NAMES, Vol. 61 No. 1, March 2013, 8–20

A Question of Faith: An Investigation of Suggested Racial Ethnonyms for Enumerating US American Residents of Muslim, Middle Eastern, and/or Arab Descent on the US Census

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In 1790, the American government ratified the first official census of the nation's population. Since then, the US Census has been taken continuously every ten years and has become indispensable for the equitable distribution of rights and resources. Nevertheless, the Census has not escaped criticism. In particular, its system of ethnoracial nomenclature is regularly attacked for failing to adequately reflect the nation's changing demography and linguistic sensibilities. Consequently, many critics have called for the introduction of new terminology. The present investigation examines some of the most popular names suggested for one group in particular: US **A**merican **R**esidents **o**f **M**uslim, **M**iddle **E**astern and/or **A**rab descent (AROMMEA). The four racial ethnonyms examined are *Arab-American*; *Middle Easterner/Middle-East American*; *Muslim-American*; and *White*.[1] As this investigation demonstrates, each of these names comes with its own unique set of linguistic, social, and political advantages and disadvantages.

KEYWORDS ethnonymy, race, Census, Muslim, Middle Easterner, Arab

Background information

On May 12 1977, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued Statistical Policy Directive 15. "Directive 15," as it is commonly called, introduced a finite set of mutually exclusive racial ethnonyms: 1) *American Indian or Alaskan Native*; 2) *Asian or Pacific Islander*; 3) *Black*; 4) *Hispanic*; and 5) *White* (US Census, 1977). The purpose of this standardized set of nomenclature was to increase the overall reliability and comparability of record keeping at the federal, state, and municipal levels.

 DOI 10.1179/0027773812Z.00000000021

While many administrators welcomed this intervention, others worried it had inadvertently introduced an unacceptable degree of error when enumerating residents who self-identified with either none or more than one of the aforementioned groupings. Such was the case with AROMMEA. According to Directive 15, the AROMMEA sub-population is to be classified as WHITE. In a letter dated August 30 1994, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee voiced its official criticism of this language policy:

> The Arab-American community is distinct from other minorities and from White America. The existing OMB categories screen out Arab-Americans and make them invisible. Agencies which use the OMB classification system often do not even perceive the existence of an Arab-American population [. . .]. They are unable to recognize the needs that exist or respond to them. Therefore Arab-Americans are deprived of the benefits and social services, which are accorded to other minorities.

To right this perceived wrong, a nationwide letter-writing campaign was initiated to petition the US Census for a new, separate category and designation for AROMMEA. The failure or refusal to do so, activists argued, would necessarily result in undercounting the AROMMEA and would thereby constitute an egregious violation of their civil rights.

In response to these and other related calls for reform, the US government held four open Congressional Hearings to review Census nomenclature policy. During these special sessions, more than 100 testimonials were heard. In addition, more than 10,000 letters, postcards, and position statements from interest groups and private citizens from around the nation were received. Several large-scale surveys were also conducted to test the possible effects of suggested terminological changes (e.g., the May 1995 Current Population Survey Supplement on Race and Ethnicity; the 1996 National Content Survey; and the 1996 Race and Ethnic Targeted Test). After considerable deliberation, a thirty-agency committee recommended, and "the OMB agreed, that there should be no racial or ethnic categories added to the 1977 minimum standard" (Wallman et al., 2000: 1705). Thus, the suggestion to include a special category and designator for AROMMEA was rejected.

Not surprisingly, this policy decision met with considerable dismay. The following excerpt is taken from an official letter written by the Arab American Institute on September 17 1997. This text exemplifies the disappointment felt in reaction to the OMB decision:

> When we first brought this issue to the attention of the Congress, and then met with the interagency committee, our effort was to educate the statistical and policy community on the flaws in the current classification system, particularly towards persons currently identified simply "white" by race. [. . .] Four years later, we have learned that the process of change itself is painfully slow and deliberative [. . .].

Frustrated but undaunted, supporters of a new OMB category and name for AROMMEA vowed to re-double their lobbying efforts. As far as the US government was concerned, however, this issue had been largely laid to rest. That is, until the autumn of 2001. In the wake of 9/11, renewed calls for the introduction of a new racial ethnonym to singularly identify, classify, and enumerate AROMMEA quickly

resurfaced, only this time from within governmental circles. Suddenly, it was argued that the classification of the AROMMEA as WHITE could interfere with two central mandates of the Patriot Act: 1) to gather intelligence on potentially subversive elements with suspected ties to such terrorist organizations as Al Qaeda; and 2) compile statistics on the increasing number of hate crimes committed against (real and imagined) AROMMEA (Protect America Act, 2007).

However, US Census officials were careful to remind that, before any new name could be added to the OMB system, it would have to satisfy many strenuous prerequisites. Chief among them were the following: 1) high public recognizability; 2) low referential ambiguity; 3) minimal conceptual overlap with pre-existing categories; 4) historical, social, linguistic, and political relevance to the current US population and its understanding of what it is to belong to this group; and 5) maximal acceptability among survey-users, both inside and outside of the targeted group.[2] The failure to adequately take into account each and every one of these requirements could not only undermine the statistical utility of the new racial ethnonym. In a domino effect, it could also destabilize the overarching conceptual balance between the categories of RACE, ETHNICITY, ANCESTRY, and NATIONALITY. Having said this, the Bureau also acknowledged that the failure to allow for the dramatic changes in public sensibilities which had occurred since 9/11 could also undermine the quality of the demographic data collected.

In view of these competing challenges, the US Census agreed to re-examine terminology which could be used for the possible introduction of a new OMB category for AROMMEA. The following section presents some of the findings gathered on the four onomastic contenders: 1) *Arab-American*; 2) *Middle Easterner/Middle Eastern American*; 3.) *Muslim-American*; and 4) *White*. Proceeding in alphabetical order, information on each of these names was gathered using three data sources: 1) the corpus of letters sent to the US government by public institutions and private citizens; 2) official testimony given during Congressional Hearings; and 3) official governmental reports on the potential suitability of the above-mentioned names. The detailed information used for this tripartite method of data collection was obtained by the researcher via the Freedom of Information Act.

Onomastic suggestions

Arab-American

In 2005, as a part of its "We The People" series, the US Census Bureau released its first specialized population report on ARAB-AMERICANS (Brittingham and de la Cruz, 2005). According to this historic document, *Arab-American* was used to label any US American resident whose ancestry was reportedly from "Arabic-speaking countries or areas" (Brittingham and de la Cruz, 2005: 2). This means that this anthroponym is primarily based on language; and therein lies the problem.

Etymologically speaking, Arabic is a member of the West Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. As such, it is historically related to such languages as Assyrian, Aramaic, Harari, Hebrew, and Maltese. Today, it is the official language of some twenty-two different nations extending from the northwest regions of Africa to the southwest corners of Asia. In Egypt and Saudi Arabia alone there are *c.* 85

million Arabic speakers. Worldwide, it is estimated that no fewer than 230 million peoples speak Arabic as either their first or native language; and this estimate does not even include those areas where Arabic is the liturgical language for the approximately one billion members of the Muslim faith. "This means that in non-Arab Muslim countries as well, Classical Arabic is widely read if not actually spoken" (Lyovin, 1997: 201). Taken together, then, the anthroponym *Arabic*, and by extension *Arab-American*, could refer to an extraordinarily diverse geographical, political, linguistic, and religious cross-section of peoples.

The official Census definition of *Arab-American* is, however, rather restrictive. As the Bureau itself concedes, this narrow definition may have the following undesirable consequence: "Some people classified as Arab under this approach may not consider themselves Arab, and conversely, some people who consider themselves Arab may not be included under this definition" (Brittingham and de la Cruz, 2005: 2). Therefore, despite the relatively high degree of recognizability *Arab-American* enjoys in the US, it would also seem to suffer from an unacceptably high level of referential ambiguity.

Ironically enough, it may well be this referential flexibility which makes *Arab-American* so desirable among certain speakers. As the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee wrote in their official position statement from August 30 1994:

> [Arabs] are defined by scholars as people who speak Arabic as their primary language. There are Muslim Arabs, Christian Arabs and Jewish Arabs, just as there are Muslim, Christian and Jewish Americans. [. . .] Some Arabs are light-skinned and blond. Others are black-skinned. Most are somewhere in between. An Arab is not a European who happens to be wearing a *kafiyeh* of a *hijab*. [. . .] It is absurd to continue the current practice of classifying black-skinned Arab-Americans from North Africa or the Gulf as White.

In the fall of 1994, the Council of Presidents of National Arab-American Organizations issued a similar statement: "Like Hispanics, Arabs are a group of mixed races united by a common language, culture and history. [. . .] The growing community of Arab-Americans has its own identity — one distinct from that of Americans of European descent or of other Middle Eastern or Mediterranean origins. We want our cultural identity to be recognized."

The comparison with Hispanic-Americans is a particularly apt one. In many ways, the problems which surround *Arab-American* are directly analogous to those confronted by the Census ethnonyms *Hispanic*, *Latin American*, and *Latino*. Originally, these terms were used on US Census schedules to name a diverse cross-section of peoples whose unifying characteristic was the use of Spanish as their first or native language. However, as national statistics continue to confirm, this linguistic prerequisite is tenuous at best. According to the Census 2000, 21.4 percent of US American residents who self-identify as *Hispanic-American* speak English Only at home. Among those Hispanic-Americans who did not speak English at home, an impressive 37.9 percent indicated that they still spoke English "very well" (Ramirez, 2004: 10).

Similar sociolinguistic developments can be observed across countless other ethnolinguistic sub-populations. Whether West Indian or Sri Lankan, Korean or

Costa Rican, the native/first language of Census respondents tends to be a far better predictor of nativity (i.e., foreign vs. US born) than ethno-racial identity. By the same token, it has long been understood that language use is an extremely unreliable correlate of self-identification with a particular racial ethnonym (e.g., *African-American*, *White*, *Asian-American*, *Hispanic-American*, *Native-American*, etc.). Why, then, should the situation be any different if *Arab-American* were added to the OMB set of standards?

According to recent Census statistics, the percentage of Arab-Americans who reportedly speak English only and not Arabic at home is rather large (31.3%). Furthermore, among Census respondents who reportedly spoke a non-English language at home, a striking 65 percent spoke English "very well" (Brittingham and de la Cruz, 2005: 10). These findings are particularly impressive when one considers the fact that some 53.6 percent of the US Arab population are foreign-born; and of these, "around 46% arrived between 1990 and 2000" (Brittingham and de la Cruz, 2005: 6, 9). Given the extraordinary amount of pressure to conform which this group has received since 9/11, there is every reason to believe that this process of linguistic assimilation might actually accelerate. Further institutionalizing a conceptual link between Arabic language proficiency and an Arab-American ethnoracial identity may therefore be extremely short-sighted, if not entirely ill-advised.

Middle-Easterner/Middle Eastern American

The US Census has also considered creating a geographically oriented category with the name *Middle Easterner* or *Middle Eastern-American*. According to the OMB, these anthroponyms would "not be based on race but on region of origin for persons from the Middle East/*North Africa* and *West Asian* region, regardless of their race, religion, or language group. It would include Arab states, Israel, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Iran" (Federal Register, 1995; emphasis added). Although envisioned as clarification, this explanation highlights the two principle problems with this designation.

The first is the lack referential clarity. If one were to use the above explanation as a guideline, there would be little to stop new immigrants and/or long-term residents who might otherwise have identified themselves as ASIAN-AMERICAN[3] or AFRICAN-AMERICAN[4] from (re-)classifying themselves as a MIDDLE EASTERNER or MIDDLE EASTERN-AMERICAN. This confound may be especially great given the fact that a not inconsiderable portion of US American residents who are Muslim by faith and who might identify strongly with the name *Middle Easterner* or *Middle Eastern-American* trace their ancestry to North Africa (Algeria, the Sudan, Tunisia, Gambia, Somalia) and/or the Asian-Pacific (e.g., Malaysia, Indonesia, Bangladesh). Thus, aside from potential political qualms about instituting a name which would subsume countries like Iran and Israel within the same category, the introduction of *Middle Easterner* or *Middle Eastern-American* might also cause undesirable shifts in more than one of the pre-existing Census categories for RACE. This confusion is directly related to the fact that, as yet, no one has provided a definitive answer to the following question: Where in the world is the Middle East?

This question is one which has plagued the toponym since it earliest usage. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first attestation of the toponym the *Middle East* comes from the year 1902, when A. T. Mahan wrote: "The Middle East, if

I can adopt a term which I have not seen, will someday need its Malta, as well as its Gibraltar."[5] As the *OED* is careful to note, the name "has been used with considerable freedom." In a 1960 issue of "Foreign Affairs," Davison addresses the referential ambiguity of this name:

> Yet the fact remains that no one knows where the Middle East is, although many claim to know. Scholars and governments have produced reasoned definitions that are in hopeless disagreement. There is no accepted formula, and serious efforts to define the area vary by as much as three to four thousand miles east and west. There is not even an accepted core for the Middle East. Involved in the terminological chaos is of course the corollary question of how the Middle East related to the Near East — or, indeed, whether the Near East still exists at all. [. . .] The United States government as well has now begun to use the term officially, but in varying senses that add to the general obfuscation. (665)

The inherited ambiguity of *Middle Easterner/Middle Eastern-American* seems to have divided public reactions. While some praise them for possessing the necessary flexibility to unify a great diversity of peoples; others entirely reject them, warning that their official adoption by the US Census would essentially homogenize and therefore once again render invisible the very intergroup heterogeneity which the government had hoped to address. The excerpts below reflect the range of impassioned arguments voiced both for and against the Census adoption of *Middle Easterner* or *Middle Eastern American*.

> Private Citizen August 12, 1994
> [. . .] Syria and Turkey are but two of the countries in that region of the world that are the ancestral homes of several million American citizens. As the Census Bureau revises its classifications, I hope you, the OMB, and the rest of our government will include a new category for "Middle Eastern" or "Middle-East American." It will be a small but significant and well-deserved recognition of yet another group of loyal citizens whose cultural roots are found far away.

> American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee August 30, 1994
> The term "Middle East" is not indigenous to the region. The middle of what? It is a Eurocentric term originating in the British Empire as a way of referring to the Arab world, which Englishmen encountered on their way to India and the "Far East." It is a term rooted in the British colonial mentality. Surely it is time to put the language and culture of 19th century colonialism behind us.

The lack of broad public consensus regarding the acceptability of *Middle Easterner* or *Middle Eastern American* is, then, the second major obstacle blocking their adoption for the OMB standards. In the August 28 journal issue released by the US Office of the Federal Register, it is was reiterated how imperative it is that any and all modifications to the OMB set of ethnoracial nomenclature "be acceptable and generally understood by both members and non-member groups to which they apply" (Federal Register, 1995). While a certain degree of disagreement is to be expected, the amount of controversy and ambiguity surrounding these names would seem to make their future adoption highly problematic.

Muslim-American

In an effort to avoid the problems connected with toponymic-based markers, a religious moniker, *Muslim American*, has been regularly offered as a popular alternative. At present, the US Census does not collect information on the religious denomination of individual US American residents. However, this was not always the case. Between 1906 and 1946, the Bureau did in fact compile detailed information about the religious affiliation of US residents via the "Census of Religious Bodies." In response to dwindling financial resources and mounting public concern over the survey's possible infringement of residents' right to privacy, this survey was officially discontinued in 1956. Despite energetic support by religious leaders, statisticians, and top-ranking government officials, subsequent efforts to reinstate a question on religious denomination were successfully thwarted for both the 1960 and 1970 Censuses. As the then Census Director explained: "The decision not to add the question in the decennial census, in which replies are mandatory, would appear to infringe upon the traditional separation of church and state" (Rosen, 2010: 2).

Lingering deliberation over this issue was abruptly brought to an end on October 17 1976 when Public Law 94-241 was introduced. This law essentially prohibits government agencies such as the US Bureau of Census from directly collecting information on residents' religious affiliations. The exact wording of this prohibition is as follows: "Notwithstanding any other provision of this title, no person shall be compelled to disclose information relative to his religious beliefs or to membership in a religious body." It is, however, unclear how this law would be interpreted if the name *Muslim-American* were officially introduced as an ethnoracial label, albeit it with admittedly strong religious connotations.

For many Census data-users, the introduction of *Muslim American* to the OMB standardized set of nomenclature would be the most useful choice as it alone would precisely target the group of actual interest — irrespective of their native/first language, ancestral origins, present nationality, and/or physical appearance. As Chon and Arzt (2005) explain: "Although phenotype still matters a great deal [. . .] perceived religious difference is a critical component of the racial formation of the other in the context of terrorism. [. . .] The key commonality among these diverse individuals is that they share a Muslim religious identity or are from countries with majority Muslim populations" (242–243).

While calls for gathering more reliable statistics on this sub-population were certainly voiced before 9/11, it is undeniable that official interest in this group significantly increased after this event. As officials are quick to add, however, the desire to monitor this growing sub-population has not only been expressed by persons outside, but also within this community. Immediately after 9/11, the number of attacks against persons either known or believed to be of the Muslim faith experienced an alarming increase. According to an official report by the Southern Poverty Law Center, "Anti-Muslim hate crimes soared by 50% in 2010, skyrocketing over 2009 levels in a year marked by the incendiary rhetoric of Islam-bashing politicians and activists, especially over the so-called 'Ground Zero Mosque' in New York City" (http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report). Be that as it may, many skeptical human rights activists have questioned whether the government's motives for seeking more information on Muslims in America are as honorable or transparent as they would have the public believe.

It is true that reports of anti-Islamic prejudice and discrimination sharply increased immediately after 9/11. Nevertheless, in comparison to other groups, the percentage of religious-based anti-Muslim hate crime is still comparatively low. Based on the nationwide statistics compiled by the FBI for 2010, there were 1409 "hate crimes motivated by religious bias." Of these, 65.4 percent were registered as being anti-Jewish. By comparison, "only" 13.2 percent were anti-Islamic (http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/hate-crime/2010/narratives/hate-crime-2010-incidents-and-offenses). Although the clear majority of these hate crimes were anti-Semitic, the US Census does not track the number of US residents who identify themselves as being Jewish. So why, then, opponents argue, should an exception be made for residents who identify themselves as Muslim — especially when reliable hate crime statistics are already kept by many other reputable organizations.

Over several decades now, high-quality statistics on the religious composition of the nation have been compiled by several private and governmentally sponsored institutions (e.g., The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), conducted by Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture; The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA); and the US Religious Landscape Survey and the Muslim American Survey, both conducted by the PEW Research Center). Why, then, should the already limited resources of the Census Bureau be diverted to collect such information as well?

This is not the only reason why adding the name *Muslim-American* to the Census Population schedules has been considered unwarranted. It has also been argued that such a terminological addition could critically undermine the entire pre-existing system of ethno-racial nomenclature in at least two ways: 1) the historical continuity of previous counts could be disrupted as respondents who previously identified themselves with one of the other categories shift their identification to *Muslim-American*; and 2) the consistency of future counts may be sacrificed as respondents who previously identified themselves with a single category begin to mark more than one in an effort to indicate *both* their religious and ethnoracial identification. Moreover, given the uneven demographic distribution of the Muslim faith in the USA, there is every reason to believe that some groupings would be more immediately and/or significantly affected by these disruptions than others.

Consider, for example, the fact that "[a]mong the roughly one-in-five Muslim Americans whose parents also were born in the US, 59% are African Americans, including a sizable majority who have converted to Islam (69%)" (PEW, 2011: 8). If *Muslim-American* were added to the OMB set of racial ethnonyms, it would not come as a surprise if a not too insignificant portion of US residents who had previously selected the name *African-American* shifted to this new moniker. Such a change would obviously lead to statistical reductions in the size of this sub-population and the goods and services which they were allocated. By the same token, the number of respondents selecting the name *White* would automatically be reduced as well.

One way to counteract such effects would be the radical restructure of the entire nomenclature system: for example, the current bipartite classification (RACE vs. ETHNICITY) could be transformed into a tripartite system (RACE vs. ETHNICITY vs. RELIGION). This alteration would then of course open the door to a host of other religious groupings and associated names (e.g. *Jewish-American*, *Christian-American*, *Hindu-American*, *Atheist/Agnostic-American*). Such a system would also produce an

unmanageable level of complexity in the number and type of statistical clusters. This would not be the only drawback, however. As Helen Hatab Samhan, the former Deputy Director of the Arab American Institute, stated in during the Congressional Hearings, nearly two decades before 9/11, the introduction of a religious-based moniker such as *Muslim-American* could also open Pandora's box: "I might add, and do so with regret, that in times of political tension and in the name of national security, among the principle abusers of the rights of Arabs and other Middle Eastern populations are certain agencies of our own government [. . .]" (Review of Federal Measurements, 1994: 187). The wisdom of this warning is discussed in the final section of this article. Taken all together, it would seem that the name *Muslim-American* has many, if not more, of the same drawbacks exhibited by the other non-religiously based terminology.

White-American

Of all the names which have been used for the US Census Population Schedules, *White* is the oldest and most continuous. It alone has appeared on every survey since the very first enumeration in 1790. The resiliency of this name is particularly remarkable when one considers the fate of so many other color-based racial ethnonyms in the United States. Since the turn of the century, the once common anthroponyms *Red*, *Yellow*, *Brown*, and *Black* have all been progressively replaced by the more politically sensitive names *Native American*, *Asian-American*, *Hispanic/Latino-American*, and *African-American*. By comparison, *White* has successfully resisted this process of semantic pejoration and lexical replacement, presumably due in part to the historical prestige associated with this grouping. However, as political sensibilities increase, so too has public pressure to replace *White* with another name which overtly marks the real or imagined ancestral roots of its name-bearers.

Despite the longevity of its form, the classificatory function of *White* has nevertheless altered. Initially, in the eighteenth century, the name was used by the government to divide the populace into three basic groupings: 1) INDIAN — the indigenous peoples of the North American continent; 2) BLACK/COLORED — the enslaved or manumitted peoples taken from the African continent; and 3) WHITE — immigrant peoples from the European continent. By the twentieth century, this original usage had been greatly expanded. Today, the official US Census definition of *White* is as follows: "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa" (Humes et al., 2011: 3). In the official Census report, "The White Population: 2010," this definition is elaborated. As it stands now, the name *White* is also applied to the following groupings:

> respondents who reported entries such as Caucasian or White; European entries, such as Irish, German, and Polish; Middle Eastern entries, such as Arab, Lebanese, and Palestinian; and North African entries, such as Algerian, Moroccan, and Egyptian. (Hixson et al., 2011: 2)

According to some US Americans, this definition is far too inclusive and *White* should be returned to its original purpose.

The US Census regularly receives public suggestions about how best to accomplish this goal. Thanks, however, to two separate letter-writing campaigns, two different plans of action have predominated: 1) maintaining the name *White* but narrowing its

official definition such that it excludes peoples of North Africa and the Middle East; and 2) replacing *White* with another name which would essentially serve the same exclusionary function. In both cases, these strategies would entail the reclassification of AROMMEA as "non-White." The two textual passages below are taken from several hundred form letters favoring one of the above courses of action:

> The German American Heritage Society Saint Louis September 5, 1994
> Out [*sic*] Society consists of over 300 members with a heritage from German speaking countries — mainly Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Alsace-Lorraine and a few from the Liechtensteiner, Luxemburger and Silesian groups. We all consider ourselves as German-Americans and request to be treated in equal fashion with other census groups such as Arabs and Hispanics which encompass eight and twenty-three groups respectively.

> Private Citizen July 7, 1994
> I am an American of European descent and heritage and ask that you include me in your revisions that are being studied for census ethnic clarification. [. . .] We are asking as citizens of the USA for our right to be ethnically named according to our adequate and appropriate ancestry as "European Americans with origins in the British Isles, Continental and East Europe and Scandinavia."

On their surface, such suggestions would seem to involve little more than the replacement of an arguably antiquated racial ethnonym with another which is perceived as being more modern, politically sensitive, and accurate. In point of fact, however, such a language change would necessitate a profound alteration in the Census system of classification: namely, the fractionalization of the monolithic racial category WHITE into different ancestral groupings (e.g., GERMAN-AMERICAN, EUROPEAN-AMERICAN, . . . MIDDLE EASTERN AMERICAN).

Aside from the fact that such suggestions are based upon the glaring fallacy that such European polities as Germany, Scandinavia, and the British Isles are monoracial/monoethnic — WHITE, they also ignore the fact that all Census respondents are already invited to write-in their ANCESTRY. Contrary to the assertion made above, the US Census already officially recognizes nearly a thousand different ancestries (<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/data_documentation/pums_documentation>). Moreover, considerable population research has demonstrated that "[a] significant number of whites do not strongly identify with a specific European ethnicity. This has been the case for decades" (Federal Register, 1995). Consequently, the above suggestions would presumably have rather limited public appeal and offer no new information.

For all these reasons, the officials responsible for the censuses taken in 1990, 2000, and 2010 rejected proposals involving the fractionalization of the ethnoracial category WHITE. It unclear, of course, whether or not this policy will be upheld for the Census 2020, especially if public and governmental support for the separate ethnoracial enumeration of AROMMEA continues to mount. What is clear is the fact that many of the issues raised during this deliberation have direct implications for the entire society.

Discussion and conclusions

No sooner did the Census 2010 end, did preparations for the Census 2020 begin. Already in the early spring of 2011, the five Census Advisory Committees on Race

and Ethnicity met to discuss plans for the next national survey (Federal Register, 2011). At the same time, grass-roots organizations across the nation have begun to coordinate their efforts to secure a name for themselves on the coveted OMB list of ethnoracial categories. Conspicuously absent in this political cacophony have been voices from the AROMMEA community. To a certain extent, this silence may be read as a political protest against several recent government policies.

In the summer of 2004, for example, the Bureau of Census admitted to having provided detailed information on not only the number but also the location of Arab Americans to the Department of Homeland Security (El-Badry and Swanson, 2007: 470).[6] In combination with such controversial initiatives as the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) program which also targeted AROMMEA for special treatment (Cainkar, 2008; Shora, 2009), this egregious breach of trust did much to tarnish the reputation of the US Bureau of Census.[7] Many previous supporters of a separate Census category now feel it would be better to avoid any policy change which might profile AROMMEA (Hassan, 2002).

Historically speaking, the fact that this official group recognition was ever sought via the US Census is quite remarkable. At its genesis, the Census was roundly vilified as a dangerous encroachment into the private lives of US residents. After more than two hundred years of successful enumeration, the Census has become a veritable socio-cultural right-of-passage for minority groups hoping to receive official recognition. On the one hand, this change in public perception may be directly attributed to the Bureau's sustained efforts to develop and improve public relations. On the other hand, this development may also be linked to a primal need to be counted, to be named. As social anthropologists von Bruck and Bodenhorn explain: "names are powerful political tools for establishing or erasing formal identity" (2006: 4). The decision of the AROMMEA to avoid being officially named could then be read as a politicized act of self-protection by seeking the safety which comes from onomastic anonymity.

By investigating the rise and fall of official anthroponyms, onomasticians can help to unravel exceedingly complex processes of identity formation. In the case of the Census, these onomastically encoded developments have always been a product of intensive negotiation between the US American pubic and its government. Consequently, investigations into this specific nomenclature can also yield invaluable information about the social forces driving these linguistic changes, both from the top-down and the bottom-up.

The present onomastic investigation has demonstrated, for example, just how profoundly 9/11 continues to affect US American identity constructions upon multiple levels. In a legal analysis of the post 9/11 constructions of RACE and ETHNICITY, Tehranian (2008) comes to a similar conclusion: "The Middle Eastern question lies at the heart of the most pressing issues of our time [. . .] the delicate balancing act between preserving our national security interests and protecting our constitutional rights and civil liberties [. . .]" (1204). Ultimately, then, decisions over which anthroponyms to use in the US Census are far from trivial or arbitrary. In a very real sense, the names we choose to call ourselves (and others) not only say something profound about the people we are today. They may also reveal something essential about the people we may aspire to become.

Notes

[1] In this paper, cursive lettering (e.g. *White*) is used to indicate a Census name and small capitals (e.g., WHITE) is used to refer to a category.

[2] See "General Principles for the Review of the Racial and Ethnic Categories" in Federal Register, 1995 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg_race-ethnicity>).

[3] The National Center for Education Statistics uses the following definition for *Asian*: "a persona having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent [. . .]" (<www. http://nces.ed.gov/statprog/2002/std1_5.asp>). Similar suggestions have been put before the US Census. On July 18 1994, the National Association of Muslim West Asian Americans wrote: "We reject the name 'Middle East' which it was given by the European colonial powers, to separate the West Asians from the rest of Asia. We would like to be called 'West Asians' rather than 'Middle Easterners'."

[4] There was much support for re-classifying AROMMEA as AFRICAN-AMERICAN. In a letter dated August 10 1994, the Black Health Education and Welfare Task Force of Southern California wrote: "As I am sure you are aware there are white supremacist Europeans and Arabians who would like to call the entire Northern quarter of AFRICA 'Middle East' [. . .] the TASK FORCE opposes the inclusion of any part of Africa in the rubric 'THE MIDDLE EAST'. They are North Africans."

[5] Teheranian contends it is far more likely that it "emerged in the 1850s from Britain's India Office" (2008: 1211).

[6] During World War II, the Bureau also released sensitive information on millions of Japanese Americans who were subsequently interned under Executive Order 9066. According to Congresswoman C. Maloney, former Member of the House Census Subcommittee, the scandal continues: "[The] Census Bureau's mission is to provide our country with statistics, not to assist in law enforcement [. . .] Don't be fooled, the Census Bureau hasn't halted this practice, they've merely added a bureaucratic speed bump [. . .]" (<http://maloney.house.gov/press-release>).

[7] As Seltzer and Anderson (2001) state: "The ultimate safeguard is not to gather or save data that permits associating an individual with a potentially vulnerable group" (495).

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