

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	693
Land:	Nigeria
Kilde:	BBC
Titel:	Why Nigeria's lax attitude to names is causing a fuss
Udgivet:	22. oktober 2023
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	19. december 2023

Why Nigeria's lax attitude to names is causing a fuss

🕒 22 October



Letter from Africa series, Abuja

There has been quite a hullabaloo in Nigeria recently over the fact that the three top candidates in February's presidential elections presented academic records showing different names to those by which they are now known.

Allegations of forgery or impersonation have been made and vigorously denied, with various explanations for the discrepancies offered by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi - or their spokespersons and supporters.

The courts of law will probably determine how the most serious of these allegations are eventually resolved, but it has led me to reflect on how a number of Nigerians utilise their many names.

Most Nigerians have more than one name apart from their surname. Most people I know have as many as five or six.

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In a society where many cultures name a child based on the circumstances of their birth, their position in the family, or the parents' hopes for the child's future, one person can have different names that reflect each of these different considerations.

For example, a Yoruba child could be named Taiwo Peter Tokunbo Olamide - Taiwo (meaning he is the firstborn of twins), Peter (Christian name), Tokunbo (meaning he was born abroad), and Olamide (my wealth/success has arrived).

The catalogue of carefully thought-out traditional names with deep meanings usually includes an English one, especially for Christians.

It can also include names given by grandparents - a privilege that some couples afford their parents after a new child is born.

I have three names - two Igbo and one Christian.

I could have added a second Christian name in my teenage years, when I was a member of the Roman Catholic church.

While taking the sacrament of confirmation (in which you're asked to formally affirm your faith and beliefs), the priest at my boarding school in south-eastern Nigeria asked all confirmands to choose an additional Christian name to mark the occasion.

However, I still presented "Tricia", which was the same name by which I had received the sacrament of baptism shortly after I was born.

I just did not feel like having another name.

Some of my classmates, on the other hand, used the opportunity of their parents' absence at the school to take on funky names that the older generation might never have thought of, such as Madonna.

Many Nigerians I know slide between their various names for different reasons or occasions.

It could be anything from feeling like a fresh start or deciding that they do not like the meaning of what they have previously been called, to finding themselves in a new environment where few people can properly pronounce their more popular name.

Many are the times I have come across a childhood friend who used to be, say, Ogadimma, but who is now, say, Ego.



| Many Nigerians have different names on different official documents, like identity cards

It becomes even more complicated when you travel to more rural parts of Nigeria.

In the course of my reporting work in such regions, I have frequently encountered people whose names on their identity card were completely different - surname included - from the name on their bank account. Sometimes they have been different to the name by which they are known in their communities.

"Madam, this one is my village name while that one is the name that I used to go to school," I was told more than once.

"The other one is my family name."

It never seemed to occur to them that having multiple names on different official documents could lead to problems down the line, especially if they suddenly find themselves in a society or system that takes record-keeping more seriously than Nigeria appears to do.

Many investigative reports have shown how easy it is to walk into a Nigerian government office and receive an official document that states a name, date of birth, or place of origin that may not necessarily be accurate.

Apathetic civil servants often do not seem to care. And on the occasions when they do, a few naira notes squeezed into a palm can make someone turn a blind eye.



| The Chibok girls who escaped from Boko Haram were offered scholarships

I encountered this same casual attitude towards names while working with different groups who offered support to the Chibok community after the 2014

kidnapping of 276 girls from their school dormitory in the north-eastern Nigerian town.

Some charities made lists of the 57 girls who, within hours of their kidnapping, managed to jump out of the trucks being used to ferry them into the Sambisa forest stronghold of the Boko Haram jihadists who had raided the school.

The groups then offered scholarships in different parts of the world to these escaped girls.

When some of them chose to not accept the offer, their families simply passed on the opportunity to other siblings or children of close friends who were interested, without bothering to let the charities know about the exchange.

"There are many girls that have graduated from school in the name of Boko Haram but they were never victims," said Yakubu Nkeki, chairman of the association of missing Chibok girls' parents.

He explained to me that he did not support the substitutions but was in many cases overridden by his kinsfolk, who often fell out with him when he tried to oppose them.

"Some of them were not even living in Chibok," he added.

"Their parents were in Abuja or Port Harcourt or Lagos but they said they were Chibok girls."

These young women will probably spend the rest of their academic lives under someone else's name - something likely to not be a hardship to those used to adapting to different names in different places.

Similar exchanges happened when charities offered scholarships to siblings of the missing girls.

Opponents of President Tinubu are hoping that the ongoing controversy will lead to his election being overturned at the Supreme Court.

They have gone to great lengths in the traditional and social media to try to prove that the different names on his different certificates show that his academic claims are fraudulent.

Whatever the eventual political outcome of all this, it might end up also being a lesson for Nigerians all over the world to legally harmonise their multiple and fluid names on all official records.

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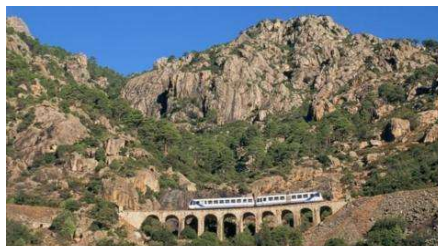
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