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Names in the News

Over the last few months, personal names have been a popular topic in various media. Here is a sampling, presented in chronological order according to their publication dates.

'In a Land of Homemade Names, Tiffany Doesn't Cut It' by Michael Wines was printed in the *Bulawayo Journal* section of *The New York Times*. Wines was describing naming practices in Zimbabwe in which the custom is to name babies after the circumstances surrounding their births. Such names seem normal enough, especially to natives, except when the parents decide to 'go modern' and name their children in English. As examples, Wines cited the name of Godknows Nare, a freelance photographer, who was so sickly at birth that his life was left in God's hands. He also told the story of Hatred Zenenga, an editor at the *Herald*, Zimbabwe's government-controlled newspaper, who received his name because of a quarrel between his upwardly mobile family and his jealous but illiterate relatives. His parents named him and his siblings in English to express the emotions they felt, while at the same time tricking illiterate family members who would not know the meanings of such names as Norest, Hatred, Praise, Confess, Raised-on, and Abide. See Livingstone Makondo's article on pp. 10–18 where he writes about the names that mothers create for their babies as a subtle way of communicating their grievances to other family members. One of his points is that only native speakers or speakers very well acquainted with Shonto social customs can understand and appreciate the subtleties that are involved. Wines made a similar point by saying that many of the names make Westerners chuckle, but 'Perhaps they are oblivious — Oblivious is another Zimbabwean name, actually — to the fact they once idolized a cowboy star named Hopalong or that many baby girls are given the name of a jewelry store to carry through life.'

The New York Times, 1 October 2007
http://www.nytimes.cim/2007/10/01/world/africa01names.html?_r+1&oref=slogi

'When boys adopt girls' names and girls adopt boys', the results aren't always gender-neutral' was the subtitle of a 'What's in a Name?' article by Sam Kean. It started out with an anecdote provided by current Names presidents Don and Alleen Nilsen. During the late 1960s, they were friends with a man whose name was Shirl. After they got to know him, they asked about his unusual name and he confessed that it was really Shirley. He was the fourth-generation male in his family to have the name, but when child star Shirley Temple came along, the name was indelibly stamped as girlish and 'Shirley IV disgustedly switched to Shirl. There was no Shirley V.'

Other traditionally 'male' names that have been 'taken over' by females include Ashley, Beverly, Kelly, Kim, and Jordan. However, it is not as automatic as it used

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to be that, when parents start giving 'boy' names to girls, the names will disappear from the list of male possibilities. 'The loosening of sex roles may have freed parents to choose gender-neutral sounding names like Riley and Jaden (or Jayden)' Peyton was on its way to becoming a girl's name until quarterback Peyton Manning became famous, and now it is shared almost equally by boys and girls. Names member Herbert Barry was quoted for his observation that in the last one hundred years there has been an explosion in the freedom that people feel as they look for, or create, names for their babies. 'Between 1900 and 1910, 27 boys' names and 26 girls' names accounted for half of all names. Between 1990 and 2000, 60 boys' names and 90 girls' names accounted for half of all names.'

New York Times Magazine, 28 October 2007

Mackenzie Carpenter, a Pittsburgh reporter, was intrigued by a photo that she ran across in the 4 November 2007 issue of *ESPN The Magazine*. It showed two-month-old Tré Rivers Kemerer wearing his own Pittsburgh Steelers knitted cap and snoozing happily on his father's chest while together they attended the baby's first Pittsburgh Steelers game. Carpenter hunted up the baby's parents, who explained that they chose *Tré* instead of *Three* because they 'liked the sound of the No. 3 in Spanish — with a French accent for flair.' They love the Pittsburgh Steelers, but did not want to name the baby after a particular player because players come and go. And not wanting people to think of ketchup, they decided against honoring Heinz Field and instead honored the old stadium, which was imploded in 2001.

Carpenter also found a Pittsburgh baby named Steeler Gerard Petrocky, who was born nine months after the Steelers won a fifth Super Bowl. In the suburbs, she found a Jackson Fenway Holt, named after the home of the Boston Red Sox; a Cameron Hernandez named after the indoor basketball stadium at Duke University, and a Keagan Penn Kresge, named after Penn State. One theory offered to Carpenter was that these names were probably chosen by fathers, with the mothers going along in hopes of encouraging their husbands to feel emotionally connected to the baby.

Pittsburgh Post Gazette, 23 November 2007

It isn't often that what happens in a kindergarten class makes news around the world, but when British teacher Gillian Gibbons, who was teaching in Khartoum, Sudan, conducted what is a fairly common activity for young school children, grave consequences followed. The activity, which is designed to help children develop speaking and writing skills, usually centers around a stuffed animal which becomes a kind of class pet. The children name their pet and vie for who gets to take it home at night or on weekends. When it comes back to school, the 'host' or 'caregiver' tells the rest of the class about the experiences. The effect is much the same as when children are less inhibited when they speak through a puppet. But the problem in the Sudan case was that Mrs Gibbons allowed the children to choose the name for the teddy bear, and they settled on Mohammad. A furor arose with Mrs Gibbons being found guilty of disrespecting the prophet. In the ensuing controversy, one claim was that the children's parents initiated the protests, while the other side said 'the case was sparked by a school secretary with a grudge.' Associated Press reporter Alfred de Montesquiou described the case as putting 'Sudan's government in an embarrassing position, facing the anger of Britain on one side and potential trouble from Islamic hard-liners

on the other.' On 29 November 2007, after a seven-hour trial, a Sudanese court sentenced Gibbons 'to 15 days in prison, avoiding a heavier punishment of 40 lashes.'

The next week, after intervention by two Muslim clerics who flew in from England, Gibbons was flown back home to Liverpool, England, where she went into seclusion.

Associated Press, 30 November 2007

Slate Magazine ran a follow-up story, 'When can Muslims Use the Name Mohammed?' Reporter Michelle Tsai found that there are no rules as such, 'But Mohammed is so venerated that worshippers all know to use his name in a respectful way,' which precludes giving the name to objects or animals. According to the *hadiths* (the collected sayings or customs of Mohammed and his associates), the deciding factor is the speaker's intent. 'In some Muslim countries, almost all males take a religious name, either Mohammed or one of the prophet's other names, Ahmed, Mahmoud, or Mustafa.' However, because of the sacredness of the name in the Middle East, you are not likely to hear anyone calling out to a friend, 'Hey, Mohammad!' The names are reserved for special occasions with the owners being given another name for everyday use. Fifty years ago, as Egypt began introducing bureaucratic processes, the country outlawed dual names because it was too confusing to have so many people named 'Mohammed-something-else,' especially when the 'something else' was likely to be the name of the boy's father and grandfather.

In a 'Bonus Explainer' paragraph, Tsai also answered the question of 'How come English-speakers don't name their children Jesus?' She wrote that 'Jesus has been a common first and last name in Iberian countries since at least the fourteenth or fifteenth century,' and because of this many Catholics from Spanish and Portuguese cultures view naming a son Jesus as a way of honoring God. However, English speaking Protestants have taken a more conservative view of religious names, and in following the commandment against misusing God's name, will name their sons Christian, but not Jesus. They also refrain from using an English pronunciation for the names of Hispanic boys who are named *Jésus*. 'In England, Mary was considered too sacred a name for common use until about 1300, and it wasn't until the past 200 years or so that naming a baby after an angel ceased to be sacrilegious.' As recently as the 1940s, most boys named Michael or Gabriel would have been recognized as Irish Catholics or German Lutherans, rather than as English Protestants. Cleveland Evans, the immediate past president of the American Name Society, was one of the cited authorities for Tsai's article.

Slate Magazine, 3 December 2007
http://www.nytimes.cim/2007/10/01/world/africa01names.html?_r+1&oref=slogi

Under the headline, 'Is a Carl Doomed to Be a C Student: We Don't Think So,' Carl Bialik 'The Numbers Guy' for the *Wall Street Journal* took a look at the research done by psychologists Leif Nelson and Joseph Simmons who did a statistical study with 'headline friendly implications' on whether people are attracted to things that start with the same letters as their initials. The study received widespread attention

in November 2007. One thing the researchers did was to examine ninety-four years of strikeout data in national league baseball. They found that batters with K in one of their initials struck out more often than other players, perhaps because they liked to see their name posted near the K on score boards. From examining data covering 15,000 graduating business-school students, students with the initials C and D had slightly lower grades than others. Bialik quoted University of California, Irvine statistician Hal Stern who pointed that the effect was tiny, only 0.02 of a grade-point average. Prof. Stern explained that 'in very large samples like the ones here, even small differences will be judged statistically significant. This means that we're confident the difference is not zero. It does not mean the difference we see is important.' Statistician Jim Albert from Bowling Green warned, 'You can prove any silly hypothesis . . . by running a statistical test on tons of date.'

The Wall Street Journal online, 7 December 2007
http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/SB119698695198016514.html