

Onoma **51**
Journal of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences

ISSN: 0078-463X; e-ISSN: 1783-1644
Journal homepage: https://onomajournal.org/

Anthroponymic system of Malaysia: Name popularity and culture shift

DOI: 10.34158/ONOMA.51/2016/10

Veronika V. Robustova

Ph.D., Associate professor
Faculty of Foreign Languages and Area Studies
Lomonosov Moscow State University
Russia, Moscow, ul. Obrucheva 28, korp. 3, flat 253
119241
nikarbs@yandex.ru

To cite this article: Robustova, Veronika V. 2016. Anthroponymic system of Malaysia: Name popularity and culture shift. *Onoma* 51, 207–221. DOI: 10.34158/ONOMA.51/2016/10

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.34158/ONOMA.51/2016/10

© *Onoma* and the author.

Anthroponymic system of Malaysia: Name popularity and culture shift

Abstract: The Malaysian anthroponymic system reflects the cultural variety of the people related to it. The name systems are quite diverse, but the general tendencies of name-giving and name functions are the same. The aim of the article is to show how socio-cultural aspects are reflected in the naming tendencies today and how names identify the people bearing them. The main criteria according to which Malaysians choose a name are religion, family traditions and status, cultural norms, and values. People's preferences are basically divided into two groups: those who want a traditional name for their child, and those who search for an uncommon name for their newborn to stand out. In the first case a child receives a traditional

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

religious name, which identifies the person throughout his/her life. We come across such male names as *Mohammed* (the name of the prophet), *Adam* ('man'), *Ahmad* ('praised'), *Zikri* ('remembering Allah'), *Rayyan* ('gate of heaven'). As far as we can see, most names are Arabic. This tendency is still very strong. The adoption of Arabic names in preference to native Malay or Sanskrit names indicates the major religion in the county. As for girls' names, the most popular are *Nor* ('light'), *Sophia* ('wisdom'), *Zara* ('flower, princess'), *Aishah* ('woman'), *Hannah* ('favour, grace'). These names have a more vivid cultural background. In the second case parents want a unique name for their baby, and this name often does not give any clue regarding the cultural identity or status of a person. The most popular sources for creative names are history, eMedTV's Uncommon Baby Names feature, and BabyBuilder's Top 100 Baby Names. This is a worldwide tendency, as modern parents do not want their children to have the same names as their neighbours. This indicates the shift towards individualism in the cultural development of the world.

Keywords: Malaysian anthroponymic system, traditional name-giving tendencies, modern name-giving tendencies, socio-cultural context.

Système anthroponymique de la Malaisie : popularité du nom et changement de culture

Résumé : Le système anthroponymique malaisien reflète une variété culturelle de gens qui y vivent. Les systèmes de noms sont assez divers mais les tendances générales des dénominations et des fonctions de noms sont les mêmes. L'objectif de l'article est de montrer comment les tendances de dénomination d'aujourd'hui reflètent les aspects socioculturels et comment le prénom identifie une personne qui la porte. Les principaux critères selon lesquels les Malaisiens choisissent un prénom sont la religion, les traditions et le statut de la famille, les normes et les valeurs culturelles. Les préférences des gens sont essentiellement divisées en deux groupes : ceux qui cherchent un prénom traditionnel pour leur enfant et ceux qui cherchent un prénom inhabituel pour que le nouveau-né puisse se distinguer. Dans le premier cas, un enfant reçoit un prénom religieux traditionnel, qui identifie la personne dans la vie. Nous rencontrons ici des prénoms masculins tels que *Mohammed* (le nom du prophète), *Adam* ('homme'), *Ahmad* ('loué'), *Zikri* ('se souvenant d'Allah'), *Rayyan* ('la porte du ciel'). On peut voir que la plupart des prénoms sont d'origine arabe. Cette tendance est encore très forte. L'adoption des prénoms arabes plutôt que des prénoms malais ou sanskritiques indique la religion principale du comté. Quant aux prénoms de fille les plus populaires sont *Nor* ('lumière'), *Sophia* ('sagesse'), *Zara* ('fleur, princesse'), *Aishah* ('femme'), Hannah ('faveur, grâce'). Ici, les prénoms ont l'origin culturelle plus vive. Dans le second cas, les parents veulent un prénom unique pour leur enfant et ce prénom ne donne souvent aucun indice sur l'identité culturelle ou de statut d'une personne. Les sources de prénoms créatifs les plus populaires sont l'histoire, Prénoms pour bébé peu communs de eMedTV et les 100 meilleurs prénoms pour bébé de BabyBuilder. C'est une tendance mondiale, les parents modernes ne veulent pas que leurs enfants portent les mêmes prénoms que leurs voisins. Cela indique le passage à l'individualisme dans le développement culturel du monde.

Mots-clés : Système anthroponymique malaisien, tendances traditionnelles de dénominations, tendances modernes de dénominations, contexte socioculturel.

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

Das System der Anthroponymie in Malaysia: Namenpopularität und Kulturdrift

Zusammenfassung: Das System der Anthroponymie in Malaysia spiegelt die Kulturvarietäten der dort wohnenden Menschen wieder. Die Systeme sind recht divers, aber die allgemeinen Tendenzen zur Namensgebung und zu den Namenfunktionen sind gleich. Der Artikel verfolgt das Ziel, die soziokulturellen Aspekte der Tendenzen der Namensgebung und den Einfluss der Namen auf das Individuum zu beschreiben. Die Kriterien für die Wahl eines Namens schließen Religion, Sitten und Gebräuche der Familie, sozialen Status, Normen der Kultur und Werte ein. Die Gewichte sind dabei unterschiedlich verteilt: einige Leute möchten ihrem Kind einen traditionellen Namen geben, andere suchen nach einem kreativen und ungewöhnlichen Namen. Im ersten Fall bekommt das Kind einen religiösen Namen, der es für das Leben prägt. Darunter sind solche Namen wie *Mohammed* (der Namen des Propheten), *Adam* (‚Mensch'), *Ahmad* (‚gepriesen'), *Zikri* (‚Allah ehrend') oder *Rayyan* (‚Pforte des Himmels'). Es ist ersichtlich, dass keine malaiischen oder sanskritischen, sondern arabische Namen in der Überzahl sind. Diese Tendenz ist immer noch populär. Darin findet sich die Hauptreligion des Landes wieder. Was die Mädchennamen angeht, sind *Nor* (‚Licht'), *Sophia* (‚Weisheit'), *Zara* (‚Blume, Prinzessin'), *Aishah* (‚Frau') und *Hannah* (‚Freundlichkeit, Gnade') am meisten verbreitet. Hier haben die Namen einen deutlicheren kulturellen Hintergrund. Im zweiten Fall wollen die Eltern dem Baby einen einzigartigen Namen geben, der keine kulturellen oder sozialen Informationen enthält. Die folgenden Quellen für kreative Namen sind am meisten verbreitet: die Geschichte, eMedTV's Uncommon Baby Names feature und BabyBuilder's Top 100 Baby Names. Die weltweite Tendenz besteht darin, dass die Eltern den Kindern einen anderen Namen geben wollen als die Nachbarn. Das zeigt die Verschiebung zum Individualismus in der modernen Welt.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Das System der Anthroponymie in Malaysia, traditionelle Tendenzen der Namensgebung, moderne Tendenzen der Namensgebung, soziokultureller Kontext.

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

Onoma 51 (2016), 207–221. DOI: 10.34158/ONOMA.51/2016/10

Anthroponymic system of Malaysia: Name popularity and culture shift

VERONIKA V. ROBUSTOVA

1. Introduction

The Malaysian anthroponymic system reflects the cultural variety of the people related to it. Malaysia comprises many ethnicities and cultures, which share their unique systems of names. Names might be considered a culture code, the so-called onomastic culture code, which helps us trace a person's cultural and ethnic background, find a clue to a person's gender and social status, religion, values, and beliefs. There are no languages without proper names, and various name systems underline special religious and cultural features of naming. In Malaysia personal names are regulated by the National Registration Department, which proposes a number of regulations according to which it is not allowed to give names with negative or obscene meanings, names with meaning colours, animals, and natural phenomena.

There are three major ethnic groups in Malaysia: Malays (including Orang Asli, the Bumiputera of Sabah, and Sarawak), Malaysian Chinese, and Malaysian Indians. Their name systems are quite diverse but the general tendencies of name-giving and name functions are the same. In this article we will analyse Malay names without paying much attention to Malaysian Chinese and Indian naming systems because they follow their (Chinese and Indian) main cultural patterns. Most Malaysian ethnic groups share a naming custom which consists of using a personal name followed by a patronym. It is possible to have two or three personal names taken from different sources including religion, public figures or personal preferences. This custom has its roots in the popularity of Muslim names such as *Muhammad* and *Ahmad* or *Nur* (*Nor*) and *Siti* which are considered to be the most popular names in Malaysia and lose their distinctive (individualizing) function. The bearers of these names have a more distinctive second or third name, and the patronym is added after them. Given names in Malaysia are strongly influenced by Islam due to the main religion in the country. There are names of genuine Malay origin but some of them have turned to be illegal because of their meanings (*Puteh* 'white', *Wulan* 'moon', *Suria* 'sun', *Rimau* 'tiger', *Awan* 'cloud').

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

2. Methodological base

Alford's (1988) large-scale analysis of naming systems, in which he used the Human Relations Area Files, reflects cultural variability across the world and provides a valuable overview of naming systems as a whole. Bregenzer (1968) investigated the complexity and communality of societies, and the effect of this on naming patterns. Bean (1980) studies universal features of naming systems, using name theories from the philosophy of language to tie these features to a wider theoretical context. The study of names as a social practice has grown in popularity during the last 20 years. Blum (1997) gives a thorough picture of the pragmatic role of personal names in China. Rymes (1996) discusses the nature of naming as a part of a wider social context. She sees meaning as bound to group membership and to experience within a community. Socio-onomastic research is a type of typological research. Name variation is the core concern in socio-onomastics.

Our study is based on socio-onomastic approach. Socio-onomastics is defined as a sociolinguistic study of names. "The emergence of individual names and name categories is always based on the cultural and social context. In other words, names are not only part of language; they are part of society and culture, as well. Names are always born in the interaction between people, the linguistic community, and the environment" (Ainiala 2016: 371). The socio-onomastic research method takes into account the social, cultural, and situational fields in which names are used. The term *socio-onomastics* was first used by Hans Walther in *Namenforschung heute* (1971). He defined the two main objectives of socio-onomastics as follows: (1) the study of the social origin and use of different variants of proper names within various situations and contexts, and (2) taking into account the name giver, name bearer, and name user (Walther 1971: 45).

Socio-onomastic research into personal names refers to the variation in the popularity of names. The distribution of forename innovations (name fashion) has been studied by Kiviniemi (2006). Socio-onomastic also studies reasons for name-giving. Statistical data are of major relevance to studies on the popularity of names. Researchers in this field often use questionnaires and interviews, but we do not apply them in this study. "Socio-onomastic research has introduced the multifaceted issue of variety in onomastics. Names or name systems are not to be understood as static, constant, or stable, but as variable and changing" (Ainiala 2016: 374). In this study we focus on the popularity of names and their origin.

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

3. Early naming tendencies and cultural heritage

We shall consider the early naming tendencies to understand the naming culture better. Malaysians used to have a naming ceremony on the 40th day after a child's birth, and this name was kept in secret. The Malays also had the habit of giving names relating to events surrounding a child's birth. These two naming tendencies seem universal. The Malays of former generations had personal names like *Bagus*, *Bintan*, *Kicil*, and *Kasūma*. Such names also had meaning. For instance, *Kicil* means 'small', *Bagus* 'fine', and *Bintan* 'star'. Typical Malay female names of old times are *Kartini*, *Hartini*, and *Melāti*. Today some parents give their children typical Malay names but the vast majority prefer names of Arabic origin.

Traditional Malay names are derived from one language or by combining elements of more languages. Names taken from Malay: *Tuah*, *Mayang*, *Kiambang*; from Sanskrit or Pali: *Darma*, *Wira*, *Wati*; from Siamese, Khmer or Cham: *Lai*, *Som*, *Tam*; from Javanese: *Joyo*, *Ratnasari*, *Kesuma*. Nowadays traditional Malay names are found in rural areas. They have lost their popularity or become illegal because the National Registration Department forbids naming a child with names which have a negative meaning or denote colours, animals or natural objects/phenomena: *Pendek* ('short'), *Puteh* ('white'), *Wulan* ('moon'), *Awan* ('cloud'), *Suria* ('sun'), *Rimau* ('tiger'). The diminishing of name diversity shows the diminishing of cultural diversity, loss of cultural heritage, because culture is strongly reflected in names, and name studies stimulate language and culture research.

4. Modern naming trends

The aim of the article is to show how socio-cultural aspects are reflected in the naming tendencies today and how names identify the people bearing them. The main criteria according to which Malaysians choose a name are religion, family traditions and status, cultural norms and values. Naming is considered a very important act in Malaysia. In our research we came across many useful sites for naming, where parents-to-be can find all the information about popular names not only in Malaysia, but also in other countries in the world, they can follow modern tendencies in naming and explore a vast data base of name meaning. We closely studied *BabyCenter*, *BabyNames.ch*, *Babynology: Baby names with meaning*, *Behind the name: The meaning and history of first names*, *Malay names*, and *The name meaning*. We discovered that modern parents choose names for their newborn within the following categories:

a) religion: *Mohamed*, *Ahmad*, *Adam*, *Umar*, *Jayde*, *Nor*, *Aisha*, *Hanna*, *Zara*, *Keisha*. Most names come from Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism.

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

b) retro: *Cyryl*, *Mordekai*, *Wyatt*, *Clement*, *Gladys*, *Elizabeth*, *Johanna*, *Hilda*, *Vera*. Retro names as well as all names coming from the groups below do not make it to the list of the most popular names, but they belong to real people and are given from time to time by parents who want their children to stand out.

c) nature: *Cliff*, *Glenn*, *Leo*, *Woody*, *Linden*, *Clementine*, *Coral*, *Flora*, *Ivy*, *Venus*. The beauty of nature inspires parents to give their children unique names or names lacking religious identity.

d) fashion: *Alexander* (Alexander McQueen), *Calvin* (Calvin Klein), *Christian* (Christian Dior), *Giorgio* (Giorgio Armani), *Michael* (Michael Kors), *Adele* (Adele Fendi), *Coco* (Coco Chanel), *Donatella* (Donatella Versace), *Milla* (Milla Jovovich), *Miuccia* (Miuccia Prada). This list is full of figures from different fashion industries – clothes, perfume, shoes, and so on. By choosing such names, parents not only try to find a vivid name, but they also project their interests on their children, though not knowing whether their son or daughter will share them.

e) places: *Eugene* (Oregon, USA), *Diego* (California, USA), *Kent* (UK), *Melbourne* (Australia), *Orlando* (Florida, US). Out of 15 boys' names having their roots in city names, 10 belong to cities in the USA. It shows the interest which parents and people in general have in countries all over the world. As for girls' names, there are *Adelaide* (Australia), *Alberta* (Canada), *Catalina* (Dominican Republic), *Florence* (Italy), *Geneva* (Switzerland), and *Charlotte* (USA). Here we observe a more diverse map, but still out of 34 names, 17 come from the USA. 38 names belong to both genders, and it is quite an interesting point of conceptualization of our reality. Not all languages have the grammatical category of gender, and when we think about a city, we usually do not connect the category of gender with it. It is in people's perception where characteristic features of gender are accumulated and then mapped on cities and their names.

f) celebrities: *Denzel* (Washington), *Jaime* (Oliver), *Liam* (Neeson), *Ronan* (Keating), *Anggun*, *Enya*, *Kimora*. By giving such a name to a newborn, parents try to show that their child is unique, talented, strong, brave, not another Nor or Adam. Nevertheless, popularity is not everlasting, and some years later parents might be faced with the situation of their children being mocked. A name which stands out makes a person stand out, not fit in a group, and it is one of the most important needs of a person – the need of belonging, of being a part of a certain community or social group.

g) music: *Allegro*, *Harp*, *Vespers*, *Arietta*, *Demi*, *Lyra*, *Nera*, *Viola*. Music provides Malay parents with a great variety for their children

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

to possess unique names.

h) colours: *Amber*, *Ivory*, *Aurelia*.

i) names of Greek and Latin origin: *Hugo*, *Maximus*, *Cassius*, *Roman*, *Nico*, *Troy*. For Malaysian people names form Greek and Latin are more usual than English, Irish or Scottish names from colonial heritage. This might be accounted for through the historical background of the country.

j) folklore: *Mahsuri*, *Jebat*, *Tuah*.

k) modern names: *Trinity*, *Erys*, *Addison*, *Mayassa*, *Roxy*, *Amanina*, *Shazzy*, *Hunter*, *Trevi*, *Ryker*.

People's preferences are basically divided into two groups: those who want a traditional name for their child, and those who search for an uncommon name for their newborn to stand out. In the first case a child receives a traditional religious name, which identifies the person throughout their life. We come across male names such as *Mohammed* (the name of the prophet), *Adam* ('man'), *Ahmad* ('praised'), *Zikri* ('remembering Allah'), *Rayyan* ('gate of heaven'), *Danish* ('clever, merciful'), *Haziq* ('skilful and intelligent'), *Daniel* ('God is the judge'), *Ashraff* ('benevolent, kind'), *Aryan* ('noble'). As far as we can see, most names are Arabic. This tendency is very strong because of the main religion in the country. The adoption of Arabic names in preference to native Malay or Sanskrit names indicates a strong Islamic consciousness. Islam came to these lands in the 15th century and continues to be the main religion among Malaysians. As for girls' names, the most popular ten are *Nor* ('light'), *Sophia* ('wisdom'), *Zara* ('flower, princess'), *Aishah* ('woman'), *Hannah* ('favour, grace'), *Adelia* ('noble, kind'), *Alya* ('exalted'), *Puteri* ('princess'), *Humaira* ('red'), *Khadijah* ('early child'). These names have a more vivid cultural background. In this case parents want a unique name for their baby and this name often does not give any clue to the cultural or status identity of a person. The most popular sources for creative names are history, eMedTV's Uncommon Baby Names feature and BabyBuilder's Top 100 Baby Names. This is a worldwide tendency, as modern parents do not want their children to have the same names as their neighbours. This indicates a shift towards individualism in the cultural development of the world.

In studying first-name fashion and reasons for name-giving, it has been noticed that although parents often try to find special or rare names for their children, their choices turn out to follow some fashionable trend typical of the period in question. "As regards the choice of a name, we can talk about 'an invisible sense' which leads the name-givers to name their children according to fashion subconsciously as it were, with the help of a certain social instinct" (Ainiala 2016: 378). The choice of a first name is based on community values: the name giver's nationality, mother tongue, religious convictions, and even social status influence name-giving. The study proves the existence of the

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

"100-year rule" (Pinker 2007), meaning that names which were popular 100 years ago seem to be the ones to become popular nowadays. This may be connected with associations people make with a certain person or the whole generation. People get tired of hearing the same names around and try to add something new by choosing old names to be on the safe side.

5. Popular names

According to 2016 data, parents can be split into three main groups. To the largest group belong parents with a definite preference for modern names. Their choices for their babies, though not uncommon, are still fresh. These name options include *Anas*, *Iyad* and *Hadif* for boys, and *Amirah*, *Nuha*, *Maya* and *Nadia* for girls. The second tendency of the past years is to choose a retro name. Such names as *Maryam* and *Aminah* for girls and *Harun*, *Hassan* and *Maheswaran* for boys continue to be popular. Some parents follow the third tendency, they try to find unique or uncommon names for their children. These names will never make it up to the top 25 of the year, but they do stand out: *Mawar*, *Aurora*, *Callista*, *Claretta*, *Jebat*, *Zephur*, *Elrond*, *Asher*, *Farrell*, and *Kingsley*.

If we have a look at top 25 boys' names for 2016 in Malaysia, we can see the following data taken from *BabyCenter*, (https://www.babycenter.com.my/a25020658/malaysias-most-popular-baby-names-2016, accessed 2017-07-05):

Table 1: Top 25 boys' names for 2016

Name	Dynamics	Name	Dynamics	Name	Dynamics
1. *Mohamed*	+0	10. *Yusuf*	+10	19. *Amar*	-16
2. *Ahmad*	+0	11. *Naufal*	Last seen 2014	20. *Jayden*	-8
3. *Aidan*	+7	12. *Ashraff*	Last seen 2013	21. *Abdul*	-8
4. *Adam*	+0	13. *Aquif*	New	22. *Daniel*	-7
5. *Firash*	+17	14. *Anas*	New	23. *Mikhail*	-5
6. *Aryan*	Last seen 2014	15. *Hadif*	New	24. *Emir*	-2
7. *Izz*	+2	16. *Harraz*	New	25. *Iman*	-2
8. *Umar*	-2	17. *Iyad*	New		
9. *Aquil*	-2	18. *Zarif*	New		

We do not observe much diversity in the case of the first five examples because these names make up the onomastic tradition of the country. However, some slight changes have occurred. For the next ten names we can see significant dynamics, some names returning to the list and others being new. The last five show only a loss of points by the names. As regards the cultural background, most names belong to the Arab culture, then Hebrew and Hindi. Some of the names are culturally and religiously marked. They

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

identify their career, place a person into a special group, and bestow on him/her all the prototypical characteristics of the culture which the name indicates. Parents usually give such names to their children when they want to underline the children's religious and cultural (ethnic) background.

The data for the top 25 girls' names looks as follows:

Table 2: Top 25 girls' names for 2016

Name	Dynamics	Name	Dynamics	Name	Dynamics
1. *Nor*	+0	10. *Hannah*	-8	19. *Humaira*	Last seen 2014
2. *Aishah*	+1	11. *Zara*	-6	20. *Isabel*	New
3. *Sophia*	+5	12. *Nurul*	-5	21. *Raisya*	New
4. *Maryam*	+17	13. *Alya*	-2	22. *Puteri*	-16
5. *Siti*	-1	14. *Aminah*	New	23. *Marissa*	Last seen 2014
6. *Dhia*	+4	15. *Nuha*	New	24. *Maya*	New
7. *Nayla*	+5	16. *Amirah*	New	25. *Nadia*	New
8. *Arianna*	+5	17. *Keisha*	-3		
9. *Alicia*	+8	18. *Arissa*	Last seen 2014		

Girls' names show more variety, they come from Arab, Hebrew, Greek, Native American, German, Hindu, Spanish, and Indian. What is interesting is that and the list of boys' and girls' names includes 6 new names and 3 come backs from 2014 and 2013. Most names remain the same, only change their place on the list from time to time. Girls' names are characterized by a greater variety of cultures of origin. It underlines the fact that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society, and people sometimes try to show their identity with the help of their name.

One of the main functions of a name is to single out and identify its referent. Names and identity have been discussed within such fields as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and economy. Renowned theorists like Plato, Mill, Searle, Kripke, Mead, Freud, Piaget, Levi-Strauss, Bourdieu, Derrida, Lacan, and Butler have approached this topic. Naming is always a question of assigning identity. Names are considered to have an actual impact on the formation or perception of identity. "Identity is viewed as a social construct, something that is socially created and contextually flexible" (Aldrin 2016: 384). Some researchers view the relationship between name and identity as primarily symbolic. Vom Bruck & Bodenhorn (2006: 27) see naming as "the recognition, rather than the imposition of personhood". Other researchers argue that names have a real impact on identity formation and perception. Alford (1988: 36) describes naming as a way to help shape identity. Longobardi (2006: 190) regards a name as a suit in which people are born: "a reality in which we emerge, progressively assimilating the characteristics contained in it". From the perspective of the name giver, naming can be seen as "a communicative act that serves an identity function" (Laskowski 2010: 84). Aldrin (2016) has shown that, from the parents' point of view, the choice of

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

first names for children is always part of the creation and display of social identities, including local identities as being a more or less traditional name giver, or acting in accordance with a certain macro-societal group. The choice of names can act as an expression or construction of cultural identity.

The term *multicultural name* is often used in Malaysian tradition. It includes such names as *Amanda*, *Aryan*, *Ava*, *Hannah*, *Daniel*, *Ariana*, *Alexander*, *Nadya*, *Virgil*, *Noah*, *Mikhail*, and some others. They are widely used in different cultures all over the world and lose their ability to indicate the ethnicity of the person bearing them. Multicultural names are often given as second and third names, and a child can choose a name by which to be addressed in any social interaction. The point to underline is that the core of most popular names consists of culturally-marked names. This shows the importance of ethnic identity, of the sense of belonging to a certain society. Multicultural names are popular as long as they are used with traditional (cultural) names.

An interesting fact is that some names are not only popular in one country but in a number of different countries. For example, *Sophia* takes the second place in Malaysia but also the first place in Russia and the USA. It offers the context for generating modern name tendencies throughout the world and indicates cognitive system universalism of a personality. Political, scientific and cultural events influence the popularity of names. The name changes its evaluating component, which determines its popularity or lack of it in the society.

6. Popularity shift

We compared the top 25 lists of male and female baby names from 2009 until 2016 and conducted a research on the following aspects: a) how many new names appeared in the list (how many disappeared); b) why they rose in popularity (lost their popularity); c) what factors generate name popularity; d) how the factor of popularity reflects the cultural landscape in the country.

In what follows we will have a close look only at the years 2013 and 2009. The analysis of names from 2016 is presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 3: Top 25 boys' names for 2013

Name	Dynamics	Name	Dynamics	Name	Dynamics
1. *Mohamed*	+0	10. *Daniel*	-5	19. *Aidan*	Last seen 2011
2. *Adam*	+1	11. *Mikhail*	+5	20. *Iman*	-12
3. *Ahmad*	-1	12. *Ashraff*	-1	21. *Imran*	New
4. *Zikri*	+5	13. *Aryan*	+12	22. *Farish*	New
5. *Rayyan*	-1	14. *Khalish*	New	23. *Harris*	-1
6. *Danish*	+0	15. *Amar*	New	24. *Amsyar*	-11
7. *Haziq*	+0	16. *Irfan*	-6	25. *Aish*	-5
8. *Aqil*	+7	17. *Yusuf*	New		
9. *Umar*	+8	18. *Thaqif*	New		

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

Such names as *Ariff*, *Zarif*, *Aaron*, *Jayden*, *Haikal*, *Naufal*, and *Aiman* were popular in 2010, 2011 and 2012, but left the top list in 2013. It is quite difficult to explain this shift, but they did not leave the list of popular names, they moved to top 50. And in 2016, as we have observed, some of them came back – *Zarif*, *Jayden*, and *Naufal*.

Table 4: Top 25 girls' names for 2013

Name	**Dynamics**	**Name**	**Dynamics**	**Name**	**Dynamics**
1. *Nor*	+0	10. *Irdina*	+4	19. *Safiya*	-8
2. *Sophia*	+1	11. *Puteri*	New	20. *Arianna*	Last seen in 2011
3. *Alicia*	+2	12. *Sara*	+10	21. *Iman*	-13
4. *Damia*	+5	13. *Dhia*	+5	22. *Keisha*	-9
5. *Zara*	-3	14. *Humaira*	-2	23. *Nurin*	New
6. *Aishah*	-2	15. *Khadijah*	New	24. *Izzara*	New
7. *Hannah*	+0	16. *Rania*	New	25. *Siti*	New
8. *Adelia*	+11	17. *Arissa*	-7		
9. *Alya*	-3	18. *Raihana*	New		

The baby naming trend for girls is moving away from Q-names. *Qaisara*, *Qalisha*, *Aqeelah* were popular in 2012, but did not make the 2013 list. Former favourites *Qistina*, *Balqis*, and *Qaseh* have lost their popularity too. The name *Rania* began rising in baby name ranks when Queen Rania of Jordan came into prominence. This example illustrates the celebrity tendency in naming. Such names as *Puteri*, *Khadijah*, and *Siti* are Malay classic names brought to the fore by the trend for retro names. Names as *Iris*, *Marissa*, *Amani*, *Husna*, *Nurul*, *Qalisha*, and *Aqeelah* dropped from top 25 to top 50. *Marissa* and *Nurul* came back in 2016.

We compared the top 10 most popular boys' and girls' names in 2009 and 2016:

Table 5: Comparison of top 10 names

Boys' names (top 10 for 2009)	**Place in 2016 top 25**	**Girls' names (top 10 for 2009)**	**Place in 2016 top 25**
1. *Mohamed*	1.	1. *Nur* (*Noor*)	1.
2. *Adam*	4.	2. *Alya*	13.
3. *Danish*	–	3. *Hannah*	10.
4. *Aqil*	9.	4. *Zara*	11.
5. *Jayden*	20.	5. *Nurul*	12.
6. *Ethan*	–	6. *Sarah*	–
7. *Irfan*	–	7. *Alyssa*	9.
8. *Rayyan*	–	8. *Qaseh*	–
9. *Isaac*	–	9. *Arissa*	18.
10. *Ian*	–	10. *Adriana*	–

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

As for boys' names only four remained in the top 25: *Mohamed* (the most favourite name in Muslim community in Malaysia, the name of the Prophet, it is unlikely to drop in the top), *Adam* (a multicultural name, popular in every ethnic community in Malaysia, comes from Hebrew), *Aquil* (comes from Arabic, meaning 'wise') and *Jayden* (comes from Hebrew, meaning 'he will judge'). Arabic and Hebrew names form the core of the naming system in Malaysian society; this reflects the ethnic situation in the country.

The list of girls' names consists of seven names constantly occupying their place in the top list: *Nur* (comes from Arabic, meaning 'light', the most popular name for girls in Muslim-majority Malaysia), *Alyssa* (comes from Greek, meaning 'rational', also the name of a bright yellow flower and the name of the well-known American actress Alyssa Milano), *Hannah* (comes from Hebrew, meaning 'grace' or 'favour', popular among various ethnic communities in Malaysia), *Zara* (a multicultural name, meaning 'princess' or 'flower'; it is the name of a world-famous clothing store and the name of the Swedish singer Zara Larsson), *Nurul* (comes from Arabic, meaning 'light'), *Alya* (comes from Old Greek, but it is also traced back to Arabic *Ali*, meaning 'high, lofty, sublime'), *Arissa* (comes from Greek, meaning 'excellent'; Arissa Ferkis is a popular German actress). The research shows less variety in girls' names but the more significant influence of popular culture on them. The core is formed by Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew names.

There are no onomastic studies yet to show how the etymology of a name effects name bearers, but it is clear that names comprise social values – boys' names incorporate male values, girls' names incorporate female values. When we analyse the meanings of the top boys' names, we see the following: 'praiseworthy', 'worthy of praise', 'fiery', 'man', 'rational', 'noble', 'might of Islam', 'prospering', 'eagle', 'enlarge', 'handsome', 'noble', 'rock', 'friendship', 'leader', 'divine', 'power', 'intelligent', 'making a home', 'he will judge', 'servant', 'powerful', 'leader', 'ruler', 'faith'. These are the main features of character which parents want to find in their children. These qualities reflect social values and norms, standards and principles promoted by the society. A name lends its meaning to its bearer and guides the bearer throughout life. Some cultures do not give explicative names because they try to conceal their social values in order to defend their society from any interference. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country, names speak for themselves. We read the meanings and understand what kind of person could become a national hero. Names come from different origins but they have the same meaning.

What about heroines? Will we find their description in top popular girls' names? The analysis reveals the following meanings: 'light', 'life', 'wisdom', 'grace', 'woman', 'one who attains', 'holy', 'rational', 'grace', 'princess', 'light', 'high', 'truthful', 'intellect', 'princess', 'life', 'excellent', 'strives to achieve her best', 'consecrated to God', 'princess', 'of the sea', 'mother', 'hope'. Female

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

names reflect the most praised features of a woman's character; they paint her portrait and inspire her in life.

In the course of an individual's acquisition of names through cognitive processing, becoming acquainted with every new name also means semantic re-creation of the given name, and representation of the names may even change during their later use. That is to say, the piece of semantic content expressed by means of names does not directly represent the world (a person in our case), but our notions of the world (a person). It is a part of our mental system (Reszegi 2012: 376).

7. Conclusion

In this article we have studied the Malaysian anthroponymic system, analysed modern trends in name-giving, and showed the influence of socio-cultural context on name fashion in the country. The key role of names as identity markers is reflected in parents' preferences for their children's names. National culture is embodied in language, and names in most cases mark cultural identity. There is no evidence whether names actually influence or merely mirror identity. The etymology of a name has a certain effect on name bearers. Names might be common or unusual, culturally marked or unmarked, but they always identify a person and include him/her in a definite group. Names often constitute an important part of a person's social identity in terms of feeling connected to a certain culture, religion, linguistic ground, and even social class. Aldrin (2011: 99–121) has shown that, from the parents' point of view, the choice of first names for children is always part of the creation and display of social identities, including local identities as being a more or less traditional name giver, or acting in accordance with certain macro-social groups.

References

Ainiala, Terhi. 2016. Names in society. In Hough, Carole (ed.), *Oxford handbook of names and naming*, 371–381. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Aldrin, Emilia. 2011. *Namnval som social handling. Val av fornamn och samtal om fornamn bland foraldrar i Goteborg 2007–2009. Namn och samhalle 24*. [Naming as a social act. Parents' choices of first names and discussions of first names in Göteborg 2007–2009]. Uppsala University.

Aldrin, Emilia. 2016. Names and Identity. In Hough, Carole (ed.), *Oxford handbook of names and naming*, 382–394. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alford, Richard D. 1988. *Naming and identity: A cross-cultural study of*

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)

naming practices. New Haven, CT: HRAF Press.
BabyCenter. (https://www.babycenter.com.my/) (Accessed 2017-07-07.)
BabyNames.ch. (http://www.babynames.ch/) (Accessed 2017-07-10.)
Babynology: Baby names with meaning. (http://www.babynology.com/) (Accessed 2017-06-15.)
Bean, Susan S. 1980. Ethnology and the study of proper names. *Anthropological Linguistics* 22, 305–316.
Behind the name: The meaning and history of first names. (https://www.behindthename.com/) (Accessed 2017-06-25.)
Blum, Susan D. 1997. Naming practices and the power of words in China. *Language in Society* 26, 357–379.
Bregenzer, John. 1968. Naming practices in South America. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Sciences* 35, 47–50.
Kiviniemi, Eero. 2006. *Suomalaisten etunimet* [Finnish first names]. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.
Laskowski, Kara. 2010. Women's post-marital name retention and the communication of identity. *Names* 58(2), 75–89.
Longobardi, Claudio. 2006. The meaning of first names in children's developmental psychology. In Brylla, Eva & Wahlberg, Mats (eds.), *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Onomastic Sciences*, Uppsala, 19–24 August 2002, vol. 2, 189–199. Uppsala: Institutet for spar- och folkminnen.
Malay names. (http://www.aboutnames.ch/malay.htm) (Accessed 2017-06-01.)
Pinker, Stephen. 2007. *The language instinct*. New York: Viking.
Reszegi, Katalin. 2012. Cognitive approaches to Hungarian toponymy. *Onoma* 47, 367–379.
Rymes, Betsy. 1996. Naming as social practice. The case of little Creeper from Diamond Street. *Language in Society* 25, 237–260.
The name meaning. (https://www.thenamemeaning.com/) (Accessed 2017-06-27.)
Vom Bruck, Gabriele & Bodenhorn, Barbara. 2006. *The anthropology of names and naming*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
Walther, Hans. 1971. *Namenforschung heute. Ihre Ergebnisse und Aufgaben in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.

BDD-A30356 © 2016 International Council of Onomastic Sciences
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:01:01 UTC)