders. At this time in their history, despite the growth of racial discrimination, most still felt that their *own life* and career opportunities within Sierra Leone remained favor-

17. *SLWN*, 26 February 1887.

18. E. W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*, 2nd ed. (London: W. B. Whittingham, 1889), 317–18, 398–99, 433–44.

19. *Ibid.*, 398–99.

20. *Methodist Herald* (Freetown), 21 December 1887.

21. Kufileh Tubokhu, letter to the editor, *SLWN*, 1 October 1887.

able. As such, they did not wish either to divest themselves completely of the European world into which assimilation had taken them or to embrace a larger, multiethnic African identity that would blend them indistinguishably with other African people in the Sierra Leone hinterland whom they had long come to consider “less enlightened” than themselves.

This ambivalence was certainly reflected in the names the “reformers” adopted—which were African only in a broad, generic sense. While many of them were in the language of the Creoles’ forefathers and mothers, most usually in Yoruba, others (like the name Africanus or Algerine) were merely manufactured to *sound* African. They were certainly not names generally found in Sierra Leone’s up-country. Similarly, the new wardrobe adopted by the members of the Dress Reform Society was a full-scale invention—*somewhat like* the short trousers and sleeveless country-cloth gowns worn by non-Creole “bush” Africans of the neighboring interior, but still different enough so as not to be confused with them. The new costume, although a departure from the clothing that the members of the Creole elite and Europeans in the colony normally wore, was sufficiently radical to invite derision. Thus while the society’s members were initially willing to be innovative in the closed gatherings of their group’s meetings, the strength of their convictions faded quickly when they tried to wear their “reformed dress” in public.

Nonetheless, while the dress and name reform societies disappeared from the scene rather rapidly as formal organizations, the “Africanization” of names (and, eventually also, of clothing) continued over the years. Although these symbolic practices elicited occasional criticism as well as jokes, both from within African society and from European colonialists, the negative reactions generally remained within the realm of the verbal. They were certainly mild when compared with the much more virulent reactions to name changing among Jews in the German-speaking lands of Central Europe.

Here, the very fact that name changes potentially erased the banner name that had remained to identify assimilated Jews *as Jews* was

seen as a major threat by anti-Semites. Emancipation and assimilation, the most hostile among them maintained, were insidious blunders that had permitted Jews—those alien, fundamentally immutable, less-than-human creatures bent on world domination—access into the German realm. Once inside, Jews transformed themselves in external appearance and observable characteristics in order to “blend in” indistinguishably; they infiltrated themselves further and further into the unsuspecting German body politic until, like a cancerous growth, they would eventually take it over to destroy. Banner names—Jewish names—had remained as warning signals to help identify and bring into visibility Jews who might otherwise pass unnoticed. If these names continued to be permitted to be changed to “truly German Christian names,” how could the enemy within be recognized and revealed?

There is, of course, a certain irony to the fears and anger that name changing engendered in anti-Semites. If one examines name changes among Jews, it is easy to note that in many of them the rupture with the past that they implied is often quite incomplete. In the practice where banner names were changed through mere shortening—for example, Rabinowitch to Rabin, Davidovitch to David, or Steinberg to Stein—the transformation is hardly a radical one. It is no more than a “half-hearted concealment,” to use a phrase Albert Memmi employed for it in his *Liberation of the Jew*—a “veil through which it is easy to see if one cares.”²² Similarly, the frequently employed practice of “name translation” (often accompanying emigration from one country to another), like Weiss to White, Grünfeld to Greenfield, Wasserman to Waterman, Aaron to Arendt or Ahrens, or Stein to Stone or Steiner; or of “modified disguises,” like Moses to Moos or Moser or Mosse or Morris; or of “equivalent letter reversals,” like Aron to Nora; or “simplified anagrams” like SchLOmoVItch to SOLVI, ISrAeL to ALSI—all merely *screen* rather than break off connection to a past identity. As Memmi observed: “Those who translate or reverse their names . . . feel their inner security has been preserved. Henceforth shielded from non-Jewish eyes, they neverthe-

22. Memmi, *Liberation of the Jew*, 35.

less remain intact, since they have abandoned nothing of themselves. Better still, they save self-esteem, since they have conceded almost nothing to their oppressors.”²³

However, these “incomplete” (or merely “screened”) transformations of surnames are also clearly indicative of continued adherence to a family group—of a desire to maintain *familial* continuity despite the felt need to conceal. To abandon the family name is to leave the family, to break away, to sever connection with kinfolk, ancestors, familial legacy, and heritage—a radical departure. And it is in this respect that the Jewish efforts to “blend in” and “pass unnoticed” *without making that break* can also be viewed as a form of resistance. They resemble the decisions made by so many ex-slaves in U.S. history after the Civil War: to maintain as their surname, even after emancipation, the name of their initial owners or the owners of their families of origin.²⁴ Only in this way could connection to a family—often dispersed, broken up, sold off—be symbolically retained.

But the very analogy between Jewish and African American practices also highlights a double bind, an inescapable trap. A link to past identity, and familial continuity, could be achieved only by holding on to the “slave master’s name” (in the African American instance) or through the partial retention of the banner name “given” to Jews during emancipation and marking them as other. In both cases, the connection to the legacy of “being named”—of having a name imposed—remains. The alternative is no better: the invention of a new name (as exemplified in the Name Reform Society of the Sierra Leone Creoles) may be a form of self-affirmation, but it comes at the cost of familial identity and continuity.



In the German-speaking lands influenced by growing anti-Semitic pressures, an initial reaction to the perceived acceleration of Jewish name changing was to make the practice legally

more difficult by placing increasingly constraining restrictions and regulations on it. Thus the right to a change of name on the occasion of conversion and baptism was abolished early in the twentieth century in Prussia (1903), as was the right to change a name upon the legal adoption of a Jew by a German non-Jew (1907).²⁵ When the decorated World War I veteran Leo Abrahamson, a Jew from Berlin, applied to change his name to “Schmidt” in 1919, he received the following response from the district president in Potsdam: “If the applicant should . . . be exposed to mocking remarks because of his name Abrahamson, the District President would, in accordance with existing provisions, be in a position to give full consideration to an application for a change of name. In this case he would be prepared to grant permission for a different name such as, for example, *Rosenfeld*, *Morgen-thau*, *Hirsch*, *Fuchs*, etc. Purely Christian names like *Schmidt* would, on the other hand, be out of the question.”²⁶

Anti-Semitic publications relished in their increasingly aggressive efforts to publicly “reveal” or “unmask” persons as Jews—or of Jewish descent—who, years or decades earlier perhaps, had changed their name. Indeed, the efforts to expose and denounce “the Jewish camouflage”²⁷ (as some termed name changing) of persons who might otherwise be mistaken for “true Aryans” gained tremendous momentum in the early 1930s with the accession of the National Socialists to power in Germany (and the German *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938). In January 1938 a law “on the changing of surnames and first names” was published that made it compulsory to “change back to the original” every Jewish change of name in the Reich—*no matter when it was granted, no matter whether the person involved was still alive or had already died!*²⁸ Realizing the difficulty of recognizing “less obvious” or “transformed” Jewish names, expert “consultants on Jewish names” of the Reich Ministry of the Interior drew up lists of hundreds of Jewish banner names and their numerous modifications and published them in book form as a “warning and

23. *Ibid.*, 38.

24. Herbert G. Gutman, “Somebody Knew My Name,” in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 230–56, especially 253.

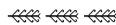
25. Bering, *Stigma of Names*, 110–18.

26. Quoted in *ibid.*, 133–34.

27. Memmi, *Liberation of the Jew*, 41.

28. *Ibid.*, 144–45.

a guide.”²⁹ But even while name-revocation proceedings based on the 1938 law were being dealt with, another decree was published compelling all persons defined as Jews (no matter what their fore- or surnames) to add the middle names “Israel” (for males) and “Sara” (for females). This measure, of course, now guaranteed the recognizability of Jews in all transactions requiring documentation or a signature. However, since it could not help identify assimilated Jews *as Jews* in their everyday public street lives, Nazi ruling officials in 1941 (in the course of the war) issued an order compelling all Jews within territories under German control to wear a visible yellow star on their clothing. By means of the yellow star, Jews were now made identifiable even from a distance. As in pre-emancipation days, they were stigmatized visually—forced to wear a sign that symbolically branded and categorized them as “other.” But now the purpose was not mere stigmatization—it was deportation and eventually extermination.



Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 film *Shoah*, a monumental exploration of the Final Solution, carries a moving epigram from Isaiah 56:5: “I will give them an everlasting name.” With these powerful words, Lanzmann exemplifies a common strategy in the remembrance of the Holocaust: to bring the victims into memory by preserving their names. In view of what I have discussed in this essay, however, this move carries a certain irony. Even though it is often treated as such, a name, as we have seen, is not an extension of the person it designates. This emerges most pointedly if one looks at social situations of domination and subordination. Names are given, and often imposed, arbitrarily. They are contingent markers, changed according to circumstances and necessities, signs not of permanent identification but of continual negotiation with social, political, and ideological circumstances. They are shaped by forces of prejudice and persecution. They can be read to tell stories of assimilation as well as of creative negotiation and resistance. Names are certainly not everlasting. On being called, we may respond. But we are not our names. S

29. Bering, *Stigma of Names*, 146.