Documentary as Autoethnography

A Case Study Based on the Changing Surnames of Women

Hande Çayır

Series in Anthropology



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Preface: From Aydın to Çayır and from "Yes" to "How?"

Feride Çiçekoğlu

When I first met Hande, her last name was Aydın, and she used the word "Yes" a lot. I remember her during a conversation after she was accepted to the master program in Film and Television at İstanbul Bilgi University: A contemplative young woman with an interesting portfolio who had an undergraduate degree in Visual Arts & Visual Communication Design from one of the best universities in Turkey. She made an impression on me as someone who was not quite sure what she was looking for. She answered most of my questions with a hesitant "yes", without giving many clues about her real motivation or what drove her to pursue graduate study in film and television.

Almost a decade after that conversation which took place in 2010, I now smile at myself for that past impression. It is a memory I try to rejuvenate every once in a while, especially during the time of interviews for new applications, so that I do not misjudge or I do not even judge anyone I meet for the first time without giving a second thought. If Hande had not been persistent to confide in me, I might have missed her. And what a loss it would be! Not that it was an easy journey, but the whole adventure was worth it: Hande has become a friend and a colleague, someone with whom I learned a lot as her doctorate dissertation supervisor so that I hope I became a better tutor and a better person.

Hande did not only change her last name from Aydın to Çayır and her status from married to single during the first two years that I knew her, but she also changed her vision and the way she spoke. Gradually "yes" ceased to be the most frequent word she used as she ceased avoiding eye contact, being lost in her own thoughts and ruminating over as if looking for an alternative way to respond rather than merely affirming. She started to look directly into my eyes while searching for answers as to how she could make her documentary better or how she could go on exploring herself in her further studies.

The documentary that she made as her master graduation project was a transformative experience, not only for her but also for those of us who were on her committee. The name of the documentary is *Mrs. His Name*, and the first shot is from a touristic trip in a Nordic country with her then-husband and his

brother. While the husband is driving, with his brother in the front seat, Hande is at the back seat. She is bored and she asks for his phone since hers does not have a camera. She starts shooting from the back seat, asking questions to her husband. His answers make her quiet. She feels she is not understood. He says, "Hande! Hande!" and when she does not answer, he calls out "Hey!" We hear the voiceover of Hande saying she wants to make a documentary about the changing surname of women when they get married. The husband responds: "It has been an unnecessary project. It's meaningless. There are a lot of subjects to film, couldn't you find anything else? Do something worthwhile. Leave women's issues alone. Did you hear me? Am I talking to the wall? Hande? Give me an answer..." Hande is quiet then, but the film itself will turn out to be her answer.

In the end, the process of making the film became one of documenting how she drifted apart from her husband while asking questions about why she had lost her voice. There is a beautiful sequence in the film where she is experiencing to make sounds with the consonants, which fail to turn into words since the vowels are missing. Her film was a way of getting back her vowels, relearning to speak with her own words and regaining her self esteem. By the time she finished her documentary with her husband's surname, she had decided to get a divorce.

So here she was, faced with a change of the surname a second time, having to change all her paperwork, including all her identification documents such as her birth certificate, her driver's license and her passport. And she realised that she had somehow developed an alter ego or a second personality all the while when she was Aydın, and now she had to switch back to Çayır, which was not as easy as she had thought it would be. It was at this stage that we had a strong bond with Hande, and she decided to go on with her graduate studies by applying to our newly founded Communication Studies doctoral program.

When she wanted to work with me as her dissertation supervisor, this time I had no hesitations, although I had no idea how we would proceed methodologically. Hande had framed her research question for her doctoral dissertation proposal as an extension of her documentary: She wanted to research her own story and the making of her own film as a case study of how the change of surname affected women. We had long sessions of discussion, and in the end she discovered the method on her own.

I recall two events highlighting her search: The first was early in our collaborative journey, Hande beaming up when she announced that her paper *Autoethnography as Documentary: My Story is (Y)ours* was accepted for a conference – *Doing Autoethnography: (Re) Writing, Self, Other and Society* –

which was held in the United States in 2013. The second was when Hande discovered a soul mate in a PhD thesis from the other end of the world: *Be(com)ing Reel Independent Woman: An Autoethnographic Journey Through Female Subjectivity and Agency in Contemporary Cinema with Particular Reference to Independent Scriptwriting Practice.* It was the thesis of Larissa Sexton-Finck who came to our rescue all the way from Australia, bonding us stronger than ever since I had made my complicated journey back to academia via scriptwriting.

By the time Hande finished writing her dissertation with her birth surname – *Documentary as Autoethnography: A Case Study Based on the Changing Surnames of Women* – we had already won the battle that her method was a valid one for her field of research, having introduced autoethnography as a brand new idea to our brand new program. And by the time Hande had her degree as the first graduate of our program, she had not only regained her full voice but had started singing jazz tunes.

It is such a joy to write this introduction, knowing that I still accompany her at this new stage of her journey. When the second decade of the new century is about to reach closure, I look back and see that it has been the best one I remember in terms of the self-assertiveness and the visibility of women. So good to know our collaboration with Hande had a tiny contribution to the past decade and will hopefully continue to have even more so with each reader of this book during the next one.

Overview: Surname Conventions Around the World

"What could be simpler to understand than the act of people representing what they know best, their own lives?". This is the question asked by Sidone Smith and Julia Watson in their article (2010, 1) "Life Narrative: Definitions and Distinctions". In this article, they referred to works including Glückel of Hameln's memoirs and Rousseau's confessions, exploring autobiography, memoir, life writing, and life narrative. I am sharing part of my story in this book, and as it has been my exploration of self, family, and the society I live in, it was difficult to give it a title. Smith and Watson (2010) emphasise that such a journey "can employ the dialogue, plot, setting, and density of language of the novel. It may incorporate biographies of others in its representation of family, friends, historical or religious figures. It projects multiple histories—of communities, families, nations, movements" (19). Therefore, this research includes the story of my surname changes after marriage and divorce, and details Turkey's naming conventions. However, before focusing on that, I would like to share some views around the world regarding this issue.

After completing the writing portion of this research in 2016, I met people all around the world and continued asking questions about their surname change stories. I want to mention some of them here in order to document the universality of this topic. For example, Stephanie Angela de Palma, 43, a filmmaker and part-time waitress from New Jersey, says that her name "has been Stephanie Angela De Palma McClelland and Stephanie Angela De Palma Cook and at some points even Stephanie Angela De Palma McClelland Cook". Stephanie Angela de Palma has been divorced twice, and notes that in the US, the surname change decision depends on the individual. "Honestly, if I got married again, I would keep my name as it is. It is just a hassle in my opinion. If you love somebody that is not really the way to prove it. I felt I lost my identity for a bit and I am happy to have back now", said de Palma. She has used many names on formal documents and it is incredibly confusing to government and banking institutions. She said that she often cannot be found in the system because parties cannot differentiate who she is. She has used different names for her bank account, passport, and UK Leave to Remain visa. In the end, she had to get a new passport, at her own personal expense.

Nicki Clayton, 55, an entrepreneur and hairstylist from the UK, says that "women can do whatever they want with their name: get married but keep their own surname, take their husband's name when getting married, return to their own name (called their 'maiden' name) once divorced. Also, anyone can change their name by deed poll (officially) if they want to assume another name."

Eshna Ramrekha, 24, an optometrist from Mauritius, says "Mauritius is still a developing country and some things are still backwards or considered as a tradition. When a woman gets married, she would change her surname to her husband's surname."

Su'ur Su'eddie Vershima Agema, 32, a poet and editor from Nigeria, says that usually when Nigerian women divorce, they file for a change of name in a court, supported by the divorce papers. Afterwards, they have it published in at least two national newspapers. "Most times they do not change their names in full because they have come to be known through that name. They have built reputations and careers with that name so they cannot abruptly just drop the name," said Agema. Most also end up adding in their father's name in a hyphenated form.

Eman Mohamed Magdy Tawfik Elharmeel, 32, a filmmaker from Egypt, says "generally, in Egypt, we have only one option which is keeping your family surname and it is not allowed legally to take your husband's surname. But you should mention your husband's name in your official ID after marriage such as national ID and passport."

Shuai Ma, 29, a student from China, says "generally speaking, Chinese surnames are handed down from ancient times, and children usually inherit their fathers' surnames. There are also a small number of children who follow their mother's surname. In modern China, women's surnames are not changed by marriage or divorce."

Nuno Juvenal Figueira Fernandes, 27, a data analyst from Portugal, says the following:

"It has not always been this way. Today, both partners—husbands and spouses—can add, if s/he wants, two surnames at the most from the other partner. They can also keep their surnames. The same rule is not applied to whom already has surnames from a previous marriage. Surnames can be taken after the divorce, and at a court request, one partner can be deprived of using his former partner surname, if s/he feels prejudiced." Fernandes added that "the answers do not reflect the 'cultural Portuguese mind', only what the law allows. Women keep getting their husbands names despite the possibility that they can choose not to."

Amanat Ali, 40, who is working with the government as a civil servant from Pakistan, says "there is no definitive pattern of the use of surnames in my country. Some people do like to use family name but others may not. Hence, there is no set pattern." That said, the majority of Pakistani women do change their surnames after marriage to the names of their husbands. Ali adds that "however, the practice is new. There are significant numbers of the ladies who do not change their surname despite the insistence of their husbands. The women belonging to old times would not change their surnames. The practice is getting currency only now."

Agnieszka Podubny, 33, a singer and singing teacher from Poland, says that she is saddened to see young Polish women sticking with the outdated and conservative practice of switching to the husband's surname. Her view is that most women think of it in terms of avoiding unnecessary arguments, or not wanting to hurt their husband's feelings.

I know just a few girls who have chosen to have two surnames; they are highly educated and successful in their career. I do not know any who keep only her surname after marriage. If I get married I would definitely keep my surname, I do not see the point why I should change it. Woman after divorce almost always return to their own surnames. On the other side I know one couple in which husband took a wife's name, probably because his own was a matter of jokes and both of the surnames when they come together sounded even more funny so they wanted to have things easier for their child's future.

Katie Barclay is a historian of marriage, and she says in *What's in a Name? Or Leaving Your Patrilineage Behind* (2010) that "in Iceland, things were different again, with women taking their mother's first name as a surname, and men taking their father's. So, I would be Katie Fionas daughter, while my brother would be Liam Billysson." (1) As can be seen from these examples, surname changes differ from culture to culture, but generally, the practice is maledominant. Nevertheless, we should always look into the context before judging anyone's personal decision; this is what I learned from this research.

Over the years, I came across some women who wanted to change their surname to their husband's because they hated their father. Sometimes it is the other way around. Some simply enjoyed having a surname change. Sometimes mothers chose to do it solely for the sake of their children. Some gay couples made up their own surnames. One day a work colleague changed her surname and everybody celebrated, assuming she had married; however, we later realised that she had actually divorced. Surnames carry a message, as do our first names. I believe it should be one's own decision. If an institution (i.e. state) or someone other than you (i.e. your ex-partner) has a right to change even your name, then in what way are you still free? Or, are we private properties? Gabriele Rosenthal (1993) says in Reconstruction of Life Stories: Principles of Selection in Generating Stories for Narrative Biographical Interviews that "the present perspective determines what the subject considers biographically relevant, how he or she develops thematic and temporal links between his or her various experiences and how past, present or anticipated future realities influence his or her personal interpretation of the meaning of his or her life". (3) When it comes to theory, I would say it is easy to see the whole picture, but when it comes to practical life, I am not sure what to say. The meaning constantly changes depending on your perspective.

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