

What's in a Name?

Understanding and Correctly Pronouncing Refugee Names

Cultures from which many refugees originate have naming traditions that often don't follow the American standard of first, middle, then family name. You may not be able to tell who is related to whom by last name. A newly arrived refugee may not know what you mean by "family name" or "surname". In many cultures women do not change their name when they marry. Some cultures use only one individual name per person, based upon personal characteristics or the time of birth for example, which is then broken up by syllables during the resettlement process to fit into our computer systems in the U.S. in order to be assigned social security numbers. Other cultures refer to people by kinship or "call names" rather than their formal or legal names. Due to differences in alphabets, spellings of names may also vary. Your safest route is to simply ask someone what they would prefer to be called, and do your best to pronounce it the same. Don't be afraid to ask them to repeat their name or spell it for you if they are able. Your name will likely sound just as strange and hard to pronounce to the newly arrived refugee as their name seems to you. In fact, many refugee cultures may prefer to call you by your title (such as "teacher") or Miss/Mr because it is seen as disrespectful to call someone older or in a respected position by their first name.

Vowels are most commonly pronounced:

A = Ah (as in 'awesome')

E = Eh (as in 'egg')

I = Ee (as in 'ski')

O = Oh (as in 'only')

U = Oo (as in 'tulip')

Did You Know?

January 1st birthdays: Some people come from countries with different calendars, home births, or lack of government birth certificates. If the exact date of birth is unavailable, refugees will be assigned January 1st as their date of birth during the immigration process.

The name adjustment process during immigration is not universal and may vary country to country. To illustrate, let's look at cultures who typically assign one individual name per person. Afghan women are sometimes assigned the acronym "FNU" (First Name Unknown) on resettlement forms if they only self-report one name to the officer or person assisting them. So a girl named Husna, for example, is now legally named Fnu Husna in the United States. It would not be appropriate for you to refer to her as Fnu; she should be called by her actual name, Husna. Single names from Burma/Myanmar, however, are broken up by syllable. An example of this is the name Ehlawsoe ("love forever"); on resettlement paperwork Ehlawsoe becomes Eh Law Soe. It would not be appropriate to refer to that person as Eh, however, unless they are OK with the shortened version.

Naming Traditions of Burma/Myanmar

- People from Burma do not have first, middle, or last names – they have one name that should be said in its entirety unless that person has stated a different preference.
- Names from Burma/Myanmar have personal meaning. Americans may better understand this if compared to traditional Native American names like Standing Bear or Crazy Horse. Just like you probably wouldn't address Crazy Horse by the shortened version of just Crazy, dropping part of someone's full name from Burma can change the meaning entirely.
- Names are often based upon what was happening at the time of the birth or pregnancy. Example: Su Na Mi = born during a tsunami. Pee Mee = grandmother was away
- Given names are somewhat private and often not casually shared
- People from Burma normally address others not by legal name, but rather by terms denoting a relationship or position; Sister, Uncle, Teacher, etc.
- People may add "Saw" or "Naw" to their name = Mr./Ms. respectively

Burma/Myanmar has over 100 official ethnic groups. The largest persecuted majority resettled in the United States are the Karen (pronounced Kuh-rin). Common Karen names you may encounter are:

- K'nyaw - Karen
- Gay – Good/Nice
- K'paw – Light or spider
- Lah – Moon or green or month
- Bah Soe Gay – Blessing
- Pee Bi - Bi's grandmother
- Soe – Higher
- Paw – Flower
- Mu - Woman
- Htoo – Gold or kick
- Hsar - Star
- Eh – Love
- Htee - Water
- Eh Taw – True Love

Names commonly mispronounced by Americans:

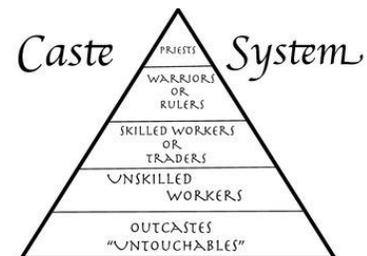
- Kya = Jyah (or Chya) - Not Jy-ya, but rather as one fluid sound
- Kyaw = Jaw (or Chaw)
- Kyi = Chee
- H at the start of a name (like Htoo), is often too hard for Americans to hear so it's best just to think of it as silent (like Too)

The Karenni are a separate ethnic group from Burma/Myanmar. Karenni is an entirely different language with a different alphabet than the Karen. Karenni are often easier to identify because they typically use the sound Reh to denote male gender and Meh to denote female gender. For example, someone named Bu Reh is a Karenni male, while someone named Bu Meh is a Karenni female. Their official paperwork will have their names listed as first name Bu, last name Reh or Meh, but again you would not want to say those syllables separately when actually speaking with the person. You would say the complete name: Bu Meh or Bu Reh.

Naming Traditions of Bhutanese-Nepali

Bhutanese-Nepali names do usually follow a three-part standard like Americans of First, Middle, Last names.

- First names are not always gender-specific; the same name may be used for males or females. There may be a mother named Chandra with a son named Chandra, for example.
- Naming ceremonies take place 11 days after birth. Often an auspicious member of the community (such as a lama or priest) chooses the name based on birthdate, horoscope, or some other spiritual connection.
- Middle names are gender specific.
- As there are limited acceptable names to choose from, inevitably many people share the same combination of first and second names. To resolve the ambiguity an informal nicknaming system comes into play. Bhutanese-Nepali people typically use a “call-name” with family or friends that may sound nothing like their formal first name. They may be unaccustomed to responding to their formal name when only recently arrived in the U.S.
- A person's last name historically denoted their caste.
 - The caste system creates a social hierarchy, identifying individuals' position in society and influencing their choice of spouse, as well as other social relationships.
 - Caste dictates an individual's profession and role in society.



Names commonly mispronounced by Americans:

- 'Sh' is more like a double 'SS' sound; example Dinesh = Diness
- The emphasis should stress the first syllable; examples: Tamang = TAH-mahng; Gurung = GOO-rung
- Rai = Rye, not Ray

Naming Traditions of South Sudan:

There are hundreds of different Sudanese tribes, each with their own cultures, languages, and dialects. In this document we will only focus on the two largest tribes.

Dinka Tribes

- Generally chosen from the names of ancestors and clan totems
- A child's name is combined with that of their father, grandfather or even the founder of the clan. The importance of the paternal lineage is stressed to children from an early age. A child may be taught to recite his father's lineage to the most distant traceable ancestor.
- Children's names often reflect the circumstances of their birth.
- Upon attaining adulthood, men traditionally ceased to refer to themselves by their birth names. In its place they adopt 'ox-names', derived from the characteristics of their favorite cattle.

Nuer Tribes

- Both men or women may choose to be called by an 'ox-name'.
- "Nya-" meaning "daughter of" is the standard prefix used for female names. For example, Nyakuoth means daughter of God. Americans commonly mispronounce this as two syllables (Ny-uh) when it should be said as one quick syllable – think of the country Kenya. Do we say Ken-ny-uh? No, it's Ke-nya. Same sound should be applied here.
- "Gat-" meaning "son of", is a common prefix for male names.
- Children are commonly given names to mark historical events (ex: "Domaac" meaning "bullet", or "Mac" meaning "fire or gun" given to a child born during times of war. "Nhial" means "rain".

Many South Sudanese have been exposed to missionaries and carry a Christian first name with a Dinka or Nuer language name for the second. The father's name follows, which is then followed by the grandfather's name, and so on. Many Nuer can easily recount ten generations of paternal lineage because they carry those names themselves. Upon immigration to the U.S. it is custom to assign their first name followed by their father's name as their middle name and their grandfather's name as their last name.

Muslim Names (Somalia, Darfur, Iraq, Syria, etc.):

When languages have different alphabets than English, names are given phonetic spellings. Spelling variations of common names may exist, such as Mohamed, Mohammed, and Muhumed. Muslim names are historically based on a genealogical system. People do not simply have first, middle, and last names, but rather a full chain of names.

- 1 - First name (personal name)
- 2 - Father's name
- 3 - Grandfather's name
- 4 – Great-grandfather's name
- 5 – And so on

Usually a three-part name is legally determined upon immigrating to the U.S.:

Example: Somali People

- The first name is their given name
- The second name is the father's given name
- The third name is the paternal grandfather's given name

Thus siblings, both male and female, will share the same second and third names.

Syrians, on the other hand, may immigrate by using their first name, their father's name, and what would be considered a "family" name. This name may indicate a place of origin (like Al-Baghdadi = of Baghdad), or an occupation/craft (Al-Muhandis = the engineer), or a characteristic (Al-Sadiq = the truthful).

Commonly mispronounced Muslim or Arabic names:

- 'Kh' is not a hard 'K' sound, but rather more of a guttural 'Huh' sound. It may be easiest for Americans to just pretend the K is silent.
Examples: Khalif = Huh-leef Khalid = Hah-leed Sulekha = Su-lay-ha
- Ayan = Eye-yon

Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi Naming Traditions

For whatever reason, names from these two countries are sometimes flipped during the immigration process, so people's first names may be listed as their last names. It's always wise to check with the individual to verify if this is the case. There are hundreds of different tribes, cultures, languages, and dialects in this region. Naming traditions may vary.

- French is one of the official languages. Some people have French names that should be pronounced that way. Example: Benoit = Ben-wah
- For more "American" or "Christian" sounding names, it is important to pronounce each and every vowel. You may think you know how to pronounce someone's name because Americans have the same name, but that is not always the case. For example: Joan should be pronounced Jo-ahn. You pronounce both the o and the a separately. If a name ends with an e, pronounce that e like the e sound in 'egg' or 'get'. Example: Rosine = Ro-seen-e

Did You Know?

Many Americans refer to a shared language of this region as Swahili, but this is incorrect. Swahili is the people. **Kiswahili** (key-swa-hee-lee) is the language of the people.

If you are interacting with people from other cultures, the best way to communicate is openly and honestly. If you have a question, ask it sincerely and in a non-judgmental tone. No one is expected to know every single thing about every other country on Earth. We need to continuously learn from one another. Answer questions about your own culture without taking misperceptions personally. Laugh at the mutual misunderstandings. Help and accept help when needed.

Saying someone's name correctly is step one in helping a new arrival feel seen, heard, and respected.

Now go out there and introduce yourself!