

## AN INVESTIGATION OF THE ATTITUDES OF YOUNG BAMBARA, SONGHAY AND FULBE PEOPLE TOWARDS THEIR TRADITIONAL PERSONAL NAMES

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**Abstract:** In Africa, more and more voices are rising against foreign cultures, calling for the continent to regain its identity. However, the use of traditional first names which can be the most significant way for Africans to display their identity, receive little attention from Pan Africanists most of whom bear foreign names. The problem is that traditional personal names are unknown to the majority of the younger population; therefore, they are abandoned in favor of Arab and European first names to show religious affiliation. The authors of this paper assume that young people would have a positive image of traditional personal names and would want to use them more often if they knew their meanings. To test this hypothesis, a liker scale questionnaire was administered to 90 Bambara, Songhay and Fulbe students to 1) determine their familiarity with and general perception of traditional personal first names, and 2) to examine any change in their attitudes towards these names after having had thorough explanations about them. The findings show that more than sixty percent of the participants developed positive attitudes towards traditional personal names and want to give them to their children, thus confirming the hypothesis. However, first names with negative connotations and the names of idols are still subject to rejection.

**Keywords:** tradition, personal names, identity, attitudes, anthroponomy

### UNE ANALYSE DES ATTITUDES DES JEUNES BAMBARAS, SONGHAYS ET FULBES ENVERS LEURS PRENOMS TRADITIONNELS

**Résumé :** En Afrique, de plus en plus de voix s'élèvent contre les cultures étrangères, appelant ainsi le continent à retrouver son identité. Cependant, l'utilisation des prénoms traditionnels, qui peuvent constituer le facteur le plus significatif pour les Africains d'afficher leur identité, reçoit peu d'attention de la part des panafricanistes, dont la plupart portent des prénoms étrangers. Le problème est que les prénoms traditionnels sont méconnus de la majorité de la population. Par conséquent, ils sont abandonnés au profit des prénoms arabes et européens pour afficher l'appartenance religieuse. Les auteurs de ce

travail supposent que les jeunes auraient une image positive des leurs prénoms traditionnels et voudraient les utiliser plus souvent s'ils connaissaient leur signification. Pour tester cette hypothèse, un questionnaire a été administré à 90 étudiants bambara, songhay et fulbe pour 1) déterminer leur familiarité et leur perception générale des prénoms traditionnels, et 2) examiner tout changement d'attitude envers ces prénoms après avoir eu des explications détaillées à leur sujet. Les résultats montrent que plus de soixante pour cent des participants ont développé des attitudes positives envers les prénoms traditionnels et veulent les donner à leurs enfants, confirmant ainsi l'hypothèse. Cependant, les prénoms à connotation négative et les prénoms d'idoles font toujours l'objet de rejet.

**Mots-clés** : tradition, prénoms traditionnels, identité, attitudes, anthroponomie

## Introduction

African names are generally determined by socio-cultural circumstances in which the bearer is born (Obeng, 2001, Agyekum, 2006, Minkailou, 2018; Minkailou & Abdoulaye, 2020). As argued by Zawawi (1993) and Nyambi et al, (2016), the name identifies a person because it represents the bearer's nationality, ethnicity, and culture. It can further be argued that the name embodies the bearer's history and world view. However, in West African countries, personal names can be deceptive because of the strong influence Islam and Christianity appear to have on naming practices (Minkailou and Abdoulaye, 2020). Therefore, Arab and European names are adopted to show religious affiliation. This tendency is sustained by negative attitudes in some people towards traditional personal names. The problem is that the meaning of these names is unknown to the majority of them. In Mali, research into personal names had not received much attention from linguists. However, recently, Minkailou, (2018), Minkailou & Abdoulaye, (2020), Minkailou & Cissé, (2021), and Kodio et. all, (2021) have touched on the topic. Their studies helped to determine the typologies, the meaning and structures of Bambara, Fulbe, Songhay, and Dogon names. Unfortunately, the area of attitudes towards those names remains unexplored. Therefore, the present study aims to take a step towards filling this gap. More specifically, it aims to show the works of the above named authors to the concerned populations and determine their attitudes towards their respective traditional personal names. In this paper, name attitude is defined as the feelings people have towards their own first names or those of others. These attitudes may be positive, negative or neutral. The study is based on the hypothesis that Bambara, Fulbe, and Songhay people would have a better perception of their traditional personal names and would want to use them more often had they known their significance. It is based on the naturalistic approach, the most used language attitude theory that perceives attitudes as an "internal state of readiness, which when aroused by stimulation of some sort will affect the responses of the individual" (Mckenzie, 2011: 21).

## 1. Methodology

### ***1.1 The Instrument***

The researchers relied upon the participants themselves to report their perception of traditional personal names. A questionnaire was used to collect data from a sample of thirty Bambara, Songhay and Fulbe people living in Bamako. The questionnaire, written in French, was divided into two sections administered one after the other. The first part helped collect data on the naming practices of the participants and their acquaintance with and attitude toward traditional personal names. They were submitted a table containing fifteen traditional personal names selected according to their ethnic groups. They had to tell whether they know the meaning of those names or not. Next, they were required to tell how they feel after reading them. They were given a three-point liker scale to select from and convey their feeling going from “I like” to “I dislike”. For the second part, another table with detailed explanations on the meaning of the same names were given to the participants. They were asked to grade them again following the same procedure. This allowed to understand if the respondents have a better feeling towards traditional personal names after learning about them.

### ***1.2 The Sample***

Following the alarming finding by Minkailou (2018) indicating the unpopularity of traditional personal names as we go lower in age group, the present study targeted young participants. Hence, a sample of thirty Bambara, Fulbe and Songhay people were randomly selected among University students. A total of ninety people, then, participated in the study. They were students from the English department and the Training School for Technical and Professional Education (ENTEPE) all located in Kabala. They were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five.

## **2. Results and discussion**

As mentioned earlier, the study was based on the assumption that Bambara, Fulbe, and Songhay people would have a better perception of their traditional personal names and would want to use them more often had they known their significance.

### ***2.1 Naming practices and the participants’ general perception of traditional first names***

This section first provides an overview of the origin of personal names used by Bambara, Songhay, and Fulbe people. Next, it describes the participants’ familiarity with traditional personal names and how they perceive them. They were given fifteen traditional personal names and were asked if they know their meaning or not. Percentages were calculated based on the number of “Yeses” and “Nos”.

-What is the origin of your first name?

Table1: Origin of Bambara, Fulbe and Songhay personal names

Types of names	Bambara	Songhay	Fulbe
<b>Religious first name</b>	91%	94%	86%
<b>Traditional first name</b>	9%	6%	14%

According to the data obtained, first names of religious origins are very common among Bambara and Songhay people. Concerning the Fulbe, religious names are also dominant among them; however, compared to the other ethnic groups, a larger number of traditional personal names are still used. The researchers were able to consolidate this finding by comparing it to the result of their classification of the list of students at the English department and at ENTP into traditional and religious names. The result of this classification showed an even greater dominance of foreign names among these ethnic groups. As pointed out earlier, this is due to the influence of Islam and Christianity on the communities. Previous researchers in anthroponomy (Minkailou, 2018; Minkailou & Abdoulaye, 2020) made a similar remark, but supported evidence of the asphyxiation of traditional personal names had not been provided.

-What are the origins of the personal names used in your close family?

Table2: Origins of personal names used in Bambara, Fulbe and songhay families

Types of names	Bambara families		Songhay families		Fulbe families	
	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number
<b>Religious first name</b>	93%	28	97%	29	47%	14
<b>Traditional first name</b>	7%	2	3%	1	53%	16

Malian families are generally large, and one can hardly retain the names of everyone. Therefore, the respondents were asked only about those they are close to. The percentages were calculated based on the number of religious and traditional personal names in the families of the respondents. The data obtained indicate an even greater dominance of religious personal names in Songhay and Bambara families. Unexpectedly, the frequency of the two types of personal names is reversed among Fulbe. While almost all Fulbe are Muslims, Table2 seems to indicate that, contrary to what was said previously, the impact of religion on their naming practices is less substantial. One can, then, be tempted to say that this is because Fulbe tend to be more conservative of their culture as indicated in language attitude studies (Minkailou, 2007); however, Songhay and Bambara people who have more religious personal names in their families, are no less proud of their culture and language. This discrepancy in number of traditional personal names among the Fulbe respondents and in their families led the researchers to conduct

further investigations. Informal discussions were, then, held with Fulbe people including two scholars. These discussions revealed that Fulbe, in general, have two different personal names. In addition to the usual traditional first name, which can be chosen for various reasons, there is the religious first name given by the Imam, in agreement with the family. This name is the real name of the child and is revealed only in a small family circle. Sometimes, not even the name bearer himself knows his real name. One of the scholars with whom the researchers conversed said he discovered his real name the day he entered school. The reason behind this practice is still unclear to the researchers; however, Camara & Rizzi (2017) describe a similar practice by the Soninke community. According to the authors, the Soninke people keep the real name secret because it can be used to hurt the child. They added that the real name is only revealed to the bearer in adulthood, often at the time of marriage, in order to be certain that he or she does not divulge it.

*-Do you know other traditional personal names?*

Table3: Participants knowledge of other traditional personal names

	Bambara families	Songhay families	Fulbe families
Oui	100%	100%	100%
Non	-	-	-

The participants were asked to give other traditional personal names than the ones used in their families. The aim was to determine their acquaintance with Malian traditional personal names. The findings indicate that despite the unpopularity of traditional first names, the younger generation still know a few of them, yet the meaning of those names, as shown in Table5, is a mystery to them. The most cited Bambara first names were N'golo and Zanke. Arboncana, Harber, and Gnamoye were repeated by Songhay respondents while Fulbe participants mostly cited Hammady, Samba and Penda. However, a number of examples given by the respondents shed light on the confusion surrounding the origin of some personal names. In fact, names like "Bourama", "Solomani", "Suley", "Balkissatou", "Zabiatu", "Amadi" are all variations of Arabic or European first names.. It is worth saying that an etymological investigation of Bamanankan, Songhay, and Fulbe languages will reveal an abundant presence of borrowed words. However, the problem is that a large number of the population (literate or illiterate) are not fully aware of the origin of these adopted words and think that they belong to their languages. For example, a survey conducted by one of the researchers and involving ninety two Bambara revealed that none of them could tell the days of the week and months of the year in their language. The words for expressing these are borrowed from Arabic and are thought to be Bambara by the mass. The same way, some borrowed names are believed to be part of the culture.

*-Do you like your first name?*

Table 4: Participants attitudes towards their first names

	Bambara families	Songhay families	Fulbe families
<b>Oui</b>	99%	100%	100%
<b>Non</b>	1%	-	-

As Jules Barbey D’aurevilly said, before choosing a boy’s first name, think about the woman who will have to whisper it later. We could add that it is even mostly important to think about the society which is going to judge him by his name. In fact when Barrack Obama said, “My middle name may be Hussein, but I’m a real American intellectual”, we understand that the name can be a real social burden for the bearer regardless of his social class. With this in mind, most parents avoid choosing for their children first names that might embarrass them later when they grow up. Reportedly, except one, all the participants were given first names they like; however, it is worth mentioning that the reasons were not related to the meaning of their names. For some, it is because the name sounds good, or because it is the same as a person they appreciate very much. One respondent likes her first names because it is extremely rare. She said she has never met someone with the same name. “People remember me easily because of the rarity of my first name, and I am proud of it. I often get compliments for my first name”. Unfortunately for the curators of Malian culture, that name, Boushra, is of religious origin. The one who does not like her first name was a female respondent who said she is mocked by her classmates because her name, Adama, is customarily given to males.

*-Do you know the meaning of these traditional personal names and what is your perception of them?*

Table 5: Participants familiarity and perception about traditional personal names

	Bambara		Songhay		Fulbe	
<b>% &amp; numbers</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Numb</b>		<b>Numb</b>		<b>Nmb</b>
<b>Yes, I know the meaning</b>	13%	4	27%	8	20%	6
<b>No, I don’t know the meaning</b>	87%	26	73%	22	80%	24
<b>% &amp; numbers</b>	<b>%</b>		<b>%</b>		<b>%</b>	
<b>I like</b>	53%	16	60%	18	67%	20
<b>Neutral</b>	33%	10	37%	11	31%	10
<b>I dislike</b>	14%	4	3%	1	0%	0

The meaning of first names is sometimes determined using numbers or the first letter of the name. It is worth saying that the question in the table above does not refer to this practice. In the present study the word “meaning” refers only to the semantic and the aspects and circumstances that are taken into account when a personal name is bestowed on a child. Malian

traditional personal names and African names in general carry something important in them. As argued by Mandende (2009), it is unlikely that an African would have a personal name that is meaningless. Depending on the factors motivating the naming process, a name may have a descriptive or a connotative meaning. The findings indicate that the respondents knew the meaning of less than four of the fifteen names presented to them. Besides, it can safely be assumed that a similar question about the meaning of religious names will yield an even higher number of negative responses. In fact, the choice of religious personal names in Mali is generally motivated by affective factors, without reference to meaning. Table 5 also indicates that the participants have more positive feelings towards the fifteen traditional names presented to them and this without knowing their meanings. This high number of “likes” for the names can be due to the fresh wind of pan Africanism blowing over the continent. In fact, even though almost all the respondents bear foreign names and said that they like them, they also recognized that those names do not identify them. However, the number of traditional first names the respondents have a neutral feeling for is not negligible. In fact, 33% of Bambara names, 37% of Songhay names, and 31% of Fulbe names were neither liked nor disliked by the respective respondents. Is this attitude of theirs related to the fact that those names simply do not sound good to them? Can thorough explanations on the meaning of those names affect positively or negatively their attitudes? Section two brings answers to these questions.

## ***2.2 Attitudes towards traditional personal names after their meanings have been explained***

In this section, the participants were provided with detailed explanations on the meaning of the fifteen traditional personal names. They were, then, asked to grade them again. This allowed to understand if the attitudes shown in Table5 were due to their ignorance of the meaning of those names.

*-Now that you know the meaning of all the names given to you, how do you feel about them?*

Table 6: Participants attitudes towards traditional personal names after their meanings have been explained

	Bambara		Songhay		Fulbe	
<b>% &amp; Numbers</b>	%	Numb	%	Numb		Numb
<b>I like</b>	57%	17	77%	23	80%	24
<b>Neutral</b>	16%	5	10%	3	11%	3
<b>I dislike</b>	27%	8	13%	4	9%	3

After learning about the significance of the given traditional first names, the number of neutral positions decreased considerably leading to a rise in likes. Table6 shows an 19% increase in positive attitudes towards Songhay names, 13% increase towards Fulbe names, and 6% increase towards Bambara names. However, the fall of neutral feelings was not in favor of

likes only. In fact, while less than 8% of the fifteen names were disliked in (Table5), the second grading saw an increase in negative attitudes towards them. Bambara respondents were the least disenchanted by the meaning of some of their traditional personal names. More precisely, there were 28%, 11% and 8% increase in dislikes for respectively Bambara, Songhay, and fulbe names. The most disliked Bambara traditional first names were those of idols. In fact, the Bambara use the names of idols as their first names. These names, linked to fetishism, indicate how attached they were to mystical forces. Four names of idols (Nakɔɔ, Komotigui, Joba, Nakolo) were presented to the respondents. The attitudes displayed by the participants show that they have turned the back on idolatrous practices. As mentioned earlier, this is mostly due to the influence of Islam and Christianity, the two dominant religions in Mali. Two slave names (Isabeeri-slave baby boy born during a feast and Beydaari-the added one) were included in the questionnaires addressed respectively to Songhay and Fulbe participants even though it could be safe to assume that those participants belong to the noble class: slaves rarely having access to higher education. In fact, cultural slavery is still practiced within these communities and some personal names are given to slaves as indicator of their social class. The two slave names received 60 “dislikes” from the 60 respondents. Besides, the grades attributed by Songhay and Fulbe participants also show that they are not enchanted by names based on superstitions. As argued by Minkailou (2018), these names are given to deceive death or protect the bearer from evil eyes. It is worth saying that these names (Farka, Bana, Cukkiri, Gida- Donkey excrement, Rubbish, I don’t like him anymore) have negative connotations and could sound like insults to the younger generation who believes less in superstitions. Names indicating the order of birth, given for both girls and boys were mostly appreciated by Bambara participants. Some Bambara names based on fauna and Flora like Jiriba (Big tree) and Sira (Baobab tree) were also liked, yet those referring to names of animals like Jaturu (Hyena) received neutral attitudes. Songhay and Fulbe communities have a large number of blessing and beauty related names (Kawdo-The victorious, Warjam-Who brings peace, Boŋkaano-Lucky person, Aruhenna-Handsome man). Those names, because of their positive connotations were the most appreciated by the participants.

*-Which Type of name would you choose for your children?*

Table 8: The type of name the participant would choose for the children

Types of names	Bambara		Songhay		Fulbe	
	%	Numb	%	Numb	%	Numb
<b>% &amp; Numbers</b>						
<b>Religious first name</b>	27%	8	33%	10	20%	6
<b>Traditional first name</b>	63%	22	67%	20	80%	24



In most Malian communities, it is the father who names the first two children, then comes the turn of the mother for the third. The process is repeated for the next children. More than 60% of the participants said they will give traditional first names to their children. In reality, the choice of the name is generally decided by the elders on behalf of the parents. This combined with the practice of homonymy could maintain the dominance of foreign personal names.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study have demonstrated that Bambara, Songhay and Fulbe young people are not familiar with the meaning of traditional personal names. Despite this, they like most of them because of pride. Participation to this study allowed them to have a higher image of their traditional first names. The respondents showed positive attitudes towards wish and beauty related names, birth order names, and Fauna and Flora names. The participants also displayed negative attitudes towards some names especially those with negative connotations. These feelings were motivated by religious reasons. When the researchers were distributing the questionnaires, students from other ethnic groups such as Dogon, Soninke, and Bwa volunteered to participate, but they were disappointed to learn that they were not concerned, hence this constituted a serious limitation to the study. A comparative study of the use of female and male traditional first names will also be helpful to future anthroponomy researchers. It can also be assumed that Africans would use religious names less often had they known that most of them are similar in meaning to traditional names.

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