

Onoma 57

Journal of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences

ISSN: 0078-463X; e-ISSN: 1783-1644

Journal homepage: <https://onomajournal.org/>

Sambulo Ndlovu, *Naming and othering in Africa: Imagining supremacy and inferiority through language*, London and New York: Routledge, 2022, 206 pp., ISBN 9780367773106 (Hard cover. General index, no illustrations)

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To cite this article: Koopman, Adrian. 2022. Sambulo Ndlovu, *Naming and othering in Africa: Imagining supremacy and inferiority through language*, London and New York: Routledge, 2022, 206 pp., ISBN 9780367773106 (Hard cover. General index, no illustrations). *Onoma* 57, 331–338. DOI: 10.34158/ONOMA.57/2022/23

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.34158/ONOMA.57/2022/23>

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Article history

Received on 2 June 2022.

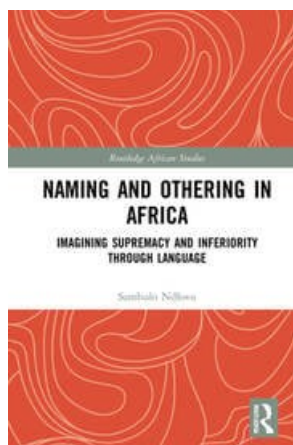
Final form accepted on 4 June 2022.

Published online on 31 January 2023.

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(<https://www.routledge.com/Naming-and-Othering-in-Africa-Imagining-Supremacy-and-InferiORITY-through/Ndlovu/p/book/9780367773106>)

1. Introduction

When I was first asked, in April 2022, to review Sambulo Ndlovu’s book for *Onoma*, the World Health Organisation was investigating cases of the infectious disease ‘Monkey Pox’ in various European countries as well as in Australia. It was only when I was ready to start writing my review, towards the end of May, that an article entitled “Monkey Pox opens up racial wounds” appeared in the South African newspaper *The Star*, written by one [Siyabonga Sithole \(2022\)](#). The opening paragraph contains the sentence “Africans are up in arms over the media’s use of Black people as the face of the disease”, and continues

Scores of social media users and civic organisations have come out against the racist misrepresentation of black people and Africans in particular as the carriers of monkeypox when this outbreak is happening outside the African continent.

The article goes on to say that the Foreign Press Association (FPA) Africa “condemned the use of black bodies to depict calamity while the current outbreak does not involve Africa or its citizens”, finding that this “continue[d] to paint a negative picture and stereotype which assigns calamity to African bodies and privileges to other races”. It seems that an “award-winning Zimbabwean filmmaker and novelist” asked “Couldn’t they get permission to take pictures of infected Caucasian people?”

Now while Ndlovu’s book regards the terms ‘monkey orange’ for the fruits of various species of *Strychnos* trees, and ‘monkey bread’ for the plant *Piliostigma thonningi* as examples of othering in Africa (43)¹, he does not

¹ Numerals in parentheses refer to pages in Ndlovu’s book.

mention ‘monkey pox’. Yet the article by Sithole and the book by Ndlovu have exactly the same theme: The use of various names and various terms, combined with negative attitudes towards black people and Africans in particular, present a systematic ‘othering’, with the ‘us’ using such terms presenting as superior, and the ‘them’ to whom the terms refer presented as inferior.

2. A wide range of ‘othering’

Ndlovu casts his net wide in illustrating the many different ways in which Africa and Africans are othered, and each of ten chapters looks at different aspects of othering. Chapters 6 and 7, which look at colonial toponyms and colonial anthroponyms respectively, are the closest this book comes to ‘traditional onomastics’ as the study of proper names. Typical of his examples in Chapter Six are the colonial names Victoria Falls and Lake Victoria, which were named as such by white explorers despite the previously existing names *Mosi oa Tunya* (‘smoke which thunders’ – the falls) and *Nyanza* (a kiNyarwanda name meaning ‘large mass of water’). Ndlovu also gives several examples of streets in various Africa cities named after white people, although these, unlike water features such as rivers, lakes and waterfalls, are extremely unlikely to have had previously existing names in African languages. Ndlovu also regards English ‘transphonologies’ of African toponyms as othering (117), and gives as an example the Ndebele name Qweqwe (‘crust forming on a river bed’, with the ‘q’ pronounced as a palatal click) being rendered as Queque in English, pronounced as ‘kwekwe’, i.e. like the Ndebele noun *[isi]khwekhwe* (‘skin disease’). I take his point here. But I don’t agree with his example of the Shona name Chirinda (‘tower for military outlook’) for a certain prominent hill, with the apparent English transphonology ‘Silinda’ meaning ‘cylinder’ and giving a wrong impression of the shape of the hill. *Silinda* is surely the Ndebele version of Shona *Chirinda*, with the Ndebele class prefix *[i]si-* replacing the Shona class prefix *chi-* and the Ndebele /l/ replacing Shona /r/, both in a perfectly predictable manner.

Chapter 7 on anthroponymy can be summed up in what I have come to recognise as an almost obligatory quote from Nelson Mandela’s autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* (135):

On the first day of school my teacher, Miss Mdingane, gave each of us an English name [...]. Miss Mdingane told me that my new name was Nelson. Why she bestowed this particular name on me I have no idea. Perhaps it had something to do with Lord Nelson, but that would only be a guess.

The major theme of this chapter is that “most European names are meaningless beyond being tags” (135), which many onomasticians will surely debate, and that they were randomly assigned to Africans. The author enlarges

on this: “This phenomenon of meaningless names is un-African and others African naming practices”. Many writers on colonial naming of black Africans have made the point that EuroWestern names are ‘meaningless’ while African names are meaningful, and Ndlovu contributes little to this discussion besides offering the notion of ‘othering’.

3. Extending the notion of naming

Ndlovu includes a wide variety of terms, phrases and identities under the rubric of names and naming. The notion of ethnophaulisms, i.e. offensive and pejorative naming, is well known and receives attention in Chapter 4 “Ethnophaulisms as crude nomen othering in African contexts”. The following extract from page 66 shows how closely this book is related to the monkeypox article referred to earlier:

The colonial and imperial stigmas associated with the ‘Black’ race have also affected the name Africa; it, too, is linked to western ethnophaulism for describing the opposite of Caucasian. Africa is a historically tainted category due to prejudice which has been colonially collocated with the name. In European and North American media, the image of Africa is associated with AIDS, hunger, civil war, corruption, authoritarianism and all things that Europe and America are not [...]. Africa is pejorated morally, and it is even physically pejorated to appear smaller than Europe in cartography.

An earlier chapter, entitled “African and global onomastic othering dichotomies” describes othering strategies in the dichotomies

- First World and Third World countries
- Global South and Global North
- West and East
- Developed, developing and under-developed countries.

‘Africa’, he argues, is always perceived as being Third World, underdeveloped, belonging to the East rather than the West, and part of the global South (even though half of the continent is above the equator).

Distinctions such as North/South and West/East are notional rather than accurate geophysical locations; for example, Japan, although distinctly in the east, is perceived as western, and Australia, in the east as well as in the south is perceived as being part of both the West and the North. Ndlovu’s ideas on such dichotomies give rise to much food for thought, although some of his theories might seem a little tenuous, such as

The body habitus of north and south naturalises oppression of the South by the North. The North maps onto the head, which thinks and eats, while the South maps onto the limbs, which do the work to feed the head. (25)

In Chapter Three “Names as cultural othering of Africa” Ndlovu looks at how colonial powers assigned names to various plants and animals. I enjoyed his point about assigning the name ‘pigweed’ for the highly nutritious and frequently harvested *Amaranthus* herb:

The genus weed implies something that grows where it is not wanted, yet the vegetable is wanted by Africans, as it forms part of the diet where it is found. It is ironic for people to come from elsewhere and declare a vegetable as unwanted in its own ecosystem. (43)

On the other hand I cannot agree that naming various trees and plants as “Monkey Orange” and “Monkey bread” is an example of othering. Botanical textbooks state clearly that the fruits of these trees are much eaten by various species of monkeys. One wonders here what he would have made of the term ‘monkeypox’ for a disease that at present at least seems to be affecting white people in EuroWestern countries, and not Africans in Africa.

While on the subject of the naming of food plants, Ndlovu tells us (54) that the Ndebele phrase *igaki leganga* is glossed as “Wild gurke cucumber, African thorn cucumber” while *igaki lesikhiwa* is glossed as “European gurke-English cucumber”. I have tried and failed to track down the supposedly English word ‘gurke’ and can only assume that the author is talking here about a *gherkin*.

In the same chapter he turns his attention to the names given to various species of gazelles, such as ‘Dorcas Gazelle’, ‘Thomson’s gazelle’ and ‘Grant’s gazelle’. Developing his theme of Europeans, particularly the English, giving ‘foreign’ names to animals which already had names in various African languages, the author writes:

Gazelles are known in various African languages by names such as *impala*, *mpaa*, *mhara* and *swara*, and these are clearly homo-semantic cognates from one proto-form. The naming of these African animals using European anthroponymy devalues the Africa names in literature, and what are now perceived as scientific names are also derivatives of these English possessive constructions. (45)

Leaving aside the notion that the scientific names are derived from the English names (they are not; it is the other way around), the author’s choice of the animal to illustrate his point is an unfortunate one. The antelope *Aepyceros melampus*, with the Zulu name *impala*, has always been known in English by this same name (‘impala’), in the same way in which the antelope *Tragelaphus angasii* has always been known in English as an ‘nyala’, from the Zulu *inyala*.

There is an interesting and thought-provoking notion in this chapter concerning the terms ‘traditional’ and ‘indigenous’, which, says Ndlovu:

are deployed for African science and systems to create the intended effects of demoting and localising this science. The concepts traditional and indigenous have the semantic effect of localising and freezing in time and space, respectively. (46)

4. When is a name not a name?

Chapter 5 deals with “decoloniality and coloniality nuances” and focuses on terms used by Black Africans to denote White colonists, specifically the terms *Umlungu*, *Mzungu* and *Oborofu*. Ndlovu refers to these as ‘names’ and it is these terms he is referring to when he says:

Naming White people across Africa is based on certain characteristics and behaviours, and the names underscore the naming motives of ethnophaulism and xenophobia which culminate in the creation of decolonial rhetoric in these names. (87)

These are not the same kind of names given to white people described for example by De Klerk (2002), Koopman (2014a and 2014b), Mtumane (2005) and Turner (1997), where individual names are given to individual white people. Ndlovu’s names are ethnic nicknames, most pejorative, given to white people *en masse*.

There is similar ambiguity in

Names given to White people by Africans are rich in colonial memory and images of early encounters of Africans with exploring and colonising Europeans. (92)

Other such mentioning of “names given to White people by Africans” can be found on pages 96 and 101, and in each case the author is talking about general ethnophaulisms and not individually bestowed (nick)names.

In other cases throughout the book Ndlovu uses the word ‘names’ to refer to words, phrases and terms which surely are not names in any sense. An example is on page 195:

The name minority language is very common as a descriptor for sidelined languages [...]. There is a clearly expressed coloniality of power in the name *minority language* which is [...].

Note that in this quote Ndlovu marks the second use of the phrase ‘minority language’ with italics, but does not do so for the first mention, where minority language is not marked in any way. Ndlovu in fact throughout the book dispenses with inverted commas or any other kind of marking of metalanguage, leading to such statements as “This medicinal plant is identified with the genus potato, implying food rather than medicinal qualities” (49). Whenever I read this kind of thing, my automatic response is “What is a ‘genus potato’ and how does it differ from other potatoes?” Another example is “The designation African poverty is a common expression [...].” (189). It can be irritating for the reader, who often has to go back when a sentence doesn’t sound quite right, and look for the unmarked metalanguage.

5. Chapters or separate articles?

Although the book is divided into eleven chapters, with ten devoted to different aspects of othering, and one to a conclusion, there is a sense that the book consists of a number of articles, which may or may not have been published separately at different times. This sense is heightened by the author giving separate bibliographies at the end of each chapter. This can be as irritating as the lack of marking of metalanguage, as if one wishes to look up a reference in the course of reading the book, one first has to find where the end of the chapter is.

Also reinforcing the idea that the material in this book was originally written as separate articles is the repetition of material, notably the definition and explanation of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a theoretical approach to his subject matter which the author constantly refers to. We see it, for example, in Chapter 1, where a quote from Fairclough (2013) on the nature and use of CDA is followed by the author's own interpretation, beginning with "CD is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse", and ending with

CDA is a methodology to extricate how discourse reproduces (or resists) social and political inequality, power abuse or domination, and names are part of the language used in situations of power asymmetries. (8)

In Chapter 4:

This chapter deploys critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2012), metaphor analysis (Kövecses, 1907) and speech acts theory (Searle, 1975) [...]. (60)

In Chapter 6, CDA is replaced by 'ECA': Altheide's 1987 Ethnographic Content Analysis, but by Chapter 8, CDA is once again explained, in a paragraph which ends with "CDA helps us to understand how language is used to construct identities and social relations (Berger, 2016) [...]. (153)."

In Chapter 9, CDA is back yet again:

The colonialities exhibited in names are analysed using the lens of critical discourse analysis. According to Van Dijk (2001), CDA is an interdisciplinary approach focusing on power relations [...]. (170)

And for those who didn't get this message, the author repeats it again in Chapter 10:

The data are analysed using critical discourse analysis and linguistic landscapes [...]. CDA is used as an analytic tool [...]. Van Dijk (2001) argues that CDA is an interdisciplinary approach focusing on power relationships. (187)

6. Conclusion

Ndlovu's *Naming and Othering in Africa* is a book which covers a number of different domains in which Africa and its peoples, languages, practices and cultures have been othered by non-Africans, primarily the colonial powers which over centuries have dominated Africa politically and economically. Each chapter covers a different aspects of othering, so there is little repetition of material, although as we have seen, Ndlovu does repeat explanations of his theoretical approaches.

The book is extremely well edited and curious statements like "Suffice it to say that a bulrush is a wild swampy area" (42) are few and far between. To balance these are a considerable number of insightful (and sometimes quirky) statements such as "The naming of marriage as holy matrimony, for example, presupposes that non-western marriage is an unholy marriage". (50).

As much of his material is from southern Africa, notably his home country Zimbabwe, and to a lesser extent South Africa, onomasticians from this part of the world will take delight in seeing something that they already know looked at with a fresh critical lens, and fitted within the single theme of othering. To those from other parts of the world, Ndlovu's material and the way he has interpreted it, will be an eye-opener. His work is likely to become a standard text on this aspect of naming.

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