

These two volumes are the fruit of considerable archival research on the origin of surnames among descendants of slaves in Martinique. Les noms de famille de la population martiniquaise d’ascendance servile (hereafter NF) is based on Guillaume Durand’s doctoral dissertation. The second volume, an enriched edition of a 2002 publication, Les noms de famille d’origine africaine de la population martiniquaise d’ascendance servile (hereafter NA), co-authored by Durand and Kinvi Logossah, explores the African etymologies of the names. The preface by historian Lucien-René Abенon makes clear that the book’s onomastic study of African names reflects the collaborative expertise of the two authors, with Durand working patiently through the registers and Logossah contributing his knowledge of “the science of African languages” (NA, p. 7). Readers interested in the two books might best begin with the more general one (NF) before taking on the co-authored volume, which gets more into the particulars. NF lays out the wide range of surnames that former slaves acquired and proposes a typology. NA focuses on one of the categories thus defined—that is, the names with African origins. I begin by looking at NF, since—in order to understand what anthroponymy can teach us about Antillean societies—it is useful to first consider the context in which surnames were assigned to former slaves as part of the complex project of integrating them into the larger society.

Durand’s extensive study is rich in precious insights and specific details that give new perspective to interpretations of Martiniquan patronyms. The preface by Patrick Chamoiseau underscores the symbolic weight of these names acquired by decree. Should we see in them the “privilège des vainqueurs” who imposed the names? Or might the scribes or civil servants have been surprised by former slaves who were “capable of naming...
themselves” (pp. 7-8)? We know that the acquisition of a surname has generally been viewed as the sort of farce that Édouard Glissant evoked in his novel, *Le quatrième siècle* (of which an excerpt is included in the opening section, pp. 15-16). Yet, in contrast to many recent contributions to this field, Durand keeps his distance from the dominant paradigm that sees the assigned name as a “wound,” proposed most recently by Philippe Chanson (2007). Durand criticizes Chanson for indulging in a “fictional” anthropology when “drier” and “more prosaic” archival research would seem to offer different interpretive insights (p. 39). Surely, without being either too Manichean or too systematic, the historian’s aim is what Glissant himself considered possible—that of a name that is deflected, appropriated, almost created by the person receiving this official identity, which turns the new freedmen into actors in what has become something more than a grotesquely staged theater piece. This interpretation gains support from the fact that contemporary documents and circulars make mention of new citizens being “invited to choose a name” and specifying that “names will not be assigned without the person’s consent” (p. 191).

But Durand is less interested in formulating an overarching hypothesis about his subject than in presenting all the various materials he has uncovered and the analyses he has been able to draw from them. This makes for a dense study built on the foundation of exhaustive archival research in *registres d’individualités*, the administrative documents that recorded surnames attributed to former slaves upon abolition at a time when “it was necessary in one fell swoop to register 73,000 ‘new citizens’ in the electoral lists and find a name for each one” (p. 17). Durand examined 53,702 documents, from which he extracted 19,391 names (p. 29). Added to this are 5,378 surnames taken from no less than 25,000 acts of manumission prior to the abolition of slavery in 1848, when the colonial authorities decided, on the basis of the royal ordinance of 1836, to give names to the then-freedmen, taking care to avoid using any name that existed in the white population (p. 164). All this produced a corpus of some 25,000 surnames. The analysis of them is preceded in Durand’s book by the results of his research in many other administrative archives, reports, and inventories, even including a dense study that identifies the civil servant agents and the “educational course” that they took, in order to show the influence of a classic education in the creation of names (pp. 237-54).
In this first part the multifaceted approach that so much material demands is sometimes unfortunate, especially because the material is presented in a relatively undigested form such as a list of occupations (NF, p. 97) or an enumeration of civil servant agents (p. 221). Some of the information is only vaguely related to the onomastic research; there are, for example, long passages on demographic history or the jobs held by freed slaves. The brushstrokes may simply appear too broad, sometimes expanding into discussion of naming systems “throughout the world” (p. 257), which reduces their relevance to the Antillean case. Nevertheless, the book’s first part produces much of interest, from the analysis of colonial directives for assigning names to the description of the tools used to give names, including the meticulous and ultimately fruitless examination of registres de matricules for slaves mentioned in the individual acts. Durand demonstrates the way the process of name attribution respected familial continuity of the former slaves, from mother to child, in an overwhelming majority of cases, as well as the way that fathers officially recognized their children using the surnames they had gotten from their mother when they were registered (pp. 137-38). Here, as Durand recognizes, genealogical research can add a lot to the image formed on the basis of individual acts (pp. 496, 563). For it is not certain that all these acts carry a notation in the margin of the events that followed, such as the recognition or the legitimization of the child by the father, even though we have every reason to believe that this happened frequently, with the patronym leaving less uncertainty about the significance of the father figure in the family organization.

It is in the second part of the book that onomastic materials really come into play. They are presented according to a typology of thirteen main categories, revealing either fully linguistic categories (anagrams, family names/personal names, invented names, names with identifiable etymologies or sounds, etc.) or “homogeneous lexical fields” traceable to a cultural supply kept by the officers in charge of the name-giving (ancient history, mythology, elements of the natural environment, objects, etc.)—pp. 28, 269ff. This is where we learn about the diversity of both the sources and the processes that went into the invention of names. Those that “sound French” are dominant (30 percent), but Durand is committed to arguing that rather than originating in the island’s white population they either already existed in France or were invented by “plausibilité francophonique” (an expression that Durand borrows from Roland Barthes)—pp. 281, 293.
The description of each category is accompanied by tables and commentary in which Durand seeks to lay out the basis of his interpretation of the origin of the names, sometimes producing a goldmine of information such as that related to anagrams, names formed from Creole, or “insulting” names. The commentary on each category merits close attention, as Durand betrays the obstinacy and erudition that he pours into this project, with occasional overloads of meticulous attention which the CD was unable to absorb. All the rest is punctuated by prudent assertions that the patronym acquired by the former slave is less arbitrary than one might imagine and that it makes sense to keep in mind the possibility of names chosen by the freed people themselves (p. 590).

This main assertion is to be found again in the co-authored volume (NA), which is considerably briefer, and of which half is devoted to exhaustive lists of names with African origins identified in the registers. It constitutes an argument for the massive re-appearance of African names in the individual acts, as compared with the acts of manumission that preceded them, even though they represent a minority of the names attributed (13 percent, p. 35). Here again, the demonstration operates by (1) broadening our gaze to include information on the slave trade in Martinique (rarely synthesized in the same way in previous studies—pp. 45-62), (2) taking into account African survivals (many of which, unfortunately, border on general trivialities—pp. 63-90), (3) taking a quick but interesting look at the mechanisms of language formation of Creole in which Durand and Logossah write of “rencontres phonético-syntaxico-sémantiques” which take place in the context of relations between French, Creole, and African languages (p. 95). They conclude this contextualized panorama by reviewing the place of the name in ancient societies and in African societies where there’s a risk of losing from view the anthroponymic study of Martinique and entering the territory of ancient Egyptian, Hebrew, or Roman values (pp. 107-19). The table that documents the restitution of names from African origins, which takes 130 pages, may or may not leave readers doubtful about the soundness of the hypothesis that former slaves engineered a resurgence of African names upon abolition. But the merit of this book is to have mobilized impressive resources (see especially p. 300) in order to explore the link that they postulate between Martiniquan names and African etymologies, leaving sufficient room for doubt and questioning by speaking prudently of “plausible significance” (p. 269).
This is why the book’s conclusion, which proposes a comparison of the percentages for particular slave-trade origins with the percentages for African names in the corpus calls for the same level of prudence (pp. 270-74). In any case, these two volumes (albeit poorly served by the publisher’s less than elegant presentation) make available a wealth of previously unpublished material that future researchers on the subject will have to take into account, well beyond their implications for the questions raised about anthroponymy in Martinique.

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