IMMIGRANTS IN NORWAY AND THEIR CHOICE OF NAMES: CONTINUATION OR ADAPTION?

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on names chosen for children born into families in which one or both parents are immigrants to Norway, and it discusses whether the infants get names that show a continuation of traditions from the country of the immigrant parent(s), or names that point to an adaption to Norwegian standards. The data referred to in the article is mainly based on research conducted with bilingual families and individuals in Tromsø in Northern Norway, and it reveals that many of the children are given names that convey their bilingual background and emphasize naming traditions from the immigrant country. There are however also a frequency of names indicating that the parents have had in mind the children's growing up in Norway and their integration into Norwegian society. All along there are numerous cases showing the parents' perception of the close link between name and identity, and their wish to express identity through naming. In addition this article focuses on the names of adult immigrants. It reveals that when individuals change one or more of their names once they have settled in Norway, there are specific reasons for altering something that is so closely related to their identity. Frequently the name change affects their sense of self and has an impact both practically and mentally.

[1] INTRODUCTION

"A person will be like his name" a Moroccan immigrant once said in a conversation we had about names. He was referring to a proverb from his homeland, in this way alluding to how closely linked the relationship between name and identity can be regarded but also to the belief that the name and the expectations and hopes associated with it may influence an individual in various ways.

When asking people: "Who are you?" the response you are most likely to receive is a recital of their names, Richard D. Alford says in his book *Naming and Identity* (Alford 1988, 51), and he continues:

With this response, people do not mean that they *are* their names, but rather that their names symbolize their identities. The fact that personal names symbolize individuals' identities is especially evident

when we compare naming systems across cultures. (...) In nearly every society, personal names do two things. First, they provide messages to the members of the society at large about who an individual is. Second, they provide messages to the named individual about who he or she is expected to be (loc.cit.).

Alford's study deals with names in a cross-cultural perspective including naming systems from all continents, and is therefore relevant to my research.

A personal name can be regarded as part of one's identity. It both identifies a person and distinguishes the individuals in a society. At the same time the naming of a child makes it part of the social world with relationships to the family and the wider community. In Western, technologically complex societies the concern with issues of individual identity has been a rather recent phenomenon, according to the psychologist Jane Kroger (Kroger 2000, 14–15). She refers to the psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson who points out that the interest in identity of the individual coincides in time with the period in American history when a new generation of immigrants were struggling towards a self-definition in a land far removed from that of their ancestors (loc.cit.). The preoccupation with individual identity when settling in a new country, is a relevant subject when studying present immigration to Norway. Tromsø, the largest town in Northern Norway, will be used as an example in exploring naming practices because individuals and families from a wide variety of countries have settled in this increasingly cosmopolitan city. They have had to adjust to a new culture and a new language, and their names in which their personal identity is embedded becomes a part of this process. Depending on how linguistically and culturally familiar or unfamiliar the name of the immigrant is to the community at large, it can act as an identity message to the wider society surrounding the immigrant, and Norwegians will react accordingly. The immigrant may choose to alter his or her name, or be forced to do so, with emotional consequences upon the individual's self esteem. The immigrant parents will put much effort and consideration into giving names to the children that are born in Norway, not least because the name might play an important role in the ethnic identity they want their child to have. This also applies to families in which only one parent is an immigrant. Many parents in *bilingual families* — here defined as families in which one or both parents are born outside Norway — give their children names intended to reflect the multicultural identity they want their child to grow up with, as we shall see.

The article is based mainly on empirical material gathered in multicultural Tromsø which has a population of about 68 000. Roughly 9 % are immigrants comprising more than a hundred nationalities (SSB 2011). Tromsø is the starting point, but much of the data probably is applicable to most towns and cities in Norway. Today even the most remote Norwegian municipality has a number of im-

migrants. Cities naturally have more immigrants with Oslo having the largest immigration community in Norway with an immigrant population of 28 % (op.cit.).

The terms *immigrant* and *refugee* are being employed slightly differently by the bureaucrats and in the mass media. Quite often there is no point in differentiating between the two groups of newcomers from abroad and certainly not when we are discussing their encounters with Norwegian naming legislation. I will therefore use the term *immigrant* about all persons who are born abroad and who have moved to Norway. Because my presentation deals with *name complexes* (the full name of a person) from different countries and name cultures I will occasionally use the term *individual name* instead of the more common terms *given name* or *first name*. When it comes to an inheritable name shared by all or most of the family and placed at the end of the name complex, the term *surname* is used. An *international name* refers to a name from the the Western part of the world. It frequently comes from the Bible and is often rendered in an adjusted English form, cf. *Mary* and *John*. A *Muslim name* refers to mostly Arabic names used by the Muslims. They are also actually international names across the Muslim world, but not from the ethnocentric European/Norwegian point of view I apply here. Some international and Muslim names overlap, as we shall see.

[2] NAMING THE CHILDREN

If one parent is a Norwegian and the other parent also comes from one of the Nordic countries, the parents will have a considerable base of names in common to choose from, unlike the families in which one or both parents come from a non-Nordic country. Depending on their religious and cultural background and because of the growing use of international names in Norway, parents from non-Nordic countries to a certain extent will recognize names in use in Norway but still have a name base rather different from the names common in Norway. Consequently it is more interesting and rewarding to look at names used by immigrants and bilingual families where unusual naming traditions are involved when discussing continuation or adaption of names. For this reason names in families will be used as examples where both parents are immigrants from Ghana or from Somalia and in families with one immigrant parent from Morocco or from Thailand.

[2.1] *Continuation of names and naming traditions from the country of origin*

My first focus will be on families in which both parents come from Ghana. The University of Tromsø for several years had a special study program for international students from so-called development countries, and most of the students were Ghanesians of which the majority belonged to the Akan group, one of the largest linguistic and ethnic groups in Ghana. Many students brought their family with them to Norway, and a number of children were born while the families

	GIRL	BOY
MONDAY ‘Dwoda’	<i>Adwowa, Adjoa</i>	<i>Kwadwo, Kojo</i>
TUESDAY ‘Benada’	<i>Abena, Abla</i>	<i>Kwabena, Kobina</i>
WEDNESDAY ‘Wukuda’	<i>Akua, Ekua</i>	<i>Kwaku, Kweku</i>
THURSDAY ‘Yawda’	<i>Yaa, Yawa</i>	<i>Yaw, Yao</i>
FRIDAY ‘Fida’	<i>Efua, Afia</i>	<i>Kofi</i>
SATURDAY ‘Memeneda’	<i>Amma, Ama</i>	<i>Kwame, Kwamena</i>
SUNDAY ‘Kwasida’	<i>Akosua, Akwasiba</i>	<i>Kwasi, Kwesi</i>

FIGURE 1: Day names in Ghana

(The names are androgynous names if not marked with f. = a girl’s name, m. = a boy’s name)

	GIRL/BOY
FIRST	<i>Baako</i>
SECOND	<i>Manu</i>
THIRD	<i>Mensa, Mansa</i>
FOURTH	<i>Anan, Anani</i>
FIFTH	<i>Enu</i>
SIXTH	<i>Nsia</i>
SEVENTH	<i>Asong, Nsonowa</i>
EIGHTH	<i>Awotwi</i>
NINTH	<i>Nkruma</i>
TENTH	<i>Baduwa and Baidoo f., Badu m.</i>

FIGURE 2: Positional names in Ghana

stayed abroad. The parents were eager to continue the naming traditions from home, including the custom of giving the children a *day name* indicating the day of the week the child was born and a *positional name* which corresponds to the birth position among the siblings in the family. In addition, the children were given one or more names which we will discuss later. In figure 1 and 2 are the names as recounted by my interviewees (cf. also [Madubuike 1994](#), 63 ff.).

Among the children born in Tromsø of Ghanesian parents we therefore find names like *Akosua* (girl born on a Sunday), and *Kwabena* (boy born on a Tuesday), and the parents have told me in interviews that it was important for them to carry on this particular naming tradition as an important part of the child’s ethnic identity. One mother told me that after the many years of colonization and dominant, overwhelming use of Christian names in an English form, she was very concerned that her children should have traditional Ghanesian Akan names. The name is part of the national-ethnic identity she wanted her children to have. The

1st generation:		<i>Ali</i>	<i>Warsame</i>	<i>Jama</i>
2nd generation:	<i>Mohamed</i>	<i>Ali</i>	<i>Warsame</i>	
3rd generation:	<i>Hassan</i>	<i>Mohamed</i>	<i>Ali</i>	

FIGURE 3: Traditional Somalian and Muslim naming

tradition to honour a good friend or a relative by naming a child after this person is however strong, my Ghanesian informants recount. The above mentioned girl Akosua e.g. has a Ghanesian name after her grandmother in addition to her *day name*, while the boy Kwabena also has got a name after a good friend of the family. It is tradition to give the child the name of a person with good qualities, hoping and expecting that the child will inherit the same good attributes and in this way a part of the original name bearer's identity. If it turns out that the friend or relative after whom the child was named, does something reprehensible, the parents might however omit the name to avoid any damage done to the child. The children of the Ghanesian students born in Norway do have a whole set of individual names, just as their siblings born in Ghana have. Consequently children born within a linguistically and culturally Ghanesian domestic environment are pragmatically given names. When a child enters the predominantly Norwegian environment in kindergarten or school, it is simple to switch between the various names. My informants tell me that outside the family circle the children use the name that is most easy to pronounce and use for their Norwegian teachers and friends.

In families where both parents come from Somalia there is a strong determination to carry on the names and the patrilinear naming tradition from home. The Somalians are Muslims, and they adhere to the traditional Muslim patrilinear system. The children are given an individual gender-specific name in the first position, then the father's individual name and finally the individual name of the paternal grandfather. For each generation the last name is omitted, and the newcomer's individual name is placed in front, as we see in Figure 3.

The Somalians are a nomadic people divided into 12 clans, and the awareness and pride of belonging to the specific clan is strong. Many Somalians recount that they easily can reel off the names of their paternal ancestors for more than fifteen generations (Reisæter 2005, 127). Among the Somalians living in Tromsø we find traditional Muslim names such as *Nasra* f. and *Nadra* f. and *Ahmed* m. and *Mustafa* m., or specific Somalian names like *Aragan* f. and *Warsame* m. The name complex with the three names in a prescribed pattern identifies the individuals linking them to the greater family history and lore and securely placing them in the clan. Among the Somalians and similar to other Muslims the respect for and devotion to the Prophet Muhammad is profound, and his name has a special position among the Muslims. This is a time honoured practice. "It would not hurt

any of you if in his house were one or two Muhammad”, said the Prophet himself who also reportedly stated “If someone has four sons and does not call any of them by my name, he has wronged me” (Schimmel 1997, 29).

The Ghanesians may give their children the name of another person hoping that the child will share some of the attributes and characteristics of its namesake, as the Muslims do by naming their children after the Prophet Muhammad (Alford 1988, 74). In many of the Somalian families in Tromsø there is a father or a son named *Muhammad*, and informants noted that preferably the firstborn boy should be called *Muhammad*.

Among families from other countries it is also evident that they are preoccupied with carrying on their national or ethnic naming traditions when naming the children born in Norway, e.g. Divya f. and Prithvi m. (India) and Navalán and Aathuran (Sri Lanka).

[2.2] *Adaption to Norwegian naming conventions*

Even among parents who come from countries with naming traditions contrary to Norwegian customs, or among immigrant parents who may hope to move home one fine day, it is common to find examples indicating that certain adaptations to Norwegian standards had already taken place. Parents attempted not to choose names that would be very difficult to use in Norway because of spelling, pronunciation, or an opaque name that could lead to negative or comical connotations. In the name study from Tromsø covering the period 1976–1996 (Reisæter 2001) and later research among bilingual families, it has become evident that the parents spent considerable effort reflecting on the fact that the names should not create problems when used both in Norway and in the parents’ native country. This is also obvious in the interviews I have carried out over several years since 2001.

The Somalian parents have, as mentioned earlier, chosen Muslim or specifically Somalian names. The majority of the names are however relatively short and not difficult to pronounce for the common Norwegian, e.g. *Leyla*, *Nadra*, *Nasra* and *Omar*. The Somalians are also preoccupied with retaining their traditional naming practices consisting of three individual names (cf. Figure 3). This system didn’t accord with Norwegian name legislation prior to the new Personal Names Act that came into effect in 2003. The old law required that a child had her/his mother or father’s last name (surname) as its surname. When following this rule, the Somalians had to leave out the paternal grandfather’s (or father’s name) in their children’s name. The Somalians I have interviewed were rather unhappy about this, but adapted to Norwegian law officially. Among themselves, however, they would use the names in the traditional Somalian order; individual name, father and paternal grandfather’s individual names.

When focusing on name choices in families in which one parent is a Norwegian and the other born outside the Nordic countries, there are clear examples of

what I have in earlier presentations called compromise names, with division into various sub-groups (Reisæter 2007, 283 ff). Such names may not only be compromises between the naming traditions of two countries, but can also be regarded as a compromise between continuation of native tradition and an adaption to Norwegian tradition. Let us look at some examples with individual double names of children with a parent from Norway and the other parent from the country in parenthesis:

Arin Erlend m. (Iran), *Erik Carlos m.* (Peru), *Isabel Montira f.* (Thailand), *Kanayo Sindre m.* (Nigeria), *Malkit Svein m.* (India), *Per Diogo m.* (Brazil), *Rami Henrik m.* (Libanon), *Stine Un f.* (South-Korea) and *Tshepiso Ane f.* (South Africa).

Among the names representing the Norwegian parent we find both Nordic names like *Erik*, *Erlend*, *Sindre* and *Svein* and names well-known and often used like *Henrik* and *Isabel*. Worth noticing is that the names that are infrequent in Norway still are short and easy to pronounce. Some of them are graphically and phonetically similar to names in Norwegian use, e.g. *Un*. This is a Korean name, and it clearly resembles the Norwegian name *Unn*. *Rami* is an Arabic name, but it resembles *Remi*, an individual name familiar to Norwegians. One of the names above is also a variant of a name that is well-known in Norway; *Carlos* = *Karl*.

Another type of adaption and compromise is taking place when names are taken into consideration that are in use in both parental countries by choosing names that are well-known in both countries. There will however be a phonetic variation and different spelling, and the parents have to decide upon the one or the other variant. An example of this practice would be *Frants Lorents* with Norwegian-Peruvian roots. The two names are officially registered in an adjusted Norwegian form, but at the same time they are well-known in Peru as *Francisco* and *Lorenzo*.

When the family for example is either Norwegian-Moroccan or Norwegian-Somalian, and both Muslim and Christian name traditions are relevant, there are initially few mutual names from which to select. But in Christian-Muslim families there are many examples of children given names from the Old Testament, names like *Adam*, *David*, *Isak*, *Jonas*, *Josef*, *Miriam* and *Sakarias* (here in adjusted Norwegian forms). In this way the Muslim side of the family is bestowing upon the child in Norway one of the names that is also a continuation of the naming tradition from the Quran. A hadith after the Prophet Muhammad urges the faithful: "Call your children by the names of the prophets", and the names of the 28 prophets have been frequently used among the Muslims (Schimmel 1997, 28–29). Among these names are many familiar names from the Bible, e.g. *Da'ud* (*David*), *Ibrahim* (*Abraham*), *Isa* (*Jesus*), *Ishaq* (*Isak*), *Isma'il* (*Ismael*), *Mika'il* (*Mikael*), *Musa* (*Moses*), *Nuh* (*Noa*), *Sulayman* (*Salomon*), *Yahya* (*Johannes*), *Ya'qub* (*Jakob*), *Yunus* (*Jonas*), *Yusuf* (*Josef*) and *Zakariya* (*Sakarias*). For the Norwegian-Christian side of the family these are also well-known traditional names. In addition these names are popular in Nor-

way at the present, being part of the fashion of naming children after the great-grandparents, who were of a generation where such names were commonly used.

[3] NAMES OF ADULT IMMIGRANTS — AND ADAPTION

Most adult immigrants keep the names they carry when arriving in Norway, and they are in this way retaining the tradition from home. Various factors, however, can lead to adapting names to accomodate to the society the immigrant is joining. This might happen upon arrival to Norway, because of bureaucratic measures or errors, or because the name is often misspelled or wrongly and badly pronounced. It may also be a complete change of one or more of the names in the name complex, because of a change in civil status, political or religious conditions, or the negative or comical connotations the society at large may harbour towards the immigrant's name. Most people identify so strongly with their names that a name change almost inevitably affects their sense of self, according to Richard D. Alford (Alford 1988, 86). Now let us focus on such changes.

[3.1] *Upon arrival to Norway*

A number of individuals interviewed speak about their names being misspelled and altered after their arrival in Norway. The change may also have taken place in their native country. According to Norwegian immigration policy the name has to be registered at the police and later at the Municipal Population Register (Reisæter 2005, 255 ff.). Some of the immigrants simply give up and let the misspelling pass by, while others immediately protest. Some react a little later when they have settled in Norway and gradually understand that a citizen in this country has a legal and common right to protest against bureaucratic mistakes. Roon from Somalia can serve as an example. She had lived in Norway for several years before she dared to contact the Municipal Population Register Office. She then told the authorities that her last name would have to be spelled differently to fully represent the name of her paternal grandfather that she wanted to identify with.

The story of Hamadou from Cameroon is an example of adaption to Norwegian name legislation. He comes from a region in Northern Cameroon where the children born in the 1960ies would be officially registered with only one single name. He was also registered in his passport in this way, but upon arrival in Norway as an exchange student problems quickly arose. Neither the university nor the bank would accept identification documents with only one name, and the solution turned out to be that he doubled his name and was registered as *Hamadou Hamadou*.

[3.2] *Phonetic and unofficial written adaption or change*

The immigrants also have to adapt to hearing their names being pronounced in various ways that reflect adjustment to Norwegian phonetic rules. Most Norwegians have problems with pronouncing foreign names "correctly" because of unfamiliar sounds. For instance the initial sound /ʃ/ will become /j/ in the name *Jalal* (m.) and /x/ become /k/ in the name *Khalid* (m.) (cf. the IPA system). Some immigrants choose to alter their names unofficially, e.g. among fellow workers or fellow students, like the Chinese student named *Shuai*. He experienced that his name was always mispronounced and difficult to remember, and consequently decided to call himself *Rice*, knowing that this was something Norwegians readily associated with China. Work mates of Abdulrahman from Tanzania found out that it was much easier to call him *Ali*, and the husband of Jansri from Thailand decided to call his wife *Jensine*. The mentioned immigrants would have preferred to be addressed by their real names, as part of their identity, but they discovered that in the Norwegian mainstream society it was simply easier and more practical to adapt. In this way exterior circumstances forces the individual to renounce a valuable part of her/his identity.

This is an interesting parallel to what happened with Norwegian immigrants in the United States in the 19th century, when American fellow workers were quick to find American substitutes for names that they were unwilling or unable to imitate (Haugen 1969, 206 ff.), e.g. *Guri* or *Guro* > *Julia*, *Hans* > *Henry*, *Sigurd* > *Sam*. The Norwegian immigrants tended to accept the names given them by their associates, Haugen says, but the double standard might prevail: an American name at work, a Norwegian name at home (loc.cit.)

[3.3] *Name changes because of a new civil or religious status, or for political or practical reasons*

In many societies across the world there might be one or more name changes of individuals throughout a life time, changes which can reflect or reinforce identity changes. Many societies institutionalize name changes to coincide with, and reinforce, expected identity changes. At entry into adulthood, or marriage, or parenthood individuals may receive new names to underscore the transformation that they are undergoing (Alford 1988, 81). The change of women's surnames when marrying is customary and well-known in many countries and for the purpose of this study Thai immigrant women in Tromsø can serve as an example. The majority of Thai women marrying a Norwegian take their husband's surname. My Thai interviewees tell me that they do this because it is a tradition they know from home, because it is the wish of their Norwegian husband, and because they want to adapt to the Norwegian society. There is an additional practical reason; when they give birth to children in Norway it is important that the mother and child share the same surname and are represented with this name in the pass-

port, otherwise there will be problems with the Thai authorities when entering and leaving Thailand. Quite frequently the Thai-Norwegian marriage ends in divorce, and several Thai interviewees tell that they would rather change back to their Thai maiden surname than keep the name of their former Norwegian husband. They do not do this, however, because of the practical questions related to their passport and Thai authorities, and often choose to wait until the children are older and there will be fewer problems with a name change. Their reasoning is understandable: "I really want to retain my maiden name one fine day, because it is my Thai name that really is me", a Thai informant told me.

A person might also change her or his name in an attempt to rid themselves of an unwanted identity. In Norway Iranian refugees who escaped from the Ayatollah regime have changed their Muslim name into a pre-Islamic Persian name, in this way disapproving of the political/religious rule and stating their identification with the ancient Persia. Iranians in Tromsø who have converted to Christianity have exchanged their Muslim name with a Christian name, just as Norwegian converts to Islam have adopted a Muslim name to state their new religious identity. Besides religious and political reasons for name change there are other more psychological motives as well. Most Thai names are unknown and opaque for the Norwegians, and they might be homophonic with Norwegian appellatives which give negative or comical connotations. There are examples in Tromsø of Thai women who have changed their names because of this, fearing that their children would be mobbed and teased because of the "queer" Thai name. This can easily also be the case with opaque names from other countries and cultures, and e.g. a young Somalian changed his name because his Norwegian friends told him that his name alluded to excrement.

The Ghanesian immigrants often have a Christian baptismal name in an adjusted English form (e.g. *Daniel, George, Jane*). They adapt to the Norwegian society by using the name in the official sphere. At home or among Ghanesian friends they prefer their *day name* (cf. Figure 1). Other immigrants adapt to the society at large by altering one or more names officially or unofficially. Still they will use the name in its original form in a more private sphere. This reflects the private, ethnical side of their identity in contrast to the more official "Norwegian" side. On an even more familiar and personal level pet names are frequently an issue. Again the Thai women in Tromsø can serve as examples. In their social Thai network in town all the women have a pet name. This name is so frequently used that my Thai informants often have a problem with remembering the official name of the person in question. A continuation of the pet name tradition from home is an intimate and consoling bond to their home country.

A particular reason for changing names has recently dominated the mass media. Immigrants who often speak fluent Norwegian apply for jobs that they are qualified for, but which they don't get because of their "strange" foreign name.

When calling the job again, and using a Norwegian name, the response is far more positive. An article in the Oslo newspaper *Aftenposten* March 11th, 2009 referring to research on immigrants, names and employment showed a picture of the immigrant *Hamsa Mohamed* from Somalia who have changed his name to *Kevin Sander*, believing the name change will make it easier for him to get a job. Hopefully this name change will make life in Norway less troublesome for the young Somalian. It is nevertheless an illustration of what should be an unnecessary adaption to Norwegian standards and a needless identity change that most probably will have an impact on his sense of self and lead to various reactions among other Somalians.

[4] CONCLUSION

We may have short or long name complexes, easily recognizable and well known, or opaque and unusual for the common Norwegian. But for the immigrants as well as for the ethnic Norwegian the personal name is an important part of the individual. For the immigrant the name additionally often is a pronounced part of his or her ethnic identity and an individual and collective sense of solidarity with the country of origin. The importance placed on a name was restated frequently throughout my interviews with immigrants to Norway, regardless of country of origin. The Somalian immigrant Raquia thus was discouraged and resigned when the Municipal Population Register Office asked her to omit one of the names in her name complex because the bureaucrats found it too long and complicated. She had just recently arrived in Norway and didn't dare to protest. The Dutch immigrant Ineke had lived in Norway for many years and then one day entered the Police Office with her two individual names and two surnames to apply for a new passport. "Why don't you go to the Municipal Population Register Office and have one of your names omitted?" she was asked. Ineke was so perplexed over this suggestion that she was dumbfounded, but soon indignation got the upper hand. Her conclusion was that the police only cared about the practical aspect of the name complex and were unwilling to comprehend the personal importance of the name as a symbol of identity, family relation and tradition.

Immigrants and name choice in Tromsø — continuation or adaption? Summing up we see that most immigrants try to do both, either officially or unofficially. And in the bilingual families few immigrants are only preoccupied with a continuation of naming traditions from their native country when considering a name for their children. Most families also have an adaption to Norwegian conditions in mind.

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