

Being an Eritrean, what would you say if a kid from one of the neighborhoods in Asmara came and introduced himself as Clinton Tesfay or Clinton Woldai? You would obviously say something along the lines of “Excuse me, what did you say your name is?” or “Come again”, talk about an oxymoron of names! Now imagine an elderly Eritrean woman or man being told that their grandchild’s name is “Valentina” or “Beckham”. They would have a culture shock without ever having to leave their own country, which is in fact what is exactly happening today in most parts of the country.

There is a Tigringa saying that goes “Shim Yimerih, Tiwaf Yebrih” which translates into something like, “a name can reveal character just as a candle gives light.” In coining this adage our ancestors had sought to indicate that a person’s name can lay a foundation for his/her personality. From this saying alone, one can understand the importance placed on names in the Eritrean culture. Mostly indigenous or taken from the Quran or the Bible, Eritrean names are carefully chosen to reflect either the prevailing circumstances in the family or country as whole, the hope placed on the baby’s future or as namesake for lost loved ones. For instance, if parents name their son “Debesay”, then it means that these parents had previously lost a child and have now been compensated by God with another one. Or if a girl is named “Sa’edia”, the parents are expressing their hope that their daughter would have luck all her life.

The popular names in urban and sometimes rural areas of Eritrea today, besides being foreign don’t seem to have been as carefully chosen as Eritrean tradition would require. Time was grandparents were prevailed upon to name children, believing that they are the only ones seasoned enough to come up with a name with an important name. Parents also sometimes chose names for their children as a tribute to lost friends or family members. But today, the basic reason behind selecting a name for babies seems to depend on whether that name is hip, trendy or new. “William”, “Natalia”, “Diana” are some of the names that you hear kids being called today. Their privilege for being the first ones to be considered to name babies gone, elderly Eritreans today not only fail to understand the meaning behind the currently popular names but they are also constantly teased for their pronunciation of those names.

Names such as “Gebrekrstos”, “Andemariam”, “Teklezghi” and others for men, and “Ametegabir”, “Letenigus”, “Letebirhan” and others for women, though difficult to imagine at this point, were quite popular back in the day. The profound meaning attached to such names made them quite popular in their time. However, they fell quite out of favor when Eritrean parents discovered shorter and seemingly better sounding names such as “Amanuel”, “Bereket”, “Yodit”, “Aster”...etc. You most likely cannot find a kid born after the mid seventies (in urban areas mostly) named “Gebremariam” or “Letemariam”. Not only had these names fell out of favor but they became so highly unpopular that today parents would rather name their children after a tree.

It is true that you cannot saddle your child with a name that belonged to another century because it is indigenous and meaningful, it would not be fair to the child. But considering the way the aforementioned names were almost universally replaced by modern but still predominantly cultural names, the way things are going one cannot help but think whether all

Eritreans would one day end up with names such as "Hilary", "Justin" or "Kelly". I have even heard of some young Eritrean parents seriously contemplating of naming their kids after European football teams like "Arsenal" or "Manchester".

Changing negative traditional attitudes and keeping up with modern times is well and good but it should not come at the expense of one's culture and identity. There is no such thing as 'old' or 'modern' culture; it is up to us to make our culture or even names popular.

\*If our readers have any views or personal experience relating to this topic they would like to share, you can send us you messages.