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Beyond Barack: Themes, Trends and How to Choose African Names

THE AFRICAN BOOK OF NAMES: 5,000+ Common and Uncommon Names from the African Continent

Askhari Johnson Hodari, Ph.D.

THE AFRICAN BOOK OF NAMES: 5,000+ Common and Uncommon Names from the African Continent (Health Communications, Inc.; February 2009) by Askhari Johnson Hodari, Ph.D., shares names from 37 African countries and at least 70 ethnolinguistic groups, and provides in-depth insight into the spiritual, emotional, social, and political importance of names from Angola to Zimbabwe. **It is the most current and comprehensive book on the subject, in which Dr. Hodari offers more than 5,000 names organized by theme -- from religion, birth circumstance and physical characteristics.** This timely and informative resource guide vibrates with the culture of Africa and encourages Blacks across the world to affirm their African origins by selecting African names.

It is clear that Dr. Hodari loves African names. She truly appreciates their sounds and meanings, which are different from names of North America. "Each time a person calls me by my African name, they remind me that my roots are indeed in Africa," says Dr. Hodari. In the last twenty years she has consulted in the naming of hundreds of babies, and in the renaming of hundreds of children and adults. She explains in **THE AFRICAN BOOK OF NAMES** that naming in African societies is more of a communal process than in other societies; in fact, it is common for parents, young people or adults to consult with community members or African Studies practitioners before bestowing a name upon an infant, or upon themselves.

Dr. Hodari explores the various circumstances under which a person is named, and the factors that come into play. For example, she helped name a child *Jasir Dia*, and explains that each time a person speaks to *Jasir*, they are calling him a "fearless champion." Dr. Hodari says that this name helps and influences *Jasir's* life, and that the expectation is for him to become all that his name implies long after his parents and other family members have passed on. Choosing an African name does not have to happen shortly after birth, and new names can represent various stages of development as one grows and matures -- Sojourner Truth, Muhammad Ali, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar all took on new names as adults.

Dr. Hodari promotes the use of African names because she says that the importance of African culture is often minimized, leading to the exclusion of African names from many baby and name books. This negligence, she explains, deprives parents, researchers, students and other readers of the philosophy and wisdom of African societies. Also, since many traditional and modern African societies tend to rely on and emphasize oral communication more than written communication, Dr. Hodari wanted to contribute to as much of a written record of African names as possible, particularly since Africans are no longer in one large space, but are scattered across the planet.

Despite enormous cultural variety throughout Africa, there are central themes common to African naming. A name evidences the day of birth, time of birth or the birth order, such as *Akua* (Wednesday) and *Layla* (born at night). Conditions and circumstances of birth also are taken into consideration, like *Alfryea* (born during good times) or *Lesá* (child born unexpectedly). Location of birth event or season of birth, religious concepts, desired characteristics and even physical traits can play a role in the naming process. With 16 percent of the world's population residing on the African continent, Africa has given birth to millions of lyrical, intriguing and significant names -- thousands of which are listed in **THE AFRICAN BOOK OF NAMES**.

While the birth of a baby is a joyous time that creates a need to choose a name, **THE AFRICAN BOOK OF NAMES** does not focus solely on "baby names." Readers of any age can embrace this collection to select names for themselves, events, or other entities. Dr. Hodari believes that the use of African names must be guided by a love and appreciation for African culture. "However, it is not my duty to judge what may or may not be an appropriate name," she explains. This book provides a diverse and comprehensive selection of names. The rest is up to readers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Askhari Johnson Hodari, Ph.D., is a practitioner of Black/Africana Studies and regularly studies and travels the African Diaspora. She has visited numerous countries in Africa, South America, and the Caribbean. She is the co-author of *Lifelines: The Black Book of Proverbs*.

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Media Questions

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- **What inspired you to create THE AFRICAN BOOK OF NAMES?**
 - The great Toni Morrison wrote: “if there is a book you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.” I wanted this African name book- a book that primarily allows me to follow my African instinct of placing the most emphasis on the meaning of names; a book that offers names from many diverse cultures on the African continent; and a book that offers context for African names
- **What features make THE AFRICAN BOOK OF NAMES stand out as a naming resource? How is it different from other African name books?**
 - The way I organized TABN is what really sets it apart from other books. I have organized over 5,000 African names by theme (over 100 themes). So, for instance, I have grouped all the names relating to beauty and appearance together; all the names relating to courage and bravery are together; and all the names meaning strength are grouped together.
- **How do you select names when you are naming people? How is your approach to African naming different from other approaches?**
 - I have a theme-based approach to selecting African names. My approach asks individuals to start with basic questions: what would you like the name to say about your child; about you; about your business, etc.? In other words, what would you like the name to mean?
- **What advice can you offer about selecting an African name?**

Think about what you want the name to say about the individual or entity you want to name. You may consider the time, location or condition of birth. You may also, reflect on emotional, physical and spiritual characteristics. There are other considerations, including, but not limited to: sound, pronunciation, length, religion and family. Most essentially, naming in African cultures is a communal process, so involve friends and family. When that is not possible, or you just need more support, I am available for name consultations- I enjoy helping people select African names.
- **What are some common mistakes people want to avoid when choosing an African name?**
 - The mistakes people commonly make are: 1) Choosing a name in a vacuum and not including family and friends in the process; 2) choosing names for siblings that sound too similar; 3) selecting names with hidden rhymes, meanings, or jokes within the names; 4) unnecessarily avoiding polysyllabic names- being a slave to the short name; and 5) not going beyond the popular names.

- **Can you share some of your favorite African names?**
 - Some names I enjoy for the way a name sounds-- names like Rasha, Isisila, Tarishi, Zindzhi—these names just feel good to my tongue. In general “a” “z” “r” “d” “j” and “i” sounds move me- I dig those sounds. Other names, I appreciate because of the meaning: Sempiira (a large fire set for a constructive purpose), Hararah (passion), Taakaa (wild fire), and Utashi (Free will). Then, there are names I am attracted to because of individuals who have lived in the same name previously—Shaka, Yaa Asantewaa, Nzingha.

- **In your book, you discuss your name. Can you speak a little about your name?**
 - One of my African names means “soldier”, another means “brave” and another of my names means “the ultimate; and yet another means, “she has earned the prize.” With all that inspirational energy, you can certainly see why I live in this name now.

- **Do you believe Black people should have African names?**
 - Naturally, it pleases me when Black people choose names that are culturally harmonious; and honor their ancestral homeland. However, I believe in the right of Black people to determine their own destinies. Ultimately, I want my people to make decisions about their identities without having their choices challenged or, worse, portrayed as inferior. Someone once said something like, “the darkest thing about Africa is our own ignorance about it.” I see part of my mission as promoting African culture, but I am not interested in forcing it on anyone.

- **Does a name always have to mean something?**
 - Naming by theme or meaning is an African based approach, and one I have chosen to represent, but people do not have use this particular approach. The ABN provides enough information to allow readers to search by sound, origin of the name, or gender.

- **Do you recommend naming ceremonies? Why?**
 - Naming ceremonies allow the entire community to celebrate and embrace the name, just as a wedding allows the entire community to celebrate and embrace newly formed families. Everyone may not get married, or graduate from school, but everyone has a name. So, I am a big believer in naming ceremonies, and I am available for naming ceremony consultations.

- **Are you working on any other projects? If so, please speak about them.**
 - I co-authored (with Yvonne McCalla Sobers) Lifelines, a book of Afridiasporic proverbs (Broadway Books, October 2009). I also developed the Black Facts Calendars, which list Black facts about Black people for each day of the calendar year. I am the founder and moderator of de Griot Space, an online writing workshop for Black writers.