



## African Names as a Vehicle to Selfhood and Cultural Identity amongst South Africans

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### Abstract

In South African culture, naming a child is a deep tradition, usually done by the father's family. Many children are named after their paternal grandfather or with guidance from ancestors, highlighting their identity and family role. This study explores how modern factors like education and Western religion have changed these customs. Researchers used group interviews and cultural analysis with 12 people from four villages. Results show that fewer people follow traditional naming practices, with many choosing Christian names and seeing African Indigenous Religion as outdated. Cultural rituals are now done in private due to social stigma. These changes weaken African cultural identity. The study highlights the need to revive traditional naming to protect African heritage.

### Keywords

African names, ancestors, religion, education, cultural identity

### INTRODUCTION

During the pre-colonial era, African societies thrived independently, practicing their cultural traditions without external influence. Indigenous knowledge systems were central to addressing community challenges, from food security to health issues, while leadership was vested in kings revered as ancestral figures. Initiation rites were universally practiced, and African Traditional Religion (ATR) served as the cornerstone of societal norms and values, emphasising community over individuality. This religion fostered a moral order, where ancestral spirits played a crucial role in guiding behaviour (Gyekye, 1996).

African names held deep significance, often linked to praise poems that were orally transmitted across generations (Finnegan, 1970). These names were believed to connect individuals to their ancestors, reflecting cultural continuity and the importance of oral literature in preserving heritage (Guma, 1983). Naming practices were guided by elders or through ancestral consultation, and any discord in the assigned name was traditionally addressed by seeking spiritual guidance (Nkosi, 1997). Despite the rich cultural practices of pre-colonial Africa, there is a gap in contemporary understanding of how these traditions have evolved or persisted in modern times. This study aims to explore the continuity and transformation of these practices, addressing the lack of comprehensive documentation in the current literature (Hountondji, 2002).

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

In South Africa, naming is more than just a tradition—it reflects identity and cultural heritage. Traditionally, names connect individuals to their ancestors and define their place in the family, with the father's family usually responsible for naming. However, modern influences like globalisation, education, and Western religion are weakening these customs. Many now choose Christian names and view African Indigenous Religion as outdated, leading to a loss of cultural identity.

Social stigma forces some to practice cultural rituals in private, and there is little research on how these naming traditions have changed or survived. This study explores the impact of modern influences on African naming practices. Using a qualitative case study, it highlights changes in these traditions and stresses the need to protect and revive them to preserve African heritage.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study adopts the Afrocentrism and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) as espoused by scholars such as Asante (1980), Gyekye (1996), and Mabetoa (1992) to understand the persistence and transformation of African naming practices in contemporary South Africa. Central to this framework is the exploration of how African names, deeply rooted in pre-colonial traditions, reflect identity, cultural continuity, and community values. Afrocentrism provides a critical lens for analysing the impact of colonialism and modern influences on these practices, focusing on efforts to reclaim and preserve African traditions. Afrocentrism, a movement aimed at reorienting African identity toward African perspectives, challenges the dominance of Eurocentric worldviews by placing African people, history, and traditions at the centre. This theory highlights the importance of reconnecting with African heritage, disrupted by centuries of colonialism and globalisation. African names carry cultural meanings and historical significance, offering a means to reclaim identity and resist the erasure of African traditions. Afrocentrism also emphasises the agency of African people, asserting their ability to act and shape their cultural narratives, which is vital for cultural survival in a modern, globalised world. African names function as symbols of resistance against colonial and modern pressures, connecting individuals to their ancestors and broader community, thus providing a sense of belonging despite contemporary challenges.

African Indigenous Knowledge Systems offer a complementary framework, particularly in understanding the role of naming in maintaining ancestral connections and moral order. In pre-colonial African societies, names were not merely identifiers but carried spiritual and moral significance, linking individuals to their community's values and ancestral guidance. African Traditional Religion (ATR) played a central role in shaping societal norms and behaviours, emphasising communal responsibility and ancestral veneration. ATR helped establish a moral order within the community, with names serving as a means to align individuals with these values. According to Gyekye (1996), ATR provided a moral framework that guided societal behaviour, ensuring individuals lived in harmony with the values passed down through generations. African names, rooted in cosmology, were believed to carry power and significance, offering an ethical compass for community members and ensuring intergenerational continuity by linking the past with the present. Thus, naming practices not only served as identifiers but as vehicles for embedding cultural and moral teachings, ensuring individuals remained connected to their spiritual guides and cultural heritage.

Mabetoa (1992) further supports this perspective by highlighting the role of Afrocentrism in validating African worldviews. He argues that reconnecting with African naming practices is central to reclaiming African cultural identity and resisting the psychological effects of colonialism. By placing African names and cultural practices at the centre, Afrocentrism reaffirms the value of these traditions and their power in maintaining a sense of community and identity.

These theoretical perspectives help to illuminate the ways in which African names, once symbols of community, ancestry, and moral order, continue to evolve in the face of modern influences. The frameworks also highlight the need for contemporary efforts to revive and preserve these practices to safeguard African cultural identity and heritage.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The study was set out to address the topic: *"African names as a vehicle to selfhood and cultural identity amongst South African natives."* To best address this interesting topic, the researcher found a qualitative research approach suitable because it allowed us to intermingle with the participants and thereby gain an insider perspective of the problem under study. Within this approach, the researcher adopted a case-study design, which allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the issues at play. More specifically, like many other qualitative researchers do, this study adopted the notion of a case study research design as advanced by Boghossion (2006) which involves an in-depth, contextually rich examination of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context. Because our constructivist paradigm stance which entails a philosophical and educational approach, posits that knowledge is constructed rather than acquired. This reiterates that we do not find knowledge, we construct it. This allowed us to become what he calls qualitative researchers interpreters and gatherers of interpretations.

In conclusion, this study employed a qualitative research approach, specifically utilising a case-study design, to explore how African names serve as a vehicle for selfhood and cultural identity among South Africans. This approach provided the researchers with a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between naming practices and identity formation within real-life contexts. By adopting a constructivist paradigm, the study emphasised the active role of the researcher in constructing knowledge through participant interactions and interpretations. This methodology allowed the researchers to engage as interpreters, gathering rich, contextually grounded insights that aligned with the study's aim of exploring cultural identity through African names.

### **Study Site and Sampling**

The study was conducted in four rural villages within the Greater Tubatse/Fetakgomo Municipality, located in the Sekhukhune District of Limpopo Province. The villages include Ga-Nkwana Village, Manganeng Village, Mothopong Village, and Mohlaletse Village. The research took place during the second term of the year, coinciding with a series of

initiation schools that are significant cultural events in the community. The final day of initiation schools, where the public can witness African cultural traditions, provided an ideal context for the research.

The researchers used *purposive sampling* to select four villages in the Greater Tubatse/Fetakgomo Municipality. These villages were chosen for their rich cultural practices, particularly the consistent use of African names as a form of daily address. The researchers focused on villages with a strong tradition of assigning African names, which aligned with the study's aim.

In terms of participant selection, the study used *criterion-based purposive sampling*. This technique was applied to recruit individuals with specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. The researchers selected three elderly women from three different villages, as elderly members of the clan traditionally have the responsibility of naming family members. These elders were believed to have a close spiritual connection with their ancestors. Additionally, three traditional healers were chosen from the same villages. Traditional healers were included because they are believed to communicate with ancestors, often through the use of bones, making them key cultural figures in understanding the significance of African names.

In total, twelve participants were selected for the study. Three elderly women and three traditional healers from the selected villages. The researchers ensured that all participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and procedures, emphasising the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants were assured of confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity, and their consent was obtained through signed consent forms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013)

## DATA COLLECTION

Following their agreement to participate in the study, the researchers began to create a cordial atmosphere where we allowed them to tell us about their experiences on how they were in overseeing the implementation of the curriculum in their schools. Data was constructed through two methods, semi-structured interviews, and cultural analysis.

### Interviews

A semi-structured ethnographic interview schedule was used to open discussions with the participants. The researcher found the semi-structured interviews more appropriate to elicit the cultural activity and art of allocating members of their clans those African names and further enforcing the use of African names as their daily individual address. We probed extensively to allow the participants to elaborate more about their experiences in the implementation of African culture. This helped us to develop our theoretical understanding of what constituted social change.

The Interview Schedule Guide included the three concepts of Afrocentrism in South African social science: what has been done, how useful has it been, and cultural terrorism in Africa. I asked participants about what directed/prompted them to provide their family members' and clan members' African names, and how they managed to enforce the continual use of those African names. The researcher further asked them whether their African names are associated with poems, how they managed to resist the colonial influence on their African cultures and African names, and finally if they have the belief that their African names have a connection with their ancestors. The initial plan was to visit all participants four times, and indeed the researcher managed to stick to our plan as no external factors were preventing us from being clued to our plan. The first visit was to make arrangements and introduce the study. The second visit was for the initial interviews. The third visit was used for feedback and debriefing. The fourth visit was used for further conversations and clarifications on areas that were not clear.

### Data Analysis

Culture is learned through social interactions and shared experiences, shaping people's beliefs and values (Matthews, Brown, & Kennedy, 2018). It constantly evolves as individuals influence and modify it.

This study examined African names as symbols of identity. To respect cultural norms, the researcher followed traditional protocols, including proper greetings and addressing participants by their African names. The research took place during the initiation season, a sacred time with strict rules, such as no loud music or fires except by initiates. Respecting these customs allowed access to ceremonies, where initiates (Badikana) and teachers (Baditi) shared their names and praise poems.

A checklist ensured all cultural rules were followed. Data analysis started early, with interviews recorded, transcribed, and reviewed to identify patterns. Themes were developed using inductive thematic content analysis.

### Cultural Analysis Supported by Inductive Thematic Content Analysis

Inductive thematic content analysis was used to identify themes directly from the data, ensuring the findings reflected participants' perspectives without researcher bias (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis revealed key themes about African names and identity. One major theme was the use of African names in formal interactions, reinforcing cultural identity and continuity (Creswell, 2014). Another theme was the strict cultural restrictions during initiation rites, highlighting their sacred role in shaping identity and social roles.

This analysis showed how African names and traditions strengthen identity, belonging, and cultural continuity within the community.

## STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the analysis of both semi-structured interviews and cultural data, the researcher came up with the following seven (06) Thematic concepts for discussions: 1) Pre-colonial period, 2) beginning of Christian names and Western religion, 3)

African Names, African Traditional Religion, and Ancestral Connection: A Pathway to Selfhood and Cultural Identity, 4) The Importance of African Names and Ancestors in Shaping Selfhood and Cultural Identity, 5) Influence of African Renaissance, and 6) Forms of allocating names and anomaly/cultural deviations.

### **Pre-colonial period**

Whether we are aware of it or not, the society we live in has ways of daily forcing its values on us about what is good, right, and acceptable. We go on in our daily lives trying to conform to acceptable ways of behaviour and conduct. Persons who do not conform to their immediate society's values are somehow called to order by the members of that society. If a man, for instance, did not think it wise to make honesty a personal value, and it is widely held by his immediate society that truth-telling is a non-negotiable virtue, it would not be long before such an individual gets into trouble with other members of his society. This shows that values occupy a central place in a people's culture. It forms the major bulwark that sustains a people's culture, making it more down-to-earth and real. Elsewhere, we have seen African culture as "all the material and spiritual values of the African people in the course of history and characterising the historical stage attained by Africa in her developments" (Idang, 2009).

During the pre-colonial period, Africans used to occupy their Africa, moving from one place to another without borders. Africans would practice their culture to the fullest, sing their African songs, and worship their ancestors. Before the Westernisation process, Africans had always believed in God and their ancestors and had been profoundly spiritual. This is contrary to some colonial authorities and Christian missionaries' general beliefs that Africans were unbelievers. Africans believed and continue to believe in the eternal and ubiquitous spirit of the ancestors and the Almighty God. The ancestors are called by different names depending on one's ethnic origins. The Bapedi, Batswana, and Basotho call them '*badimo*'. The AmaZulu and the Amakhosa call them '*amadlozi*' and '*iinyanya*' respectively (Mokgobi, 2014). The African continent experienced its form of training and learning before it was colonised and even before the arrival of the missionaries. The training systems of Africans such as the traditional schools did exist, but most importantly, the family unit served as an important structure for knowledge provision and acquisition (Msweunyane, 2013). During this period African people knew no other religion except the ATR. They would give their children African names because that was before the arrival of the Western missionaries; there was nothing like Christian names during this period and African people retained their identity and selfhood from birth to death.

### **Beginning of Christian names and Western religion**

It is pertinent to examine some of the changes in culture and the problems of adjustment. Within this context, "change" means a significant alteration or marked departure from that which existed before. Invention, discovery, and diffusion are some of the ways by which a culture can change or grow. Invention, for instance, involves the recombination of existing cultural elements to fashion new things. Traditional African religion had existed for many centuries before the arrival of Western Christian missionaries and Western political expeditions on the African continent. With the challenge for and the Westernisation of the African continent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Africans became Christians not by choice but via intimidation. Nonetheless, it is also worth mentioning that others became Christians by choice. In many parts of apartheid South Africa, an African child had to have a 'Christian' name before she or he could be enrolled at a primary school. This is where many African children were introduced and 'converted' to the Christian religion. Contrary to the intentions of colonial authorities and the apartheid government, this forced conversion and Westernisation did not lead Africans to completely abandon the traditional African health care system and African religion. Instead, many Africans practiced Western and traditional African religions concurrently and as such utilised the services of both the traditional and Western health care systems (Nigosian, 1994).

It was an obligation for African children to attend school not by choice. All other cultural and societal activities like caring for cattle and subsistence agriculture were obliged to be under the care of the elderlies or sometimes by the children after school. It was in the school where African children were just given so-called Christian names not by choice and without the approval of their parents. Nelson Mandela was born in South Africa on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1918. At birth, he was given the name Rolihlahla. It was a primary school teacher who gave him the Christian name Nelson. This is a clear indication that the Christian names were not ideally given to Africans legally but were enforced; African names are ancestral names given to African children from birth.

### **African Names, African Traditional Religion, and Ancestral Connection: A Pathway to Selfhood and Cultural Identity**

African names hold profound significance within African Traditional Religion (ATR) and the veneration of ancestors, serving as a powerful vehicle for selfhood and cultural identity amongst South Africans. In many African societies, names are not merely labels but are imbued with deep spiritual and cultural meaning. They often reflect the circumstances surrounding an individual's birth, the hopes of the parents, or the characteristics the parents wish to see in their child. In the context of ATR, names can also carry the weight of ancestral legacy, connecting the individual to their lineage and the spiritual world.

In ATR, the belief in the spiritual connection between the living and their ancestors is central. This connection is often maintained through rituals, offerings, and the use of names. The name given to a child can be seen as a link to the ancestors, often honouring a deceased relative or invoking the presence of a protective spirit. This practice is a means of ensuring that the individual is grounded in their heritage and protected by the ancestral spirits. For example, a child

named after a respected ancestor is believed to inherit the qualities and wisdom of that ancestor, thus reinforcing the continuity of the family's lineage and cultural identity (Olupona, 2014).

The role of African names in fostering selfhood and cultural identity is particularly poignant in the South African context. During the colonial and apartheid eras, many African people were stripped of their Indigenous names and forced to adopt Western ones, severing them from their cultural roots and diminishing their sense of identity. In the post-apartheid era, there has been a resurgence in the use of African names as part of a broader effort to reclaim and assert African identity. By embracing their Indigenous names, South Africans are reconnecting with their heritage, honouring their ancestors, and asserting their selfhood in a society that once sought to erase it.

The choice to use African names is also an act of resistance against the erasure of African culture and an affirmation of the value of African traditions. It is a way of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations. As African names are passed down, they carry with them the stories, values, and beliefs of the people, contributing to a collective sense of identity. This act of naming, therefore, is not only a personal declaration of identity but also a communal affirmation of cultural continuity.

African names play a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of cultural identity and selfhood among South Africans. Through their deep connections to African Traditional Religion and ancestral veneration, these names serve as a bridge between the individual, their community, and their spiritual heritage. In reclaiming their Indigenous names, South Africans are actively participating in the revival of their cultural identity, ensuring that their history, traditions, and values are honoured and preserved for future generations.

### **The Importance of African Names and Ancestors in Shaping Selfhood and Cultural Identity**

Names often reflect the circumstances of birth, family hopes, or honour revered ancestors, keeping their memory alive (Mbiti, 1969).

Naming ceremonies involve elders, who seek ancestral blessings for the child, reinforcing the idea that names link the living and the dead. African names also carry values like resilience and unity, shaping identity and fostering pride. In a globalised world, using traditional names helps preserve culture and resist cultural loss.

By embracing African names, South Africans reclaim their heritage, strengthening cultural identity and intergenerational ties. This practice ensures that traditions remain alive and meaningful in a changing world.

### **The Influence of the African Renaissance and Its Connection to African Names**

The **African Renaissance** is a movement focused on reviving African culture, identity, and heritage after colonialism. It encourages pride in African traditions and counters past colonial narratives. A key part of this revival is the appreciation of **African names**, which hold deep cultural and historical meaning, especially in South Africa.

African names connect individuals to their ancestry, lineage, and community. During colonial and apartheid eras, indigenous names were marginalised, but today, many South Africans are reclaiming them as a way to restore cultural identity. Parents now choose traditional names to instil pride and reinforce heritage.

This movement has also sparked academic interest in how names reflect identity and resist colonial erasure. Scholars study how names shape personal and collective history, influencing South Africa's social and political landscape. By embracing African names, individuals affirm their heritage and strengthen the broader cultural revival.

### **Forms of allocating names and anomaly/ cultural deviations**

Anomalies do happen sometimes when allocating names to children in African cultures. The first cultural anomaly occurs when the infant is allocated the wrong name, the child will cry incessantly to prompt the head of the family to consult the traditional healer, who is believed to have powers to communicate with ancestors. In the Bapedi tribe, traditional healers are generally called '*dingaka*' or '*mangaka*'. The different types of traditional healers include diviners ('*Ngaka ya ditaola*'), Sanusi ('*Sedupe*'), traditional surgeons, and traditional birth attendants ('*Babelegisi*'). The diviner uses bones and the spirits of the ancestors to diagnose and prescribe medication for different physiological, psychiatric, and spiritual conditions. This category includes those that deal with '*mafofonyane*' (schizophrenia) and '*malopo*' (being possessed by the spirits of the ancestors that can be healed without the possessed person becoming a traditional healer him or herself). '*Malopo*' can be treated by a combination of therapies that include dance (Hammond-Tooke, 1989).

If the traditional healer is consulted, he will throw his bones which serve as a connection with ancestors, and they will immediately provide him/her with the precise name for the troubled infant. It should be acknowledged that the name will most probably not be a Christian name but a real African name which will be coupled with the praise poem. On mentioning the name an elderly woman and member of the family will ululate while other members of the family will be clapping hands and the child will immediately calm down to indicate that the ancestors are happy and appeased.

### **Case study on Forms of allocating names and cultural deviations**

A fascinating case shared by a participant highlighted how naming plays a crucial role in African and Northern Sotho traditions. After repeated infant deaths in a family, a traditional healer was consulted. The healer, using bone-throwing divination, revealed that the ancestors were taking the children. To prevent this, the healer advised naming future children after undesirable animals or insects, making them unappealing to ancestors. Names like **Podile** (a foul-smelling beetle),

**Mphukhudu** (a resurrected human used by witches), **Pokolo** (donkey), and **Khwephane** (skunk) were believed to protect children, allowing them to survive into old age.

### Key Takeaways

#### 1. Ancestral Influence & Healers

- Ancestors are seen as both protectors and takers of life.
- Traditional healers act as mediators, using rituals like bone-throwing to interpret ancestral will.

#### 2. Naming as Protection

- Naming children after undesirable creatures discourages ancestors from taking them.
- This ritual highlights the cultural and spiritual weight of naming.

#### 3. Social & Ritual Significance

- Naming is not just a label but a survival strategy in times of crisis, like infant mortality.

#### 4. Risk of Renaming

- Changing a child's name to a more pleasant one is believed to attract ancestors, risking their life.

#### 5. Cultural Worldview

- This case shows how Northern Sotho society views life events as connected to a broader ancestral and spiritual narrative.

The practice underscores the deep-rooted belief in ancestors and the power of rituals in African traditions.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

After going through all the submissions of participants, the researcher came up with the following five recommendations: One, African people must reunite with their culture, retain their African names, and be proud of them. Two, African people must rediscover and affirm their African roots, which calls for worshipping their ancestors freely without hiding and prejudice. Three, African names, African traditional religion, and ancestral connection serves as a pathway to selfhood and cultural identity. Four, African Renaissance. Five, forms of allocating names and anomaly/cultural deviations.

#### Africans must Retain their African names and be proud of them

Africans must retain their African names and be proud of them. Our first recommendation is to encourage and call for all Africans to rediscover themselves and reunite with their African culture. This step should be followed by the adoption of African names and the disposal of the so-called Christian names. It is disheartening to witness an African adopting foreign languages, cultures, and names, and even more concerning when they pass this influence onto their children, encouraging them to speak and adopt foreign traditions. Africans must accept that they will never become whites in their lifetime; they will remain black and must emancipate themselves from that mental slavery by loving who they are and being proud of their African cultures. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986:3) highlights, "the biggest weapon wielded and daily unleashed by imperialism...is the cultural bomb", which erases cultural pride and self-awareness. By reclaiming African names, individuals resist this "cultural bomb" and assert their identity. Thus, reclaiming African names is an act of resistance and a step toward cultural and mental emancipation.

Reclaiming African names is not merely a personal choice but a broader symbolic act against the domination of Western culture. It restores historical narratives, revives indigenous knowledge systems, and inspires global solidarity among oppressed peoples. By reclaiming African names, individuals resist the "cultural bomb," asserting their identity and taking a step toward cultural and mental emancipation.

#### Africans must worship their ancestors freely without prejudice

Western missionaries introduced Christianity to Africa, devaluing African Indigenous Religions (AIR). Many converts were seen as abandoning their traditional beliefs, but in secret, they still practiced ancestor worship. This shows that AIR remains influential, especially in times of crisis (Mercado 2004, 2005:104).

Despite adopting Christianity, many Africans continue to seek help from AIR priests. A missionary, Harry Sawyer, shared an experience in Nigeria where he saw a Christian woman secretly performing a ritual at night. She quickly hid but was recognised before disappearing.

Ancestor worship is central to African traditions and challenges Christianity. Many Africans practice both religions—praying to ancestors in the morning and attending church later (Amanze 2003:43). Some believe that ignoring ancestors may lead to suffering, as they could cause diseases or demand that people become traditional healers. This raises the question: how long can Africans hide their ancestral beliefs?

#### African Names, African Traditional Religion, and Ancestral Connection: A Pathway to Selfhood and Cultural Identity

Africans should prioritise preserving their traditional names, African Traditional Religion, and ancestral connections, as these are key to cultural identity. African names hold deep spiritual and cultural meaning, symbolising history, family bonds, and community identity. Despite foreign influences, reclaiming and proudly using traditional names is essential. African Traditional Religion, which honours ancestors and the natural world, provides the foundation for understanding names and culture. Preserving these practices maintains a link between past and present, with ancestors seen as guides and protectors.

Honouring ancestors strengthens unity and cultural roots, both in Africa and the diaspora. Recommitting to traditional names, religion, and ancestry will help safeguard African heritage in a globalised world. As Gyekye (1996:85) states, African names represent identity, spirituality, and a person's role in the community.

### **African Renaissance**

Africans should embrace their intellectual heritage by learning from African scholars and thinkers who have preserved traditions and identity (Mphahlele, 2002). This is not just nostalgia but a way to strengthen African culture for future generations. A key part of this renewal is reclaiming African names, which carry ancestral and cultural significance. These names affirm identity and belonging. African Traditional Religion should also be embraced, as it connects spirituality, ethics, and community well-being.

This cultural revival protects African identity in a globalised world. By practicing traditional customs, including names and beliefs, Africans can preserve their heritage while adapting to modern times.

### **Forms of allocating names and anomaly/cultural deviations**

African communities should honour their ancestors, as they are vital to spiritual well-being. Regular rituals help maintain harmony and prevent ancestral displeasure.

Families should follow ancestral guidance when naming children, as these names carry spiritual protection and meaning. Even if they seem unusual today, they are meant to ensure the child's safety and strengthen family ties with ancestors.

Deviating from traditional naming customs, such as ignoring ancestral wishes, can lead to spiritual misfortune or punishment. To avoid this, communities must uphold these traditions, as names connect the spiritual and physical worlds. Naming should also help preserve African culture. Traditional names link individuals to their heritage and ensure cultural continuity (Mndende, 2006). Ignoring these customs disrupts spiritual balance and weakens cultural identity. By following these practices, African communities can protect their heritage and maintain spiritual harmony.

### **CONCLUSION**

African names have long been central to identity and cultural heritage in South Africa. In pre-colonial times, names reflected lineage, social roles, and spiritual beliefs. With colonisation, Christian and Western names were introduced, leading many to adopt them for social and economic reasons. However, African names remained significant, creating a dual identity where individuals balanced both traditions.

These names hold deep spiritual meaning, linking individuals to ancestors and reinforcing cultural identity. They honour heritage, strengthen communal ties, and play a crucial role in selfhood. The African Renaissance has further revived interest in indigenous naming practices, emphasising the importance of reclaiming cultural heritage.

As globalisation influences naming trends, African traditions continue to adapt while preserving core values. The evolving use of names reflects the resilience of African identity. Ultimately, names serve as vital connections to the past, present, and future, ensuring the continuity of cultural identity in a changing world.

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