

Regarding Names And Naming

By Rick Pearce

When someone first begins to learn of and explore their Tsalagi heritage a few certain subjects always seem to arise before others. The most predictable seems to be the subject of "Indian Names". I thought I would share my thoughts on this subject.

There are many ways of giving or receiving a name. I won't go into great detail regarding the actual process as that may vary from person to person and group to group. There are certain traditions our people followed in the process of giving a name though that I think have been lost or nearly forgotten over time. At birth the name was typically given within the first seven days of life, more specifically between the 4th and 7th day. This was done because if the child should die without a name it was believed that it would not be able to be united with family in the "Nightland" because family would be unable to call out to the child. During this naming ceremony the child was passed through the smoke of The Sacred Fire. The name was generally given by a female Elder of close relation, such as a grandmother. Today there are many ways of being given a name. The most basic rules were that a name could change many times in one's life. A name was considered an extension of the individual and to harm the name or speak it in a negative way was to do harm to that person. If such was done then a new name might be sought by the offended party. A name can be used in ceremony by those who might seek to do you harm.

Over the years I have heard this subject discussed countless times. In my conversations with many Elders I have become aware of a distinct cultural separation between recognized and unrecognized Tsalagi. Among those I have spoken with that are from established communities and grew up raised with traditional ways, stereotypical or Hollywood style

names are either frowned upon or laughed at and viewed as "Wannabes". Among unrecognized Tsalagi it is also a sensitive subject for different reasons. Typically people take or give such names in an attempt to connect with and honor their ancestors. I will not delve into the right or wrong of either viewpoint. It is not for me to judge anyone nor tell others how they should live or act.

I do know that those traditional Tsalagi do indeed have other names used by close family or during ceremony and that their English name is there mainly for documentation reasons such as birth certificates, social security numbers, driver's licenses, etc. These "secret" names are not frequently bandied about to just anyone but are closely guarded and protected.

I have known many people to take names or be given names that are used in English and carried about like a banner saying "This is who I am!". There is nothing wrong with being proud of who you are and who your people are. Perhaps there is a better way though. Yes, be proud of your name but guard it and protect it as well. Actions always speak more than words can say. Lead by example, by action and not always by words. I would truly enjoy seeing more names spoken and used in the Tsalagi language (or whatever your people's language is). It is one extra step to preserve our culture and honor our ancestors.

Another thing I have noted is some older customs regarding the use of someone's name. One such custom revolves around those who have crossed over. Since a name is generally connected with who a person is, speaking the name of that person is usually avoided. This is done for several reasons. First, calling the dead is viewed as an act of sorcery and in the old days that accusation would bring swift execution. Second, this was also avoided lest you confuse the spirit of the one making the crossing and interfere with their journey. This typically lasts about a year which allows time for the person to complete their crossing and for those here to adjust to the loss. Thus the tradition of referring to the one who crossed over as "the Traveler". A much older

custom, rarely used anymore that I have learned of is to speak the individual's name followed by "tsigesv" (chee-gay-SUN). Emphasis placed on the last syllable. This means "who was" or more literally "used to be". To borrow an example from someone else, if I had a friend named John I would say John oginali (John is my friend), after a funeral I might say John tsigesv oginali (John, who was a friend). As it was explained to me we change the name and in doing so we acknowledge that the person is not the same as they were. We avoid calling to them and confusing them, and it helps us to let go of some of our attachment and move on.

Ultimately we must understand that there is much more to a name than words strung together. It is a part of who you are and should be cared for in the same manner. Do not use someone's name disrespectfully, even if there is anger or frustration. Do not be careless and unthinking with your own. Everything is much more interconnected than we think at first glance.

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