

GHETTO-FABULOUS NAMES: WHO'S LAUGHING NOW?

By Shelia Benskin

In the last few decades, an interesting phenomenon has been occurring in the African-American community. The names we choose for our children have become a point of contention for some of us. Talk, fanfare, debate and heated arguments on this topic can be heard in grocery stores, churches, schools, nail salons, barbershops and beauty salons all across America. Some of the names are hard to understand and even harder to pronounce. My heart truly bleeds for our teachers as they struggle to call roll in their classrooms. If not for fear of losing control, it probably would be better to let everyone introduce themselves.

Many of you may be wondering why I chose to bestow the title of “Ghetto-Fabulous” on these names. After all, who am I and what gives me the right to do so? To answer in a nutshell, I’m a mother who gave two of her children “Ghetto-Fabulous” names.

This leads us to the point where defining “ghetto” is appropriate. For the purposes of this discussion, ghetto is defined as a choice of style, action, speech, dress and attitude rather than defining it is a community of a particular geographic location and socio-economic status. In other words, “ghetto” is not so much a place as it is a state of mind. I liken it to “over-the-top”, “drama on steroids” attitude and behavior.

Let’s be honest, whenever we hear one of these unusual names, we immediately conjure up an image of and set expectations for what we think this person is going to be

like—right, wrong or indifferent. In females, we usually perceive lip smacking sassiness, head swiveling, hand in your face non-stop action. In males, it's pants sagging to the knees, grills on teeth, hats set crooked on heads and that unmistakable waddle of desperation to keep those pants from dropping to the ankles.

I've all met many fine upstanding people with traditional styles and tastes who were born, raised and still live in areas considered the ghetto because of the socio-economic status of the community. I've also met some really ignorant, raunchy people who came from and still live in the finest communities. Likewise, there are many African Americans from economically depressed communities with traditional names and many who are wealthy and prosperous with "Ghetto-Fabulous" names.

Lately I've been running into traditional names that have been converted to "Ghetto-Fabulous" simply by changing the spelling to something which is hard, if not impossible, to decipher. Case in point—Jennifer now spelled Gynipher; Brittany—Brytnee; Erica now spelled Erykah (as in Erykah Badu) or Eriica; Ryan—Rhyaan; Kristen—Krystyne; Aaron—Air'ren . I know it doesn't make sense but it has become a fact of life. Then there are those names whose spelling leave me dumbfounded. Case in point, the name BukaT and Abc. What were the parents thinking? Can you pronounce either of these names. Let me help you. "BukaT" is pronounced Booker T—yes as in Booker T. Washington. "Abc" is pronounced Ah-bah-see—I did not make this up! There are children in this world with these names!

Often associated with Hip-Hop, "Ghetto-Fabulous" names assault our culture much like the music of this genre. Why I'm not sure? It could be because of some of the names of the more popular Hip-Hop artists such as Ludacris, Eminem, Snoop Dog, 50

Cent, Remy Ma, MC Lyte, Queen LaTifah, YoYo, Khia, Foxy Brown, Rihanna, Shareefa, Chamillionaire, Ginuwine. Of course, these are not their real names but it seems to have influenced the naming of our babies anyway. Fame and wealth of these artists seem to have not only legitimized this movement but also propelled it to a new level.

“Ghetto-Fabulous” names have some very defined characteristics:

- 1) Unusual sounding
- 2) Usually flow melodiously and/or rhythmically
- 3) Many times difficult to understand and even more difficult to pronounce
- 4) Spelled very unusually—sometimes the name is spelled nothing like it sounds
- 5) Lately, taken from a drink (such as Chardonnay, Beajoulais, Champagne—pronounced Chom-pawn-yea; Cristalle—pronounced Cris-tall-lay); car (Lexus, Ferrari, Lotus Elise, Acura); food (Chateau-Briand);
- 6) Often has apostrophe or accent marks somewhere in the name
- 7) Comedians have a field day proclaiming how impossible it is for people with those names to get a job!

Unfortunately, so far I have found no rhyme or reason to this naming phenomenon nor am I attempting to. The intent of this book is to define meanings for some of these names. After all, you can easily find meanings for the more traditional names in books, pamphlets and on web sites galore. Two web sites that I have found helpful are babynames.com and behindthename.com. But the millions of children who carry nontraditional names have no such resource. I pray that this guide will serve as a source to begin to remedy that.

Right upfront let me address some questions that might be fluttering through your mind.

Q. How were the names selected to be “Ghetto-Fabulous”?

A. That’s simple. Since I wrote the book, I made the choice.

Q. Does the person have to live in (or come from) the Ghetto to have a “Ghetto-Fabulous” name?

A. Obviously not, look at Beyoncé`. Well, she did grow up in the 3rd Ward of Houston which at the time may have been considered the “hood”. With the cost of real estate and redevelopment in that area now, it is quickly losing that designation.

Q. Because a person has a “Ghetto-Fabulous” name, are they ghetto?

A. Obviously not, look at Beyoncé`.

Q. Am I an etymologist (not be confused with an entomologist)? By the way, what is an etymologist?

A. No, I am not an etymologist. An etymologist is a person who studies the origin and development of words vs an entomologist who studies insects.

Q. Have you really seen or heard all of the names on the list?

A. Okay, true confession time. No, I haven’t seen or heard all of the names—though I have seen most of them. I allowed myself to get carried away in a few instances and made up names that just sounded good to my ears or felt good rolling off my tongue. “Which names?” you ask. “I’ll never tell.” I reply.

As you may have already guessed, my first inspiration to write this book was to poke fun at some of the names that we have dared to give to our children. From the beginning of time names have carried great importance. Names give identity. Many believe that what a person is called they become. A person’s name associates them to their destiny. Each time that a person is called, it is a reminder to them of their destiny.

In the Bible, Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us, “I know the plans that I have for you, says the LORD, ‘plans of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.’” From the very beginning of our lives, God communicates his plans for us—His future and hope—by the name He whispers in the hearts and ears of our parents. He literally etches our character and expected destiny through our names.

Recently, my partner, Lorey Hayes, and I did a Mind Gym Workshop focused on Creativity in Careers for two different youth groups in Dallas, Texas—each miles apart

and done at different times of the day. We played a game called the “name game”.

Before the exercise began, we asked each child two questions: 1) What made their parents give them their particular name? 2) What did their name mean?

Interestingly, almost every child said “God whispered it in my Mommy’s (a few said Daddy’s) ear.” Conversely, only one child out of close to fifty students knew the meaning of her name. By the way, she was one of the few with a traditional name.

We shared the meanings of their names with them. Every child was delighted as they learned what God had whispered to their mother or father: “This one shall be ‘my beloved’. This one--‘my noble princess’. I call this one to be a ‘peaceful ruler’ for My kingdom. This tiny bundle will be my ‘beautiful flower’. And the list went on with each child not only marveling in their names but the names of their classmates. Eyes sparkled as they began to see themselves as God saw them. Probably for the very first time in their lives, they were awakened to all the things He wants to accomplish through their lives along with the character traits He wants to develop in them. In the traditional African culture, names are extremely important since they believe that they are to walk in the meaning of their name.

A study of the Bible reveals that the word “name” is used 903 times. Mind you, that doesn’t include the words named, nameth, name’s, names. Okay, I’m a wuss--I got tired of counting! The 903 also does not include the words “call”, “called”, “calling”, etc.

The Old Testament alone contains 732 uses of the word “name” with the remaining 171 occurrences in the New Testament. This leads us almost to the very beginning of Genesis. The first occurrence of the word “name” appears in Genesis 2:11.

When we see the word “name” in the Old Testament, it is based on a translation from the Hebrew language. According to *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, the Hebrew word for name is “shem”. Shem is defined as “an appellation (that is, naming; name or title), as a mark or memorial of individuality; honor, authority, character, reputation; memory; renown.”

Many of us can clearly recall Kunte Kinte’s father lifting him up to the Heavens as he named his son in the powerful mini-series “**Roots**”. “Behold the only thing greater than you!” The mere thought of this scene still makes me tingle with goose bumps all over.

Though my original intent was to make fun of “Ghetto-Fabulous” names, something transformational happened to me in the process of writing this book. In my Bible studies, I discovered that strange sounding and spelled names are nothing new. A review of genealogy in 1 Chronicles alone challenges the brain with eye-popping , tongue twisting, mind boggling names.

Don’t take my word for it, look for yourself. The Bible is literally filled with names that I’m still trying to figure out how to pronounce. For those of you who don’t want to take time to get your Bibles out, here is a small sampling of those names:

Mahalalel	Methuselah	Lamech	Japheth	Magog
Madai	Javan	Tubal	Meshech	Tiras
Ashkenaz	Riphath	Togarmah	Elishah	Tarshish
Kittim	Rodanim	Havilah	Sabteca	Arphaxad
Almodad	Sheleph	Hazarmaveth	Hadoram	Nebaioth
Kedar	Diklah	Mibsam	Naphish	Kedemah

Keturah	Shuah	Abida	Zepho	Shammah
Dishon	Dinhabah	Mehetabel	Oholibamah	Naphtali
Bathsua	Calcol	Darda	Jerahmeel	Amminadab
Nahshon	Shimea	Abinadab	Raddai	Amasa
Abijah	Ahijah	Atarah	Jamin	Shammai
Nadab	Abishur	Sheshan	Mareshah	Tirhanah
Madmannah	Macbenah	Ahinoam	Adonijah	Talmai
Shephatiah	Ithream	Shobab	Ammiel	Japhia
Elishama	Eliada	Eliphelet	Rehoboam	Jehoram
Johanan	Jehoiakim	Jehoiachin	Shenazzar	Jekamiah
Nedabiah	Zerubbabel	Meshullam	Shelomith	Hashubah
Berekiah	Hasadiah	Rephaiah	Elioenai	Anani
Hazzelelponi	Jezreel	Haahashtari	Jabez	Temeni

Okay, I'm tired. My tongue is twisted into a knot and I still can't pronounce many of these. I think you get the picture. By the way, some of the names on the above list were King David's children and kinfolks.

Since names are so important, a minor source of irritation for me has been people naming children without regard to the destiny being strapped to that child. Often when I've heard a "Ghetto-Fabulous" name and inquired about its meaning, rarely (if ever) was the person or the parents able to tell me. With proud grins they would always say, "Oh I named her that because I just liked the way it sounded."

I guess I shouldn't be surprised. After all, how many of us with traditional names even know what our name means? But at least for the traditional names, there are many sources that can be used to find the meaning. To my knowledge, there is no such resource for those with unconventional names.

So in my infinite wisdom (I use this term loosely) I decided that I would find meanings for some of the names that I consider "Ghetto-Fabulous". I was confident that this could be done since each of the names has a root. As I began to research the meanings of these names, I was astounded. The smirk was wiped off my face as I discovered time and again that many of those funny sounding, "Ghetto-Fabulous" names have truly powerful meanings.

I was having such a hard time reconciling this that my personal trainer, Rena, noticed my distraction one day at the gym. I shared with her the conundrum of my research. Her next words made me lift my eyes in awe. "Isn't God something," she smiled. "Even in our ignorance He still shows His sovereignty. Who else but God would make sure that these names, as funny and strange as they may be, truly have meanings that telegraph His destiny for the lives of its recipient?"

Rena's wisdom summed it up for me. So while there may be some humor in some of the names that are outlined in this book, God's fingerprint of the character that He has destined for the bearer is still evident.

Let's face it, there are so many of these names, with more being created as we speak, there's just no way to define them all. So I've picked a sampling of some of my favorite female names. In a future edition, I hope to include male names. I've also picked out some of the more popular roots found in "Ghetto-Fabulous" names and

defined those. So if the name you're interested in is not on the list, you may be able to piece together its meaning using these roots.

I must admit that I myself have experimented with “Ghetto-Fabulous” names for my own children. As I thought about why I had chosen some of their names, it dawned on me that my foray into naming my children showed me at the different cycles of my life.

My first child was born when I was only seventeen so I'll label myself at that period of my life as a rebel. I was determined to give my baby something special—a name like nobody else had. I proudly and rebelliously named my first child SheRonda Deneen. Can't get much more “Ghetto-Fabulous than that! Well today, actually you can. This name sounds somewhat tamed compared to some of the names out there now.

My next child was born during my phase of just moving into a responsible position in corporate America. I wasn't sure that this was the right place for me but I liked the “benefits” so I was trying to fit in. In essence, I was a mutant. Ambivalence led me to name my next child Edwin Jabari (traditional first name; unconventional middle name).

Seven years later, when my last child was born, my life was thoroughly entrenched in corporate America. I had become a conformist. I chose the name Christyn Tracy (traditional and acceptable) for my youngest child.

I suspect many other parents go through similar stages in their lives as their children come along.

Another eye-opening discovery for me was that many of the names that I had considered “Ghetto-Fabulous” really had a long history in other languages such as

Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, African, Arabic, Native American, Gaelic, Spanish, Portuguese, etc.

Before we get started, I have a confession: I do not profess to be an expert on words or language—far from it! I just had a healthy curiosity about the meanings of some of the “exotic” sounding names heard in the African-American culture. This book does **not** claim to be accurate or an authority on the subject—far from it. It’s just a book that looks at the roots of these names to develop meanings.

WARNING—This book does not contain all known “Ghetto-Fabulous” names—an impossible task. This edition concentrates only on names given to children of the feminine gender.