

Perfect water

Jason Vasser-Elong

University of Missouri – St. Louis, Missouri, USA

1. Introduction

Full of anticipation after a four-hour flight from St. Louis, Missouri, I arrived in Silver Spring, Maryland, unsure of why this naming ceremony meant so much to me. It was September, and the leaves had only begun to change. After settling in my hotel room, I sat on the floor, pulled a stack of clipped paper out of my messenger bag, and laid it out page after page onto the carpet. I was near completion of a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from the University of Missouri – St. Louis and *Shrimp* was my manuscript. That weekend, I would meet Bamileke elders from Cameroon that were eager to meet me. After learning that we shared maternal ancestry, I was also eager to meet them. Just hours after assembling *Shrimp*, the Cameroon Royal Council had given the name ‘Elong’ back to me.

2. Vasser

Growing up with the surname ‘Vasser’ had its share of mystique. As an African American, the subject of my family name was always a point of intrigue, particularly among those one would expect to carry that namesake. My grandfather, Willie Gene Vasser, Sr. was born in Aberdeen, Mississippi. The small town where he grew up was full of black Vassers and it is said that when he was a child, the owner of the Lann Hardware Store would allow my grandfather to get free candy and other goods. Also, legend, is that in nearby Egypt, Mississippi, lived Charity Vasser in the 1800s. She was one of the enslaved matriarchs of our family.

Vasser

is Dutch for vase
 or German for water,
 so white people tell me
 when they shake my hand,
 after we introduce ourselves.

They make a point
 to educate me,
 and immediately express
 how they seldom meet
 people like me with that name

and that I have a strong grip
 before they list
 the other Vasser's they know,
 questioning if we are related –

i can only imagine
 that we are, but not
 in the way that stimulates
 a cheerful conversation.

Names are important. Smith, for example, is an English name that I would argue is fairly common in England. Perhaps the originators of that name were blacksmiths or in other vocations that worked with their hands. In any event, names are placeholders for who people are in society, what they are known for. So then, if 'Vasser' is Dutch for vase, then that can mean 'one that holds water', or conversely, if 'Vasser' is German for water, then that can mean 'of the water', respectfully.

3. Elong

It is often said by artists and scholars that African Americans were made on the Atlantic Ocean. That the Middle Passage, the voyage from Africa to European nations, the Americas, and the Caribbean on slave ships, is where our story began. But to the contrary, our story begins in Africa. In African nations; my own family's origin beginning in the grass fields region of Cameroon. Though yet again, names are important, they are placeholders for who people are in society, as it was the Portuguese that initiated the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. While traversing the Atlantic Ocean, Portuguese slavers followed large prawn up the

Wari River, which led them to my family. They found the prawn so bountiful, that they named the region *Camarão*, which is Portuguese for large prawn or shrimp.

It is interesting to note that something as simple as a name, can follow a person, a people, or even a whole country into a destiny that was never theirs to own. The Portuguese likely named the region colloquially and it later became a national identity for complex cultures within the borders for those who refer to themselves differently, on their own terms. At some point, ownership of where one lives and how they identify themselves, becomes the manner by which they are known not just regionally, but throughout the world.

The sun was warm that weekend, and the crisp evening air reminded me that the season was changing. I remember clasping my hands and twirling my thumbs while on my way to meet and greet members of the Cameroon Royal Council. I was pensive. More nervous than I had ever been. Ada, my host, tried everything she could to ease my nerves. She had driven me around the city and introduced me to local Cameroonians in the Maryland area, all of whom were warm, friendly, and assured me that my people would accept me as one of them, not as an outsider. That was one of my fears. My family had been in this country for seven generations, and I knew very little about Cameroonian culture. Most of what I learned growing up was that *maybe* we had Native American ancestry, and that certainly our 'people' were slaves.

Ada had taught me, very quickly while in Maryland, some of the customs that our people shared, especially when meeting elders and royalty. For example, Bamileke royals typically do not shake hands, as is a Western custom, but one I grew accustomed to. When approaching an elder or royal within Bamileke society, the proper gesture is to slightly bow and clap your hands three times. At which point they would acknowledge you. I practiced this in the floor length mirror in my hotel room and felt ridiculous, but ready to learn the ways of my forebears. To step into my identity, one that was forcefully taken from my family. To put on the customs, my customs, that had to be relearned.

A year prior to this trip, after learning about my African ancestry, I joined the Cameroon American Council, an organization whose sole purpose was to advocate for issues affecting Cameroonians within the African Diaspora, including programming and outreach initiatives. One afternoon, someone called me raising funds for an event to benefit the Cameroonian community in Silver Spring, Maryland and I happily donated. And while greeting the many Cameroonians that came to participate in my naming ceremony, I met a woman who introduced herself as Princess Patience Mbaso, her voice and name I remembered. When I introduced myself, she immediately recalled that it was I she spoke to when they were raising funds; she gave me the biggest hug. I soon

learned that it was her majesty that picked the ancestral name of the Bamileke people, 'Elong', for me. 'Elong' (eh-Long), which means 'the perfection', also bears a resemblance to who I have always been. My name explains that *Elong are affectionate and have a positive, radiant image. They are innocent and remain happy even through difficult times. They help others.* It was as if she had read the story of my life and picked a name that gestured to the character that my mother would agree that I have; with words that my family would use to describe me. Princess Mbasia had not renamed me, but rather bequeathed what was rightfully mine to begin with.

4. Shrimp

Arthropod

I is the memory of one's self
and me is the experience of i;
so, in the abstract, it is the confluence
of rivers that lead to my ocean
where there is perspective,
searching for life,
protecting the vision.

I cannot remember
when i learned that when among giants
i would have to be the bigger person,
to somehow divert the seemingly whimsical –
from my beating fist of a heart,
expecting to react instead
i redirected, retreated to the dark.

Life as a shrimp can be quite lonely,
but every once in a while
i would see other shrimp make their way about
the decayed, picking up pieces of the past
only to make use of its history, and it is in those
moments that make for pleasant swimming
among blue whales, almost as if i too
am heavy, significant,
that i am a wonder to behold.

The use of the lowercase “i” in this poem is meant to exemplify my experience. It is a metaphor for how society sees me in the literal and figurative sense. Whether it was underestimation or the belief that a person’s stature demonstrated their worth, my experience had been one in which I always had to prove myself. Like a shrimp in the ocean, scavenging for what it can find, I found myself searching for anything that could feed me the answers I sought about my ancestry. Moreover, like the lives of Africans, other African Americans, and other marginalized groups, our otherness only exists because it was created, socially, to be compared to whiteness. Whiteness in this poem takes on in the moniker of the whale, something that by default is taught to be the standard by which others are measured.

5. Naming ceremony

We were ushered into the basement of the *Fon’s*¹ home for the ceremony. There were two of us, a young man from Baltimore who they gave the ancestral name of ‘Maka’ back to, and myself. There was a grand procession of *djembes*² rumbling and women chanting as we all descended into the basement. As Maka and I entered the room, there were nine elders seated on African stools, in full regalia. The iconic blue and white *Ndop*³ cloth adorned all of the walls. Their wives were also present playing small instruments. Of all nine, one stood out as the leader, who wore a crown of porcupine quills. I had never seen anything so majestic. His royal highness spoke to us for about thirty minutes about their ancestor’s role in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, apologizing to us on their behalf.

He explained that many of their people had been taken from the interior and marched to the shores of Bimbia⁴. There were stories in the villages that their people would be coming back one day, and that day had finally arrived. He began to cry, as did some of the others, as were we.

After our names were given back to us, we did what any family does at a birthday party. We ate like kings and were given gifts, the most precious of which could never be taken from us again.

As I think about my family’s journey and the sacrifice that so many gave, I am humbled. I read somewhere that among the African nations affected by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the Bamileke were sold cheap, because they would rather die than be enslaved. Many of my ancestors chose their fate among the

¹ The term used in Bamileke society for King.

² *Djembes* are rope-tuned skin-covered goblet drums played with the hands.

³ *Ndop* cloth is a typical fabric of the Northwest and the West of Cameroon.

⁴ The major Slave port in Douala, Cameroon.

sharks in the ocean. Others decided to live, regardless of how horrible their lives would become, and I will never forget them for that.

Elong (eh-Long)

For those first twenty
traded for food in Virginia,

for the Argonauts and their voyage –
my golden fleece was a phoenix
in September, two thousand fourteen

for my mother's mother mother
who lived among the breeze
and the wind knew my name,

for when the stars became my friends
that twinkled when they saw big momma's
momma run to the north and her kin across the water,
who cried from the coastline to the ghosts in my ears,
for those at Fernando Po⁵

for my nephews who need to know who they are.

Conclusion

Names are important, they let the world know who you are and, in many cases, where you come from. To think that my story began all those years ago, in the annals of antiquity. That the man I am today was made in the grass fields of Cameroon to withstand the waves of the Atlantic Ocean, the toil of a sugar plantation or cotton field, who at the start of life, struggled to survive is no small feat. The young man that wrote these pages was told he would never amount to anything, that he would never be good enough, handsome enough, smart enough, tall enough to matter. But in the end, I am what I have always been and if you read my name, it will tell you exactly who and what I am.

⁵ Fernando Po is a strategically important island off the coast of West Africa. Its position made the island highly sought after by various European navies including the Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish and also the British.

References

Vasser-Elong, Jason. 2018. *Shrimp*. New York: 2LeafPress.