



What’s in a Spelling?

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“Qui nequit, hic NIGER est, hune tu, Romane, cavetto”
[“This is a black, Roman; beware this”]
Horace's Satires, Book 1, Satire 4, line 85

“The name Nigeria applying to no other part of Africa may without offence to any neighbours be accepted as co-extensive with the territories over which the Royal Niger Company has extended British influence, and may serve to differentiate them equally from the colonies of Lagos and the Niger Protectorate on the coast and from the French territories of the Upper Niger”.
Lady Lugard The Times, 8 January 1897.

Turkey recently announced its intent to change the spelling of its name to “Turkiye”. In the English language “turkey” means a bird. Worse, it means a stupid or useless person. Turkey also means a failure [1]. Even as a child, I found it comical that a country shared the name of a bird. In my opinion however, there are two countries with worse name spellings- Niger and its southern neighbour Nigeria. Should they change spellings to “Neejer/ Naija” and “Naijeriya” respectively? The names Niger and Nigeria are both derived from the Latin word “Niger” which is the root of the most racist word in modern history-The N word. Lady Lugard knew exactly what she was doing when she coined the word “Nigeria” [2,3]. She was educated at a time when the study of Latin was mandatory. Plus, being a widely travelled lady she must have known that prejudiced white Americans used the N word. She could very well have called the country GOLLIWOG Land. Consciously or subconsciously, Lady Lugard was racist. Centuries ago, William Shakespeare asked “What’s in a name?” It appears that today the golden question is “What’s in a spelling?”.

Any and every country has the right to change its name, or the spelling and/or pronunciation thereof. In the 1940s, when Ethiopia joined the United Nations Emperor Haile Selassie got the world to abandon the name “Abyssinia” which foreigners had been calling Ethiopia for a long time. But was this a name change for the better? “Abyssinia” means “Land of mixed people”. “Ethiopia” means “Land of burnt faces”. I think this was a name change that literally went from frying pan to fire! Methinks the former name was less racist. Hopefully now that Turkey has changed its name/spelling no one will make wisecracks like “what happens when a man from Hungary goes to Turkey?”.

Below are a few countries that have changed their names in the past. The Turkey to Turkiye phenomenon is nothing unusual [4-6].
(Table 1)

Old name	New name
Turkey	Turkiye
Swaziland	Eswatini
Rhodesia	Zimbabwe
Ceylon	Sri Lanka
Holland	The Netherlands
Irish Free State	Ireland
Zaire	Congo
Gold Coast	Ghana
Siam	Thailand
Burma	Myanmar
Persia	Iran

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