The Power to Name

A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa

Stephanie Newell

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Anonymity, Pseudonymity, and the Question of Agency in Colonial West African Newspapers

What cannot one say behind the screen of a nom-de-plume?

—Charles E. Graves

Scholars of the imperial encounter are generally keen to emphasize the agency of colonized subjects in questions of political resistance, personal testimony, and anticolonial activism. In a study of the techniques employed by Jomo Kenyatta between 1909 and 1952 to fashion his subjectivity, for example, Simon Gikandi asks how colonial subjects participated in the production of their own conflicted identities through the simultaneous endorsement and critical reformulation of colonial modernity. He locates the African subject “at the intersection between colonial governmentality (the semantic and material conditions of colonial politics) and the realm of subjective desires (the colonial subject’s cultivation of their selfhood through the mastery of the trappings of colonial modernity).” Gikandi focuses on an East African educated elite whose relationship with colonial authority was contradictory, vexed, and elaborately performed but whose agency he nevertheless describes using terms that indicate intentionality, including self-making, mastery, and sincerity. Always situated in the wake of empire, African elites were not its passive products, he insists, but “active agents in the making and remaking of their colonial worlds.” As with many social and cultural histories of colonial Africa, one gets the impression that the African subjects he describes took themselves very seriously in their vocalizations of identity as they sought a mode of self-expression for their self-made subjectivity in colonial settings.

Across the continent from Gikandi’s colonial subjects, in British West Africa the concepts of identity and agency need to be reconsidered in
order to understand the ways in which colonial elites articulated their “selves” in print, for if the ability to read and write conferred on Africans an array of new opportunities for social advancement and genres for self-expression, their uses of anonymity and pseudonymity dramatically complicated the selves that were expressed.

Between the 1880s and the 1940s, the region known as British West Africa became a dynamic zone of literary creativity and textual experimentation. African-owned newspapers offered local writers numerous opportunities to contribute material for publication, and editors repeatedly defined the press as a vehicle to host public debates rather than simply as an organ for the communication of news or editorial ideology. Literate locals responded with great zeal, and in increasing numbers as the twentieth century progressed, they sent in letters, articles, fiction, and poetry for publication in English- and African-language newspapers. But if African writers’ self-actualizations were part of a public process, occurring in print and intended for the consumption of reading publics, the selves that were articulated were often pseudonymous and playful rather than reliable sources of opinion. For much of the colonial period, English- and African-language West African newspapers were filled with the writings of untraceable authors using invented personae. Contributors carefully concealed their identities behind the “screen” of print.

Robert J. Griffin points out that writers have many different reasons for withholding their names. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, these included “an aristocratic or a gendered reticence, religious self-effacement, anxiety over public exposure, fear of prosecution, hope of an unprejudiced reception, and the desire to deceive.”7 With these categories in view, this book seeks to define the shape of a history of anonymity in colonial West Africa and to ask about the ways in which it shadows or diverges from the explanations offered by scholars of pseudonymous writing practices in Europe. This is a paradoxical task if one agrees with John Mullan that anonymity, by definition, “does not exactly have a history.”8 Given the manner in which anonymous and pseudonymous contributors to the West African newspapers drew power from print and playfully engaged with colonial identity, however, this book will argue that anonymity does have a history in the region, distinct from its history in European countries, and that the study of anonymity and pseudonymity in African newspapers can reveal a great deal about the cultural histories of colonial societies.

2 Introduction
The chapters that follow bring together two fields of study, broadly defined as book history and imperial cultural history, in order to fill some of the gaps in current studies of the history of anonymity, which remain exclusively European in focus. Through a series of African case studies, the book will examine a wide range of anonymous and pseudonymous writing practices in anglophone West African newspapers between the 1880s and the period after World War II, arguing that new forms of subjectivity and new political possibilities emerged in relation to the newspaper in colonial West Africa as a direct consequence or by-product of print. Yet the print subjectivities described in this book were not exclusive to English-language presses, as demonstrated by the Yoruba-language material discussed in chapter 5 and by Karin Barber’s groundbreaking work on the Yoruba press in 1920s Lagos.

In Europe, the study of authorial masking frequently involves a biographical turn, or the discovery and disclosure of authors’ “real” identities and secret intentions. Carmela Ciuraru’s recent book, Nom de Plume: A (Secret) History of Pseudonyms, is entirely motivated by the quest to uncover the (secret) identities of masked writers. Similarly, Mullan’s Anonymity: A Secret History of English Literature is preoccupied with the identities and motivations of self-concealing authors, particularly when their gender-crossing writings hid “women being men” and “men being women.” Methodologically, therefore, Ciuraru’s and Mullan’s histories of anonymity paradoxically morph into their opposite: with indexes packed with “proper” names, they yield a plethora of historically situated, intentional bodies, albeit bodies full of mischief and mockery.

Surprisingly, given their deployment of sociological categories of identity to understand pseudonymity, race is ignored in both Ciuraru’s and Mullan’s studies. Ciuraru writes an entire chapter on Isak Dinesen without mentioning Africans or colonial rule, and the sole reference to the history of race in Mullan’s book is a passing comment on Aphra Behn’s refusal to write pseudonymously in the slave narrative Oroonoko. Mullan argues that Behn contravened seventeenth-century feminine modesty conventions by using her real name to make herself “public property.” He does not, however, discuss Behn’s own use of multiple pseudonyms in her writing; nor does he address the politics of naming and renaming in slave history, famously exposed by Malcolm X in his Afrocentric “Who are you?” speech, which demands: “What was your name? . . . And why don’t you now know what your name was then? Where did it go? Where did you lose it? Who took it? And how did he
take it? What tongue did you speak? How did the man take your tongue? Where is your history? How did the man wipe out your history?”

Malcolm X’s vehement exposure of the racially violent politics of naming and his particular mode of resistance to imperialist interpel lation help to explain why the study of pseudonymity and anonymity in African, Caribbean, and African American print cultures should be regarded as more historically complex and politically charged than in the European literary histories presented by Mullan, Griffin, Ciuraru, and others. In the diverse cultures of the black Atlantic, as Malcolm X makes clear, many given names carry the violence of a brand. To write under one’s given name is thus to sign into a particularly conflicted strand of black history.\(^17\)

This immersion of personal identity in the dynamics of violent cross-cultural encounters was palpable in colonial West African societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly among the Creoles of Sierra Leone and the Saro of Nigeria, where slave crossings and displacements could be mapped onto the recent past of most families. The transcripts of the Reverend R. A. Coker’s testimony at a court case brought in 1911 by his daughter, Adel, against the “ordinance” marriage of Sarah E. Olaore Green to Dr. Oguntola O. Sapara—to whom both women were already allegedly married by custom\(^18\)—exemplify the slave geographies behind many anglicized West African names:

My father’s name is John Coker born in Egbaland he was carried off as a slave and rescued to Sierra Leone. He died at Abeokuta. . . . My mother’s name is Sarah, an Egba woman was carried off to the same place and returned with him. They were married at Sierra Leone. I was born at Abeokuta at the beginning of 1844, I never went to Sierra Leone with my parents. . . . [My wife] came from the West Indies, was born in Jamaica, of West African parents, who went from Sierra Leone to the West Indies and her parents returned with her to Sierra Leone and then she came to Lagos.\(^19\)

Coker’s self-identification in court illustrates the striking proximity and pervasiveness of slave histories but also the migratory networks through which ex-slaves moved.

In the colonial societies that supplanted West African slavery, African bodies such as Coker’s were subjected to a further layer of inscription through government processes of naming and legal identification,
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ranging from baptism to school rolls and census records. Indeed, the colonial court’s demand for Coker’s family history at the start of the testimony as well as the transcription and preservation of his words in the official records exemplify the British colonial preoccupation with the minutiae of naming, a preoccupation that was devastatingly exposed by one prominent anticolonial activist, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, whose trickster-like behavior is discussed in part 2 of this book.

As a consequence of these distinctively West African historical currents, although The Power to Name will tread a forked path similar to that followed by Ciuraru and Mullan, moving between the activity of biographizing and respect for pseudonymity, several major differences will emerge. The book seeks, first, to complicate the biographical methods that are frequently used by Western scholars in the study of pseudonymous literary material and, second, to debate the ways in which African pseudonymity and anonymity relate to or challenge existing theorizations of African agency in the British Empire. In this, the book offers a cultural history of newspaper production and consumption that experiments with reading beyond or reading outside the anticolonial nationalist perspective that generally prevails over historical studies of the press in the colonial and immediate postcolonial periods.

The reason for this choice of orientation is that both anonymity (the voluntary condition of nonbeing) and pseudonymity (the voluntary condition of being other) call into question many of our assumptions about agency, subjectivity, biography, naming, authorship, and (post) colonial identity in the British Empire. Several chapters of the book will demonstrate that a striking feature of West African pseudonyms in the colonial period is the manner in which they allowed writers to experiment with voices, genders, genres, and opinions; to vocalize across identities; and to play against biographical methods and desires.

Newspapers provide a substantial and unique resource for research into reader reception, cultural production, and political agency in Africa. Far more than an archive to be mined for information, the newspapers studied in this book are productive literary forms with the power to generate (and to be modified by) particular types of discourse. They form a vital part of the continent’s literary heritage, and they represent a literary field in which readers participated in debates about moral, cultural, economic, aesthetic, historical, and political issues. When West African literatures emerged in their own right after the 1940s, in the form of pamphlets and short novels, the influence of newspapers...
could clearly be seen in the “fluent, everyday” quality of language, as well as in “the social realism of the fiction” by local authors. The newspaper thus deserves detailed scholarly attention for the way in which it contributed to the emergence of African reading cultures.

Roger Chartier argues that readers read differently in different social, material, and historical contexts and that debates about print cultures demand contextualization. Given the late appearance of African-owned newspapers in French West Africa, where the first locally managed newspapers were not established until the 1940s and 1950s, and given the stark differences in French and British colonial policies toward education, citizenship, and language, French colonial West Africa is not included in this study. Newspapers in French and German colonies merit a study in their own right for their complex positioning in relation to the power structures of the colonial state. In the wake of missionary publishing activity in the early twentieth century, for instance, many local Cameroonian newspapers were published in African languages in the 1930s, lasting at least until the anticolonial French-language press rose to prominence after World War II; meanwhile, in Togo a distinctive “Ewe print sphere” emerged from early twentieth-century mission stations in direct opposition to German colonialism. By contrast, the African-owned newspapers at the heart of this study started to be published several decades earlier, in the 1880s, largely in English, and they remained dominated by the colonial language until the 1940s and 1950s.

A methodology for addressing the broad postcolonial relevance of localized histories of reading is therefore required, one that avoids meaningless generalizations about “the reader’s” relationship to colonial history. Empirical inquiries into situated texts and readerships can help scholars to comprehend the variety of relationships between readers and printed texts in different global locations. Through such situated histories of reading and literary production, we can start to build comparisons between print cultures in different regions of the world and to understand the historical contexts that inform contemporary understandings of literacy.

Full of bias and hope, the West African writers and readers at the center of this study were articulate and playful, often relishing the invisibility and ambiguous subjectivity conferred on them by print. Slippery, pseudonymous, and ventriloquistic, their articulations reveal the necessity for scholars to think beyond homogeneous or binary
categories for textual consumption and colonial identity. Local readers were and remain pivotal to the generation of “public” cultures in West Africa, and though literacy meant different things to different social groups in colonial West Africa, it also created a meaningful, shared reference point for readers as print subjects. In focusing upon newspapers as vehicles for specifically print-mediated forms of subjectivity, this study tries to avoid treating texts simply as mirrors of the intentions of individual authors, pseudonymous or otherwise. Instead, writers’ printed “identities” are regarded as rhetorical positions mediated by local ideologies, beliefs, and power structures but different in fundamental ways from other types of “publincness.” Ultimately, this book seeks a method for conducting African cultural history that is capable of including—and respecting the integrity of—the pen lives of pseudonymous writers without reimposing the very social and ethnic categories with which these writers dispensed.

The blanket application of identity markers can introduce misunderstandings and reductive generalizations, but the near impossibility of avoiding categories such as race, gender, and class in scholarly investigations of colonial print cultures illuminates an important feature of colonial societies that cannot be ignored. In the most concrete sense, identities mattered in colonial settings: people’s access to resources was mediated by factors such as race and gender. The social and political systems produced by British colonial rule therefore necessitate an inquiry into names, agency, and intentionality in colonial contexts. In other words, the interpretation of a text should be markedly different if we visualize the author as a white colonial administrator rather than an African clerk or as a female ex-prostitute rather than a Lagosian male editor with a passion for Yoruba newsprint (see chapter 5).

Pseudonyms took many different forms in the African-owned newspapers. Some correspondents buried themselves beneath generic names such as “A Youngman,” “Tired,” “Overworked,” “Bashful,” “A Man about Town,” “A Banker,” “A Reader,” or the ironically misnamed “Proud of Name.” Some chose comic or exotic names such as “Bored,” “Dick Car-nis,” or “The Man in the Moon” or aestheticized names such as “Parasite de Sycophant.” These pseudonyms were a form of “being away,” and they were often vehicles for burlesque or parody, making possible ventriloquism and experimentation with English literary forms.

Other writers chose politically charged generic names such as “Jim Crow,” “A Negro,” and “Old Black Joe,” through which they declared
essential(ist) identities. Common pseudonyms such as these reveal the ways in which correspondents selected identities that revealed their cultural or racial affiliations and political interests, as well as a powerful sense of their place in the world. Between April and October 1916, for example, Jim Crow wrote a regular open letter, published in the Gold Coast Nation, addressed to various individuals in West African journalism and public life. His name alone commented on and parodied racist labels for people of African descent, and his open letters were polemical and often ardently Afrocentric, criticizing any African who appeared to support “these children of the ‘barren north’ who are thrusting on us ideas, customs, manners and what not, which are absolutely inappropriate to us in so far as we are a nation having our own history, social ethics, language, customs and usages, religion and feasts.”

Used in an imperial setting, Jim Crow articulated British imperial rule through the framework of North American segregationism: the name thus functioned to comment negatively on the racial identities imposed on Africans by colonial regimes in Africa. The name also served to assert the writer’s sense of being part of a pan-African network of articulations of African identity, albeit in the form of negative caricatures, adopted in order to comment on the colonial regime. Amusingly, in October 1916 Jim Crow announced a formal change of pseudonym in his final open letter, signed “Jim Crow (to be hereafter known as Rambler).” True to the new name, toward the end of 1919 “Rambler” produced a series of travel articles describing rambles around the Gold Coast countryside in an epic, rambling tone: “Pale, but hale, up he [the traveler] rises with the day’s first beam, Aurora bright-enthroned shedding forth his rays.” In this, he illustrated a disinvestment in a singular name or identity, and in common with naming practices in numerous other African societies, he demonstrated how “Africans were and are not the passive recipients of names imposed on them by a dominant system or by any other person.”

The space occupied by all of these pseudonymous writers can be regarded as an “elsewhere,” commenting on the present or the past and often containing political wishes for the future. This is not to suggest a postmodern lack of authorial intentionality or a lack of political resistance. Rather, as several chapters will show in detail, writers’ practices of self-naming and renaming can be regarded in large part as strategies to thwart imperialist modes of labeling and containing Africans.
As demonstrated by the example of Rambler, the pseudonyms chosen by correspondents often related to and emphasized the content of contributions. Thus, “A Gold Coast Native” wrote an article entitled “Are We Ashamed of Being Africans?”; Rambler wrote on “Life in the Lake District”; and the regular column “Home Chat” was composed by “The Man in the Street.” Rather than preceding the text, these names often supplemented the content of articles and letters. Through their choice of pseudonyms, contributors therefore tacitly asserted that the message was more important than the messenger and that print could easily hide a person’s identity. To this extent, they helped to endorse and sustain the mediated print subjectivities that will be discussed in the pages that follow.

Some pseudonyms were nicknames as well as literary masks: everybody knew, for instance, that the writer named “Zik” was the anticolonial nationalist and newspaper entrepreneur Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904–96), although Zik’s lawyer, Frans Dove, exploited the difference to great effect during the prosecution of his client for sedition in the late 1930s (see chapter 3). Less famous internationally, the regular Igbo contributor “Odeziaku”—also “O. Dazi Aku”—was in fact the British palm-oil trader John Moray Stuart Young (1881–1939), who lived in Onitsha and wrote poems and articles for numerous African-owned newspapers between the 1910s and his death in 1939. Similarly, H. B. Herman-Hodge of Nigeria, known locally as “Langa Langa” during his period of service in northern Nigeria, affectionately adopted his African nickname for the authorship of his memoirs, Up against It in Nigeria (1922). Both Odeziaku and Langa Langa exemplify what Osumaka Likaka describes as the European appropriation of African nicknames to proudly display their acceptance by local communities, even though such names were often ambiguous, conveying “a subtle counter-hegemonic discourse” and implicit political protests against colonialism, of which their recipients were unaware.

In the West African press, other pseudonymous authors barely concealed their identities, as in letters and articles signed by “J. A. G. of Saltpond,” “K. A. S.,” or “J. C.” Chapter 4 examines the political parables produced by some of these semihidden authors through the medium of the publicly shared discourse of folktales, and chapter 6 analyzes the gender perspective of J. C. in the Sierra Leone Weekly News. Such initialized contributions were ways to float writers’ “proper” names close to the surface of texts. As with nicknames, these forms of
anonymity were not always or necessarily designed to hide a writer’s identity. Given the limited size of the literate community in West Africa until the 1930s, together with the fact that African-owned newspapers recruited the majority of their readers from the towns in which printing presses were located, the person behind a pseudonym or abbreviation may well have been known to the reading public. Initials and ordinary names were not necessarily signs of a correspondent’s “real” identity, but unlike obvious pseudonyms such as Tired or Overworked, they gave the impression of a writer’s authenticity and physical presence behind the text, especially when, as so often occurred, a place-name appeared alongside the abbreviation. If correspondents were known in the world, however, they were protected by their cloak of newsprint.

Only rarely did editors threaten to name and shame pseudonymous correspondents. When faced with “spies and informants” in Cape Coast who had published “fibs” about his staff, the editor of the Gold Coast Leader published this irate response: “They seem to think we do not know them—we know them and after getting all the information we want, we shall publish their names to the public, and ask them to shun them as they would a venomous snake.” Although the editor of the Leader was keen to disclose these antagonists’ names, he vigorously protected his own contributors’ identities at all times and promised to guarantee their anonymity. Proof of identity was required with all correspondence to the Leader “as a guarantee of good faith,” but staff were willing to risk imprisonment rather than disclose the names of allegedly libelous contributors. Thus, the editor twice found himself in court between June 1902 and April 1903, accused—and excused—both times of printing libelous material by anonymous contributors. Except for the court cases involving the notorious political agitators Wallace-Johnson and Azikiwe, discussed in chapter 3, these principles of nondisclosure were generally also respected by officials at the Colonial Office (CO) in London. “I don’t suppose a West African editor . . . is obedient to the best Fleet Street standards,” wrote one legal expert at the Colonial Office, Sir Sydney S. Abrahams, in a memo to another, Sir Kenneth Poyser, when the governor of Nigeria attempted to tighten press censorship laws in January 1942: “But at the least he has the sense to know that if he throws his contributors or informants to the wolves he is likely to lose not only these people but his readers into the bargain. . . . Contributors or newsgetters would naturally object to sending in matter which the Governor has the power to deem objectionable.”

10 Introduction
The case studies presented in part 2 elaborate upon the ideological problems and contradictions generated by London’s adherence to such liberal notions of the freedom of the press in Britain’s West African colonies, for in tension with London, colonial governors sometimes attempted to flush out and penalize anonymous and pseudonymous contributors of material they deemed to be “seditious” or offensive. In 1942, for example, when the governor of Nigeria, Sir Bernard Bourdillon, attempted to introduce legislation aimed at compelling local editors to disclose the names of pseudonymous and anonymous sources of allegedly seditious articles, officials in London were dismissive of his plans. As the case studies indicate, their resistance reveals ideological disparities between Whitehall and the colonies and between British traditions of press liberalism and the censorious practices of colonial regimes toward African readerships. “Sir Bernard wishes to discover the identity of persons who contribute to the local press matter of a mischievous nature,” wrote Sir S. S. Abrahams in a disapproving Colonial Office memo, adding, however, “I understand that it is a fixed canon of editorial etiquette not to disclose the name of an anonymous or pseudonymous contributor or the source of any information used in the paper.”

Staff at the Colonial Office frequently had to smooth over—literally, to paper over with memos and diplomatic letters—the tensions that arose within the colonies and between Britain and the colonies when individual governors attempted to introduce legislation to control the press without adequate consultation and guidance from the center or when governors appeared to discriminate more against particular editors than others. Thus, Governor Bourdillon’s amendments to existing censorship legislation and his efforts to discover the identities of pseudonymous informers caused Colonial Office staff to undertake a damage-limitation exercise in an effort to maintain liberal ideals of British imperialism, particularly the principle of freedom of expression. Moreover, they did so even as they recognized the politically destabilizing impact of anticolonial African editors such as Azikiwe and the need “not to do anything to hamper the Governor in maintaining good order.”

These tensions were compounded by the fact that British officials in the colonies often believed that “native” readers required more stringent press laws and greater general censorship than people in the supposedly mature civilizations of Europe. “A greater measure of control
is now necessary,” the Gold Coast governor insisted in 1934, during the crisis covered in the first case study in part 2, “in view of the irresponsible and misleading matter which is continually appearing in the local papers and which is readily believed by the half-educated classes.”47 The governor’s inspector general of police agreed wholeheartedly, adding, “There is not a single editor of repute or sense of responsibility on any one of the local newspapers.”48 In taking these positions, colonial officials on the ground demonstrated greater conservatism than officials in London, who believed that, “save in exceptional cases, the less banning of literature there is, the better.”49 Indeed, for all their familiarity with established principles of press freedom, critical speech, and the formation of public opinion in Britain, large numbers of Europeans on the ground—including magistrates, educators, and police chiefs—perceived the so-called native newspapers to be alarmingly outspoken in British West Africa, wholly unsuitable for dissemination among uneducated and “semieducated” people.

London’s attitude of tolerant liberalism toward West African newspapers stemmed in part from a perception of the region’s lack of global strategic relevance until the early 1930s. The metropolitan perspective was also a consequence of the lack of widespread, globally coordinated anticolonial agitation in the region. This situation changed in the “stormy 1930s” and 1940s, as the third case study in part 2 will suggest, when Colonial Office support for the idea that newspapers were vehicles for public opinion started to be tempered by the realization that educated Africans—emergent political leaders—were making use of their literacy to read and write and to transmit to illiterate others “undesirable” anticolonial and communist material. Furthermore, the onset of the Cold War challenged and changed Colonial Office attitudes toward newspapers in the colonies, and official concerns that Cold War politics had arrived in West African colonies led to a new, two-pronged approach whereby imported publications were rigorously censored, on the one hand, and local editors were subjected to proimperial public relations materials, on the other hand.

West African reading cultures depended upon the creation and maintenance of print-oriented subjects, as well as upon the availability of machinery, materials, and techniques for mass production. African newspaper publics did not simply exist “out there” in society or emerge out of oral local cultures, primed for the appearance of printed texts. Readerships had to be renewed, continuously convened and
reconvened around particular local presses. Yet print was a source of discomfort as well as empowerment for many local readers. Between the 1880s and the 1940s, the African-owned newspapers offered local readers numerous opportunities to contribute to printed debates, but print represented a highly visible and apparently permanent record of an individual’s opinions and (dis)loyalties, as well as a vital channel for the expression of political and social demands. A court case brought against the Gold Coast Leader by Rev. Jacob Benjamin Anaman of the Wesleyan Church illustrates the importance of anonymity to the editors and proprietors of newspapers in the colonies. In his quest to discover the identity of “Abu,” a correspondent who had openly criticized him on the letters page in September 1902, Rev. Anaman sent a local barrister to the offices of the Leader. The colonial court heard how the editor, Samuel Harrison, “politely thanked” the barrister, saying that “he would under no circumstances whatever, give him the name of his correspondent, rather than that, he was prepared to undergo anything.” Reflecting on the case after their victory in court, the proprietor—Fynn Egyir-Asaam—and Harrison reiterated the cardinal principle of their newspaper: “To give up the name of a correspondent was a thing we would never dream of doing as we considered such a thing a flagrant breach of ‘editorial etiquette.’ . . . Here let us remark to our correspondents and intended correspondents, that it is our earnest wish that the Public should have implicit confidence in us.”

As this court case demonstrates, the reasons for a contributor’s decision to use pseudonyms were sometimes spiteful and libelous, rather than political or ethical. This illustrates a malicious use of anonymity with a long and controversial history. Anonymous journalism was regarded by the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer in the 1850s as a form of “rascality” that “must be completely stopped” and by Daniel J. Solove, in his recent study of gossip, rumor, and privacy on the Internet, as enabling people to be “much nastier and more uncivil in their speech,” less responsible in their comments, and more defamatory and invasive of the privacy of others. Closer to home, G. K. Tsekpo, owner and editor of the 1950s Ewe-language newspaper Mia Denyigba (Our Homeland) in British Togoland, had such a distaste for pseudonymity that he described it as the vehicle for “falsehoods and bad conscience.” As Tsekpo was aware, when immersed in print and cut free from physical surveillance some people would exploit their invisibility to launch vitriolic attacks on local personalities or on other correspondents.
Pseudonymous letter writers frequently criticized one another in an intensely personal way on grounds of poor literary style, revealing in the process that newspapers were often regarded by readers and correspondents as a type of literature rather than as a form of ephemera. From the earliest days of West African press activity, the literary value of a journal was as significant as its content to readers. Throughout the colonial period, one finds correspondents using self-consciously “literary” turns of phrase, ranging from a comment by “S. H.” in 1885 that “idle phantasms and dreaming sentimentalisms of local objectionists are ridiculous. Some only look strabismus and consequently must be periphrastic” through to A. H. Filson’s high-blown descriptions of his efforts to produce writing with literary value during World War I: “In fact, I feel diffident because cognizant as I am of the nature of the argument veritably bearing the inscription of ‘To the most Intelligent’ like the mythical ‘Apple of Discord’ it is my expressed wish that patience should be exercised.”

Readers did not hesitate to patrol the boundaries of English grammar and style in order to determine who had the right to see his or her text in print. A writer’s mode of articulation was a clear sign to other readers of his or her social status and authority. As “K. A.” warned “Robertus” after the latter’s article on English literature was published in the Gold Coast Nation: “It is not meet for Mr ‘Robertus’ to employ illogical and ungrammatical terms in his advice and to support same with a host of irrelevant quotations from Hymn Books, etc, thus to expose us to the bitter ridicule of other colonies.” Thus, pseudonymous writers abused other pseudonymous writers, reveling in the criticism of their chimerical enemies and, at the same time, asserting their entitlement to participate in the colonial public sphere (see chapter 1).

While articulating the opinions and desires of literate elites, these scathing letters also recall older, established oral traditions of protest and abuse in Africa in which socially inferior individuals or groups used song, dance, poetry, and other genres to convey their complaints against figures of power in society while carefully avoiding customary slander and defamation laws. In their influential study entitled Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History (1991), Leroy Vail and Landeg White point out that “the various forms of oral poetry in sub-Saharan Africa are licensed by a freedom of expression which violates normal conventions”: through a variety of socially recognized poetic genres, “chiefs and headmen may be criticized by their followers,
husbands by their wives, fathers by their sons, employers or overseers by their workers, officials or politicians by their underlings, and even Life Presidents by their subjects, in ways that the prevailing social and political codes would not normally permit.” To some extent, the letters pages of colonial newspapers can be regarded in a similar manner, furnishing a genre in which disgruntled, pseudonymous “nobodies” in colonial society could find opportunities to air grievances, express rage, and make demands without naming, shaming, or physically exposing themselves. Editors carefully patrolled these spaces, however, rejecting any material that appeared to go too far.

One way in which editors separated authorial attribution from the contents of texts was through the composition of fiction, and several chapters of this book examine narrative prose by pseudonymous African writers. Focusing upon two editors from Nigeria, Isaac B. Thomas of the Yoruba-language Akede Eko (1929–53) and James Vivian Clinton of the English-language Nigerian Eastern Mail (1935–51), chapter 5 shows how their writing activities were not confined to political commentaries and editorials: these men also wrote fiction for publication in local and international journals. The reasons why Thomas and Clinton chose to ventriloquize as women in their choice of pseudonyms and first-person narrators is examined in the chapter, which addresses the relationship between print, gender cross-vocalizations, and the cultural dynamics of gender relations in different parts of colonial Nigeria.

If newsprint served an anonymizing function for West African journalists and creative writers in the colonial period, helping to mask the markers of social identity, in no sense was it gender neutral. The final two chapters of this book are dominated by the discussion of gender and pseudonymity. The participants in the publishing activities and print cultures described in this book were generally male members of Christian, professional elites and educated minorities, primarily located in colonial towns and cities. Except for a tiny minority of elite-born and well-married individuals, West African women did not participate in newspaper production and consumption until the 1940s and 1950s. Faced with the problem of identifying the gender of long-lost pseudonymous authors and in an effort to avoid speculative attributions of gender based upon the extent to which textual content manifests empathy or lack of empathy with women, chapter 6 asks about the ways in which the few known women journalists in the colonial period positioned their material in relation to the plethora of...
male-authored stories and articles containing familiar female character types and marriage scenarios.62

The pervasive use of pseudonyms in the colonial press considerably complicates any effort to “restore” the work and life-stories of early women writers, and these chapters highlight the difficulties of extrapolating—or presuming to know—an author’s gender simply by interpreting the contents of published articles. Nevertheless, questions of authorship are all the more pressing given the “masculine” gender bias of a great deal of pseudonymous material and given the manner in which, in the cases examined in chapters 5 and 6, feminine masks were donned in order to perform moral judgments about marriage roles that were oriented against women.

Although a pseudonym hid a writer’s identity from influential figures in the community and, of course, from the colonial state, the preceding examples demonstrate that not all pseudonyms were adopted for overtly political or anticolonial ends. Unsigned and pseudonymous articles were not always brimming with politically incendiary opinions in the colonies. Many writers were playfully mischievous, experimental, or didactic in their work. For instance, one writer for the Gold Coast Nation chose the name “Won Hu Nos” for a lengthy series of moralistic articles on West African education and the workplace. Described by the editor as “provoking us to jealousy, to wrath, to love and to good works,” Won Hu Nos chose a name that was a transformation of the pseudonym “One Who Knows,” also used by someone—perhaps the same individual—who contributed to the Gold Coast Nation in previous months.63

Given the predominance of pseudonymous writing in the colonial West African press, the reasons why some authors did wish to be publicly named should not be ignored. Did the content of named items differ in some way from that of anonymous and pseudonymous items? Were named items associated with religious or improving material, as with such pieces in Elizabethan and Jacobean England?64 As will become clear in the case studies on the rise to celebrity of Wallace-Johnson and Azikiwe, one cannot ignore instances of named authorship in relation to unnamed material. This is especially significant given that the appearance of “proper names” on newspaper articles carried legal consequences in colonial courts, where legislation existed to prosecute named individuals for printed libel, defamation, and sedition and where official inquiries required the identification of named individuals as responsible for particular texts. The second case study in chapter 3 shows
how Wallace-Johnson mocked and perverted British colonial systems of attribution, continuously slipping away from his inquisitors’ efforts to identify him using English legal processes, while simultaneously generating celebrity status around his very name. Wallace-Johnson made a mockery of the colonial judicial system with his exasperating pedantry and refusal of sincerity. He outwitted his legal interrogators at every turn and used techniques inspired by oral naming conventions to undermine the process of “proper” naming upon which the British court depended.

In attempting to understand the social and political role of African newspapers in the colonial period, however, it is necessary to avoid the temptation to produce too rigid or oppositional a periodization of the press. In locating the emergence of new naming practices in the post-war period, for example, we risk erasing vital currents and continuities from earlier decades. The identification of an era of pseudonymity over and against a new era of self-naming and celebrity in the nationalist 1930s and 1940s produces a distorted, overly teleological model of African press history, not least because the notion of celebrity has a long history in Africa and because newspaper editors and journalists such as Azikiwe and Wallace-Johnson did not suddenly emerge as political celebrities in the 1930s.65

Nonetheless, there is a reason why Fred Omu’s classic study of Nigerian newspaper history stops in 1937, with the arrival of Zik’s African Morning Post in Nigeria, and why The Power to Name also ends in the 1940s. Through their achievement, first, of celebrity status among their supporters and, second, of notoriety and persona non grata status among their opponents, Azikiwe and Wallace-Johnson facilitated a rebirth of the African journalist as a named entity. In this, the two men mark a turning point in the politics of naming in West African newspapers. Unlike their pseudonymous predecessors who played with the anonymity of print, both men enabled authorial intention to be reconnected with public attribution: in other words, even when they used nicknames and pseudonyms, they generally wanted readers to attribute the content of their columns to a physically present, politically active person who circulated around the colonial public sphere producing a new, assertive political agency among local populations.

As indicated already with reference to slave names, for several historical and social reasons in the colonial period names were considerably more meaningful and mobile than names as traditionally conceived in Europe. In the opening two decades of the twentieth century, numerous
people Africanized their “Christian” names, partly in response to the international rise of pan-Africanism alongside local cultural nationalisms that opposed the mimicry of English cultural forms and partly in opposition to the intensification of racism and the rise of “new imperialism” in Britain. As a consequence, in the 1890s and 1900s the African press carried increasing numbers of advertisements containing public announcements of name changes by deed poll. Names that carried particular social histories from the nineteenth century, including slave names, were transformed into new—or rather, precolonial and “traditional”—African names: thus, the surname “Solomon” became “Attoh-Ahuma,”66 and “Macaulay” became “Ajasa.”67 “Adam L. Jacobs” of Lagos became “Adeoye Desalu,”68 “Thomas William Waters” of Anamaboe (Anomabo) became “Kwamina (Waters) Ayensu,”69 and “Isaac Augustus Johnson” of Freetown became “Algerine Kelfallah Sankoh.”70

Particularly in Lagos, the period between 1906 and 1922 produced a bumper crop of name changes.71 Throughout West Africa, all of the name changers were men, and sometimes entire families underwent the process: in 1914, for example, eight men in the Morgan family of the Gold Coast collectively changed their surname to Torto, and those brothers with European middle names also formalized their African names (see fig. 1).

![Fig. 1. “Change of Name: ‘Torto’ for Morgan,” from the Gold Coast Leader, 10 January 1914, 2](image-url)
Yet as figures 2 and 3 reveal, some of these name changes were more ambiguous, mediated, and ambivalent than implied by notions of nationalist assertions of Africanity. Not all name changes represented deliberate Africanizations of identity, especially in Sierra Leone: thus, in 1906 Maximillian Eugene Hamelberg of Oxford Street, Freetown, advertised a change of surname to Dawson, and Moses Athanasius Taylor of Fourah Bay Road, Freetown, “absolutely renounced relinquished and abandoned” his middle name, without tampering with his first and last names (see figs. 2 and 3).

The newspaper was an essential vehicle for the communication of these new and self-conscious identities. Apparently ordinary family names such as Jacobs and Johnson and the ways in which African names were spelled were exposed as loaded with social and political implications, containing commentaries on a history of violent European
contact, but also lively local political contexts and debates about Africanity and Englishness.

One printed genre in which authors are always named—not discussed in detail in this book—is the memorial poem, a genre that flourished in the early twentieth century. Lay writers used the medium of print to memorialize loved ones and insert them into history. The authors and subjects of memorial poems were often named many times over, and the poems themselves frequently took the form of acrostics, giving thickness and textual form to the names of the deceased (see fig. 4).

From the 1880s onward, the writing of death became increasingly commercialized. In December 1885, Sawyerr’s Bookselling, Printing and Stationery Trade Circular advertised “The Penny Packet of Mourning Stationery,” containing three sheets of black-bordered notepaper and three matching envelopes. Biographical writing also prospered after the 1880s, particularly the genre of newspaper obituaries of “great men of affairs” in which (dead) subjects were fleshed out in print by

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**Fig. 4.** “In Memoriam,” from the Gold Coast Leader, 17 July 1915, 2
named authors; the genre of newspaper profiles of African heroes also flourished at this time.\textsuperscript{74}

People’s regional and political identities in the colonial period were characterized by great elasticity. An individual might identify as part of a local ethnoregional nation such as the Fante or the Yoruba, \textit{and/or} as part of the British West African nation stretching from Nigeria up to the Gambia, \textit{and/or} as part of the global pan-African nation reaching from West Africa to the Caribbean, London, and North America, \textit{and/or} as an imperial citizen, loyal to the British Crown. Consequently, the central idea behind studies of anonymity and pseudonymity in Europe—that a person possesses a singular “true” and discoverable name over which a mask is placed—is anachronistic when applied to colonial West Africa, where names were compound and mobile.\textsuperscript{75} Over the course of an individual’s life, he or she would accrue a variety of names and titles depending upon and reflecting social status, gender, generation, religious beliefs, achievements, and standing in the eyes of the community.\textsuperscript{76} Replete with content and commentary, West African names, including Christian names and the names given to people at their funerals, thus spoke volumes about individuals’ social position. Viewed from this context, the pseudonyms to be found in the colonial newspapers can be regarded both as part of a public commentary and as part of an established West African tradition where nomenclature reflected a person’s public standing. As Likaka comments of naming in colonial Congo, “Renaming and name changes were in reality continuous practices throughout the life of a person. They occurred often and appeared vital because they altered the personality and restored harmony in the body and psyche of the name-bearer.”\textsuperscript{77}

Though this book focuses on newspapers rather than on anonymity and pseudonymity per se in colonial West Africa, the types of oral naming practices identified by Likaka and others—including abusive names, nicknames, praise names, evasive names, and slander and defamation in customary law—cannot be excluded from the field of study. As indicated earlier and as argued in several chapters, an understanding of customary contexts for naming is vital to an appreciation of the ways in which printed names were deployed in West African newspapers. Indeed, to do justice to the local cultural contexts for pseudonymous practices, two other interconnected dimensions of orality need to be considered prior to a discussion of printed materials. The first is the relationship between oral genres and naming, including
those oral genres that license the performer to make a political or social critique and to ventriloquize across gender and rank, mentioned briefly in the preceding pages and discussed in part 3. The second is the mobilization of oral genres within the press.

Large numbers of anonymous folktales found their way into print, often reworked for political and moral ends. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, newspapers such as the Gold Coast Nation published folktales in which a political moral was extracted from a familiar parable, and realist narrative techniques were used to draw lessons from nonrealist tales. Chapter 4 analyzes the dynamic status of these anonymously authored folktales, together with their power to absorb contemporary moods, opinions, and representations. Newspaper folktales and folklore in the colonial period were characterized by a plurality of uses, styles, influences, and orientations. Even the most familiar Ghanaian Ananse Spider story would often be narrated through “untraditional” or “imported” texts such as Pilgrim’s Progress, Aesop’s fables, Shakespeare’s plays, and biblical parables.

Not all folk stories were anonymously authored. Chapter 4 also considers an array of fully attributed tales in terms of how they might or might not differ from the unnamed material. The chapter asks whether named tales were politically less critical than anonymous stories, as one might expect if one adheres to the Eurocentric model of anonymity-as-masking. Examining a range of tales from Ghanaian newspapers in the early twentieth century, the chapter attempts to explain the surprising discovery that the most politically critical tales were in fact written under so-called proper names or barely concealed abbreviations.

Besides folktales, an additional but rather different and more abstract type of anonymity can be found in the colonial West African press, relating not to the disguise of individual writers but to the ontological status of print. Again and again, editors insisted that the medium of print allowed the text to be disconnected from the writing body. They made every effort to de-personalize writing, to de-scribe it in order to press ahead and, in the words of “Atoo” (also known as “Attoo” and “Atu”) in the Gold Coast Leader, “call a spade a spade—whether it be a Governor spade or a Subject spade.” In the process, another form of anonymity emerged in the press, one that is inextricable from the history of print in the colonies.

One way in which editors attempted to remove themselves from the printed page as named individuals with biased personal opinions was
through their regular commentaries on the role of the press as a mouth-piece for Africans in the absence of an electoral system and democratic representation in government. Chapter 2 details the near-obsessional preoccupation of editors with describing the role and function of newspapers. On each occasion, editors maintained that their newspapers represented the public, at a far remove from individual personalities, including their own. In an “Open Letter to His Excellency Sir Matthew Nathan,” the editor of the Gold Coast Leader carefully negotiated this impersonality: “In humbly cooperating with your Excellency in the administration of this Government we shall be called upon as the mouth-piece of the people over whom your Excellency is appointed to rule, to criticize where criticism offers itself.”

Attoo, who wrote a regular column for the Gold Coast Leader for many years, exemplified the principle that personal feeling should be separated from journalistic reportage: “The duty very often falls on us loyal sons of the country to set aside all feelings” in the reporting of actions that “[are] offensive and dangerous to the safety and welfare of the public.” This was not “to engage in personalities” but to protect the public’s “rights, liberties and lives.” Attoo’s argument on this occasion set the Leader on a collision course with its archrival, the Gold Coast Nation, but both journals operated according to a similar ideology in which the opposite of the public sphere was not so much the private sphere as the sphere of personalities. Thus, the editor of the Gold Coast Nation, Attoh-Ahuma, was vehement in his assertion that his journal was innocent of “rioting in personalities.” Indeed, on one occasion Attoh-Ahuma defended the very dullness of his paper on the grounds that its lack of interest to readers and “circumspect” approach to politics should be interpreted as evidence of its integrity as the “official organ” of the Aborigines Rights Protection Society (ARPS), over and against the Leader’s scandalous, gossipy style. In support of this position, he published a letter from the general superintendent of the Wesleyan Methodist Mission, W. R. Griffin, praising the “high tone” of the Nation.

One result of the editors’ repetition of the principle that their newspapers expressed opinions cut loose from personal identity, or personality, was the magnification of the status of the printed word. Anonymous and divorced from the pen-holding hand, the printed page seemed to take on an activist subjectivity of its own in the minds of correspondents. Print was regarded as discursive yet also as impartial and public. As
“K. S.” wrote in an article on “Journalism on the Gold Coast” in 1903, “Consider such memorable works as the Bible, Pilgrim’s Progress and many others that have served to help more men to heaven than what their authors could do by human agency.”\textsuperscript{85} The printed page conferred anonymity and independence on correspondents, removing human agency and thereby turning individual writers into members of a public that could exercise its “right to take notice of anything that affects it, whether morally, socially or otherwise. It has a right to complain of or praise the actions, or conduct, of any person or a community of persons when such action or conduct is beneficial or otherwise to it.”\textsuperscript{86}

An illuminating early example of this emphasis on the independent textual agency of print can be found in Sawyerr’s Bookselling, Printing and Stationery Trade Circular; and General Advertising Medium, a newspaper published in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in the mid-1880s by the trader and bookseller T. J. Sawyerr. In spite of the fact that its title carried the name of its proprietor,\textsuperscript{87} Sawyerr’s was one of the earliest West African journals to define its journalistic content as separate from individual authorship or personality. In a front-page editorial in February 1886, Sawyerr insisted that “public interests” were served by the journal together with the interests of “the clientele of the business it advertises.”\textsuperscript{88} “The individualism wherewith our title is interwoven is limited to the advertising phase of the ‘Circular’ and operates no further in its influence,” he insisted, adding that in contrast to the “advertising phase” of the journal, the “Circular” dances to no special piper. . . . Whilst discountenancing whatever is scurrilous or defamatory, we allow no spurious delicacy or fear of man to influence our exposing whatever we believe to be detrimental to the public interest or our bringing to notice whatever we believe might tend to the general well-being of the community. We can neither cringe nor fawn: we neither court the approbation nor fear the frowns of any, and the travailing of carping critics we regard with the utmost indifference. . . . Though seemingly only a Trade circular in an insignificant settlement, we shall never look on lamely while oppression and villainy are rampant.\textsuperscript{89}

Sawyerr’s ideas about “the community” and “public interest” were bound up with the withdrawal of his “self” from the printed page.
Disavowing individual bias and a personal agenda, he seemed to believe that self-interested commercial discourse could be separated from neutral journalistic discourse, even though both discourses flowed from the same person’s pen. In spite of West African newspapers’ masculine orientation and elite bias, Sawyerr’s insistence on the independent, social character of print—his invocation of a public sphere, in other words—was echoed many times over in the West African press between the 1880s and the 1940s. Correspondents and columnists were regarded as equal to one another in the public anonymity of print, and West African newspaper correspondents were often subjects whose identities were constituted through print, rather than prior to print.

A description and discussion of a colonial public sphere is therefore necessary in order to understand the assertive, self-idealizing presence of the region’s fourth estate, at least until the media transformations and political upheavals of the period after World War II. Newspaper editors—often also political agitators—continuously and sometimes disingenuously reiterated liberal newspaper principles about the public sphere, insisting that they used the press to “discuss public affairs fully and freely.” With this in view, the next chapter debates the contradictions and (im)possibilities involved in attempting to refract colonial West African newspaper history through the lens of Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, for if a government is not answerable to or elected by a country’s citizens and if political institutions ignore the presence of civil society in their ordinances and statutes, it is necessary to question the extent to which newspaper readers in colonial settings can gain access, through the press, to any kind of conventional, anonymous, or ideal public sphere.
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