



What's in a name?

Before we are born, our parents lovingly choose a name for us. Our names can be seen as the starting point of our identity — how we see ourselves. Everybody's name is precious. CHEW WEI SHAN finds out what happens when unfamiliar names are not valued.

Names reflect our heritage. Names might also express our parents' hopes for us. Yet, names can be the basis for everyday racism. Today, I speak to Iman and Reyansh about names.

Shan: If you don't mind me asking, do you know what your names mean?

Iman: Yes! "Iman" means "faith".

Reyansh: Mine means "ray of light".

Shan: Whoa, beautiful names with beautiful meanings.

Reyansh: What about you, Shan?

Shan: "Wei Shan" means "rare coral".

This series is based on interviews with people who have experienced casual racism. As a member of the majority race, the author was keen to understand what it was like to be an ethnic minority. She has written these articles so that you too may learn about racial discrimination. The stories are real, but the names have been changed.

WHAT'S UP

Iman: Ooh, that's lovely.

Shan: Aww, thanks! Hey, have you two ever had your names mispronounced?

Reyansh: Oh, plenty of times. I've even been called "Ranch" like the salad dressing!

Sometimes, instead of asking me how to say my name, people go, "Aiyah, I'll just call you Ryan, okay?"

Some of my friends have it worse. One of my good friends is named Chetanjeet, which means "the spirit of life". He is a genius with words, and won many trophies for our school in Scrabble competitions.

Every time he went on stage to collect a prize, the announcer would say his name wrongly. Sometimes, emcees even made jokes to make the crowd laugh at his name! Like "Cheddar cheese Singh". It always angered me.

This made him very **self-conscious**, and he could never enjoy award ceremonies. He just dreaded the moment he would hear his name being butchered, and possibly **ridiculed**.

Nobody's name is funny. Maybe you might find a name funny if it sounds "weird" or foreign to you. But, my name and Chetanjeet's name are not foreign. Our names are just as local as anyone else's.

Shan: I remember actress Zhang Zi Yi getting her name mispronounced as "Zee Yee Jang" at many award shows in Western countries. Some of my Chinese friends were angry that the overseas announcers did not do their homework. Similarly, Reyansh, you may feel upset but more so because you are in your own country.

Iman: I get the same thing. Many people call me "Ai-men", when it should be "Ee-mahn".

Also, different cultures have different systems of naming. Some non-Malays seem

to be confused about the way Malay names work. My full name is "Nur Iman Binte Mohammed Afsah". Till today, people still call me "Miss Mohammed" or "Miss Afsah". But "Mohammed Afsah" is my dad's name.

For Malay names, the part after the "Binte", or "Bin" for guys, is the name of the person's father. So, we address them by what comes before it, like "Miss Iman".

Some Malays don't have the "Bin" or "Binte" included in their names, though. In those cases, a safe bet would be to still use the first part of their names when addressing them. Do you know the local singer Aisyah Aziz? We should address her as "Miss Aisyah", not "Miss Aziz".

If you are not sure, just ask them politely.

Shan: We would find it strange if a Singaporean doesn't know that Chinese surnames traditionally come first — so I am Ms Chew, not Ms Shan. I think we should all learn how different cultures say their names.

Iman: I can also totally relate to what you said about nicknames, Reyansh. My teachers used to call me "Man Man", which means "slowly" in Chinese. My PE teacher turned it into a pun when I was falling behind in sports.

My best friend, Sangeetha, who sat next to me in class, got the same treatment. Teachers said that her name was too "complicated", so they called her "San San". Together, we were known as "Man Man and San San"!

"Sangeetha" means music. It is such a gorgeous name! Nobody's name is too difficult. A name may be unfamiliar to you. But, it is just as deserving of respect as any other name.

Reyansh: I am 100% Singaporean. But, very often, people look at my name and say "Oh, your name doesn't sound Singaporean. Where are you from?"

Reyansh (cont'd): My full name is Reyansh Charles. Growing up, other kids liked to say, "You're not Indian, you must be Eurasian or something. How come your surname is Charles and not, like, Subramaniam?"

To them, I'd like to explain that I have a Catholic surname because my family is Catholic. So, my name reflects my faith and my family history.

Too many times, I have heard people refer

to minority names as "foreign" or "less Singaporean". Why isn't my name just as Singaporean as yours?

VOCAB BUILDER

self-conscious (say "self **kon**-shi-es"; adjective) = uncomfortable because you are worried about what others will think about you.

ridiculed (say "**ri-di**-kiul'd"; verb) = mocked or laughed at.

Getting names right

Hearing Iman and Reyansh's stories, I imagined what I would have felt if someone had made fun of my name when I was a kid. I would have felt very insecure. If people were always tickled or confused by my name, I would hesitate to introduce myself. Maybe, I might even have avoided making new friends or speaking up in class.

My parents picked my name from our culture, but if my name caused me so much trouble, I might start wishing my parents had given me a "normal" name. But, a name is a gift, and should never be a burden!

We should not make anyone feel that way. When you first start to make friends with kids from different cultural backgrounds, their names may be unfamiliar to you. Sometimes, you may find them hard to pronounce.

Learning how to say someone's name correctly is a first step to being considerate. Besides, the world is full of wonderfully diverse and beautiful names to learn!



WHAT IS EVERYDAY RACISM?

Racism means to treat some people worse than others, just because they are of a different race or skin colour, come from a different place, or have a different culture. Everyday racism is a form of racism where people say or do hurtful things without intending to be unkind. Everyday racism is also called "casual racism", although there is nothing casual about it for the person at the receiving end.

This series is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Singapore. You can find more articles about casual racism at <http://more.whatsup.sg>.