## “What’s in a Name?”

**Overview**

The film *Prince Among Slaves* encourages us to think about matters of identity—particularly African American identity. What’s in a name? How does it feel to be called by a name which isn’t yours? What names and labels identify us?

Spellings sometimes change when we attempt to represent the sound of a name in another language, or with another alphabet. For example, on this website, you learn about two prominent West African ethnic groups: the *Fulbe* and the *Mandinka*. In some sources, you will find the Fulbe referred to as the Fulani, the Fulah, or even the Peul. Don’t be confused: all of these are names for the same group of West African pastoral people. In some sources, you will find the Mandinka referred to as the Mandinga or the Mandingue. Again, these are simply variations in spelling the same name. [Photos of Fulbe; Mandinka people]

The bill of sale between Thomas Edwin and Thomas Foster for the purchase of Abdul Rahman and Samba referred to these captives as “brute Negroes”. This term may imply “wild” or “unskilled”, but in fact, many captives were sought out and purchased precisely because they had skills which would be very important to the success of their owner’s business. In short, they had professions! Here are the names of some of the valued professions of enslaved Africans in America: blacksmith; accountant; midwife; carpenter; potter; weaver (or, textiles expert); soldier; agricultural specialist with expertise in rice, sugar, cotton, corn, yams, peanuts, or millet; specialist in beekeeping and beeswax; mineralogist; goatherd; shepherd; cattleman; expert in paper production. [Photo of slaves working]

A “brute” slave was then “seasoned”. This could be a brutal process, and almost always included being assigned a new name. [Clip of Mos Def: “What you are essentially doing is you are removing the identity of an individual…”]

Our hero’s name was Abdul Rahman Ibrahima Sori. In the religion of Islam, “Rahman” is one of the Names of God. It means “the Compassionate One”. “Abdul Rahman” means “servant of the Compassionate One”—Servant of God. “Ibrahima” is a version of “Abraham”—after the great prophet/patriarch who figures importantly in the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. His owner called him “Prince” sarcastically, but Abdul Rahman was indeed from a royal family. His father was King Sori of Futa Jallon. West Africa. [Image of Abdul Rahman]

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**NOTE:** soon we will have audio and AV recordings of several people talking about the meaning of their names. They will answer such questions as:What does your name mean? [Link to “meaning of names” website.] Who gave your name? Does your family practice a naming ritual?