

## Urban Name Environments in a Multicultural Perspective

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### **Abstract**

What is a multicultural name environment? What names in a town or city are multicultural, and what reasons for and perspectives on name-giving are multicultural? How can an official name-giver best contribute to the positive development of our multicultural society? These questions are interesting, but turn out to be more difficult to address than we might initially imagine, a point which this paper attempts to develop. Officially adopted urban names in Sweden today are strikingly Swedish in character. But alongside these official names there exists an unofficial group of names that is now gradually changing, showing great innovativeness, and flexibly adapting to our multicultural society, i.e., names of shops, hairdressing salons, places of entertainment, restaurants, etc. At the same time, there is a cultural influence that is growing increasingly strong in such unofficial names and in the language of Sweden's towns, namely that of the Anglo-American world. So far, official urban names have escaped this Anglicization. But English is pushing at the door, and only time will tell what its impacts will be.

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In Sweden the year 2006 was officially declared a multicultural year. That is the main reason why I came to think about the questions and matters I deal with in this paper. I am the secretary of the Name-Drafting Committee in Stockholm. I handle urban name issues and suggest new names on a regular basis. How can an official name-giver best contribute to the positive development of a multicultural society? What actually is a multicultural name environment? What town or city names are multicultural? What constitutes multicultural reasons for, and perspectives on, name-giving? These questions are interesting, but turn out to be more difficult to address than we might at first imagine, which is a point this paper attempts to develop somewhat.

Certainly there are multicultural environments in many Swedish cities (as well as elsewhere in the world) and certainly there are different kinds of name environments that we can study, live in, or be a part of, regardless of our own cultural background. But are there really any multicultural name environments, if by that we mean environments with names that indicate other cultures, names that originate in or are borrowed from another culture than the one using the name today? I think the answer is no. This is not how it is in Sweden. Is such a multicultural name environment something we strive for in Sweden? Again no. But this conclusion can of course be debated.

### **Official and unofficial names**

So, let us start by taking a closer look at the urban name stock in Sweden from a multicultural point of view. First we must make a distinction between official and unofficial place names. The official names for streets, city-blocks, squares, parks, etc., are normally the result of very conscious choices, formalized action and political decisions, very often preceded by profound discussions and detailed inquiries. The unofficial names – on the other hand – are created in a more spontaneous way. They are often linguistically playful and sprung out of the needs and wishes of certain individuals or groups. Formal rules and regulations are not important here.

Unofficial names are not unknown to researchers and naming scholars. Unfortunately however, not very much is known about them: how they are created and structured, who invented them, etc. – So to begin with, I will discuss only the officially designated names.

### Historical names

First of all, I would like to point to some different types of official names that might be considered the result of multicultural influence. Quite a large number of Swedish towns and cities date back to the Middle Ages. Many of these have over long periods had substantial parts of their population emanating from other cultural or linguistic backgrounds, for instance Germany. We see this most clearly in Stockholm's Old Town, where names like *Funckens Gränd*, *Staffan Sasses Gränd* and *Ferkens Gränd* remind us, respectively, of the family *Funck* who were immigrants from Stralsund in Germany, *Staffan Sasse* from Westfalen, and an old tavern called *Ferken* based on the German word *Farch* 'pig' (now only found in some south German dialects). *Gränd* means 'Alley'. Here we obviously see evidence of early influence from the German language and culture. This influence however is not multicultural but rather monoculturally German. Today names like these still sound rather foreign to us, but as already pointed out they were minted many centuries ago and they are actually very few. It is also impossible to find anything similar in any of the other medieval towns in Sweden: Strängnäs, Söderköping, Sigtuna or Visby.

I have checked through the national address register that contains almost half a million addresses. The name stock we see there, in all its detail, turns out to be very Swedish. Of course words and personal names of foreign origin occur in our street names, but in almost every case these words and names have become established in the Swedish language and society in general so long that we no longer experience them as in any way foreign.

### Nationalities

Sometimes individual persons, activities, incidents, or buildings of a particular foreign origin have given rise to spontaneous names in cities, and these names have later been made official or have been more consciously used as a basis for official names. The reasons vary greatly so I will only cite a few examples here (the municipality is shown in the third column):

Amerikagatan	'America Street'	(Södertälje)
Baltiska Vägen	'Baltic Road'	(Malmö)
Engelska Vägen	'English Road'	(Kalmar)
Franska Gatan	'French Street'	(Alingsås)
Kinavägen	'China Road'	(Charlottenberg)
Ryska Gränd	'Russian Alley'	(Visby)

I do not consider these names to be the results of multicultural thinking or any ambition in that direction.

There are many other examples where foreign places or persons are contained in Swedish urban names without the name givers having had any multicultural ambitions whatsoever. In Sweden we often apply the idea of name categories when creating new names in urban areas, i.e., names are grouped around certain semantic themes: birds, flowers, tools, artists, etc. This provides a possibility to use names of cities, countries or even people from a certain area. In the harbour district in Stockholm the city-blocks are called *Antwerpen*, *Bristol*, *Genua*, *Hamburg*, *New York*, *Rio*, etc. But hardly anyone lives there and there is no direct connection of any kind to the cities mentioned in the names.

In other parts of Stockholm, “Finland”, “Norway” and “Iceland” have been used as themes or categories in official naming. We find e.g., *Helsingforsgatan* ‘Helsinki Street’, *Kalevalagången* ‘Kalevala path’ (after the national epos Kalevala) and *Saimagatan* ‘Saima Street’ (the great lake Saima in Finland) in the city district of Akalla. This district is truly multicultural with a population stemming from all over the world together with a minority of Swedes. But the official names here are all inspired by or based on “Finland”. There is no connection between the people living in the area or the character of the area and the Finland-inspired names used there. The names are based on something outside of Sweden – that is true – but we cannot claim that they are the result of a conscious multicultural approach.

### Commemorative names

Let us turn to the commemorative names in Swedish towns and cities, names that are minted to honour and commemorate a person for some reason. I have examined urban names containing personal names and structured in one of the following ways::

Staffans X (a first name),  
Nyströms X (a family name),  
Staffan Nyströms X (a first name + a family name).

The final *-s* shows the genitive case. The X stands for either *gata* ‘street’, *väg* ‘road’, *plats* ‘place’ or *torg* ‘square’. The question is: Do we allow people from other parts of the world, from other cultures, into our commemorative names? The answer is no, we don’t. The personal names used here turn out to be very Swedish, and in that sense not multicultural at all. Some names include personal names of foreign origin (*Fredriks gata*, *Henriks gata*). But in such cases the names, as here *Fredrik* and *Henrik*, have become integrated into the Swedish onomasticon for such a long time that we now experience them as totally Swedish.

In some cases we find personal names that look and sound very un-Swedish, like *Beatrice Lesslies gata* and *Robert Macfies väg*. But these personages also turn out to be very established in Sweden, representing families who have been living and working here for generations. As far as I know we have only one street or park name in Sweden which honours a foreign celebrity and that is *Martin Luther Kings plan* ‘Martin Luther King Square’ in Uppsala, minted shortly after his tragic death. The overall majority of Swedish street names containing personal names such as *Gustaf Frödings gata* refer to a Swede with a Swedish first name and a Swedish family name. One does not find anything worth terming multicultural here.

### Unofficial names

Let me return to the unofficial names. We know of some jocular but also disparaging names from suburban multicultural areas, especially in the major cities where many immigrants live, such as *Biafra*, *Somalia*, *Abessinien* ‘Abyssinia’, *Bangladash*, *Arabdalen* ‘Arab Valley’, etc. But these names are not used by the people living there. We also know of other cases where alternative names exist such as *Boogie B* for ‘Botkyrka’, *Vårbronx* for ‘Vårberg’ and *Skärharlem* for ‘Skärholmen’; names created and used by individuals or certain groups of young people living in these areas. But as I mentioned before, we don’t know enough about the content and proportions of this unofficial name stock. Maybe the names are not as numerous or as deviating as the high number of languages and ethnic groups in these areas might lead us to believe. Maybe the official Swedish names are the simplest and the best to use, whatever one’s linguistic or cultural background. Maybe we don’t have any monolingual population group anywhere in Sweden that is large enough to create and maintain an alternative, competing urban onomasticon? We simply lack sufficient knowledge and information here; more research is needed.

Alongside the official names, however, there does exist an unofficial group of names that is now gradually changing – showing great inventiveness, and flexibly adapting to our multicultural society. These are what are often referred to as ‘other’ names, i.e., names of shops, salons, places of entertainment, restaurants, etc. Here, the naming process is different, and a multicultural situation gives rise more naturally to multicultural names. A very random exposition of such names from five cities in Sweden illustrates their high linguistic and cultural diversity:

*Stockholm:* Vanak, Pamir, Samad, Dalo, Club Alem, Atish, Atam, Tabbouli, Üsküdar, Mama Africa, Ablaze, Rub a Dub, Cave de Roi, Merhaba, Aya Sofia

*Göteborg:* New Delhi, A Hereford Beefstouw, Ichi Ban, Hwa Yuan, Maekrua, Kalaya, Kalkalis, Kezban, Panache, Quomodo

*Malmö:* Maguro, Caramello, Wasabi, Café Rasoir, Cutty Sark, Polonus, Sattelivs, Akrams Livsmedel, Bahram Livs, Bevli Livs, Nakhlat Livs, Munzur Tobak

*Linköping:* Nimas tobak, Alrafiden Livs, Famtyr, Salong Bouclé, Roots of Sweden, Murat Rüyä Livsmedelsaffär, Ghingis Restaurang, La Mansion, Micasa Coffee

*Umeå:* Ghandi, Hai Chang, Cu lee mee, Criti, Archipirata

At the same time, there is another cultural influence that is growing increasingly strong in unofficial names and in the language of Sweden’s towns, namely that of the Anglo-American world. In Stockholm, a very trendy and commercial district is now presented as *Sofö* ‘South of Folkungagatan’ – inspired of course by the American *SoHo* and *SoMa*. Other Stockholm areas are called *SoRi* and *NoVa*. In the shop-windows in Sweden we can nowadays read SALE (not UTFÖRSÄLJNING or REA as before, in Swedish) and at weekends we attend STREET MARKETS. A new development area and construction site in the very heart of the Swedish capital has been put on the market as the *Stockholm Waterfront*, and so on. In these cases it is not a matter of linguistic or cultural diversity, i.e., multicultural, but of one single language – English – replacing Swedish in names and words used for various functions. So far, official urban names have escaped this Anglicization. But the English language is pushing hard at the door, and only time will tell what its impact will be.

### To conclude

A basic problem for all official name givers in Sweden today is whether we should try to adapt the Swedish name stock to the multicultural situation we have in society nowadays. Personally I don’t think we should. It happens quite often however when conversing with authorities, organizations and interest groups, that more multicultural names are called for. From city planners, entrepreneurs and above all politicians, one often hears:

“We must face the fact that we live in a multicultural society. We have people from all parts of the world living here in our city. We want this to show also in the names of streets and parks. It is their city as much as ours.”

Fine! I agree! This sounds attractive, democratically congenial, loyal to all citizens, politically correct, and of course sympathetic in some sense. But exactly what should we do? How do we handle this? Shall we find more non-Swedish persons to commemorate? Shall we use more foreign words? Shall we translate our Swedish names into other languages? Shall we mix our generics *gata*, *väg*, *torg* with *street*, *rue* or *via* perhaps? Shall we include more words from different ethnic groups, foreign food, dances, customs and habits? Will this really create positive multiculturalism? And finally, if we do choose something of a non-Swedish character or origin, and focus on it in a particular street name or district name, in a certain geographical area of a Swedish city, does this imply a step in the right direction towards sound integration, or do such

“multicultural” names rather promote the opposite – stronger segregation? I am not sure, and this is not the place to discuss it more thoroughly.

My main point in this paper has been that no matter how just and sympathetic these multicultural ambitions may be, they are very difficult to handle when it comes to dealing with specific names. A name has a very strong symbolic value and name issues very easily get politically ‘hot’. Names often become a source for jealousy, competition and conflict. And what then have we gained?

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