WHAT’S IN A NAME?

CULTURES AND TRADITIONS OF PERSONAL NAMES THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

An exhibit prepared by the International & Area Studies Library

Names can be considered one of the most important signifiers of identity. Humans, as rational beings, name everything. We name objects, animals, plants, machines, places, and tools. We name bodies of water and extensions of land. We name concepts and theories, laws and decrees, rules and crimes. We even name wind and precipitation (storms, hurricanes, cyclones, tornadoes). There is a name for everything we see, and even things we cannot see; planets, and microorganisms, stars and atoms; earthly leaders, gods, and divine beings. They all have names, and ways of identification. Scholars of naming and naming practices differentiate among types of names and their study based on the nature of the object to which a name refers: toponyms are names of places, hydronyms are names of bodies of water, ethnonyms are names of ethnic groups, demosynoms are names of residents of a locality, pseudonyms are false names.

Of all the names we know and use, however, none are more personal than our own name. Anthronymy is the study of personal names. Most of us inherit our names, yet for some others names develop as we grow older. Sometimes our names are given to us, but other times, we choose our own names later in life to fit better our personalities and beliefs.

Yet personal names do not follow the same rules and conventions throughout the world. Individual societies develop their own rules, traditions, and ways of naming people. In some parts of the world, names follow certain religious traditions and in others names have a special, culturally specific meaning. Some names honor social leaders, while others honor our parents, relatives, or distant ancestors. Naming traditions also undergo change within respective regions over the course of time. The naming traditions from two thousand years ago in Spain, Germany, Egypt, the Philippines, or Illinois were quite different than today’s. Distinct areas of the world have different timelines and experiences with how naming traditions have changed over time. In today’s world, names carry the traditions as practiced in each region for centuries. However, with today’s fast and convenient means of communication exchanges between peoples from different cultures have dramatically increased, exposing individuals to foreign naming traditions, and even influencing the way personal names are employed today.

Our twenty-first century world is also characterized by research universities, such as our University of Illinois, that attract people from all over the world, or from different cultural traditions from within the United States, and turn a rather regional Midwestern town, into a richly multi-cultural, multilingual cosmopolitan city. The diversity in naming traditions is everywhere on campus. It is the intention of the International and Area Studies Library to not only showcase the wealth of materials on naming traditions from our rich international collections, but also to provide an opportunity for the campus to talk about our personal names, share the traditions we have inherited, present the ways that these traditions fit ourselves or not, and learn from each other in the hope of enriching cultural understanding. Not all naming traditions are represented in this exhibit. The world is a big place, and there are too many naming traditions to be showcased here. Our intention is to show a sample of naming traditions in different parts of the world, and encourage others to think, research, and learn from their own naming curiosities.