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978-0-521-12171-2 - The Anthropology of Names and Naming

Edited by Gabriele Vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn

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### THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF NAMES AND NAMING

This book is about personal names, something of abiding interest to specialists and lay readers alike. More than one million people have checked the American Name Society website since 1996, for instance. Many philosophers and linguists suggest that names are “just” labels, but parents internationally are determined to get their children’s names “right.” Personal names may be given, lost, traded, stolen, and inherited. This collection of essays provides comparative ethnography through which we examine the politics of naming; the extent to which names may be property-like; and the power of names themselves, both to fix and to destabilize personal identity. Our purpose is not only to renew anthropological attention to names and naming, but to show how this intersects with current interests in political processes, the relation between bodies and personal identities, ritual and daily social life.

Gabriele vom Bruck is currently a lecturer in the Department of Social Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She has completed extended research in the Republic of Yemen.

Barbara Bodenhorn is a Newton Trust Lecturer in Social Anthropology and a Fellow of Pembroke College at the University of Cambridge. She has worked with Iñupiat in northern Alaska since 1980, publishing on kinship, economic relations, gender, and knowledge systems. Her current research focuses on languages of risk and institutionalized decision-making processes in Mexico as well as the Arctic.

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# The Anthropology of Names and Naming

Edited by

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

While this volume has been in preparation, we have discovered that if you scratch an anthropologist, you are likely to find a paper on names clamoring for attention. In the autumn of 1999, ten anthropologists met for two days at Pembroke College, Cambridge, to talk about names and naming. Our institutional affiliations were international and our fieldwork experience spanned many regions across the globe. We asked what a focus on names and naming might bring to current anthropological thinking and we asked how recent developments in anthropology and beyond might shed new light on our understanding of names and naming more generally.

It was an exhilarating experience, as has been the genesis of this book. Seven of the original workshop participants have contributed chapters here. Maurice Bloch was unable to attend, but provided a chapter. Nadia Abu El-Haj and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro felt their individual papers were too close to their own about-to-be-published books to warrant inclusion,<sup>1</sup> although happily Viveiros de Castro was able to provide commentary on Hugh-Jones's paper; Thomas Hansen and Linda Layne contributed chapters.

We have been fascinated, delighted, moved, amused, and not a little awed by the sheer amount of detail waiting for the interested researcher. Suddenly, virtually everything – newspaper articles, websites, asides in historical texts, and academic publications – seems to point in some way to the importance people around the world attach to names. However, we found nothing in the field of recent anthropological analysis that brings together the intrigue of comparative ethnographic detail and an overarching theoretical examination of the processes themselves. That is our aim here.

Our thanks are both institutional and personal. Without support from the British Academy, the Department of Social Anthropology, and Pembroke College, Cambridge, we would never have succeeded in bringing the workshop into being. Thoughtful comments from Martin Holbraad,

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Benjamín Macías, Emile Perreau-Saussine, Barbara Rosenthal-Schutt, and Harold Schickler enriched the scope of our introductory arguments. Those from Andrew Beck, Cambridge University Press religious studies editor, and from two anonymous reviewers helped to strengthen the book overall. It goes without saying that the physical production of a manuscript is inevitably beset by technical crises at the worst possible moment. It should not go without saying that Barry Haylock and Chick Hatch were instrumental in ensuring these crises were not fatal.

We are sad to report that Susan Benson, one of our contributors, passed away in the summer of 2005. Although she will be much missed by family, friends, and colleagues, we are happy that her voice will continue to carry weight in the present collection.

## NOTE

1. Nadia Abu El-Haj 2001. *Facts on the Ground*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.  
Eduardo Viveiros de Castro 2002. *A Inconstância da Alma Selvagem*. São Pao: Cosac & Naify.