North American Indians: Personal Names With Semantic Meaning

Frank Exner, Little Bear
North Carolina Central University

This article describes the significance, characteristics, uses, and problems of personal names and naming practices among North American Indians. The three most important aspects of North American Indian personal naming are their:

- Three name forms (European, traditional, and mixed)
- Name changes which create name sequences (two or more names at different times) and name sets (two or more names at the same time)
- The effects of colonization on North American Indian personal names

North American Indian names represent one group of indigenous cultures whose names have semantic meaning, and, as this article suggests, names with semantic meanings may pose onomastic issues all their own.

Introduction

North American Indians have naming practices which result in unexpected, but characteristic, name forms. For example, Sitting Bull was a Lakota medicine man whose name changed throughout his life (from Jumping Badger to a Lakota word meaning slow to Sitting Bull) (Utley 1993). The story of Black Pipe's names is told in Clark (1982, 266). He was a Cheyenne scout for the U. S. Army and had a series of names (from Boy Baby to Little Bird to Long Horn to Black Pipe), each of which was the man's official name at its time. At the same time that the Cheyenne called him Long Horn, White traders with whom he did business called him Tall-White-Man. So he had different real names among different groups at the same time.

This article assumes that its results can be generalized to all North American Indian tribes (but not necessarily to other aboriginal cultures). Since North American Indian tribes

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represent many different cultures, it is possible that the results of this study may be incomplete (e.g., an unexpected name structure may be in use) or even invalid.

This article begins with a look at the context of anthroponyms. Next will be the story of Black Pipe taken from the reprint of a nineteenth century manual of Indian sign language. Then North American Indian personal name characteristics, uses, and problems will be examined. Colonization's effects on names will also be described.

Anthroponyms In Context

A name is, at a minimum, a label which identifies a person, place, or thing (Nuessel, 1992:1; Trask, 1999:196-97). According to the most common definition of *name*, it is a noun phrase that has no connotative meaning (Nuessel, 1992:2) but is limited to its denotative meaning. For example, the maiden name of the author's wife is *Rosenquist*, which is Swedish for *rose twig*. The author feels that her name is an accurate description, but, as a name, this descriptive power (connotation) is irrelevant. The identifying power (denotation) of the name is the only generally accepted significance.

Ingraham (1997:xv-xvi) lists six aspects of anthronyms:

Eke-names – an additional or replacement name

*Family name*s – a name that is passed on from generation to generation

*Surname*s – an "after name." Often an eke-name or a family name

Patronymics – a "father-name" that changes from one generation to the next

Christian names – a given name that connects the recipient to his or her Christian religion

Name-titles – a name that follows the line of holders of a position

Names are chosen for many reasons. In some cases parents choose first names based on their perceptions of the name's image and influence (Reed, 1991). Hook (1982:13)

notes that most surnames based in English and other European cultures came from four sources: place names, patronyms, occupational names, and descriptive names.

Throughout the world, names can signify many things (Alford, 1988). A person's name may tell the day of his or her birth. It may indicate clan membership or the passage of an important event. Other significant elements that affect a person's name include physical or psychological character, a birth event, place of birth, animal spirit guide, or a warning to the named person or others.

Most people in North America are named according to a European-based system and have a fmily name and a given name. Both are given at birth or soon after, so the name's significance to the name giver is probably more important than its significance to the name bearer. Nicknames, however, can be given at anytime in life (Morgan, O'Neill, and Harre, 1979), so that the name's significance is a negotiated result of the name giver, the name bearer, and the people around them.

Other name patterns, however, are found throughout the world. Alford (1988) notes cultures as geographically diverse as the Bemba of Central Africa, the Chuckchee of Northeastern Siberia, and the Hopi of the Southwestern United States have no surnames. Cultures as geographically diverse as the Ganda of Central Africa, the Yakut of North Central Siberia, and the Aranda of Central Australia give children Great or Sacred names (page 57) as their only names or in addition to other names. Finally, seven types of semantic meaningfulness, a name characteristic missing from the European model, are defined (page 184).

Black Pipe's Story

The Indian sign language (Clark 1982, 266) is a reprint of a nineteenth century U. S. Army training manual for officers working with the Plains tribes in the 1870s and 1880s. He quoted the story of an old Cheyenne warrior about personal names and naming:

> When a child is first born, whether a boy or girl, it is called a baby,--a girl baby or boy baby,--afterwards by any childish name until, if a boy, he goes to war; then, if he "counts a coup," he is named for something that has happened on that journey, from some accident, some animal killed, or some bird that helped them to success.
>
> Or, after returning, some one of the older men may give the young man his name. When I was small I was called "Little Bird." When I first went to war and returned to camp, the name of "Long Horn" was given me by an old man of the camp. Then the traders gave me the name Tall-White-Man, and now, since I have become old, they (the Indians) call me Black Pipe. This name was given me from a pipe I used to carry when I went to war. I used to blacken the stem and bowl just as I did my face after these trips, and was especially careful to do so when I had been successful.

Black Pipe's story demonstrates unique characteristics of North American Indian personal names that will be discussed in the next section.

Characteristics Of North American Indian Names

North American Indians in the United States and Canada today have three name forms: those derived from a European model, traditional forms, and names that mix the two (IFLA 1996; Ingraham 1977). These name forms are explained below.

The name of Sherman Alexie (2000), a contemporary Spokane/Coeur d' Alene poet and novelist born in October 1966, follows the English or European model (IFLA 1996; Ingraham 1997). His father's family name, Alexie, was taken by the author's mother at marriage and passed to all of their children. Sherman is the writer's given name. The name *Sherman Alexie* identifies a specific individual (has denotation)

but contains no additional descriptive information (has no connotation) (Nuessel 1992, 2).

Sitting Bull (Utley 1993), who received his name before the first census of the Lakota people, is a traditional name form (actually the translation from Lakota of a traditional name form). Traditional North American Indian names defy Nuessel's definition since they can both denote (identify) and connote (describe) a individual. Traditional North American Indian names describe at least three aspects of an individual:

- They tell a person's story
- They may be autobiographical
- They may identify clan membership

Traditional names connect an individual with some aspect of the natural world.

Severt Young Bear (Young Bear and Theisz, 1994) has a mixed-form name; Severt is his given name and Young Bear (not Bear) is his family name. If alphabetizing his name in an author list therefore, it would be "Young Bear, Severt" not "Bear, Severt Young". This may be obvious to an onomastician, but the Library of Congress' Name Authority File (the official list of author names used in almost all American libraries) alphabetizes Adam Fortunate Eagle as "Eagle, Adam Fortunate" rather than "Fortunate Eagle, Adam".

Another example of a name in mixed form is John "Blackfeather" Jeffries. John Jeffries is Tribal Chair of the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, and his name, when written this way, is of the European form. Blackfeather is his tribal name; his name, when written this way, is is traditional form. Unfortunately, English assumes that each person has one true name at any one time. A woman's name may change at marriage, but, at any one time, she still has only one real name. English does not make provision for people with two or more real names at one time, so any pattern used to show both names at once looks like a nickname or eke-name. As a result, with his tribal name within his European name, John

"Blackfeather" Jeffries is a mixed form.

Traditional North American Indian names often changed over time (Clark 1982; Utley 1993). The medicine man commonly called Sitting Bull was originally given the name of Jumping Badger. As a child he was called Slow because of his deliberate manner. He received the name Sitting Bull after his first battle. Because of his heroism, the young man was honored with his father's name, Sitting Bull. His father took the name Jumping Bull.

In many North American Indian tribes, naming traditions allow a person to have more than one name at a time. For example, Tony Brave (2000), the Lakota Sioux Indian and systems administrator at Oglala Lakota College, has the tribal name Wambli Ho Waste (which means *Pretty Voice Eagle* in English). Severt Young Bear (Young Bear and Theisz, 1994), another Lakota Sioux Indian with a mixed form name, also has a tribal name, Hehaka Luzahan (*Swift Elk* in English).

A final characteristic of North American Indian names is the effects of language changes (Utley 1993; Ingraham 1997). Campbell (1997) notes the effect on naming language of the removal of the Creek Confederation from Georgia to Oklahoma. In 1832, 6.5% of Creek names were in English and 93.5% were in Indian languages. In 1858-1859 22% of Creek names were in English and 78% were in Indian languages.

Uses Of North American Indian Names

Because individuals can change names throughout life, Wong (1986) notes that traditional form North American Indian names can tell an autobiographical story. Because individuals can have more than one name at the same time, Young Bear and Theisz (1994) note that use of these names can form a social control.

The story of Sitting Bull's early life is an example of a sequence of changing traditional names that tell an autobiographical story. The future chief's name was changed to a Lakota word meaning "slow" when his deliberate manner

asserted itself so that his name reflected the most important aspect of his character. But his heroism in battle showed that he could think and act quickly when speed was needed. As a result, the young man was honored with his father's name, Sitting Bull, which contains both fierce and deliberate aspects.

As noted above, North American Indians may have more than one name at the same time. Young Bear (Young Bear and Thiesz 1994) says that these different names often carry different social expectations. When making an ordinary social request his common name (Severt Young Bear) is used. When making an extraordinary social request his tribal name (Hehaka Luzahan or Swift Elk) is used because its use both honors him and carries important duties. For example, if Severt Young Bear (his common name) is asked to sing at a Pow-Wow, there is no social pressure on him and he can do as he wishes. On the other hand, if Hehaka Luzahan or Swift Elk (his tribal name) is asked to sing at a Pow-Wow, he feels obliged to comply. In his case, the obligation follows the tribal name in either language.

Problems With North American Indian Names

There are three possible problems specific to North American Indian names. First is the use of a personal name in an inappropriate way. Second is the use of the wrong name for an individual who has different names at different times of life. Third is the use of the wrong name for a person who has two or more names at once.

As an example of inappropriate name use Young Bear and Thiesz (1994) note that the names of deceased Lakota people are rarely mentioned. Alford (1988) notes the same prohibition among the Klamath, Ojibwa, and Pawnee tribes. However, the prohibition does not exist among the Blackfoot, Copper Eskimo, Hopi, Iroquois, and Tlingit peoples. There are hundreds of distinct North American

Indian societies and each has determined its own prohibitions. Clearly, understanding the rules of personal

name use requires knowledge of each culture.

The other two problems specific to North American Indian personal names derive from the fact that North American Indians often have more than one name, and depending on the circumstances, different names should be used.

Young Bear (Young Bear and Thiesz 1994), who has at least two names at the same time (Severt Young Bear and Swift Elk), says that name selection is a normal problem among the Lakota people. As discussed above, the name used in a situation determines the significance of the material around it.

Effects Of Colonization

Prior to contact with Europeans, North American Indians lived in oral cultures. Colonization brought both spoken and written European languages along with the institutions (e.g., schools and governments) of the colonizers. Over time, then, the oral cultures adopted new languages (partially or fully) and writing (some individuals more fluently than others).

The personal names of North American Indians may represent a pre-contact culture, a mixed state (some fully traditional oral people, some people fully integrated into the European-based culture, and many people between these extremes).

North American Indians do not necessarily have one name only. As described above, Clark (1982, 266) described the name sequence of one of his scouts:

- Little Bird
- Long Horn
- Black Pipe

During the period that his tribe used the names *Long Horn* and Black Pipe, traders called him *Tall-White-Man*. Certainly the name *Little Bird*, when it was first bestowed, was not spoken in English. Since the scout's tribe is unknown, his

language and the pronunciation of his first name are also unknown. Little Bird, Long Horn, and Black Pipe could reasonably appear in an army biography or history that named scouts in English or in a tribal history written by anthropologists writing in several languages (Waldman 1985).

Since *Tall-White-Man* was a name given to the scout by traders, it probably would only appear in English. Thus, this single scout might well be known by three names in two languages. This does not include names that might have been given by other tribes with whom Black Pipe interacted. A complete authority analysis of the personal names of Clark's scout, then, would require working knowledge of several languages describing two cultures within multiple contexts.

To control traditional (or traditional-like) names in an English-based context, North American Indians often use hyphens to connect the separate words in a naming concept (e.g., Tall-White-Man [Clark 1982, 266]) or concatenate the words into an unbroken string (e.g., the author Martin Brokenleg [Mitten 1999]) to force the proper treatment of their names in English listings. Names like these can be treated as a European name form; equivalent mixed form names would appear as *Tall White Man* and *Martin Broken Leg*.

Some individuals indicate the possibility of a name set by their recorded name. For example, Robert (Gray-Wolf) Hofsinde, the author of *Indian Costumes,* has two names (*Robert Hofsinde* and *Gray-Wolf*) that could be used interchangeably.

Another example is the name 'Eastman, Charles Alexander (Ohiyesa)'. Dr. Eastman, a Wahpeton Dakota Indian who lived from 1858 to 1939, became the first American Indian to receive an M.D. degree. He received the name Ohiyesa as a youth when he was raised traditionally. The name Eastman was his maternal grandfather's family name (his maternal grandfather was of European descent), and Ohiyesa began to use it when he went to school in Wisconsin. He served in both the American Indian and White American

worlds; 'Ohiyesa' and 'Charles Alexander Eastman' were a name set (Giese 1996).

Summary

According to the literature of onomastics, a name is (at least) a noun phrase that has denotative meaning but no connotative meaning. In addition to serving as an identifier, personal names have other purposes including expressing the named person's self-concept and indicating cultural inclusion.

Self-concept can be indicated by name form, for example national, ethnic, and clan membership (i.e., cultural aspects of personal names). North American Indian names represent one example of national or ethnic membership. Their names have three forms: a European model, a traditional form, and names that mix the two.

Traditional names are analogous to those given before contact with European cultures. They can describe at least three aspects of an individual:

- They tell a story
- They may be autobiographical
- They may identify clan membership

European-form names are like those of immigrants to what is now the United States and Canada. They have some combination of a first name, middle name, and family name and they do not exhibit semantic meaning. An example is the Spokane author Sherman Alexie.

Often North American Indians mix traditional and European name forms. An example is Severt Young Bear, a Lakota Sioux writer; his given name is *Severt* and his family name is *Young Bear*. *Young Bear* is like a traditional name, with two words which should not be separated, making a single concept. And they often create English-looking names by placing a hyphen between their name-words or removing the spaces between the words. Examples are *George P. Horse-Capture* and *Martin Brokenleg*.

In addition to the three forms of North American Indian names, they can exhibit:

- Name sequences (change over time)
- Name sets (two or more names at one time)

Sitting Bull's story exhibited a name sequence. He was given the name Jumping Badger at birth. This was changed to a Lakota word meaning slow (reflecting his deliberate manner) when he was a youth, and he received the name Sitting Bull after his first battle.

An example of a name set is that of Severt Young Bear who is also named Hehaka Luzahan (Swift Elk in English). Both are real names and he holds both at the same time. Each name has significance and different responsibilities are attached to its use.

Black Pipe had both a name sequence and a name set. Within Cheyenne society he was named boy baby, Little Bird, Long Horn, and Black Pipe one after the other (a name sequence). During his adult life white traders named him Tall-White-Man so that he had different names in different social settings (a name set).

Three possible problems specific to North American Indian names are:

- Using a personal name in an inappropriate way.
- Using the wrong name for an individual with a name sequence.
- Using the wrong name for a person with a name set.

For example, in the case of Severt Young Bear it would be inappropriate to call him Severt Young Bear if formal tribal obligations were involved and it would be inappropriate to call him Hehaka Luzahan when inviting him to a party.

A name sequence requires tact and understanding to avoid problems. When referring to his first battle the Cheyenne scout would be called Little Bird, the name he earned there. When referring to him in his last days, he would be called Black Pipe. And a name set also requires the user to be careful. Is Long Horn or Tall-White-Man proper? Is Severt

Young Bear or Hehaka Luzahan the name that communicates the desired message?

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