Issues Of Names And Naming

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Part 1: Movements of names

First names are so easily taken for granted; yet they are a treasure of revelations when it comes to a
culture's history. The complexity of European names, for instance, reflects the incredible amount of
movement (of population, such as migration or invasion, but also of religion and cultural influences) that
characterizes its history. The Roman Empire survives not only through its law system which is still applied
today, but also through the many Latin names still popular in countries like France and, naturally, Italy:
Amanda, Antonio, Celine... Others were pagan names that were latinized when the Empire conquered Gaul
(Armniius), or later when they converted to Christianity, the language of which was Latin in those parts (the
most famous example being Emperor Carlos Magnus).

France is also peculiarly rich in Greek names (Chrysmène, Althea), doubtlessly due to the many revivals of
Hellenistic art and literature, the peak of which can be observed in the castle of Versailles. However, other
Latin and Greek names arrived in France through the liturgies of the Churches of Rome and Byzantium, the
former much more strongly than the latter (Deodat, "god-given", or Christophe, "Christ-bearer"). This is very
revealing as to the religious background of the area, especially when set against the taste for Old
Testament (Hebrew) names that is so obvious in English-speaking countries (Amos, Bethany, Sam). Very
few Hebrew names are used in French, except New Testament ones -- Jean, Matthieu, Marc, Marie are
classics.

Although Christianity overwhelmed local pagan faiths in most of continental Europe, pagan names survived
and often outlived liturgical ones. In the British Isles the Celts, Scots and Welsh held on to theirs, passing
them for equivalents of Christian names when necessary (like Welsh Alun equated to Allan, with which it
actually has no link whatsoever). The Norse seem to have disdained to christianize them (as shown by
contemporary names like Torsten, "Stone of Thor"). On the continent Germanic names, which are perhaps
more numerous than Latin, Greek and Hebrew names together in Western Europe, remained the most
common -- a reminder that a large part of Europe was built on the Frank Empire. From this language
combined with the very close Saxon and Scandinavian tongues, we get most of the best-known Western
names, actually highly totemic: Bernard ("staunch bear"), Edward ("warden of riches"), Arnold ("all-powerful
eagle"), Henry ("ruler of the house"). It goes without saying that names of Germanic root are the most
common in Germany, though the German have adopted numerous Latin names as well. Greece has less
Hellenistic names than we would expect; it has adapted Latin and Germanic names and modernized a few
old pagan ones, but also and mostly, it was influenced by Byzantine liturgy, which moved away from
ancient Greece.

A few isolated names can be surprise testimonies to old, almost forgotten migrations, such as the puzzling
French name Arpade, the origin of which I was astonished to find in the founder of a Magyar dynasty.
Another surprise was Amilcare, an Italian rendering of Phoenician Hamilcar, father of Hannibal who led his
army all the way to the Alps during war against the Romans. Long after they had defeated the Punic
general, the inhabitants of Rome began to pay homage to him and his through statues and, apparently,
through the names they gave their children.

When such movements occur, people find themselves adopting names in a language that is not their own,
and so the meaning is lost to them. A consequence of this is the adaptation of a root name into its local
equivalent (such as James being the equivalent of Jacques in France), and the formation of infinite
derivatives as spelling and pronunciation go through the test of time, not to mention the fashioning of feminine equivalents and vice-versa. In this fashion did Alexander give rise to Sandra, among a plethora of other derivatives. Hanna (John), perhaps the most popular Christian name of all, is found in forms that only the continuation of tradition permits us to recognize: Sean, Zane, Yannick, Eoin, Shaughan, Ivan, Ieuan...

On the other hand, cultures that were more self-contained never lost sight of the original meaning of names and so we find names that have been in use, unchanged, for centuries or for as long as the language has existed. Japan and Hawai'i are extreme cases, where until recently the name pool remained uniquely pure. India is an equally peculiar case as derivations and equivalents occur within the country itself, between the different languages spoken there. Arabic names are an interesting example for they did undergo movement but it is very easy to trace. Very few have had their pronunciation altered, and when that happened it was because these were names whose pronunciation was incompatible with the local dialect. For example in Lebanese, which tends to eliminate all sounds that require some effort, the names Lu'lū'a and Nā'ēla (with vocal stops) would sound as creaky as Benjamina. They may be written thus on official documents, but we pronounce them Lulwa and Nayla. Other derivations may be caused by a diminutive, such as Barhum, "Little Ibrahim (Abraham)".

With the expansion of the Muslim Empire, Arabic names were carried as far as China and Spain, where they were adapted to the local pronunciation -- but it is to be noted that every Muslim, whether Chinese or Spanish, spoke Arabic, and therefore the names were less distorted than in the case of a Greek name borne by a Saxon. Some names were totally exported however -- who would think that Eleanor means "Allah is my Light"? It is probably through Spain that this one reached France and England.

Persian and Arabic names overlap much, and later on the Turkish also adopted many of the latter, as they regarded Arabic as a "high tongue" the way Europe regards Latin. Thanks to the connection to Persia, we find that some Muslim names used today are literally antique. My own name, Joumana, is an example: it has been in use so long that it is considered an Arabic name, yet it is really an old Persian word meaning Pearl (Lulwa in Arabic), which became Muslim before finally losing any religious connotation and spreading among Christians. I only met one person capable of spelling it right, a sign that for a supposedly Arabic name, it is peculiarly mysterious. Some other pre-Islamic names fell out of use by force, forbidden by the Prophet Muhammad because he judged them unworthy of human beings: Harb (War), Murr (Bitter), Kalb (Dog). They arose again in the past centuries as surnames, forced by the Turks on the people of the lands they occupied, but that is another story. It must also be mentioned that Hebrew and Arabic names have so much in common that when analyzing contemporary names, it is often impossible to tell which of the two adopted a name from the other, or if they both adopted it from earlier Aramaic, Phoenician or even Old Egyptian sources.

Arabic does not seem to have ever absorbed names from languages that were not directly related to it the way Persian or Hebrew are. Western names occur galore in the Middle-East, from Nicole to Josephine, but they are not adapted to the language: they are pronounced à la French, Italian, English or whatever tongue they were taken from. New characters have been invented to mark sounds like P, G and V (for names such as Peggy or Fulvio), which did not exist in the Arabic script before. There is one important exception, that of Greek names which were adopted centuries ago, under Byzantine rule, by the Phoenician and Syrian well before the birth of Islam. Boutros (Peter) is still widely used, but Thekla ("divine fame"), a saint's name that barely survives in French Thècle, is forgotten by the rest of the world. It is not exactly in use but an area named "Saint Thekla" testifies that it was, not so long ago. (As an unrelated anecdote, Saint Theophile was less lucky with the Beirut area that bears his name: the locals simplified it into Sin el Fil, which means "elephant's tooth" and figures high on the list of absurd place names.) The majority of Arabic names however remain words immediately understandable by Arabic speakers (Farid, "unique", Ghada, "mermaid"). Because of this, Arabic texts often have to put names in quotes to indicate that they are proper names and not words in the sentence. Let me also note that there are Arabic names and Arabic names. Lebanon favors the "light" names, those that refer to words that are more or less common in everyday speech. Heavy Arabic names are directly from literary Arabic and are meant to sound old and venerable. They are more common in Arab countries.

In this day and age, not surprisingly, the circulation of names has never been so intense, nor the loss of meaning so clear. Until recently root names always had a meaning, for the latter was the very purpose of the name. Shakespeare may have been the first to coin names (such as Miranda), followed by other writers...
(Wendy was made up by J.M. Barrie for Peter Pan) but the coining of names for purely phonetical purposes is a trademark of the United States, especially for female names. Americans also began the unique practice of transforming family names into first names, usually after they first slipped into the position of middle name. Hence we find deForest, deTraci, laToya and other highly original (and hard on the researcher) names, but also Wheeler, Carter, Dean, Beverly and others that refer to medieval professions or dwelling-places. Not to mention adopting names of cities, States and tribes such as Montana or Cherokee. Although they inherited British customs and names, they were the first to spread the interest in Celtic and Gaelic names, which were not at all in favor among the subjects of the Crown. They also carry on the old European trend of importing names from "classier" cultures, such as done by the Russians with France in the last century, or by the French with Greece. Finally (?), they turned back to the original concept of meaningful names, browsing their own language for them: Melody, Sunshine, Sky, many of which (such as Rainbow) hardly survived the trend that gave birth to them -- just like French names such as Arrosoir (sprinkler), Sabot (wooden shoe) did not survive the French Revolution where they were used as a reaction against aristocratic names.

Family names

A great part of all family names originated in patronymics. Usually, these were populations who did not care for family names and were known as A son of B or C daughter of D, but were conquered by a culture that imposed (or became an example of) the use of family names. It happened with the Gauls under the Romans and it also happened this very century in British colonies such as India. To this day in Russia, family names are simply patronymics, one being known by Piotr Nikkolovich (son of Nikkolo) or Anna Nikkoloynva (daughter of Nikkolo). Irish O’ and Irish-Scottish Mac simply mean "son of" -- a Scottish woman would have used Nic, meaning daughter of. Worldwide we have ap- in Welsh, map- in Cornish, -szoon in Holland, -son or -sen in Scandinavian countries, -escu in Romanian, -ian in Armenian, ibn in Arabic, anak in Borneo, ag among the Targi (ult for a girl)... Sometimes surnames are gendered without being patronymics, as in Bulgaria and Greece.

Other family names were originally nicknames or designations referring to profession, appearance, and of course place-names. Many cultures have the equivalent of aristocratic "of" in English and "de" in France: von in Germany, van in Holland, ze for Czechs, -tsi in Armenian... In Russia the nobility particle is an -ov in the patronymic; in Arabic nobility is recognized by a surname preceded by El ("the").

The case of Turkey may be unique, as their family names did not develop naturally but nor were they imposed by an outside culture. People used to be content with their personal name and the mention "son/daughter of" or a village name, but in 1928 Kamal Ataturk bade each family freely choose a surname. This is so new that people have not developed the habit to mention their family name immediately. This is noticeable in Lebanon as well, where people more readily use first names and then inquire from what "house" the person is. In some Arab countries, men still introduce themselves by lineage: "Malek son of Yaacub son of Ahmad", while women are more known by their father, brother of husband. In Afghanistan they can also be known as Noor ("light") of one of the above, for women don't reveal their name to strangers.

The appearance of family names in China was as sudden as in Turkey, only they were set by law in 2852 BC. They all come from the poem Po-Chia-Hsing (Hundred Clan Names), which contains 408 single words that became the legal names. Much later, about 200 BC each family was again requested to adopt a generational name poem of about two dozen words: it was important to be able to tell what generation an individual belonged to, as a man could have concubines besides his first wife. The Chinese are similar to Westerners in that calling someone by their first name is slighting unless they're close.

A unique occurrence of family names is in Japanese "families" of entertainers —actors, dancers, singers... Their teacher gives them a stage name as a mark of competence, the last name being that of the school and the first built to taste. One can inherit the name of a dead performer as one advances in skill, and the ultimate honor is to earn the name of one of the legendary members of the school.
Westerners are used to the following order: personal name, middle name, family name, which is typical of an individual-oriented society. Group-oriented cultures however, which represent the majority of the planet (count China and India alone), would follow the family name-personal name order, if they have a family name at all. Indians would have never adopted these weren’t it for the British invasion; they then derived them from patronymics, caste and sub-caste names. Similarly in Kashmir, family names came about under Muslim and Sikh rules, and designate occupation, appearance, event or other —but they can change instantly and permanently in case of a memorable event. The Cherokee as well took family names under European influence. The Jews are a particular case as European authorities both imposed a last name on them and forbade them the privilege of family names: they had to use patronymics, ben X or bas X. Family names the way we know them, transmitted down the line, were usually born in cultures that had a notion of aristocracy and hierarchy —the status of the bearer made the name and its lineage worth preserving through time (already in Mesopotamia, the longer a name the higher the status of its bearer). The ancient Greeks’ democracy seeped all the way into the naming system: people would be known to be part of a lineage, but this was not a family name. Some cultures were so proud of the latter that they created a nomenclature permitting to keep both the father’s and mother’s family names. Such is the case in Spain, where the nomenclature is: personal name(s!), father's surname separated from the mother's by a y (same thing in Portugal, with e instead of y). And yes, this can pose problems at wedding time. On the far end of the spectrum, in Iceland, it seems that family names matter so little that phonebooks are listed according to personal names, not family names. China has not only family names but also generation names, so that each person is known by family-generation-personal names, each of one syllable. Japan also places the family name first, but in older times things were not that simple. One could be known by a string of names including childhood and adult names, clan position, sobriquets, not to mention titles for the nobility and religious names if one retired in a monastery or nunnery, or the posthumous name and deification name! There remain many cultures where family names simply do not exist. In the Himalayas one may be fooled by two-part names, but that's what they are: personal names formed of two parts, as if you were called John Michael. Neither is inherited. Under British influence, the Nepalese added a family name after their two personal names while hitherto, only the nobility or royalty had any. Korea may be the only country where royalty doesn't bother with a family name, unlike anywhere else where the higher the status, the more precious the family name is. True, European monarchs don't use their family names, but they exist. It is interesting that commoners throughout history are known only by their first name (when they have a last name at all), low and high nobles by their family name (especially if it has a particle), but kings revert again to a simple personal name.

One of the reasons for the apparition of last names may have been the need to differentiate people with the same personal names. Think of Victorian England where only about 3 dozen first names existed! No wonder people were known by the name of their lands. The inhabitants of Yap (an island) supply to this with a conventional set of differentiating names meaning large, medium, small, oldest, and youngest. Most others use patronymics.

Very few cultures have middle names in the meaning understood by Americans. For Catholics, it will be the christening name, that of a saint, and never used except on official paperwork -- it's more like a protective addition. In Lebanon, the middle name is the father's name no matter the gender of the child; it's not used either but in a society where everyone is connected to everyone else by 2 degrees at most, this allows immediate pinpointing of a person's place on a family tree -- characteristic of a group-oriented culture again.

**Part 2: Issues of naming**

This article explores issues related to names throughout the world: name-giving, avoidance of names, changing name, gendering, women issues, nomenclature, family names... For reasons of size, I split it into three parts.
To Give A Name

Western cultures hardly ever have a special event to mark the giving of a name, except when a saint's name is given during Christening, in the Catholic tradition. Other civilizations grant more importance to names to the Delaware one's true name is a sacred gift, and only visionary name-givers can give it. Shawnee name-givers ponder a name during a night wake and each of them offers a name to the parents, so they have two choices for their child.

In Hawaii it is the whole family that participates in the name giving. It is usually based on special events or people or places, but it can come "from heaven": in a dream, through a sign or a voice. In Samoa, the parents don't name their offspring: the grandparents handle this at a family gathering. This reflects an ideology where the grandparents are considered better suited to raise children than their young parents. The midwife gives Akan children akeradini-name at birth, based on a day of the week. The second part is chosen by their father and given on the 7th morning after the birth.

The people of the Truk island make no ceremony about naming a child, but the name itself is carefully chosen. It is a specialist name (each clan is specialized in something such as sailing or war) chosen by the members of the mother's clan, and expressing what the child is to become. The child can pick another one later on.

I do not need to mention the fact that names, in cultures that take into consideration their meaning, are based on events surrounding birth, people, sacred places, and animals (this deserves a deeper study, but in another article). Christians however are doing the same when they name a child after a saint or a feast that happened around the day of birth (like in Spain Anunciación, Asunción), and so are Muslims (Ramadan, Ashur). Muslims may not have "saints" per se, but naming children after religious figures occurs as commonly as in any other religion.

Christians may hesitate to name their children Jesus (although the Hispanic have no qualms about it), but Muslims have no problem with his name or Muhammad's which, with its many derivatives, is the most overwhelmingly popular name on the planet. While Hawai'ians would never do such a thing as give the unchanged name of a god to a child (saints do play the part that the old gods did), Orthodox Hindus directly name their children for incarnations of divine beings. Sometimes their second name has the meaning of "spouse" or "offspring" to create a close relationship between it and the deity. These god-names can be replaced by names of holy places or planets and signs. Sometimes, the two names are that of a goddess and her spouse, always in this order.

Many names evoke the qualities or beauty that the parents hope to see develop in the child. The Japanese give their child a balancing name: if it's too noisy, a name evoking calm, if it eats too much, one that evokes moderation. The Delaware do the total opposite -- they never try to use names to change their children.

Often a name is ordinal (reflecting the order of birth), and even more often it is determined by the day of birth, whether on a weekly or monthly cycle. Burma has a very interesting custom; the name's initial is determined by the day on which the baby is born. Some days are believed incompatible, so that people born on them cannot get married for fear of an unhappy marriage, and you'll never find a K husband with an H wife. I suspect this custom to have been designed as a way of instantly knowing if a person is compatible with you or not. Similarly, the Koreans shy away from people bearing the same family name marriage can absolutely not occur between them, which can be problematic in the case of Kim and Park: these two last names make up over half of the population.

In Europe and many African countries, alliterations (Milly and Mary, Robert and Herbert) are a favorite way of marking the birth of twins. Twins get special names in Sesotho. Other special cases in this country are a daughter that comes after many sons, or a son after many daughters. The ideal family being half boys and half girls, a girl arrived at long last is called Ntzwaki (the mixer), a boy Modise (herdsman) or Mojafela (inheritor). Special names among the Yoruba reflect unusual births or the reincarnation of a deceased family member.

In some countries first sons form a "line" of alternating names, as each of them is named after their father's father. Sometimes there is not even an alternation and all first sons bear the same name. This transmission of name is probably the same mechanism that turned family names into what they are now, from the nicknames they used to be. In Greece, the first son is almost always named after the father's father, and
the second after the mother’s father; the same thing occurs with daughters and their grandmothers. This contrasts greatly with cultures who refuse to grant names of deceased relatives, or even living ones, or even a used name at all.

**Name Avoidance**

Westerners, who have all but lost the notion of the power of names (not to mention spirit evocation), may find the notion of name avoidance a very alien one. Yet it is very widespread, with different degrees of avoidance. If you say Rest In Peace when mentioning a deceased person, you are practicing a remains of this old custom. Arab-speaking people do not avoid names, but they will not mention a dead acquaintance without adding "May God honor him/her". Whether it's to protect the dead person or the speaker, I couldn't say.

Among the Choctaw a dead family member is never called by name. One will also, when possible, avoid using his or her name, and a wife will mention her husband by "father of so-and-so". The Delaware similarly refer to their children by their birth order to avoid disclosing their true names, which are too powerful to be mentioned outside the family. The Delaware, like the Shawnee, do not reuse names, certainly not dead people's. The name and the person are one, and the name is buried with them. Australian aborigines take it even more seriously D when the member of band dies, any one bearing a similar name will use a conventional avoidance name so as not to call up grief or the angry spirit. But also, any vocabulary word reflecting the name needs to be changed for many years.

Yiddish-speaking Jews (the Ashkenazim), on the other hand, don't mind naming someone after a dead relative. However, they don't name children after a living older relative for the simple reason that the angel of Death, when coming to take the elder, may make a mistake. People who marry into the family need to change their names to stay safe from this threat.

In Vietnam the belief in the power of names is such that a person's true name is not used even within their family. Nicknames or pseudonyms are used, the latter being the name of the person's shop, business, status etc. You could be called Mr. McDonald to protect your name. All scholars publish under pseudonyms, and deceased people get a posthumous new name. If a word used in the name of a family member comes up during conversation, it will be avoided by using a synonym or, if it's not possible to use a substitute, the word is mispronounced in order to respect the name bearer.

Similarly, Hawaiian high nobles had names too powerful to be used outside the immediate family. They had a public name for other uses, and sometimes also an honorific one denoting their public image. Tahitians beat the record by requiring that syllables used in the name of a great noble must not be used in everyday languages, so that many words must be borrowed or invented. The names lose their meaning then, becoming noble sounds instead of words.

The reverse can happen: some words can be banned from being included in a name. Early Indians considered it primitive and a bad influence on women to call a girl after "a constellation, a tree, river, mountain, bird, servant or terror". The Prophet Muhammad also forbade his followers to use unworthy names such as War or Dog. In a similar line, I am certain that generations of post-WWII Westerners have banned the name Adolf from their lists of choices.

**Temporary Names**

The one naming issue common to all cultures may be that of temporary names. This can be as informal as the childhood nickname our parents never really let go of, or as formal as a name that is ceremonially given then ceremonially changed at a coming of age. In the Marshall Islands, for the first few days after birth, boys are known as Labburo and girls as Lijjiron. Then they are given a name from their maternal ancestral line. It doesn't exclude that later nicknames can become the true name after a while. Swahili-speaking people give the permanent name on the 7th or 40th day exactly, while the Delaware's way is less
numerological, between the ages of 9 and 12. A birth order name is given to Sioux children until they get a more appropriate one; Winona for instance applies to a first-born girl.

Temporary names can also be unpleasant or disgusting ones, meant to keep evil spirits or Death away from the child (especially if earlier children died) until he's strong enough to be safe. A Hawaiian child can go by Stinking and an Egyptian as Dung Heap until the name can be changed.

**Change of name**

Comparatively few people keep their name unchanged throughout their life. The bureaucratization of Europe makes it necessary for Westerners to go through impossible paperwork to legally change their name, something I find as ridiculous as needing to legally convert to another religion Ð it's none of anyone's business (except governments that want to keep tabs on people). In Spain however, one can choose a name during one's confirmation to add to their given names. In Burma adopting a new name is as simple as sending presents to one's friends, with the message that they should now be known as so-and-so (women cannot however, as it is considered criticism of the parents). Among the Cheyenne, it is one's parents who may decide to change their child's name after a striking event; they send a crier through the village to announce the "death" of the old name and that a new one will be used henceforth. Almost all Native American tribes will change a name to reflect special events. People can even be given a resentment name, commemorating an insult or a hurt. On top of this, some like the Comanche change boys' names to indicate their coming of age, while women retain their birth name Ð an inverse situation to the Old World habit of women changing their name when they marry while men never change theirs. This separates the bride from her old life. This habit exists in Hindu marriage ceremonies, but as many Indians have no family name to change, the groom gives his bride a new first name during the ceremony.

The event that determines a change of name can be a birth. When the first son is born into an Arab family, the parents are henceforth known as Father of/Mother (name of son). This is considered a great pride and in some countries like Jordan their new name will figure on (for instance) doorbells, under the full name. Uniquely, Tahitian fathers lose their name and title to their first son at his birth, and so must take now a personal name based on the characteristics of the child.

Entering priesthood or a monastery/nunnery life anywhere, whether Christian or Buddhist etc, is an occasion to change one's name. In Japan (and actually everywhere, but less openly), it can also be changed to avoid the law, to protect oneself from vendetta, or to spare the family shame.

The most obvious and argued issue of name-changing, however, is that of women's name and family name. In the Old World and Northern America, the norm is for the wife to take her husband's family name, although today in the States all the possible options (both keeping their names, hyphenating both names, keeping the wife's name...) are available and it's up to the couple to choose. In Russia the woman adopts the feminine of her husband's patronymics, as if she was now daughter of his father (we find the same notion all the way in Palau). In Poland and Czechoslovakia women add a "daughter of" ending to their father's personal name, then when they get married, they append "wife of" to their husband's name. Sesotho brides are referred to by new names as well, and soon are known as Mother of so-and-so (as in the case of Arabs, so does the husband become known as Father of someone).

Very few cultures, but they exist, are matrilineal and the names are transmitted from mother to children, as in the Marshall Islands and Basque culture. Tahiti isn't matrilineal, but a mother does transmit her titles (which are used as names) to her children.

**Names and Gender**

Differentiated names for men and women can be considered a sign of a culture that at least went through a period where it held women in low regard. This is particularly true when female names were all derived from male names and make no sense on their own. For instance Carlotta was formed from Carl, but it is not originally a name, it was born of the people's need to differentiate male and female names in order to
make the gender immediately obvious. Most Latin and Greek names are such, female versions of names (we all know what was the place of women in their society), while Germanic people had autonomous sets of names for male and female, such as Brunhild and Gareth. Still, in this case, it implies preconceived ideas of what girls and boys could be named, since a man would not be called Brunhild nor a woman Gareth. There are exceedingly rare names that started out female and were adapted to male "clients", but Averell is one, from a female name meaning Golden.

In Arabic this gendering exists for names that are adjectives, as the latter are gendered ("red" would not be said in the same way if it applied to a rose D female D or skin D male), but names that are words (such as Light, Victory) can be given to both sexes and have only been differentiated after getting attached to a famous figure. This also happened with Hebrew names from the Bible: in their original context most of these names could have been given to man or woman, but once a famous man is called Abiel and a famous woman Bethany, the association is too strong to break.

Many other cultures never understood the need to gender names, or the notion that some names were not appropriate for one gender or the other. Why can't a boy be called Desert Rose, or a woman Angry Bear? Inhabitants of the Himalayas, Native Americans, Polynesians differentiate gender neither in grammar nor in meaning. Some Native American tribes, however, add a "woman word" to make a name feminine. Hindu names are often non-gendered, and a child can have two names that are that of a goddess and her mate. Mongolians only have a few names that are specifically feminine, and those are names of Lamaistic goddesses; others are undifferentiated except if historical events made one male. The Sikh on the other hand, though they don't have preconceived ideas about what a man/woman should be called, add kaus "woman" to female names and Singh "lion", "best of its kind" to male name. I find this very telling of their ideology!

The case of Yap is curious in that the elements tin and pin make a name female, and tam and moon male. The peculiarity lies in that these elements can be anywhere in the word: Fanapin, Tinag are female, Moonfel, Gilmoon are male, and it doesn't seem to make any linguistic sense.

Family names

A great part of all family names originated in patronymics. Usually, these were populations who did not care for family names and were known as A son of B or C daughter of D, but were conquered by a culture that imposed (or became an example of) the use of family names. It happened with the Gauls under the Romans and it also happened this very century in British colonies such as India. To this day in Russia, family names are simply patronymics, one being known by Piotr Nikkolovich (son of Nikkolo) or Anna Nikkolovna (daughter of Nikkolo). Irish O' and Irish-Scottish Mac simply mean "son of" -- a Scottish woman would have used Nic, meaning daughter of. Worldwide we have ap- in Welsh, map- in Cornish, -szoon in Holland, -son or -sen in Scandinavian countries, -escu in Romanian, -tsi in Armenian... Sometimes surnames are gendered without being patronymics, as in Bulgaria and Greece.

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The case of Turkey may be unique, as their family names did not develop naturally but nor were they imposed by an outside culture. People used to be content with their personal name and the mention "son/daughter of" or a village name, but in 1928 Kamal Ataturk bade each family freely choose a surname. This is so new that people have not developed the habit to mention their family name immediately. This is noticeable in Lebanon as well, where people more readily use first names and then inquire from what "house" the person is. In some Arab countries, men still introduce themselves by lineage: "Malek son of Yaacub son of Ahmad", while women are more known by their father, brother of husband. In Afghanistan they can also be known as Noor ("light") of one of the above, for women don't reveal their name to strangers.
The appearance of family names in China was as sudden as in Turkey, only they were set by law in 2852 BC. They all come from the poem Po-Chia-Hsing (Hundred Clan Names), which contains 408 single words that became the legal names. Much later, about 200 BC each family was again requested to adopt a generational name poem of about two dozen words: it was important to be able to tell what generation an individual belonged to, as a man could have concubines besides his first wife. The Chinese are similar to Westerners in that calling someone by their first name is slighting unless they're close.

A unique occurrence of family names is in Japanese “families” of entertainers —actors, dancers, singers... Their teacher gives them a stage name as a mark of competence, the last name being that of the school and the first built to taste. One can inherit the name of a dead performer as one advances in skill, and the ultimate honor is to earn the name of one of the legendary members of the school.

Westerners are used to the following order: personal name, middle name, family name, which is typical of an individual-oriented society. Group-oriented cultures however, which represent the majority of the planet (count China and India alone), would follow the family name-personal name order, if they have a family name at all. Indians would never have adopted these weren’t it for the British invasion; they then derived them from patronymics, caste and sub-caste names. Similarly in Kashmir, family names came about under Muslim and Sikh rules, and designate occupation, appearance, event or other —but they can change instantly and permanently in case of a memorable event. The Cherokee as well took family names under European influence. The Jews are a particular case as European authorities both imposed a last name on them and forbade them the privilege of family names: they had to use patronymics, ben X or bas X. Family names the way we know them, transmitted down the line, were usually born in cultures that had a notion of aristocracy and hierarchy —the status of the bearer made the name and its lineage worth preserving through time (already in Mesopotamia, the longer a name the higher the status of its bearer). The ancient Greeks’ democracy seeped all the way into the naming system: people would be known to be part of a lineage, but this was not a family name. Some cultures were so proud of the latter that they created a nomenclature permitting to keep both the father's and mother's family names. Such is the case in Spain, where the nomenclature is: personal name(s)!, father's surname separated from the mother's by a y (same thing in Portuguese, with e instead of y). And yes, this can pose problems at wedding time. On the far end of the spectrum, in Iceland, it seems that family names matter so little that phonebooks are listed according to personal names, not family names. China has not only family names but also generation names, so that each person is known by family-generation-personal names, each of one syllable. Japan also places the family name first, but in older times things were not that simple. One could be known by a string of names including childhood and adult names, clan position, sobriquets, not to mention titles for the nobility and religious names if one retired in a monastery or nunnery, or the posthumous name and deification name!

There remain many cultures where family names simply do not exist. In the Himalayas one may be fooled by two-part names, but that's what they are: personal names formed of two parts, as if you were called John Michael. Neither is inherited. Under British influence, the Nepalese added a family name after their two personal names while hitherto, only the nobility or royalty had any. Korea may be the only country where royalty doesn't bother with a family name, unlike anywhere else where the higher the status, the more precious the family name is. True, European monarchs don't use their family names, but they exist. It is interesting that commoners throughout history are known only by their first name (when they have a last name at all), low and high nobles by their family name (especially if it has a particle), but kings revert again to a simple personal name.

One of the reasons for the apparition of last names may have been the need to differentiate people with the same personal names. Think of Victorian England where only about 3 dozen first names existed! No wonder people were known by the name of their lands. The inhabitants of Yap (an island) supply to this with a conventional set of differentiating names meaning large, medium, small, oldest, and youngest. Most others use patronymics.

Very few cultures have middle names in the meaning understood by Americans. For Catholics, it will be the christening name, that of a saint, and never used except on official paperwork -- it's more like a protective addition. In Lebanon, the middle name is the father's name no matter the gender of the child; it's not used either but in a society where everyone is connected to everyone else by 2 degrees at most, this allows immediate pinpointing of a person’s place on a family tree -- characteristic of a group-oriented culture again.