

Exile: the “True Name” of the Subject

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An essential link connects the subject’s coming into the world and his or her naming. Anthropology observes that, in all cultures, the individual’s physical existence is not sufficient and must be “completed” by a symbolic system in order for the individual to be considered a fully constituted subject.

Van Gennep studied these social procedures of humanization and naming from the perspective of “rites of passage”².

The sequence of the rite of passage operates according to a ternary structure that includes, at its core, the dimension of exile. In a first phase, the individual is separated from and set apart from the group; in a second phase, the individual is maintained in an “intermediate zone” in which identity and name are unknown and indeterminate. M. Segalen writes: “*The individual (...) is in an in-between situation; he is dead to the world of the living (and his) social invisibility may be marked by the loss of the name*³.” Finally, in a third phase, the individual is reintegrated into the group, becoming a full member, and comes to know his or her “true identity” and what may sometimes be considered his or her “true name.”

Psychoanalysis points to something comparable. Since the child, Freud tells us, comes into the world unfinished, in a state of “primitive helplessness,” he or she is dependent on the welcome, the symbolization of the Other, on the Other’s words and signifiers.

The links between exile and name are also present in Lacan, insofar as it is at birth that the subject is named—that is, at the moment of exile from the mother’s body.

By conceptualizing the *Name-of-the-Father*, Lacan formalizes the individual’s inscription into the symbolic field within the register of neurosis.

Everything thus unfolds as if naming the subject were a way of completing and suturing the Real of bodily separation through a symbolic act in language.

However, clinical experience shows that it is not uncommon for migratory exile, rather than conferring a name upon the subject, to cause the subject to “lose” it.

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² Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage* (1909) Translated from French; first English edition published by the University of Chicago Press in 1960.

³ Segalen M., *Rites et rituels contemporains*, Paris : Nathan université, 1998.

A young Senegalese man who arrived in Spain by boat bears witness to this: “*I have turned into something I do not recognize. I don’t understand how people see me. It’s been a long time since anyone has named me. Here my name is difficult to pronounce. For people here, my name means nothing.*”

These effects go beyond the formal dimension of the name and may extend into the legal register. Thus, during the ceremony for acquiring French nationality, the State offers the newly naturalized subject the possibility of changing their first name and adopting a new one, supposedly to facilitate integration.

There are also cases in which entire symbolic systems come into conflict with one another, leading to a durable change of the individual’s name—not only for the individual, but also for their descendants.

At a conference devoted to naming in migration, Kouassi Kouakou, a psychologist living in France and born in Côte d’Ivoire, recounts how he became “Kouakou Kouassi” after changing countries⁴. He also explains that until 1985 he published his articles under his “French” name (Kouakou Kouassi), whereas since then he has signed “Kouassi Kouakou” (his name in Ivory Coast).

To understand this, one must observe the systems of naming in the two cultures: in France, the given name (which designates the individual) precedes the surname (which designates the lineage), whereas in Côte d’Ivoire it is the father’s given name (“Kouassi”), placed first (since it precedes the child), that functions as the “family name” and is transmitted to sons. Upon his arrival in France, when asked his name, he therefore gives as his first name what distinguishes him as an individual (Kouakou) and as his “family name” his father’s given name (Kouassi).

The effects are somewhat complex to grasp, but if we transpose this example to Sigmund Freud, the situation becomes clearer.

In the Ivorian system of naming, since Sigmund Freud’s father was named Jacob, Sigmund Freud would have been called *Jacob Sigmund*, and his son would have been *Sigmund Oliver*. But had Freud arrived in France—and thus changed symbolic systems of naming—he would have designated *Sigmund* as his first name and Jacob as his family name, and his son would have been named *Oliver Jacob*. Freud would therefore have found himself unable to transmit his first name to his son and would have had to use his own father’s first name to “make” the family name, thus naming his son with the name of his own father.

One should not be mistaken, however: what is at stake here is indeed another symbolic system. There is a patronymic lineage—even if it is renewed with each generation—and there is indeed a *Name-of-the-Father*, in the sense that the individual is inscribed within a symbolic lineage.

But the effects of exile on the name do not stop there. If the loss or modification of the name in exile entails significant psychic effects, or if the foreclosure of the *Name-of-the-Father* operates on the side of psychosis, there exist “procedures for the recovery of identity.”

⁴ Kouakou K., « Nomination et identité dans la migration », in *Le Coq-héron* 4/2003 (n° 175).

On the individual level, subjects may “rename” themselves in order to heal symbolic or narcissistic wounds (as Kouassi Kouakou does when he uses, as a reparative procedure, his Ivorian name to sign his articles); and on the collective level, ritual care procedures centered on the name may be applied in order to treat subjects suffering from psychic illness.

This latter point raises the fundamental question of the symbolic or imaginary dimension of the name.

There is no doubt that the patronymic—*the Name-of-the-Father*—belongs to the symbolic register, insofar as it inscribes the individual within a lineage, a history, an origin, and a debt. In Lacanian terminology, the effect of the symbolic is to border the Real beyond the subject’s self-discourse or the fantasy of self-generation.

Nevertheless, the imaginary intervenes in the construction of the ego or identity (mirror stage and specular identification), but not in the same way as the symbolic. The symbolic name is not chosen by the individual but is given/imposed by the Other, whereas a nickname or a pseudonym may be self-assigned by the subject, undoubtedly according to the image and the ego-ideal the subject adopts in an attempt to free himself or herself from the desire of the Other.

A change of name is therefore not always the effect of exile, and it is not uncommon for subjects themselves to give themselves a nickname or a pseudonym.

Some adopt a “stage name” that allows them to assume a public persona and to overcome certain inhibitions linked to the name given by the Other. For the artist, the pseudonym makes it possible to assume a desire censored by the gaze of the Other, as if doing something “under one’s stage name” allowed what is not possible under the symbolic name. Adolescence is often another occasion for such renamings.

Everything suggests that, in this case (as in the case of the “naming ceremony”), we are dealing with an imaginary identification whose effect is to cause the symptom to give way (at least temporarily).

Still in Africa, B. Holas reports something that points in the same direction, while specifying a hidden dimension: individuals “*very often have other, ‘true’ names*” that they themselves do not know.

Thus, on certain occasions, a suffering individual may be “treated” through a particular ceremony in which parents reveal “*small names hidden away in corners*⁵,” with the expectation that this revelation may cure the subject’s madness (which is probably interpreted as the effect of a mismatch between the subject and his or her “true name”).

This almost resembles “a second round of the symbolic,” and one may legitimately ask whether the curative effectiveness of the pseudonym or the revealed name is not more a matter of supplementation or of a sinthome than of the *Name-of-the-Father*.

Indeed, if the *Name-of-the-Father* is foreclosed, one may think that whatever name revelation is carried out through such ceremonies will be effective at the imaginary level, functioning as an imitation of the symbolic, as a discreet sinthomatic procedure.

⁵ Kouakou K., « Nomination et identité dans la migration », (already mentioned).

We may perhaps find here an illustration of Lacan's phrase: "*to do without the Name-of-the-Father, on condition of making use of it.*"

Thus, by transmitting to the individual a meaning for his or her existence in the world, a family (and/or mythical) history, and by assigning a place to the individual, it is the Other who humanizes the subject, revealing, in negative, exile and the Real as the necessary condition for the advent of the name.

Everything thus seems to suggest, in the end, that the subject's "true name" is the one that borders exile, and that there is no name other than the one that signifies an exit from exile.