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Fitting in takes toll on tradition

Latinos often drop mother's name

By SHANNON MULLEN
STAFF WRITER

It's only a tiny punctuation mark, but newborn Angelique Ortiz-Hernandez's parents hope the hyphen in her last name is strong enough to hold together a tenuous Hispanic tradition.

The custom in their native Mexico, as it is throughout the Spanish-speaking world, is to give children the family names, or surnames, of both parents, without a hyphen.

"It's traditional," Angelique's father, Juan Carlos Ortiz Santos, 31, of Sea Bright, said of using two separate surnames. "Everybody does that in Mexico."

Here in the United States, though, the practice has become a casualty of cultural assimilation. While there's no law against it — New Jersey, in fact, lets parents give their children any surname they want, as long as it's not obscene — Hispanic immigrants like Ortiz Santos and his wife, Sara Raquel Hernandez Diaz, 25, soon discover that in this country, for a host of practical reasons, two last names can be one too many.

The conventional American way, in which children are given only their father's last name, is hardwired into our society, affecting everything from seat assignments on the first day of kindergarten to the space allocated for last names on credit card applications.

"Every single form is designed for "John Smith,' " observed Michael L. Detzky, a Freehold-based immigration attorney, who said his Hispanic clients frequently hit snags in their dealings with U.S. government agencies because of confusion over an extra surname.

Part of the problem is technological. The software system the state Motor Vehicle Commission uses to generate New Jersey driver's licenses, for example, can accommodate last names with a maximum of 17 character spaces — too short for many compound Hispanic surnames. Other systems can't handle the empty space between two last names. When Angelique's mother registered as a maternity patient at Monmouth Medical Center in Long Branch, the system recorded her last name as "Hernandezdiaz."

Where identity is concerned, such seemingly trifling discrepancies can lead to big headaches — at school, the voting booth, the airport, the Social Security office — anywhere you have to prove who you are. Recording names by hand isn't foolproof, either, since clerks tend to assume the first surname is actually a middle name, which throws everything out of whack.

"So it's a ball of confusion," said Freehold resident Frank Argote-Freyre, a professor of Latin American history at Kean University, Union.

To simplify matters, many Hispanic immigrants drop one of their last names, typically their mother's. Others, like Angelique's parents, use a hyphen to perpetuate both family names, a compromise of sorts that's increasingly common among U.S. Hispanics.

Either way, the end result is a break from a centuries-old tradition, one that's deeply entrenched in the cultures and legal systems of Spanish-speaking societies.

When Keyport resident Al DeGracia returned to his native Puerto Rico a few years ago to buy property, he was surprised when the local attorney told him he had to sign his name on the contract the way it appears on his Puerto Rican birth certificate — Alberto de Gracia Perez.

"But that person doesn't exist in the U.S.," protested DeGracia, 52.

"He exists here," the attorney assured him.

Argote-Freyre, who legally changed his last name as a young adult to incorporate his late Cuban-born mother's surname as a tribute to her, said the tradition serves a practical purpose.

"The idea is that you're a part of each of them equally, and using both of those names will identify all your cousins, all your local roots," he said.

Jose F. Buscaglia-Salgado, director of the Caribbean studies program at the University of Buffalo, said establishing one's lineage is extremely important in Hispanic cultures.

"To put it in plain terms, a common insult you can give someone in a Spanish-speaking country is to tell them they have no mother — No tener madre," he explained. "That usually means that somebody is a particularly bad person, so there's a connotation" when the mother's surname isn't used.

Growing up in Puerto Rico, he was known by his full name, Jose Francisco Buscaglia Salgado. "My entire name, when I was in the first grade, took me like five minutes to write because it's like a whole sentence," he said.

Now, the variations of his name reflect the malleability of contemporary Hispanic identity. Informally, he's known as "Jose Buscaglia" or "Professor Buscaglia." Formally, he uses both surnames, though he's added a hyphen so non-Hispanics don't assume his middle name is Buscaglia.

In Chile, where Ana Pinto is from, a woman's legal name never changes, even if she marries. Hers was Ana Maria Armijo Camus.

She and her husband, Andres Pinto, immigrated to the United States more than 30 years ago. Early on, she hyphenated her name, which wasn't commonly done then, but when she became a U.S. citizen about 20 years ago she decided to legally take her husband's name, for simplicity sake.

Nationally, about 16 percent of immigrants who become citizens change their names, according to statistics from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

"You have to adapt to the culture," said Pinto, 52, of Ocean Township.

As the clinical director of Monmouth Medical's mother-baby unit, Pinto has helped countless Hispanic immigrant parents like Angelique's fill out birth certificate forms. After she explains the drawbacks of using two surnames, most opt for a hyphenated last name, she said, though the concept might be foreign to them.

Pinto herself said she still feels conflicted about her own name change.

"You kind of lose that connection, that connection with your homeland, with your family," she said. "Personally, I feel like I'm missing something with my family, because I don't have my last name."

"It identifies your whole family tree," agreed Fatima Potente, executive director of the Hispanic Affairs

and Resource Center of Monmouth County. "I think it's very important, it keeps you connected. And here, you lose that."

A native of the Dominican Republic, her legal name was Fatima Venicia Polanco Alvarado, but in the United States she dropped her parents' surnames and took on her husband's, to avoid confusion. Even so, she still uses her full name when she meets other Dominicans.

"It's part of my history," said Potente, 55. "If you mention the Alvarado family, everyone in the Dominican Republic knows what town they're from" — San Francisco de Macoris.

While it may be possible to alter software and make other systemic adjustments to better accommodate the two surname tradition, Argote-Freyre, for one, doesn't foresee that happening.

"Most people coming from a Latin American country don't want to fight that issue," he said. "There are so many other issues, they kind of let that one go."
