



What is in a Name?

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WHAT WE DO, WHY WE DO

Names form an important part of a person's identity. They serve as conventional labels to identify a person. Bhutan has an interesting naming culture both in terms of how the names are given and used and what they mean or signify.

Giving a new name

Names in Bhutan are not usually passed down from or chosen by parents but they are given through 'a divine intervention'. It is normally a religious figure who is asked to give a name. In principle, when a name is requested, the lama goes into a meditative state of prayers and the name, which comes to his/her mind fortuitously, is considered to be the most auspicious one. In the past, almost all names in Bhutan were given by lamas in such a manner and they denote great Buddhist persons, concepts and principles.

It is a common practice to get new names. If an important lama is visiting a village, throngs of devotees queue up for blessing and many of them would ask for names for the young children. When asked to name a child, the lama can be seen stopping all other activities, thinking momentarily and blurting out a name which comes to the mind. This has become very taxing for some famous lamas who get too many requests that they have resorted to carrying with them a large stock of name combinations printed on slips, which they randomly hand out when they are asked for a name. Some lamas also use the naming tradition to impart their blessing and mark their influence by attaching a part of their own name to the new name. Before giving a name, the lamas or their attendants would generally ask the sex of the child and give the right combination. However, sometimes a lama is asked to name a baby in the womb. A smart lama gets around this problem by giving a name which works for both, while a daring one may give for either sex. If the name corresponds to the sex of the child, the lama gets the credit of having clairvoyance. If the name does not correspond, parents often get a new one. Today, prenatal ultrasound scans help parents overcome this problem for the lamas.

Names are also given by parents with some religious authority or by the priest who writes the horoscope for the newborn child. Sometimes, a priestly elder may randomly open a religious scripture and give the first name he encounters in the book. In the case of names through astrological calculation, children are often named after the days, constellation and heavenly features associated with the time of their birth. Thus, a staggering number of Bhutanese have a day of the week as their first name. Some people have names in association with a holy place or person such as Kinley for the connection with Drukpa Kinley, and Chogyal given during the dance of Shinje Chogyal.

Sometimes, clumsy names such as Nado (Dark), Kado (Fair), Tegpo (Stout) or Kuchu (Small), given by the relatives or friends as terms of endearment, gain currency. A good number of Bhutanese are known by nicknames given by their milieu rather than by the one bestowed by a religious person. Names and clothes of the opposite sex are occasionally used for children in order to avert malicious spirits and misfortunes. This, however, does not persist and children generally grow up with names, which are appropriate for their sex.

New names are mainly given to babies but not restricted to them. Occasionally, even adults get new names as they go through rites of passage such as ordination as a monk or initiation into a tantric practice. These rites signify the beginning of a new life and identity with a new name, outlooks, goals and priorities. In this way, a Bhutanese can get new names at various stages in life and most people get at least a few names. Among the names, the name which gains widest currency is the one by which a person is known. Today, this is generally the name on one's citizenship identity card and school certificates. Also, parents now increasingly choose names for their children.