

New trends in Nordic Socio-onomastics

Research network

THE ROYAL HERITAGE OF NAMES

by Sofia Kotilainen

King Charles III will be crowned during the Coronation Service at Westminster Abbey on 6 May 2023. He has had several decades to prepare for this new position. “He’s been practising for a bit,” his sister, the Princess Royal, playfully told Canadian CBC News.

In the interview, Princess Anne summed up the meaning of coronation, saying that more than just being a big celebration, it is also an essential part of the responsibilities of the Crown. The Coronation is a combination of several traditional, historical and religious meanings. It symbolically strengthens the relationship of the people and their monarch and represents the continuity of the regime.

The coronation ceremony of May 2023 has been planned to be shorter and less extensive than in earlier centuries. According to media reports, King Charles also has had plans to renew the British monarchy, even though he will naturally honour the royal traditions and history. In recent months, there have been news of slimming down the amount of the members of the royal house.

LONG-LASTING COMMITMENT

There will certainly be changes in the British monarchy in the next few years, for the simple reason that the reign of Elizabeth II was so exceptionally long, and society and its attitudes have changed since 1950s. The coronation always symbolizes the beginning of a new era. Many things in the administration and practices of the court no doubt will be modernized and updated, but there is one immaterial heritage the kingdom has preserved for centuries and which will not be changed: the royal names carry long-lasting traditions.

Charles I and II (House of Stuarts) ruled in the 17th century. The new monarch of the 2020s will carry on this naming tradition. Within the House of Windsor, too, there are long naming traditions. If we consider the male line, there’s a continuation from generation to generation.

The King's granddaughter, Princess Charlotte (who is said to look a lot like her great-grandmother Queen Elizabeth and also her father, the Prince of Wales), has inherited this name in a feminized version from her grandfather. She is also the namesake of both her grandmothers as well as Queen Elizabeth. Her brothers, George (the future heir of the crown) and Louis, also carry the traditional names of earlier generations of monarchs, and of their grandfather. King Charles himself inherited his forenames from earlier generations of the House of Windsor as well as the Duke of Edinburgh (Louis and Alexander in the princes' names are inherited at least from Prince Philip's forefathers):

- King Charles III – Charles **Philip Arthur George**
 - Prince of Wales – William **Arthur Philip** Louis
 - Prince **George** Alexander **Louis**
 - Princess **Charlotte** Elizabeth Diana
 - Prince **Louis** **Arthur** **George**

Even now in the 2020s, these centuries-old traditions continue to define the naming practices of the royal families. Why, then, are the royal families so committed to such long-lasting naming practices?

ONOMASTIC LITERACY AND THE INHERITED NAMES OF ROYAL FAMILIES

In my research on name-giving practices, I have made use of the concept of onomastic literacy as an analytical tool. Onomastic literacy can be understood as the skills needed to interpret the cultural and social phenomena and meanings related to name-giving. Onomastic literacy skills are part of a person's cultural capital. I have studied personal names in family networks utilizing this concept, and in the royal families of the United Kingdom and Sweden.

The concept of onomastic literacy helps researchers to contextualize the lives of their research objects more closely as part of the cultures and local communities of their times, thereby revealing the deep-rooted motives behind name choices and the slow change in mentalities affecting naming generation by generation. These are connected with identities, symbols and kin networks.


Onomastic literacy is part of the cultural and informational capital of each individual and family. Communal norms have governed interpretations of name choices, but in order to be able to choose a 'suitable' name, an individual has to be sufficiently familiar with the traditions of the family and the locality. It is a question not only of fashion but also of identities, values and ideals. For example, in royal families it has been important to

maintain the prestige of the dynasty in the eyes of the people through name choices and the symbolic meanings connected with them.

Royal names are inherited from one generation to another, and this long continuity of important names results in slow change of the nomenclature and favours traditional names. Thus, personal names, not only surnames and the names of royal houses but also inherited forenames, could be described as a kind of a cultural DNA, which immediately expresses the family and royal house into which a person has been born. This has also been connected to trust in and the good repute of the royal family and its networks. For the subjects of the royal families and for the media, these ‘safe choices’ of inherited forenames also communicate their uniqueness and legitimate their status.

On the other hand, royal families cannot isolate themselves from society. That is why in the Nordic countries, for example, the name choices of the royal families, even as they respect older traditions, also reflect the greater freedom of choice that parents nowadays have in name-giving compared with earlier centuries.

The whole article in NoSo: Kotilainen, Sofia 2022. [Utilizing the concept of onomastic literacy as an analytical tool: a methodological examination of the names of European royal families](#). Nordisk tidskrift för socioonomastik / Nordic Journal of Socio-Onomastics 2, 63–88 (Open Access pdf).

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