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# What's In a Name?

ICAV Perspective Paper

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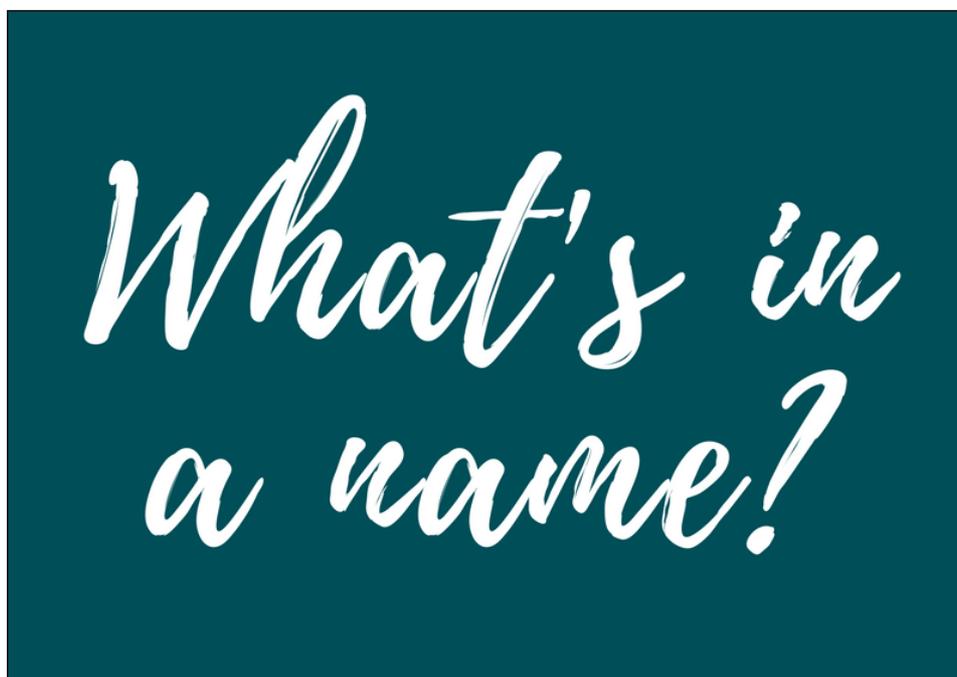


**Inter Country Adoptee Voices**



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## Introduction



Many prospective and adoptive parent forums discuss whether it's a good idea to change our original names at adoption. We thought we'd provide you our views, as adults, with hindsight from our lifelong journey as intercountry adopted people to help inform you of how we feel about this issue.

Here's a collation of our responses, shared in no particular order, from our ICAV facebook group where we had this discussion. We hope it is helpful.

*Lynelle Long*

Founding Director  
**InterCountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV)**  
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## Микайла Трапезникова

*Adopted from Russia to America.*

My view is that our names should not be changed unless we want them to be changed. My adoptive mom changed mine simply because that's what she wanted but to me, my original name is what I really resonate with and it's my identity. In adoption they use us as a substitute to make us theirs and not just take us in to take care of us because another family cannot or will not do it.

As far as the documents go, I think there needs to be legislation in place stating that we have the right to access our birth documents and be given them freely. Most times we cannot even go to ask for them from the courts because you need to know certain details such as county etc and adoptive parents have and can withhold that from an adoptee. It's our history and we have every right to know who we are and we shouldn't be forced into another person's mould of family.

To me it's just unethical especially taking into consideration some of us were actually trafficked and not given up. Such was my case. The government lied and by the time there was enough information to find me in the orphanage, I was already adopted and bio family members were denied custody of me within that time also because of my adoptive mom's expression of wanting to adopt me. They lied about medical records and they lied about my bio dad's information simply to gain more money for the federation.

Adoptive parents should be able to change our name but only if they can prove there is an immediate threat to us in keeping our birth name.

## MKR

*Adopted from Asia to America*

We lost enough. We are people before we enter their families, regardless of whether they like our names or not, it is ours. Even if it is "just" an orphanage name.

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## Daniel Walsh

*Adopted from Peru to Canada.*

I'd prefer they would have kept my name but then again, the orphanage were calling me by my middle name, "Manuel" which I always felt was odd. But when I found my mom, she called me by my first name "Antonio" and it made more sense. Anyways, now my name is Daniel which has nothing to do with my real one.

My birth family also say Tonio, short for Antonio. In Peru, this name is very common but in Canada, not so much. I feel like it's a part of where I'm from. It's also my father's name. I always knew my real name, I just wish I'd got to keep it. The entire thing. I will eventually change it back to my real name. It's just frustrating that I have to get through the legal procedure over all the stuff I have to do to reconnect with my culture.

It's very sad 'cause it adds to all the stuff I was deprived from when I was adopted. It's my identity. I also feel like growing up not speaking my language was cruel. I wish I could have grown speaking it a little bit so I didn't waste my brain plasticity's peak when I was a kid and have to learn it as a grown man.

In Canada, it always was important to learn English if you are french and both those languages are easier to learn or immerse in. Peruvian Spanish is also different from other Spanish, so even though I know Central American's and South American's, I don't wanna learn Mexican stuff and realise it's not the same.

I just feel like adoption out of country is wrong. Changing names or not, it doesn't give back what we lose by being deprived of our culture. I wish I still had my name but then again, I wish I wasn't adopted and I wish I grew up in Peru with my family even more.

I had this identity crisis where neither my real name felt like me nor did my legal name. It's weird to say but it was very confusing for me. I suffered from this, not being able to identify with these names. It meant nothing to me. It's like I'm in between and nowhere, at the same time. That's what being adopted is for me. It's assimilation. It took away my sense of self.

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## Gemma

*Adopted from South Korea to Australia.*

Honestly, I wouldn't want my Korean name. After finding out my birth mother didn't even name me and that the midwife did, I kinda thought about getting rid of them as my middle names too. I don't like being asked all the bloody time about "why this and that" so at least having an "english" sounding name has helped me not have to constantly be asked questions all the time. But thats just me. I hate being asked and having to explain for the billionth time .



## Anonymous

*Adopted from India to America.*

I wouldn't want my Indian name. I partly just love the uniqueness and ambiguity of my current name but I ALWAYS hated my Indian name. I think as I child I truly believed that name represented an ugly part of me. That ugly, unknown confusing part. Then with how non-Indian I am, I wouldn't want it!! BUT on the flip side I wonder how connected I would actually feel if I hadn't had the opportunity to completely separate myself from the Indian part of me.

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## Maria Hernandez

*Adopted from the Philippines to Canada.*

A lot of people don't think names matter. But just like in tribes, they knew where you belonged by the tribal name associated. So changing our original names means that you are erasing our identity.

I was named Angela as a baby, born to my mother, my roots, my history, my identity. I was renamed Maria, which I never felt connected to. Maria was someone I knew who was brought into another family and my memories don't go beyond the days I can recall being part of a new family. If they had kept my name and added on to it, maybe with a middle name if I didn't have one, that would have been acceptable, it would have given me some sort of comfort that I am real and not just some random child who needed to be wanted because of the circumstances my birth mother was in at the time. An added name / surname comes second to who I already was, we aren't renewed after we're adopted. We're human, not some immaculate being that comes down from some planet.

We are the same child and who we become after adoption doesn't redefine our identity, it merely hides and erases it on paper. We are not to be claimed like a puppy who gets two owners in one life. We aren't animals you make up names for. We are already someone before we had to be someone else's.

The key to "loving" this child that you need to have because there are so many children out there who need your "help" – is not to change who they are, or to replace their beginning with one that attaches / claims them as yours. It's to take the child who's already someone and build from that, understand that no change of name, no information erased from their true birth certificate will make them look like you birthed them into this world. Nothing will fix what's broken within yourself, or whatever void you're trying to fill, by changing / falsifying our identity.

Your power to change the identity of a child on paper is something you need to look inward about and think whether it's truly for the benefit and the best for the child who's lost/losing her biological ties and everything that goes with that; or if it's to benefit you and your needs.

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## Marisa Smith

*Adopted from UK British/Native American ancestry to America.*

My name is mine. I used to hate it and wanted to change it. And then when I got married, people wondered why the hell I didn't change it. It's mine. It's grown on me. Yes, it links me to a birth mother for whom I do not care, but it's my name. No one can pronounce it, but it's my name. I've thought about adding my birth father's last name to mine but maybe in the future. I have so little left of my roots. Leave me with something.

## Jodi Gibson

*Adopted from Ireland to America.*

Don't go there. That's our family name and changing it strips us of our identity and family connections. Even married couples don't always have the same last names. The adopters just want us to "match" them so they can pretend we're theirs.

For adoptees whose names have been changed, going back to our birth names should be as easy as going back to a maiden name after a divorce. No cost, no hassle, just file it with the courts and you're back to your own name again. It's just one more area in which adoptees have no choice or right to consent.



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## Vong Ung Thanh aka Lynelle Long

*Adopted from Vietnam to Australia.*

One of the first things we learn to write as a child, is our name. This is what identifies us as an individual, it is the collective sum of our unique personality and our lineage held together by words – our first and last names. So when we become adopted, we shouldn't lose the right to who we are born as. I want to suggest respectfully that most adoptive parents change our names out of an unrecognised acceptance of the patriarchy and colonialism that predominates the basis of adoption. I hope that parents in this era will question more deeply why they feel the need to change our name.

Of course it's convenient to not have to explain to half the world why our name is not the same as our father or mother or how we "belong" to them — but how can we develop self esteem, confidence, and pride in our own identity if we are not allowed our own name? Our name is an expression of who we are and we all deserve to live our truth. The most important thing we have to develop as we journey life, is our relationship with self and our name is integral to our sense of self.

I was given an anglo name by my adoptive parents with my Vietnamese name in the middle. At age 17, I was given a choice if I wanted to keep my Vietnamese name as my legal name. I chose at that time to keep the name as my parents had chosen because at that stage in my life, I hated everything Asian and had absorbed the negativity and racism I experienced within my adoptive country. After doing much work on myself years later, to find my true identity and reclaim my Asian self with my caucasian mindset, I now feel pride as to where I was born and I do wish my adoptive family experience had been different. No doubt if they'd taught me about my heritage and beginnings with a sense of respect and pride, I would have been proud to own my Vietnamese name. It would have helped me develop a stronger and more positive sense of who I am rather than the unnecessary complications I had to sort through as a much older adult.

On the flip side, there's no doubt people in Australia would have struggled with pronouncing my Vietnamese name considering I was raised in very remote rural regions but I question any adoptive parent who intends on raising their child in areas with no racial mirrors; my generation of intercountry adoptees has definitely seen that this adds to our complexities in negative ways. Now that I live in multi-cultural and very-Asian-dominated-Sydney, my original name would not have been an issue if I'd been raised somewhere like this.

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## Allison Young

*Adopted from Sth Korea to the America and adoptive parent.*

I asked a bunch of adoptees this question for our child whom we adopted. Some said they wouldn't have wanted a Korean name growing up because they already stood out too much and the name would make it worse. Others wish they had kept part of it (I'm in this camp).

We kept his birth name given by birth mother but changed the romanisation. I have advised other adoptive parents to keep at least part of the name.

## Lina

*Adopted from Brazil to Germany.*

I didn't know for a long time that my birth mother had indeed named me. I wish it was my second name and now if I had to go through the process of changing it, it would be long and costly.

It's a difficult question because I have periods when I dislike my own name because well, it's not my first.

I know of not one adoptee that doesn't at least attempt to find their roots. Finding out your adoptive parents gave you a new name can be difficult to digest, especially when you find out later in life. It can also enhance the internal divide an adoptee may already feel.



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## Sue Bylund

*Adopted from Vietnam to Australia.*

The moment or moments you are given a name, or alter a name (via marriage, divorce, blended families, immigration, or choice thru Deed Poll etc), they are all markers in the time line of an individual's life. There are always many things to consider, however, inclusion and continuity of names (where ever it sits eg first / middle / hyphenated etc) seems to tell a story of a life lived and cared for by many whether biological family, carers, adopted family, or married family. Nothing is hidden and it's just left to the individual as to which name they would like to be known as, which may change as they grow up, which is naturally what we often do (adopted or not, child names and adult name versions).

The issue for me would be about providing choice for the adoptee, not taking that away. And to not create identity erasure. Doing this creates identity ambiguity which is so damaging. Choice is empowering when so many parts of our lives as adoptees is about feeling disempowered and marginalised. My five cents worth.

## Jesse Lassandro

*Adopted from Spain to America.*

What's in a name? For adoptees, connection and disconnection. Most adoptees have little else going forward except their birth name – their link to humanity. When adoptive families change a child's name, often to one that removes ethnic relevance and birth family history, the new name is a primal severing.

In my case however, the abusive people who adopted me mocked my birth name relentlessly. When I finally escaped my childhood hell as a teenager, I chose a new name that powerfully symbolised my new life. I eventually changed my name legally.

My advice as an adoptee is to keep and honour the adopted child's birth name; use a nickname if needed. In this way, the link to the child's core identity is preserved and not denied.

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## Gardom

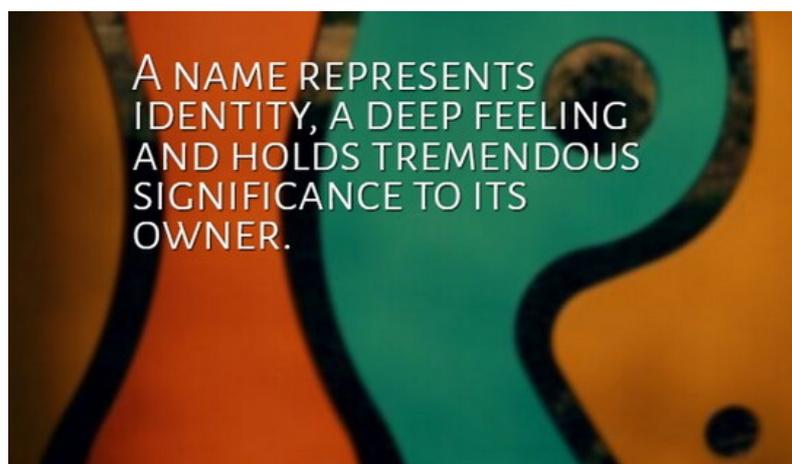
*Adopted from Malaysia to the UK.*

In many cases our name is the only gift our mother gives us and our only link to her, to family and to culture. If it wasn't given by her it's still a part of our story.

Our name is important and a disregard of it is significant it sends a message about who and what's important. It's the first sign that parent (and in some case white) comfort is more important than ours and we must collude with that or face their pain and resistance if we want to reclaim that name or any part of our biological identity – it's a heavy burden for an adoptee.

If you have to change an Asian or African name for the comfort of a white community you're not ready for a transracial child and all its complexity, not ready to advocate for them and celebrate their otherness instead of trying to disguise it. Don't gift a child a sense of shame in their culture instead nurture confidence and security in who they are and the skills to advocate for themselves. Learn those skills yourself if you haven't already. If you choose to erase your child's identity instead you fail at this first hurdle. So prepare for a rough ride once your child tries to find their roots without your help because you've shown yourself unable to be supportive.

Name changes also play a crucial role in anonymising us so that biological family can't search for us. No matter how well argued the parents case is for name changing – it's a power grab, which means it disempowers others. I can't express how heavy the burden of search is, it lies entirely with the adoptee because of the many ways birth families are disempowered and shamed to deter them from searching. I shouldn't have to search, I want to be found.



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## Anonymous

*Adopted from Sri Lanka to Australia.*

Prospective and adoptive parents are contributing to a situation where we may end up with a huge list of names. It can be very confusing and does not aid identity. I have 5-6 different last name options (and more, if you consider hyphenating any of those). Now, that's exacerbated by the fact that Sri Lankan Sinhala people typically have two different types of family names and can use either and that I am married. But being married and changing your name is not unusual in many countries.

Also, having two last names is also not totally unusual as Spanish and Latin American cultures often also use two names (and perhaps there are other countries too who follow such a system).

I have three given names as my bio mother gave me two and my adoptive parents kept my birth name as middle but gave me a new first name. So that's three given names. It is just plain psychologically difficult to have so many different names. How many people have 9 different names? I don't even want to calculate how many combinations that is!

## Anonymous

*Adopted from Sth Korea to America.*

I think this is very personal to individual adoptees and there's no way an adoptive parent can know which the child would prefer. They often have to make the best decision they can based on what they think is best. Hindsight is always 20/20.

I don't think I would have wanted to grow up with my Korean name and deal CONSTANTLY with people misspelling it and mispronouncing it and having to spell it for people everywhere I go. Ugh. Just thinking about it makes me tired. Lol! But I also wasn't very in touch with my Korean-ness as a kid.

I think today, it would be neat to have it as a middle name so I could have this little reminder. My husband and I also adopted from Korea. Our son is 9 and we chose to change his name. For one, his Korean name was one that was easily turned into a cruel taunt in America and we felt it would make him a target for bullying. We've told him all along, however, that we will help him change it back if he ever wants to do so. He knows we are fine with whatever he wants to do. We actually gave him a middle name he shares

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with my husband, who is white. Many adoptive families I know keep the Korean name as the middle name so they can decide later to go by their middle name if they'd like. I think that's a great thing.

## Sarah Mårtensson

*Adopted from Iran to Sweden.*

My Iranian name Susan was given to me at an orphanage, probably a horrible place to have spent any time in whatsoever. I am happy I got to keep it as a middle name because otherwise it would have felt as if my Swedish adoptive parents were actively trying to erase my origins. They gave me the first name Sarah, which works in the whole world. Sarah is common in Iran too, which is great now that I have found my birth family.

I am happy with not having a Scandinavian name that no-one abroad can pronounce. It would raise so many questions wherever I travel. With a name like Sarah there are less questions. Finding my birth family, it turned out I have a big sister named Susan, so now I'm even more happy I wasn't given that as my first name.

So my advice is:

- 1) don't erase the orphanage name;
- 2) give your child an international name;
- 3) if possible, give the child a name that works in their native country; and
- 4) if the child was given a name by the birth parent and if the child is old enough to answer to that name, you CANNOT under any circumstances change it.

