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Apotropaic names in different cultures

1. The name is, on the one hand, part of the person and, on the other hand, symbolizes him. In most prehistoric societies, the name was equivalent to the soul; essentially, it could be regarded as identical to it. As a matter of fact, name giving was believed to be soul giving (FRAZER 1922: 321–322, TAKÁCS 2005: 249–251, see also FARKAS 1998: 29).

The inverse was also true: if someone had no name, (s)he was regarded as non-existent. This belief is evident in a Hungarian saying used during children's games like hide-and-seek and tag. One can say 'My name doesn't count, my head is a cabbage' (*Nem ér a nevem, káposzta a fejem*). In this case, this person cannot be caught, because (s)he has no name and therefore does not exist (BALÁZS–TAKÁCS 2009: 205).

Names can serve as magical protection e.g. when specific names like protective (such as the names of saints) (TAKÁCS 2005: 251) or apotropaic (derogatory-protective) names (see SAARELMA 2013: 138) are used. In some cultures, a child is given a derogatory or otherwise semantically negative name so that evil spirits would not be interested in him/her (SAARELMA 2013: 127).

In this study, I will introduce the practice of apotropaic name giving in different cultures, and in different periods of time.

2. In Hungary we have records of the apotropaic naming practice in the Arpad period (1000–1301). When a baby was feeble, seeming to lack vigour, the parents could decide not to name him/her for a while or could assign an apotropaic name to the baby to protect him/her from the evil spirits, to divert the evil influences from him/her. These names expressed worthlessness, e. g. by denying the existence of the baby or negating positive features, e.g. *Numel* 'not living', *Halaladi* 'little death', *Mawag* 'living only today' (recorded in 1138/1329), *Nemvagy* 'not existing' (recorded in 1174), *Nevetlen* 'no name'/'without name', *Nemvaló* 'not appropriate', *Nemhisz* 'not believing', *Nemhű* 'not faithful', *Beteg* 'ill', *Féreg* 'worm', *Hitvánd* 'hound', *Szemét* 'rubbish', *Disznó* 'pig'. These names seem humiliating, but they protected the baby from the force of the evil spirits by misleading them into believing the name bearers were ill, ugly, worthless or dead, and therefore not worth their attention (PAIS 1921–1922: 95, ZLINSZKY 1927: 108, HAJDÚ 2003: 104, 353, FERCSIK–RAÁTZ 2009: 10–11, SLÍZ 2011: 49, TÓTH 2016: 136; see also FARKAS 2014: 134). Names that emerged from appellatives denoting animals

like *Patkan* ‘rat’, *Cenke* ‘young dog’, or *Culqued* ‘puppy’ also belong to this name group when received at birth (HAJDÚ 2003: 353).

The name *Farkas* ‘wolf’ was first recorded in 1146 and afterwards occurred often in the written resources. BORNEMISZA (1758) in his literary work recorded the practice that children were named *Farkas* if their siblings had died before them. According to NYÍRI (1963), it was a totemistic name intended to protect the child from death and wished him to be the same strong and brave as the wolves.

Among Changos (who are living in the Romanian region of Moldavia, traditionally speaking an old Hungarian dialect), at the end of the 1950’s, a Hungarian researcher, HEGEDŰS observed the practice of the symbolical selling of the child who appeared to be weak, to a woman who had many children, each of them alive. In this case also the name of the child was changed, to deceive the evil spirit (HEGEDŰS 1956: 112).

3. Now I will look at examples from across the borders and from earlier periods of time. The same concept existed in the Egyptian belief system and was later transferred to the Greek and Roman apotropaic name practice of the ancient Greek-Roman period (SAUNERON 1966: 51, 63, 77–78, and BERNAND 1991: 103, as cited in ELLIOTT 2015: 155).

Among Egyptian personal names, we can find the following apotropaic names to neutralize the evil eye: ‘his name does not exist’, ‘they did not remain’, ‘I do not know him’, ‘we do not know him’ (RANKE 1936: 304). During the Greek-Roman period in Egypt, the practice of using apotropaic names continued. The Greek apotropaic name *Κοπρος* ‘dung’ was assigned to a child at conception if the mother had experienced difficulty in getting pregnant or if the parents had already lost several of their children, they gave their baby this apotropaic name to ensure that (s)he survived despite the evil eye (HOBSON 1989: 163–164).

In Greek mythology, Odysseus introduced himself under a pseudonym, *Utiis* ‘nobody’ to Polyphemus (who was a cyclops), so as to be protected against the evil forces (SLÍZ 2013: 226).

In the ancient Roman period, names such as *Calumniosus* ‘insolent’, *Exitiosus* ‘pernicious’, *Injuriousus* ‘acting unjustly’, *Stercorius* ‘excremental’ or *Projectus* ‘cast out’/‘contemptible’ were presumably apotropaic names aimed at diverting evil influences away from children. Of these, *Projectus* and *Stercorius* were by far the most common (WILSON 1998: 58–59).

In Armenian culture apotropaic names were created by using the privative suffix *a* or *n*, as in *Anahit* ‘not nice’, ‘not beautiful’, *Anus* ‘not sweet’ (of Persian origin) or *Nvard* ‘not a rose’. Today the meaning of these names are



positive. The name *Gurken* ‘wolf’ was a wish-name (DZSOTJÁNNÉ KRAJCSIR 2004: 447–448).

In Yiddish culture, we can also find apotropaic names such as *Kayem*, given to a sick child; the etymology of this word is the Hebrew adjective *qayom*: ‘tough’, ‘enduring’ (HANKS 2003: 289).

Data from the Byzantine sources from 691/692 show that in Ossetian (a northern Iranian language spoken in the central Caucasus), the name *Ānäud* ‘being without soul’ was used. This name was meant to send away the evil spirits and thus prevent the death of the child. It is similar to the Slavic name *Nebil* ‘one who has never existed’ (WENZEL 2011: 19).

4. In the ancient Slavic name giving practices, the name *Volk* ~ *Vlk* ~ *Vuk* ‘wolf’ was given as an apotropaic name if several babies had died in a family. The spirits and demoneses would not dare harm him/her if (s)he had this name (HAJDÚ 2003: 285).

Until the end of the 9th century, in the territory of the Principality of Kiev, the following apotropaic names were used to protect babies from danger, evil forces, etc.: *Nemil* ‘not nice’, *Nekrac* ‘not beautiful’, *Nelyuba* ‘not loved’, *Neudacha* ‘misfortune’, *Nenash* ‘not our baby’ (the *ne* negation particle is found at the beginning of these names, see in WENZEL 2008: 362), *Bezohraz* ‘ugly’, etc. (SUPERANSKAYA 1995, 1999: 194). To keep a baby alive and not to attract an evil eye to it the denominations of some non-valuable objects were also used as personal names: *Bashmak* ‘a shoe’, *Gorshok* ‘a pot’, *Kocherga* ‘a poker’, *Poleno* ‘a piece of wood’, etc. (SUPRENSKAYA 1999: 194). Ukrainian apotropaic names from the oldest layer of the language are as follows: *Nezhivij* ‘not living’, *Neznan* ‘not known’, *Nekrac* ‘not beautiful’, *Nayden* ‘fell upon’/‘found’ (CHUCHKA 2011).

Among the southern Slavic languages, e.g. in Bulgarian, the ancient name giving practice of the ‘found baby’ need to be mentioned. An ill, nonviable baby was placed outside the home, found and given a new name that meant the beginning of a new life; it was believed this would result in good health. Examples of the new name are *Nayden* ‘fell upon’/‘found’ or *Obreten* ‘found’. The name of a wild animal, like *Vlko*, *Vlkan* ‘wolf’ was given as a wish-name, as the family wished the child would become as strong as the animal. Among the Serbs, the most frequently given name was the *Vuk* ‘wolf’. It was an apotropaic name not a wish-name, as they believed that the name-bearer would not be attacked by bad spirits (HAJDÚ 2003: 305–306).

In addition to the apotropaic name giving practices (that is, giving an unpleasant name to the child to divert harmful demons) discussed so far, the practice of false name giving can also be observed in Russian lands: many times a person



approaching on the street could give this false name aimed at preventing death by diverting the demons and magicians who could become animal-human hybrids. In families in which infant mortality was high or a new-born baby appeared to be weak, the parents shouted names into the stovepipe, and when they uttered a name that caused the baby to stop crying, that name was assigned to the infant. There were cases when the parents organized the funeral or selling of the child to a wanderer and afterwards they took the child back under a different name. In another case, the child was swept out with the garbage and later brought back by the relatives, already with a different name. In the Indigirka region in northern Siberia, a child could be given a second name, an animal name, to keep the harmful demons from finding him/her (RYAN 1999: 311).

The story of Ivan the Fool (*Ivan-durak*, *Ivanushka-durachok*), well known from Russian folklore, is about a young man who is unlike typical heroes: he is naive and kind and his bravery helps him to fight villains, make friends and win princesses' hearts. Ultimately he is rewarded with half a kingdom or some similar prize. When his stories were created presumably in the 15–16th century, the Russian word *durak* 'fool' did not have any negative connotation and was used to refer to the youngest son in the family. Ivan was also the youngest of three brothers. Researchers have suggested that it might have been an apotropaic name to protect Ivan from the evil eye (SINYAVSKY 2010, ANGLICKIENĚ 2013: 127–128).

5. Among the Udmurts (whose language belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family) if the child was frequently ill, the parents performed the ceremony of the name change (*ut't'shan*, lit. meaning: 'soul search', i.e. through the new name, a new and healthy soul would be found) so as to mislead the harmful spirits. When the infant mortality rate was high in the family, the name of the child was concealed until (s)he reached a safe age (SOLYMOSSY 1927: 88, KEREZSI 2009: 130). An Udmurt apotropaic name is *Sakta* 'rubbish' (HAJDÚ 2003: 314).

Among the Mari, another Finno-Ugric ethnic group, in case of illness, two methods were believed to help: changing the name and 'selling' the child. The sold child was brought out of the gate and smuggled back secretly into the house through the window. A mock burial could also be organized: the mother would create and bury a clay figure to deceive the spirits that caused the illness (MOLOTOVA 2005: 178).

6. In the Russian Far East, in Siberia, among the Evens (their language belongs to the Tungusic languages), the people believe that the soul and body of the new-born baby are very fragile because their soul and body have not yet connected to each other. Therefore the child's soul and body could return or transform; their body is said to be 'open'. The child is still susceptible to the spirits of the ancestors, who have the power to kill the child before his body

closes up and become invulnerable. The apotropaic names pretend to close up the child's body by creating the illusion of it. Still among the Evens, a similar protective function is believed to be effective when the same name is assigned to several children, as this reduces the possibility that the harmful demons find the child. For example, in a family in which several children have died of illnesses, later the parents named their new-born daughter *Sasha*. Then the following child, a son, was also named *Sasha*, and (as hoped) both children survived (BRIGHTMAN–GROTTI–ULTURGASHEVA 2012: 56–57).

Among the Yakuts (who are Turkic people) a child was not considered a person until the age of seven, because it was easy for him/her to be eaten up by even a small evil spirit. At about seven, when a child could talk, learn and think, (s)he was seen as fully human. One way of protecting children was to give them a protective name in those early years (HOB DEN).

Among the Oirats (Turkic people living in Siberia) shamanism is still alive, and apotropaic names like 'dog ear', 'dung', 'manure', 'sob', and 'pus' are used even today (HAJDÚ 2003: 164).

Among the Kazakhs, a baby who was born weak might be assigned an apotropaic name so as to divert the attention of the bad spirits, to deceive them. Examples of these names are: *Tezek* 'excrement', *Ijt-Kulak* 'dog ear', *Adjal* 'death', *Sokur* 'blind', *Sangirik* 'bird dropping' (HAJDÚ 2003: 192–193).

One name category among the Mongols is the 'bad names', meaning undesirable traits, such as: *Eljigetel* 'donkey' or *Bujir* 'dirty, filthy'. According to Mongol shamanistic beliefs, a child with a name that has a positive meaning can arouse the interest of the evil spirits. Thus boys might receive the name *Keuken* 'Little girl', since male offspring were more precious than female children – no doubt this bias was shared by inhabitants of the spirits world (MIKU 1998).

In the Middle Mongolian language (in the 13th–16th centuries), the largest semantic group of personal names consisted of those related to physiological or psychological features of a given person. In this group, we can find names such as *Büjir* 'filthy', *Budayu* 'stupid, dull' and *Ködön ~ Köten* 'backside, buttocks', which carry a negative connotation. Behind such names is the superstition that 'bad names' (indicating that the child is nauseating and worthless) may discourage and repel evil spirits (RYBATZKI 2012: 335). In this corpus, we also have apotropaic names indicating that the child is similar to despised animals (e.g. *Kücügür* 'field mouse' or *Kökecü* 'titmouse'). These names may belong to the group of fortuitous or omen-names, as well. In this group falls a set of names classified as 'first animal or person seen after birth'. Most names connected with domestic animals, as well as some bird names, might belong to this group; *Nomon* 'mole', as well as the aforementioned *Kücügür* 'field mouse'



and *Kökecü* ‘titmouse’ should also be included in this group (RYBATZKI 2012: 336–337).

Also in Inner Asia, but from an earlier period, the time of the Second Turkic Khaganate (ca. 682–742/744), after a disastrous defeat, the Turkic tribe Sir, which had an important role in the region, adopted the name *Qıpçaq*, meaning ‘unlucky, unfortunate’ as a protective name to ward off further misfortunes (GOLDEN 2011: 53, VÁSÁRY 2003).

7. Further to the East, in Korea, until the beginning of the 20th century, people were assigned several names. The childhood name was often an apotropaic name like *Twaeji* ‘pig’, *Kangaji* ‘puppy’, *Kaettong* ‘dog crap’ or *Malttong* ‘horse crap’, which were changed after the person became an adult. The function of these names was to deceive the evil spirits (OSVÁTH 1989: 337). According to the military registers from the Joseon period (which lasted until the beginning of the 20th century), some soldiers holding military ranks bore the names *Kaettong* ‘dog crap’ or *Malttong* ‘horse crap’. Thus, we can conclude that in these cases the childhood name was not changed once the person reached adulthood. Similar names recorded in the registers were: *O-in* ‘a person who hates virtue’, *Ak-han* ‘evil scoundrel’ or *Keom-dong* ‘blackie’. According to the records, the bearers of these names were freedmen (PARK 2011: 30).

In Japan, children could be called ‘dogs’, ‘pigs’, ‘leeches’, ‘worms’ when they became ill, or their previous siblings had died at an early age (HAJDÚ 2013: 104).

We have records of apotropaic naming practice in China, as well. The original personal name of one of the great Confucian philosophers, Xunzi (c. 310–c. 220 B.C.E) was an apotropaic name: *Bingyi* ‘his illness is over’ (XUNZI–KNOBLOCK 1988: 233). In China in the Ha Tsuen culture in the Kanton region, the newborn babies are not named until they are one month old, because in this period their soul is exposed to the phenomenon of ‘losing soul’. A long-awaited son may be assigned an apotropaic name like *Mui-jai* ‘little slave girl’, in hopes that the rambling spirits would not pay attention to him (SUNG 1981: 81–82, as cited in WATSON 1986: 620–621). In China, children could be called ‘dogs’, ‘hogs’ and ‘fleas’ against evil eye (SIEBERS 1983: 41–42).

In Vietnam, upon their birth, children, especially in the villages, may be first named after simple, dirty things such as *bùn* ‘mud’, *cát* ‘sand’, *rêu* ‘moss’, *kèo* ‘rafter’, or *cột* ‘pillar’, etc. or after animals such as *chó* ‘dog’, *chây* ‘louse’, originally intended to ward off evil spirits. Names such as *lùn* ‘dwarf’, *đĩ* ‘harlot’, etc., and also obscene words like *cu* ‘penis’, *hĩm* ‘cunt’ are present at the countryside (CADIÈRE 1944: 139). According to NGUYỄN (1995), the Vietnamese child gets an apotropaic name first so as to avert misfortune. The giving of the real name comes only later.

8. The Tangkhuls in India in the pre-Christian era believed that it was easy for evil spirits to kill a nameless person. Therefore, the family tried to name the child as early as possible and the name had to be meaningful. A naming celebration was done usually for the first child and in particular for the first son. Otherwise, the name was usually given by the family before the baby's ears were pierced. When the family had very few male members or in general the infant mortality rate was high in the family, derogatory names were given to the baby so the spirits would not want to take the child away: they named their son *Seipaileng* 'cow-dung', *Fapaileng* 'dog-dung', etc., and this applied to even the female babies. They were named *Seipaila*, *Fapaila*, etc. (JOY 2014: 75–76).

In northern India, among the precautions taken against the evil eye was throwing a child onto a rubbish or dung heap and naming it 'rubbish', 'dung heap', 'lord of refuse', 'broomstick', or 'pot'. The same applies in the northwestern state of Gujarat and in the Muslim Sindh province of Pakistan (MALONEY 1976, as cited in HOBSON 1989: 164). According to EMENEAU (1978: 127), in northern India, parents who had lost several children, sometimes gave an apotropaic name to a child, e.g. *Peṅṭa-yya* 'rubbish + male suffix', *Peṅṭ-amma* (f.), *Pull-ayya*, *Pull-amma* from *pulli-āku* 'a leftout leaf on which one ate'.

9. In northeast Africa, in Sudan, a child whose siblings have died before him/her is called *Ajefas* 'let be thrown away', or *Ajuji* 'on the dung heap' to avert God's attention from them (GREENBERG 1946: 23). In the east, in Uganda, among the Lugbaras, a woman who had previously been considered barren or whose previous children had died at birth would assign a death name (e.g. 'in the death hut') to her baby. MIDDLETON (1961) identified 144 'death' names among these people (as cited in HOBSON 1989: 164).

In the traditional Xitsonga culture of South Africa, when death or illness strikes, a supernatural cause is suspected. This unfortunate situation is, therefore, enshrined in a name. According to the informants, experts in name-giving can assign children apotropaic names such as *Telakufa* 'come to die' and *Nyamayavo* 'their flesh, their meat', which serve to publicly encode complaints to the members of the family and are also known as sarcastic names. In other words, these names are often given with a slightly teasing tone. The names of *Telakufa* and *Nyamayavo* are used when parents have lost many children and may have little hope that the child will survive. The name may thus be considered as a form of prayer in desperation to save the baby from the evil spirits, to protect him/her against the witches. The underlying belief is that the dead children were bewitched. In case of the name of *Nyamayavo*, it is believed that the witches will realise that their evil deeds are known and thus will shy away or distance themselves from the baby's family. The parents wholeheartedly hope that these names will protect the child from all the evil spirits and expect the



child to survive (NKONDO 1973: 72 and JUNOD 1938: 54, as cited in CHAUKE 2015: 310).

In Central Africa, in Gabon, apotropaic names are given to babies from birth, in particular to those whose viability is in doubt. These names are supposed to contribute to warding off evil spirits, banning curses into forgetfulness or removing children from the influence of people with bad intentions. Among the Nkomi and the Eshira, these names are spoken in the form of an anti-phrase to preserve children from death. The aim, when they are chosen, is to make the baby survive sheltered from bad intentions. (These names are called *talisman names*.) For example, if a child is born on an unfortunate day, his parents may prudently call him *Raferia* ‘manure’ or *Ratisoa* ‘pig’, since fate will not be interested in visiting its cruelty on anything as unattractive as manure or a pig. Something similar occurs with the children of princes, whose disagreeable names are intended to distract the attention of evil genies. The parents later give them attractive names, but take care to keep them in secret (TESONE 2011: 19).

In West Africa, the parents assign apotropaic or death names so as to deceive the evil spirits by communicating that the children are not precious to them, thereby protecting them from death. In Gambia, when the mother was considered barren or her children died early, her new-born baby was given the name ‘refuse-heap’ or ‘throwaway’ (AMES 1959: 269).

10. Today the practice of apotropaic names is present in traditional societies where people believe in magic and evil spirits. The apotropaic names are given in general to protect against the evil spirits; the degrading names have the function of diverting the evil influences from the child. We can see that these names could refer to a child, but for the Turks, it referred to the tribe, the people themselves, and was meant to ward off possibly catastrophic developments in the state of affairs.

In many cultures, apotropaic names were generally not applied to the first child. Only when a previous children had died, for example of some kind of illness, would the parents decide to use the apotropaic name. Therefore, we can conclude that people believed in the life saving effect of an apotropaic name, but if it became a real name accompanied by its bad connotations, as well, then it was not favourable for the person and his/her family. Giving apotropaic names is like paying for the survival of the child. The parents sacrifice something precious: the prestige of the child, of the family and presumably of the extended family, as well. If the aim were just to deceive the evil spirits, neutral names would have sufficed, but, as we know from folk tales, the greater the sacrifice, the more effective the result.



It is worth specific research to know where and in which cultures the parents changed the child’s apotropaic name as time went by, and where and in which

cultures they did not. For cases in which the child possessed it all his life, we can refer to the apotropaic names of the Korean soldiers of military ranks. In Korea, these names were generally applied only in the childhood. Further examinations are required to discover in which cases, for what reasons, and under which conditions, the apotropaic names remained life-long.

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Abstract

An aspect of name magic in many regions of the world, apotropaic names were assigned to children to make them undesirable to evil spirits. After introducing the characteristics of this former practice in Hungarian culture, I will look at examples from across the borders and from earlier periods of time. The same concept existed in the Egyptian belief system and was later transferred to the Greek and Roman apotropaic name practice of the ancient Greek-Roman



period. I will also examine in detail the practice in Russia of giving a false name to a child and use of the apotropaic name 'fool' in the name of Ivan the Fool (*Иван-дурак ~ Иванушка-дурачок*), a stock character representing the lucky fool in Russian folklore. To present as complete a picture as possible of this phenomenon, I will also discuss its practice among the Evens, the Yakuts in Siberia, the Mongols, the Tangkhuls in India and the Tsongas in South Africa, as well as its use in Korea, China (in particular in the Ha Tsuen culture), the north Indian region (particularly the state of Gujarat), the Muslim Sindh province of Pakistan, Sudan, Uganda, Gambia and Gabon.

Keywords: apotropaic name, name-giving