Saying goodbye to Mary Danquah

Words — Nana-Ama Danquah

It is not a balanced equation if all languages must come to English to mean something.
– Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

'Nana-Ama!' my mother called out. 'Come meet one of your cousins.'

We were in Accra, at a family gathering – a wedding or funeral or naming ceremony, I can't say which; they all blur into what, essentially, seems like the same memory of delicious platters of food and an endless array of new kinfolk whose names and exact relationship to me I no longer even try to keep track of. Except this time. This time would be different. This introduction would leave me speechless.

I went and stood beside my mother. She placed a hand on my back, just below my right shoulder. 'Nana-Ama,' she said, almost giddily, 'this is Mary Danquah. And Mary, this is Nana-Ama.'

I was instantly confused, thrust into what felt like an alternate reality. I blinked slowly, allowing my lids to stay down for a moment or two longer than usual, then I looked at my 'new' cousin. For a moment, I half-expected to see my own face staring back.

'I'm sorry... um... did you... what... um... Mary Danquah?' I mumbled, unable to decide which of my many questions to ask first.

She nodded, said hello.

''That's my name, too,' I blurted, drowning in the awkwardness of the moment. Not once in my 40-something years had I ever met another Mary Danquah.

¶

In 1973, at the age of six, I emigrated to the US to be with my mother, who had been living there for three years, and my father, who had only recently arrived. One of the many changes that came with living in a new country was the acquisition of a new name. Even though in private, and in the company of other Africans, my parents continued to call me Nana-Ama – my traditional, cultural name – when introducing me to anyone else, they used my Christian name, Mildred. I was not used to being called Mildred.

The practice of conferring Christian, or English, names on African children was introduced by missionaries from the Western world who came to what they considered the 'Dark Continent' for the purpose of religious indoctrination. In many cases, children were required to have Christian names in order to register and attend classes in the missionary-run schools. Usually that meant balancing an existence of duality – using one name when operating within the colonial system and using another when operating within one's native culture.

Mildred was as far removed from my reality as anything could be. I was being called a foreign name in a foreign country by foreign people. It was ill-fitting, and I wore it uncomfortably, resentfully, woefully. It was like sharing a body with a complete stranger. Mildred was an old white woman in Hampstead who enjoyed a proper fry-up – baked beans, tomatoes, blood pudding, triangles of heavily buttered toast – not a Ghanaian girl transplanted to Takoma Park, Maryland, who craved aponkyenkrakra with fufu.

Americans tend to be lazy-tongued, preferring brevity over all else, including beauty. They tend toward names that are familiar and monosyllabic: Sam instead of Samantha, Beth not Elizabeth, Hank for Henry, and Tim not Timothy. Many immigrants to America adopt English names or Anglicize their own. Itzak is transformed to Isaac, Ekaterina to Kate. Chang Kong-Sang becomes Jackie Chan. I didn't want Nana-Ama to become anything else. I wanted to remain who I was, who I'd always been. That, unfortunately, wasn't a viable option.

The children I went to school with weren't just mean, they were hateful. They felt as certain of their superiority as Americans as they did of my supposed inferiority as an African. And they never let me forget it. I was teased mercilessly, called a monkey, an 'African booty-scratcher', asked if I had slept in trees back home, and told on a regular basis to 'go back to Africa'. Imagine if in the midst of all that, I'd asked my terrorizers to call me Nana-Ama!

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It never occurred to me that I could change my name until one of my classmates mentioned something about looking forward to marriage in adulthood in order to drop a surname she disliked. That's when the idea of finding a name to replace Mildred took hold and I began exploring possibilities for reinvention.

The lists I made were ordered alphabetically. Beginning with 'A', I jotted down names I thought acceptable, thought I could tolerate, perhaps even learn to like. I listened to their rhythms, the particular cadence people used when saying them. I turned each letter over and around in my mouth, letting my tongue glide over the smooth edges of its vowels. I tried to avoid names with sharp, hard consonants, and names that were an obvious magnet for bullies.

The first name I fell in love with was

Amanda. I heard it one day while watching television. A father, square-jawed and towering, had been teased by his daughter, a raven-haired girl with Shirley Temple-style curls. Afterwards, he said, 'Oh, Amanda,' through an exaggerated smile, then used his fingers to softly brush the girl's bangs from her forehead. There was such tenderness in that scene. We had an Amanda in our school whom everyone liked. She wasn't in my class, but during recess, when we were all outside, I watched the other kids speak to her, their voices carrying the sound of each syllable until it started turning into song.

I'd often pretend that those were scenes from *my* life, that the father in the programme was talking to *me*, gently patting *my* afro-puffs; that *my* imaginary circle of friends was singing *my* name in perfect harmony, as though we were in a musical. There were so many things about that name, Amanda, that reminded me of my own name, the one I'd quite unceremoniously been stripped of. Rhythmically, they are the same: *ah-MAN-dah* and *nah-NAH-mah*. They have the same three-syllable beat and, with the exception of 'd', all of the letters in Amanda are also in Nana-Ama. I think that's why I didn't, in the end, choose Amanda. I didn't want to be called a name that would forever remind me of my original name.

Next were the names that began with 'Z' which, perhaps because it's the last letter in the alphabet, seems to throw a shade of mystery onto everything in which it appears. It wasn't hard to envision myself as a Zelda, Zoe, Zora or even Zeva. Ah, but those names commanded attention; they were bold, the exact opposite of what I was convinced I needed: an ordinary name that would blend in, bring an end to the teasing and make the pain of being me – heavily accented me, dark-skinned black girl me, African me – miraculously disappear.

Eventually, I just returned to my own given names. You see, I had not just one but two Christian names. In addition to Mildred, there was also an English middle name: Mary.

The name felt too deeply rooted in religion for someone such as I, who has always entertained doubt. Nevertheless, I changed the spelling to Meri to make it uniquely my own. For years, that name served me well; it enabled me to move through American society without the additional scrutiny and xenophobia that comes with having a name that's 'different', 'funny', 'difficult to pronounce', a name that announces one's origins.

Meri is a well-constructed persona, a person my circumstances forced me to become. Whereas I despised Mildred, I am rather fond of Meri, but she doesn't reflect the whole truth of who I am, the image I see in the mirror, or the internal voice I hear when I put pen to paper. Because of that, when I began my literary career I published as Meri Nana-Ama Danquah. A few times in my young adulthood, I had tried to do away with Meri altogether but was advised against it by editors, colleagues and friends. 'Nana-Ama is just too…' each one said, citing one or more of the reasons that had previously sent me running in the direction of Meri.

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I don't know the meaning of Mary. It occurred to me while writing this essay to look it up, but I didn't because, frankly, I don't have a burning desire to know. I imagine there is a beautiful story to its origin, one that probably predates the Biblical anecdotes we know of the Madonna and of Magdalene. There's a story behind every name, a narrative much longer than the simple adjectives often given by way of translation, in which so much is often lost.

Tennessee Williams wrote that 'the name of a person you love is more than language'. As I grew older and less compromising in my love of self, I began to see each reason I had been given for needing an English name for the lie it was. How can Schwarzenegger be easier to pronounce than Nana-Ama? If Americans can learn the proper pronunciation of Liev, Bogosian and Sinead, then why not Nana-Ama? My name also has a significance that surpasses language. It holds its own power and makes its own magic. It ties me to a land, a history, a lineage.

Sometimes we look back on our lives and, despite the difficulties of our journey, despite the many times we faltered, it seems as though we were destined to be exactly where we have arrived. As an African writer, it feels strangely like a rite of passage, this decision to dispense with the use of an English name. Chinua Achebe was once Albert. Kofi Awoonor was once George. Ama Ata Aidoo was once Christina. Buchi Emecheta was once Florence. Now I, too, am my authentic self again.

Who best to define the parameters of your authenticity than you?

After I decided to drop Meri and use only Nana-Ama, the first person I told was my friend and mentor, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. We were at lunch, speaking of Africa, specifically of dictatorships and the need for philosopher-kings.

'I don't think Meri is such a bad name,' he said with a shrug.

'I hear what you're saying, James,' I responded, not missing a beat. I had deliberately called him by the colonial name he was given at his baptism but had very publicly and emphatically rejected as a young writer. We both laughed, and when our eyes met I knew he understood.

¶

Mary Danquah is round-faced and soft-spoken, with a presence that stands firmly in its space. We laughed, exchanged pleasantries, expressed shock about sharing the same name.

'I only borrowed it for a bit,' I teased.

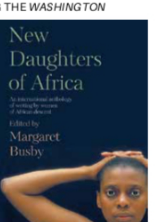
Just before we said our farewell, I could feel the part of me that had, for so long, been Meri Danquah preparing to leave with her. My cousin and I embraced like two women who knew their meeting was kismet.

'Bye, Mary,' I said as she was walking away, her stride purposeful. She turned, waved.

'Bye, Nana-Ama.'

There was something about the way she said my name, with pride, with certainty, that made me suddenly feel weightless and free. ●

A NATIVE OF GHANA, **NANA-AMA DANQUAH** IS THE AUTHOR OF THE ACCLAIMED 1998 MEMOIR *WILLOW WEEP FOR ME: A BLACK WOMAN'S JOURNEY THROUGH DEPRESSION*, AND THE EDITOR OF THE ANTHOLOGIES *BECOMING AMERICAN* (2000), *SHAKING THE TREE: A COLLECTION OF NEW FICTION AND MEMOIR BY BLACK WOMEN* (2003), AND *THE BLACK BODY* (2009). SHE HAS TAUGHT AND LECTURED AT MANY NOTABLE INSTITUTIONS, AMONG THEM THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA AND ANTIOCH COLLEGE, AND HAS WRITTEN FOR PUBLICATIONS INCLUDING THE *WASHINGTON POST*, THE *AFRICA REPORT* AND THE *LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS*. SHE DIVIDES HER TIME BETWEEN ACCRA, GHANA, AND THE COACHELLA VALLEY IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.



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