Personal Names in a Mande (Garo) Village

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The Mandes (Garos), a hill people of northeastern India, have had no fixed inventory of personal names. Instead of choosing a conventional name for a child, parents try to find a sequence of sounds that has rarely or never before been used to name a Mande. Given names often reveal the person's gender but they rarely have any other meaning. Kinship group names, by contrast, are shared by hundreds or even thousands of others. Thus, given names are highly individualizing while kinship group names are not. Searching for ways to preserve tradition and to symbolize their ethnicity, some Mandes want to give their children "real" Mande names. However, is it more traditional to find a new name that has never been used before, or to seek a traditional name where the tradition has been to find something new?

Introduction

Names for people, like names for objects, can group individuals together by calling them by the same name, or they can distinguish individuals by calling them by different names. In Western societies, family names group related people together, while given names distinguish individuals within a family. Generally, Western given names are chosen from a more or less limited set; some European countries even have lists of acceptable names from which all parents are expected to select the names for their children. The stock of family names is often larger than the stock of given names, but most family names are shared by the members of many more than a single nuclear family. Given names alone serve to distinguish siblings from one another and family names are often all that are needed to identify the members of small groups of adults, but both names must be used together if individuals are to be distinguished within the larger community.

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In this article we will describe a strikingly different naming system, one that is used by a tribal people who live in the state of Meghalaya in northeastern India, and across the border in Bangladesh. These people are known to outsiders as "Garos," but they more often call themselves "Mandes" (which in their language also means "human beings") and that is what we will call them here. Unlike Western practice, the Mandes in the village where we collected our data do not select names for their children from an established, limited set. Quite the contrary, they deliberately choose names that have never before, as far as they know, been used for another Mande. The result is a much greater diversity of given names than is found in the West. On the other hand, Mande "family" names, the names that indicate membership in a particular kinship group, may be shared by half the population of a village, and by thousands of people from neighboring villages. Mande given names, then, are far more distinctive than Western given names, but their "family" names associate them with much larger groups than do the family names of Westerners.

The Mandes are often thought of as a hill tribe because the majority, almost half a million, live in a hilly district of northeastern India. Some also live in the surrounding lowlands and about 100,000 live in the very flat lowlands of neighboring regions of Bangladesh. The Mandes, together with the several dozen other tribal peoples in northeastern India, are distinct in several ways from the majority population of the plains. Most of the tribal people speak Tibeto-Burman languages, while the majority speaks Indo-European Assamese or Bengali. Most tribal people also lack the kind of social hierarchy that the caste system brings to other parts of India. Even in their looks, the tribal people are set apart, for they more closely resemble the people of southeast Asia than they do the other citizens of India and Bangladesh. The Mandes, along with the neighboring Khasis and a few smaller groups, are further distinguished by their matrilineal kinship system.

Our data come largely from the Mande village of Rengsanggri, located about 25 kilometers northeast of Tura, the headquarters town of the Garo Hills. Burling (1963; 1997a) reported on the Mande language and the social organization of kinship when he visited this village in the mid-1950s. He was able to revisit the village in early 1997, this time with Hvenekilde. They took a new census and observed both the continuities and the changes that could be seen after the four decades since Burling's earlier research. Burling has also done anthropological

and linguistic fieldwork among Mandes of two villages in Bangladesh (1997b), and we have supplemented our Rengsanggri data with some observations from those villages. Marak, who is a scholar of the Mande language, joined in the analysis of the material after it was collected.

Given Names

A Different Name for Each Individual

In Rengsanggri, each given name belongs to a single individual. In January 1997, 672 people lived in the village. Of these, five were too young to have been named, but among the remaining 667 people 655 had unique names, leaving only 12 people, six pairs, who shared a name. One member of three of the pairs had been born in another village and had later moved to Rengsanggri. One of the names (Kinkin) is a nickname and probably not the name originally given by the parents.[1] Thus there are only two "real" names that are shared each by two people who were born in Rengsanggri. Clearly, the villagers make a deliberate effort to select unique names for their children, and indeed there is a feeling that each person in the village should have a unique name. This feeling seems to be widely shared among Mande villagers. In a Mande village in Bangladesh, a ten year-old girl once asked Burling to tell her the names of his children. This is a stereotyped question among the Mandes, but this girl followed it up by another question that is less common. She also wanted to know the names of Burling's brothers and sisters. When she heard that his daughter and his sister shared a single name, she burst out laughing. She seemed to find this as ludicrous as would a Westerner who learned of two brothers who had identical names. Like the Western rule against giving the same name to two siblings, the Mande avoidance of the same name for a kinsman or a fellow villager hardly has to be explicitly articulated. This seems to be taken so much for granted that it is rarely expressed.

It is almost always possible to avoid reusing the names of a kinsman or fellow villager, even though these groups may include several hundred people. However, since there are more than half a million Mandes, it is impossible to know what every one of them is called. It is well recognized that two unrelated people from different villages or different regions may turn out to have the same name, though this situation is sufficiently odd to attract attention. It is said that during the pre-British period Mande warriors, on learning of a namesake in another

village, would challenge him to combat to test his strength. The challenger felt that he alone merited the name. How often such challenges actually occurred is impossible to know, but the story confirms the oddity that Mandes still feel when they find that two people have the same name. Today, some educated Mandes who share the same name address each other as *Mita*, a word borrowed from Assamese. The Mande language even has a verb, *mingtinga*, that means 'to have a name that clashes with the name of another'. Another Mande verb, *mingsika*, means to compose a new name on the basis of parts of one or two other names, such as creating the name *Coleen* from *Lincoln* by reversing the syllables and omitting one *n*. Mandes who are familiar with Western naming practices sometimes say that there are "no names in Mande," meaning that they have no standard or fixed forms—no names like *Robert* or *Mary* that are shared by hundreds or even thousands of English-speaking people.

The Mandes of Rengsanggri not only avoid reusing the name of a living person, they avoid the names of the dead as well. In the 1950s, Burling collected genealogies of all the Rengsanggri villagers, including the names of as many deceased ancestors as the people could remember. He recalls not a single instance of two related people, dead or alive, who shared the same name. While it is common in the West to name a child for a deceased relative, often a grandparent, the Mandes in Rengsanggri follow no such practice and in fact avoid it, but not because of any taboo on pronouncing a dead person's name. Unlike some people, the Mandes have no more hesitation about mentioning the name of a dead person that about naming a living person, but in Rengsanggri given names are reserved for a single individual not only within that person's lifetime, but even after death. Rengsanggri, however, remains relatively conservative and the prohibition of naming people for ancestors is not so strictly observed everywhere. We know people in Tura, only 25 kilometers from Rengsanggri, who have been deliberately named for their grandparents.

A handful of Rengsanggri names can be linked to Mande myths and traditions, but far fewer than in the West where most given names have a history. In fact we were able to find only six among the 661 different given names used in Rengsanggri that may have links to Mande traditions:

Songdi: May refer to the river Songdu (Brahmaputra).

Singwil: Awil and Singwil are sisters in a myth; Singwil is a river which originates in the Ranggira region in the West Garo Hills.

Rangsi: The name of a god.

Rengta: May be derived from *lengta* 'naked'. This may be a borrowed word, adapted to Mande phonology, as suggested by the change of initial [l] to [r]. Rengta was a Mande chief in the Mahendraganj area in the southwest Garo Hills on what is now the Bangladesh border around the time the British first reached the frontiers of Bengal in the 18th century. The name could have been given to the chief by non-Mandes.

Kanjing: A character in the oral epic *Katta Agana*.

Waldison (*Waldi*): Also a character in the *Katta Agana*.

These few names that may be drawn from Mande tradition make up less than 1% of the total number of different names used in the village; more than 99% of the names have no link to history, mythology, or tradition.

Phonological Shape and Spelling of Given Names

A major consideration in selecting a name is its sound. Most names are meaningless, but people still want them to sound nice. Exactly what "nice" means, of course, is a highly subjective matter, and we have never heard any explicit rules about what makes a name good or desirable. Nevertheless, by examining the names that have been given, we can gain a reasonably clear idea of what is considered desireable in a name.

Mande names in Rengsanggri and elsewhere most often have two syllables. Only five of the Rengsanggri names which we collected were monosyllabic: *Jem, Kin, Sen, Sil,* and *Ram,* and *Ram* belongs to a non-Garo who moved into the village as an adult. To Marak, the native speaker among the authors, the four monosyllabic Mande names seem incomplete, truncated. More three syllable names are found than those with only one, and a few even have four, but the long names that are used for formal purposes, and that are offered to inquisitive census takers, tend in daily use to be abbreviated to more familiar disyllables. A few names are reduplicated; they have identical first and second syllables. Many of the reduplicated names probably began as joking names but they have become customary and are in daily use. Apart from the number of syllables, there seem to be no restrictions on the form of

a name, other than those imposed by the phonology of the Mande language. Even when names are borrowed from other languages, such as *Debi,* from Bengali *Devi* 'goddess', and *Jentilmen* from English *gentleman*, they are generally modified to fit Mande phonology. In this semi-literate community, given names are rarely written, and this probably eases the phonological adaptation of the name.[2]

Most often, the parents of a child choose the name, but parents sometimes ask a friend or older kinsman to make the choice. As in the West (Nuessel 1992, 10), most Mande parents choose a name for their children primarily on the basis of its sound. In a few families we can see a fondness for certain sounds and syllables; perhaps the repetitive sounds are a way of giving unity to the group of siblings. The six siblings of one family were named *Mentil-a* (f), *Re-pil-a* (f), *Kre-ni-ta* (f), *Rel-ip* (m), *Wil-en* (m), and *Ripja* (m). The three girls' names have the same rhythm, each having three syllables and the same sequence of vowels; the three boys' names have the typical two syllables.

Meaning of Given Names

Most of the names given to children in Rengsanggri are unique; they are newly contrived sequences of vowels and consonants and most of them carry no meaning, either for the speakers of the language or for the linguist searching for etymologies. Not only do Rengsanggri people avoid names that already belong to someone else, they also seem to be reluctant to use forms already used as meaningful words in Mande, or in any other language. In some societies the semantic content of a name is considered so important that it can influence a child's future. In the West, many names are linked to nature or to religious tradition. The Scandinavian names *Bjørn* and *Ulf,* for example, have the transparent meanings 'bear' and 'wolf', respectively. English names such as *Katherine, John, Peter* and scores of others derive from Christian tradition, and versions of these names are found throughout the Western world. Even names that are no longer semantically transparent can generally be traced back to a meaningful origin, often in Latin or Greek. Even if most Westerners do not know the original meaning of a name, they are generally aware that the name meant something at one time or another. By contrast, most Rengsanggri names have no history and they invite no search for meaning. With the exception of gender, any meaning that a borrowed name may have had in the donor language seems to be essentially irrelevant for the Mande borrowers.

While the vast majority of the given names in Rengsanggri lack meaningful parts, we do find a few possible exceptions. The following forms that are found in a few names do have meanings in Mande:

-bat is a comparative suffix meaning 'more' and is found in the names *Chinbat, Rebat, Silbat, Salbat, Walingbat*, and *Wilbat*. It may convey a sense of "more" in these names; however, since the first syllables of several of these names have little obvious meaning, it is not clear what there is "more" of.

chi, meaning 'water' is used in *Namchi* and *Simchira*. *Nam* means 'good' and *sim* means 'dark, black', so the names can be understood to mean 'good water' and 'dark water', respectively.

man is a truncated form of *mande* meaning 'person' and is found in *Tangman, Rakman, Elman, Tuman,* and a few others.

no means 'younger sister' or more generally 'little girl'. It is one part of *Noji, Norila, Nobi(na), Noleni, Nosen-i, Nomira, Nori-ta,* and *Norikchi*. In Rengsanggri all the names beginning with *No-* are girls' names.

rak means 'strong', and it is used in *Rakmi, Rakman,* and *Rakteng* (*teng* 'bright, shining').

rang means 'gong'. Traditionally, gongs were prized heirlooms, and the names *Rangan, Rangjang,* and *Rangsi* may reflect the value of the gongs.

ring, when used as a suffix, connotes something that is long and straight. This may be part of the meaning of *Ringmi, Ringnan*, and *Ringnon*.

sal means 'sun', and it appears in *Salnara* ('where the sun rises'), *Salnak, Salme ~ Salmi, Salchi, Salseng* (bright sun), and *Salbat* (*bat* 'more').

seng' means 'bright', and is found in *Seng'mit* 'daybreak' as well as in *Salseng*.[3]

sil means 'pretty, handsome' and is used in *Sil*, a nickname, *Silba* (becoming pretty), *Silkami* (forever handsome), *Sil-o, Sil-ti-ra, Silak, Silbat* (more beautiful), *Silbi, Silbin, Silbira, Silcheng, Silchira, Silgra, Silmen, Silnak, Silni Teng'sil*, and *Teng'silbat*.

sim 'dark' is found in *Simchira* 'dark water'. This morpheme has been used by some Mandes in names for children with dark complexions.

tang 'living, alive' is found in *Tangman* and if *man* is taken to be an abbreviation of *mande* 'human being', it could mean 'the person who lives'.

teng'a means 'bright' or 'shine', and it is found in *Teng'chi, Teng'man, Teng'sil*, and *Teng'silbat*.

In addition to these, one of the names mentioned above, *Rengta* 'naked', also has a clear meaning.

More names contain *sil* 'beautiful' than any other syllable to which it is possible to attach a meaning and it seems to be used mainly in names for children. Among the sixteen names that begin with *sil*, ten are for children who, according to our estimates of ages, are eight years old or younger. *Sil* seems to have enjoyed a wave of popularity.

To summarize, fewer than 50 of the 661 names in Rengsanggri have elements that, to Marak, might plausibly be interpreted as having semantic content. Some additional syllables are homophonous with meaningful words, but these are not, it seems, semantically related to those words. The phonotactic rules of Mande allow for only 2294 distinct syllables, and a large proportion of the possible syllables can be used as morphemes with readily identifiable meanings. With such a restricted range of possible syllables, and such a diversity of given names, some homophony is inevitable. Indeed, we find such a low proportion of given names that can plausibly be interpreted to contain elements that are meaningful in the language that we suspect that those who bestow names try, deliberately or otherwise, to avoid meaningful words, just as they most often avoid personal names that have already been used. With so many syllables already preempted for the general vocabulary, however, it is not always possible to avoid them entirely when inventing a name.

Discussions concerning the relationship of names to other kinds of words have tended to focus on the question of whether the meaning of names extends beyond their reference to the particular individual who is named; in other words, do names connote as well as denote? As Gardiner said (quoted by Nicolaisen 1995, 19):

> The question whether names have meaning in the way that other words have meaning has been central to most discussions of the relationship between names and other words (appellatives) for hundreds, if not thousands of years. The question found an extreme answer in Sir Alan Gardiner's dictum: "The purest of proper names are wholly arbitrary and totally without significance," although he admits that "the fact that ... names [like Smith and Brown] have some significance does detract a little, but only a little from their purity." (Gardiner 1954, 19)

In this sense, the given names in Rengsanggri are extremely "pure." Nevertheless, the fact that most Mande names have no "meaning" does

not imply that the names lack significance for a person's fortune in life. Now and then, people feel that their names have brought them bad luck. Occasionally when they have been seriously ill, or when they have survived some other grave difficulty, they attribute their misfortune to their name, and deliberately select a new one. After one Rengsanggri woman broke her arm, she changed her name, perhaps as a way of signaling a new beginning.

Names of Foreign Origin

While the majority of given names in Rengsanggri are original creations, constructed for individual children, a few villagers have names whose origin is foreign. Two non-Mande men who had married Rengsanggri women were living in the village at the time of our census. One is a Nepali Hindu, the other a Bengali Muslim, and of course, their given names, *Ram* and *Ali,* respectively, derive from their background. Several Mandes also have names of foreign origin. As far as we can tell, these foreign names have little or no cultural significance. Since the Mandes in Rengsanggri search quite deliberately for names that have never been used before, foreign names must have a certain appeal. They may have a pleasing sound and they will almost certainly be novel. The fact that Mandes generally attach little cultural or semantic meaning to their names probably makes borrowing easy. Of course, even foreign names are adapted to the phonology of the villagers' language, although the adaptation is not always complete. In older Mande words, for example, [l] occurred only as syllable final and [s] only as syllable initial, yet we find the names *Lusi, Mohes*, and *Rakes* among the names in Rengsanggri. The initial [l] and the final [s]'s help to reveal the foreign source of the names—English or Bengali—but even without such unambiguous signs, the origin of the names is often clear.

The following names show influence from non-Mande neighbors, primarily Bengalis:

Albin-at	Ja-mindro	Mi-nal	Pria
Bi-na	Jasinta	Mi-nu	Ra-kes
Bijonsing	Jisinta	Mi-ta	Rahen
Bisonsing	Jol-endro	Mina	Raju
Bri-nat	Jolmi-nat	Mo-noronjon	Roji-ni
Debi	Kabi-ta	Mohes	Ronjon
Diren	Kiran	Mo-nen	Ru-ma
Hema	Majobal-a	No-mira	Sa-mir
Indira	Mal-i-ni	Nori-ta	

Here, *No-mira* and *Nori-ta* apparently combine the Mande word *No* 'little sister' with *Mira* and *Rita* from Assamese or Bengali.

The following names all show Western influence. We spell them as they are pronounced in Rengsanggri and their English sources should be clear:

Anjela	Eljin	Johon	Nekson
Bal-nadet	Gos-pel	Jo-nes	Pil-ipson
Benja-min	Han-na	Josi-pen	Pil-ison
Bringston	Jentilmen	Lusi	Rubi-na
Debid	Jerom		

In addition to the names themselves, some of the suffixes that distinguish gender are borrowed from other languages. The most frequent suffix for male names is *-son*, which was probably borrowed from English family names like *Johnson* and *Peterson,* while *-dro* as in *Jolendro, -ta* as in *Mi-ta,* and *-nat* (from *-nath*) as in *Jolmi-nat,* all have Indic origins. They may be joined either to genuine foreign names, or to invented sequences of sounds.

The borrowing of foreign names has been established longer in areas where literacy is older than in Rengsanggri. Literacy has come to Rengsanggri only since Burling's visit in the 1950s; at that time only three of the 148 married residents of Rengsanggri had names that appear to have been fully or partially borrowed (*Rujoni, Morison,* and *Wilson*). In 1997, the 43 names listed above, plus 63 others that have borrowed suffixes, show foreign influence, about half from Indic languages and half from English. The average age of the people with names borrowed from the Indic languages of the plains is higher than that of people with names borrowed from English, so a shift in the most frequent source of borrowing seems to have taken place.

We have heard of a number of Mandes from areas other than Rengsanggri who have received the names of famous foreigners. One Mande was named *Truman,* and another *Hitler.* We doubt if either name was bestowed in admiration of the original name holder. We know a woman named *Kohima* after an important town in the Indian state of Nagaland. None of her family had any connection with the town, but the sound was pleasing. We know a man who spells his name *Division* (pronounced *Di-bi-son*), a name that is probably safely unique. Other

people have quite ordinary Western given names, or names constructed from parts of Western names, such as *Wilson, Jackson* (pronounced *Jekson*), *Welington, Milikson, Robert, Natasha, Joanna,* and *Melissa.* Mandes write their language in the Roman alphabet and literate people always spell these name according to English conventions, even if they pronounce them differently. Borrowed names seem always to be given to children of the same gender as foreign bearers of the name. The character of the earlier name holder may not matter, but the gender does.

Given Names and Gender

The conventional given names found in Western countries generally indicate, unambiguously, the gender of the person named. We know that Gary is a man and Mary is a woman, but the gender of someone with a made-up name such as *Dary* would not be obvious. For the majority of the names in Rengsanggri, however, it is possible to make reasonable guesses about gender, even though the names are made up. Gender is most often indicated by the final syllable of a name. By noting the names assigned to males and females in Rengsanggri, and by taking advantage of Marak's intuitive familiarity with Mande naming practices, we can see that a number of final syllables clearly indicate gender.

In Rengsanggri, the following final syllables, given in order of decreasing frequency, are used primarily in names for females:

-jak	31	-chi	13 + 2 male names
-na	31 + 2 male names	-ra	11 + 3 male names
-la	30	-ri	7
-ji	22	-no	4 +1 male name
-me	22	-se	3
-ta	7	-nak	2
-ni	15 + 2 male names		

Of the 323 different female names in Rengsanggri, 208, or 64%, end with one of these syllables.

Other final syllables indicate male gender and none of these are used in any names of females. These syllables are:

-son	40	-nen	5	-rang	3
-seng	20	-man	5	-sang	3
-sing	21	-men	4	-sin	3
-jeng	12	-chang	4	-neng	2
-jen	11	-cheng	4	-ning	2
-bat	11	-don	4	-bal	2
-an	8	-jon	3	-dro	2
-nat	6	-nang	3	-kan	2

Of the 338 male names in Rengsanggri, 180 (53%) have one of these suffixes.

If we consider the final phonemes of the names rather than the final syllables, even more general patterns become apparent. Among the male names in Rengsanggri, no fewer than 266 (88%) end in either [n] or [ŋ], while only 13 female names have one of these final consonants. (Interestingly, [m] does not pattern with the other nasals; only seven male and 3 female names end in [m].) Furthermore, only 1% of male names end in a vowel, but no less than 83% of the female names do, the most frequent vowels being [a] or [i]. Thus, it is surprising that *-jak* is one of the most common indicators of femininity in Rengsanggri. We have no reason to suppose that gender marking is a recent innovation since even the oldest people whom Burling knew in Rengsanggri in the 1950s often had names that unambiguously fit their gender.

Before we undertook the present analysis, Marak, who was not acquainted with the inhabitants of Rengsanggri, guessed at the gender of all the given names of the villagers. Her guesses were correct for 232 female names and 246 male names. She classified only 34 names incorrectly, but she was uncertain about the remaining 149 and did not attempt to classify them. Altogether she was able to classify 72% of the names correctly. Among the 20 male names that she classified as feminine, 13 ended in a vowel, and among the 14 female names that she classified as masculine, only one did so. Thus the intuitions of a Tura resident were quite good, but not perfect. Clearly there are regional differences in naming practices. One of the common feminine endings for Rengsanggri names, *-ji,* was not familiar to Marak, and she did not identify it as an indicator of gender. On the other hand, Mandes in a village in Bangladesh, much further from Rengsanggri than Tura where Marak lives, were also, more often than not, able to guess the gender of Rengsanggri names, so there appear to be widespread patterns within

which there is local variation. Just how widespread the individual gender markers are remains to be determined. Studies from larger sets of names and from other villages might reveal additional patterns.

Temporary Names and Joking Names (Mingkilakas)

Newborns are not always named immediately and even after a baby has been given a name, people tend to avoid using it until the child is past the period of highest infant mortality. Even small babies need to be called something, however, and baby girls are often called *Nono* (from *no* 'younger sister') while baby boys are called *Jojong* (from *jong* 'younger brother'). Babies may be called *Nono* or *Jojong* until a younger brother or sister arrives, often sometime after the older child is two years old. Then, if the new baby is of the same gender, the baby name will be passed on.

Some Mandes have two or even three given names. These are alternatives and are never used together. One of the given names may be the person's "real" name; that is, the name given by the parents or by someone else at the parent's request. Another name may be a *mingkilaka*, a 'nickname', literally a 'joking name'. Some mingkilakas are simple reduplications such as *Kinkin, Tiktik,* and *Benben*. When taking the census we were not concerned with joking names, so the exact status of the reduplicated names cannot be known without a return visit to the village. Most joking names are acquired in infancy. Later, they are generally dropped in favor of the individual's real name, but some continue to be used throughout adulthood, and may even be used more often than the more formal given name. A few individuals are referred to now by one name and now by another, apparently quite randomly. We have never been confused by a name that was used for two individuals, but we have often been confused by two names that were used on different occasions for the same person.

When and How Mandes are Named

Mandes in the Garo Hills have no tradition of formal or elaborate naming ceremonies, and little significance seems to be attached to the act of naming itself. Burling noted that in Rengsanggri in the 1950s the attending midwife sometimes gave the baby a name and we found that in the 1990s the parents, or someone invited by the parents, might give a name instead; it seems unlikely that, even in the 1950s, naming

practice was uniform or fixed. The decision about who is to give the name simply does not seem to be a terribly important matter. In a village a few kilometers east of Rengsanggri the two non-Mande authors visited, quite by chance, a household where a baby had been born on the previous day. They had never before visited this home, or even the village, and they had not been acquainted with the family. Nevertheless, the father urged them to give the baby its name.

In Bangladesh, Mandes who are Catholics are given baptismal names, almost always biblical. The priest, having a greater familiarity with biblical names, may select the name himself, and parents seem willing to accept his decision, though the priest may consult with the parents before the ceremony. Occasionally a baptismal name becomes the ordinary given name that is used for everyday purposes, but more often a quite different name is used in daily address and reference. In Bangladesh this everyday name is known by the Bengali term *dak* name. *Dak* is sometimes translated as 'nickname' but it is quite different from a *mingkalaka*, which is more frivolous and more accurately translated as 'joking name'. *Dak* names are simply the names used for everyday purposes. For most people, their dak name is used on all except the most formal, legal, or ceremonial occasions.

In Rengsanggri no one seemed to have received a biblical name—or any new name—upon conversion to Christianity. The majority of the people living in Rengsanggri are now Baptists. The Baptists do not give converts new names at baptism, and the baptismal records of the Baptist congregation of Rengsanggri contain the same Mande names that were already in use by the people. The baptismal names recorded for the oldest people in the village were the same as those used when Burling recorded them forty years earlier, well before the arrival of Christianity. The people reported the same names when our census was conducted in 1997.

Names for Ma'chongs and Exogamous Groups

In additional to their given names, all Mandes have two names that identify the larger matrilineal kinship groups to which they belong. The kinship names expressing group relationships are acquired at birth and they are retained, unchanged, throughout a person's lifetime. Mande society is matrilineal; individuals are automatically assigned to the kinship group of their mother. As this implies, they also belong to the same group as their brothers and sisters, their mother's brothers and

sisters, their mother's mother, and all other kinsmen who are related through women. The Mandes themselves do not call the words for their kinship groups "names." More precisely they do not call them *bimung*, which is the Mande word that most often translates "name." When Mandes speak English, and often when they speak Mande as well, the words that identify their kinship groups are generally referred to as "titles" although they have little in common with the "Mr.," "Mrs.," "Dr.," and "Captain," that are called titles by English speakers in Britain and America. To fully identify someone, Mandes use a person's given name followed by the "titles" of their kinship groups.

Each Mande belongs to a named matrilineal kinship group known as a *ma'chong*. Several hundred Mande ma'chongs could probably be identified, although any single village generally has only a few, and in many villages most or all of the women belong to no more than three or four. Often, more than half the women of a village belong to a single ma'chong, the one that is recognized as the central ma'chong of that village.

Everyone then, both men and women, belongs permanently to a ma'chong, always the mother's. In addition, the ma'chongs are grouped into a smaller number of much larger named groups. The two largest of these are called "Sangma" and "Marak," and in some Mande regions, everyone belongs to one of these two. This is the case in Rengsanggri. In such regions, it is, or was until recently, the rule that a Sangma was not allowed to marry a Sangma nor a Marak to marry a Marak. All marriages joined people from opposite groups. In other parts of the Mande area, other smaller groupings of ma'chongs have less restrictive marriage rules. The most widespread of these additional groups is called "Momin," while two others, "Shira" and "Areng," are even smaller. These groups all allow marriage to someone from any of the other groups, but marriage within their own group is forbidden. The word *chatchi* has sometimes been used for the larger exogamous groups of Sangma, Marak, and the rest, but at least in some dialects *chatchi* has the more general meaning of 'kin', so we will simply call them "exogamous groups."

Every Mande, then, has a given name, a ma'chong name (or title) and a name of one of the exogamous groups, most often either Sangma or Marak. For formal purposes, Mandes who live in the Garo Hills identify themselves by these three names. Thus a man might be known as Jengnon A'gitok Sangma and he could be married to Ringmi Chambigong Marak. *A'gitok* and *Chambigong* are names (or "titles") of

ma'chongs that belong respectively to the Sangma and Marak exogamous groups. Often the ma'chong name is abbreviated so these people might be identified as Jengnon A. Sangma and Ringmi Ch. Marak (Ringmi [si eč] Marak). People readily refer to one another in this way, and this is how their names appear in official records. Even a person's given name is occasionally abbreviated to an initial, so that a list of Mande authors in a table of contents could include J. A. Sangma, R. Ch. Marak, and B. N. Momin, followed by a few other Sangmas and Maraks with a scattering of Momins and others. In a few of the formal circumstances that come with modern life, people may even be identified and addressed as "Mr. Sangma," "Mrs. Marak," or "Dr. Momin," but since neither men nor women change their ma'chong membership or any part of their name at marriage, Mrs. Marak is likely to be married to Mr. Sangma. In ordinary village life, such modern ways of talking are rare, though they are well known.

People had surely been identifying themselves by their ma'chong and their exogamous group membership since long before the British introduced the written records that required formal names, but we do not know when people first began to join their three names in a string, as they so easily do today. Perhaps that practice began only during the British period, but it may be much older; in any case it is now well established. Superficially, these Mande names appear to conform closely to Western practice. A given name comes first and a "family" name comes at the end. Even the middle initial looks strikingly Western, or at least American.

The apparent conformity of these names to Western practice hides a deeper difference, however. The ma'chong names and names for exogamous groups refer to groups that are important in the daily life of the people. The number of ma'chongs represented in any village is generally limited, so dozens or even hundreds of people in a village generally belong to the same ma'chong. The ma'chongs provide much of the social framework for village life.

Because there are so few ma'chongs in each village, the ma'chong titles are much less helpful in distinguishing people from one another than are Western family names. Instead of distinguishing among individuals, ma'chong titles bind the members of a ma'chong together. The members of a ma'chong who live in a single village or in a single group of neighboring villages depend upon one another. They are jointly responsible for one another's behavior and they gather in times of crisis to solve family and group problems.

The names of the exogamous groups do even less to distinguish individuals from one another. In many villages, exactly half the married people are Sangmas, and the other half Maraks. These titles hardly distinguish individuals at all, and with Sangmas and Maraks mixed together wherever Mendes live, they cannot possibly act as independent social groups. Nevertheless, the titles do regulate marriage and they govern the use of kinship terms. All Sangmas of roughly the same age are, in an extended sense, regarded as "brothers" and "sisters," and no Sangma should think of finding a spouse from among the Sangmas, even if no direct relationship can be traced.

The Mandes in the two villages in Bangladesh where Burling has lived use their titles in a slightly different way than those who live in Rengsanggri. In particular, they less often use Sangma and Marak as if they are family names. If they lived in Bangladesh, Jengnon and Ringmi would probably identify themselves simply as Jengnon A'gitok and Ringmi Chambigong as do a few people in the Garo Hills. Even in Bangladeshi villages, of course, people are clear about the exogamous group to which their ma'chong belongs, but in identifying someone, they rarely add the name of that larger group to the name of the ma'chong. Nevertheless Marak and Sangma do find their way into official government records in Bangladesh just as they find their way into Indian records (Singh 1996, 28).

Uses of Names

Given names are not the only words that Mandes use to refer to others or to address others, and the alternatives to given names greatly complicate the choices that speakers must make. Ma'chong names such as A'gitok and Chambigong, and exogamous group names such as Marak and Sangma are not, of course, used when addressing familiar people, or even when referring to people in everyday conversation, but even given names may be avoided. Everyone addresses children by their given names, and older people can, without discourtesy, use given names when addressing people whom they know well or who are substantially younger than themselves. Good friends of about the same age can use given names with each other, though this is surely easier between two men or between two women than between a man and a woman. Except with younger people or close friends, however, Mandes find ways to avoid given names in direct address. Indeed, it would be a distinct discourtesy, an unwarranted presumption of intimacy or

superiority, to call someone much older than oneself by a given name. Even husbands and wives rarely call each other by given names. The few who do are quite self-consciously defying the established rules and perhaps striving for some perceived modernity.

Mandes even place some restrictions upon the use of one's own name. It is mildly impolite to ask people directly for their names. People may prefer not to mention their name, and they will occasionally hesitate at a cautious inquiry and say, modestly, "my name is not good." It is more polite to ask a third person for a name, and here there is no reluctance to answer. On the other hand, there is no discourtesy in asking about another's ma'chong, and it is in fact difficult for two Mandes to have dealings with each other if they do not know each other's ma'chongs.

The two most important alternatives to given names are kinship terms and terms constructed from the name of one's oldest child. When people first become parents, or at least when their oldest child first receives a name, others immediately begin to address them as "mother of so-and-so" or "father of so-and-so." If the first child is a daughter named Baljak, for example, the parents will be addressed as Baljakma and Baljakpa, 'mother and father of Baljak'. Once they have become parents, husbands and wives have a suitably friendly way to address each other, and it is generally these terms that they will use with each other for the rest of their lives. When asked what they called each other before their first child was born, some Mandes laugh and admit that the best that they could manage was *oy!*, approximately equivalent to the English *hey!* So regularly are older people addressed and referred to by their son's or daughter's name that young people are often entirely ignorant of the real names of fellow villagers who are a generation or more older than themselves. The name of a child almost becomes the name of its parents. Sometimes even a mingkilaka may become the name of the parents. We know of a couple in a Mande village who are called Dengguma and Denggupa. Literally, *denggu* means 'naughty person', though it is often used for small children in a teasing and affectionate way. Denggu became the mingkilaka of this couple's first child, and so, by extension, they became Dengguma and Denggupa.

The second way to avoid using a given name is to use a kinship term. Two Mandes can always find some sort of real or fictive kinship tie that unites them. They may find that their grandfathers had some relationship or one person may be able to find a distant cousin who has

married into the ma'chong of the other's uncle. If no closer connection can be found, people can always fall back on their Sangma-Marak membership. Two Sangmas of approximately the same age will count as siblings, and they can use sibling terms for each other. A younger Sangma can call a Sangma of an older generation *mama*, the term for mother's brother, and a Sangma can call an older Marak man by one of the terms for father's brother. A Sangma woman can address a Marak woman as *sari* 'sister-in-law' even if no real kinship tie can be traced. Someone who has attained the dignity of age can be addressed respectfully as *ambi* 'grandmother' or *achu* 'grandfather'.

Rengsanggri is a semi-literate village. Many villagers have gone to school and cracked the code of literacy, but very few actually read, either for practical purposes or for pleasure. However, some Mandes from other villages and from the towns of the Garo Hills take part in local and national politics, give public speeches and publish newspaper articles, textbooks, and works of scholarship. The names used in these contexts often include only the author's initials and the name of the exogamous group: S. A. Sangma, or J. P. Marak. Since the majority of Mandes are either Sangmas or Maraks, these public names seem to hide the identity of the authors. Ironically, the uniquely individual given names are obscured by being reduced to their initials. In spite of their apparent similarity to Western names, the real information conveyed by Mande names is very different. For private purposes, Westerners are content with names like Robert and Mary which they share with thousands of other people, but for public purposes they become R. L. Mandelson or M. G. Carpenter, names that are unique or nearly so. Mande given names are close to unique. Their public names are almost anonymous.

Conclusion

Rengsanggri is a fairly conservative village, and we do not know how much variation in naming practices can be found among the other villages and towns in the area. Studies of names used by educated Mandes of the towns might reveal different patterns and perhaps a higher proportion of names with foreign origins than we found in Rengsanggri.

We do know that the Mandes who live in Bangladesh have come under more insistent pressure from other societies than have those who live in Rengsanggri. They have given up slash and burn farming in favor

of wet rice cultivation, educational achievement is higher than it is in Rengsanggri, and in addition to their native Mande, virtually everyone speaks Bengali reasonably well. One sign of these modern influences is that a high proportion of Bangladeshi Mandes have names of Bengali or Western origin. Also, some Mandes in Bangladesh are beginning to worry about the loss of their culture and their distinctive identity. A few have even begun to criticize the practice of giving their children "foreign" names. They would like to see more people selecting what they feel are "real" Mande names.

Two people in Bangladesh have asked Burling if he could provide them with a list of Mande given names. One of these people is a well educated Mande woman who is much concerned with the preservation of her people's culture. The other is a foreign missionary who is similarly concerned with helping the Mandes to maintain their identity and way of life. For both of them, the use of so many foreign names seems to symbolize the insistent pressure of the impinging cultures. Resisting foreign names seems to be one symbolic means of maintaining the Mande heritage.

As we hope we have made clear, a list of "genuine" or "traditional" Mande names would be very short. In Rengsanggri, most names are not traditional but made up, constructed anew each time a child arrives. What is traditional is the search for something unique. The use of a Bengali or English name is one way of finding a name that, within the community at least, is unique. Mande villagers in Bangladesh have preserved the idea that each person should have a unique given name. The ten year-old who found it so hilarious that Burling's daughter and sister had the same name lived in Bangladesh, and other Bangladeshi Mandes have expressed their dislike of the situation where two people have the same name. Nevertheless, giving their children names that they recognize as Bengali or Western encourages the notion that names are drawn from a fixed inventory.

A few concerned Mandes (generally the better educated) in Bangladesh have started to give "Mande" names to their children once again. These are names that sound like Mande words, or that at least do not sound obviously Bengali or English. Some are names of old Mande gods, and some are words that have easily recognizable meanings in Mande. Unfortunately, we do not know enough of these names to write confidently about them, but as time passes it is not unlikely that a growing number of people will want to use the symbolism of their

children's names as a means of asserting their self-identification as Mandes. However, in their very urge to be traditional, they may lose the even more traditional inventiveness that allowed totally new names to be constructed for each new child. Is it more traditional to give a child a Bengali name that no Mande child has ever had before, or to give a name with a transparent Mande etymology? What is traditional and what is innovative is rarely obvious. What is most striking about the Mande naming traditions that we have found in Rengsanggri, however, is the search for a unique name for each unique individual. This tradition is still very much alive.

Notes

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1. Although a nickname, Kinkin has no more meaning than any other name.

2. The Mande spelling conventions that we use in this article are close to the way in which literate Mandes now write their language. While this spelling is, on the whole, very well adapted to the language, it is limited in one way. Conventional orthography does not indicate syllable boundaries, even though these can be crucial to the phonology. Names like *Di-nil-a* and *Di-ni-la* are pronounced quite differently even though they would be spelled identically. We have, therefore, inserted hyphens whenever the spellings might otherwise give ambiguous readings. When the phonotactic rules allow only a single interpretation, we omit the hyphens. Since the glottal stop can occur only at the end of a syllable, while *b, d, g, ch* [č], *j* [j] *r, h,* and, except in some borrowed words *s,* can occur only at the beginning, the hyphen would often be redundant. Sequences of two consonants that occur between vowels generally have the syllable break between them. In the conventional orthography a raised circle, or sometimes an apostrophe, is used for the glottal stop, and we follow that practice here.

3. The glottal stop, shown by the apostrophe, always drops in the second syllable of a word.

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