The Arabic Naming System

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Editor's note: As authorship in science becomes increasingly international, science editors are increasingly working with names of diverse linguistic origins. Earlier issues of Science Editor *contained articles on Chinese names (2002;25:3-4) and Spanish and Portuguese names (2003;26:118-21). We are pleased to include in this issue an article on Arabic names. We also hope to publish articles on names of additional origins. Readers wishing to prepare such articles are invited to contact Barbara Gastel, editor,* Science Editor, *at b-gastel@tamu.edu.*

The Arabic naming system does not conform to the English system, with its first name, middle name, and family name. The Arabic system has a regularity of its own, although it may have variations related to country of origin, religion, culture (rural or tribal vs city), level of formality, and even personal preference. In general, however, traditional Arabic names consist of these five parts, which follow no particular order: the *ism, kunya, nasab, laqab,* and *nisba.* More accurately, Arabic people can go by one to five, or even more, names.

Strictly speaking, the ism is the given name. These are the names given to children at birth. Male isms are such names as *Abdullah, Abdul Aziz, Abdul Rahman, Adel, Hussein, Sa'ud,* and *Omar.* Men's isms are sometimes preceded by one of the attributes of Allah—such as *Ahmed, Mahmoud,* and

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Mustapha—but this practice is declining, especially in areas influenced by Western practices, such as Lebanon, Morocco, and other North African countries.

Female isms include *Leila, Ayisha, Salma, Nawal,* and *Samira.* The "ah" sound is typically a feminine ending. It is considered somewhat inappropriate to address a woman by her ism, but this would be more the case in tribal areas than in urban areas

Most Arabic isms mean something; for example, *Abdullah* means "servant of God", and *Noor* means "light". Examples in English would be *Felicity* and *Hope.* In many areas, because of their predominantly nomadic existence, Arabs had to be able to convey their culture from place to place easily. Therefore, poetry became a supreme art form in Arabic culture. Even today, names are inspired by the Arabic love of poetry. Thus, in naming a child, parents may consider not just the meaning and significance of a name but also the sound of the name when spoken.

The names of Christian Arabs can be derived from the Bible. One example is *Butros,* which is the Arabic version of *Peter.* These names follow the same general pattern as other Arabic names. Relatively recent—and surprising—additions to the list of isms are Western names, which again are sometimes used by Christian Arabs or by people living in areas influenced by the West. In Beirut, Amman, or Tunis, for example, you might come upon such names as *Emile Safwad Youssef* and *Chantal Sameh Issa.* Needless to say, there are hundreds of isms; those here are just a sample.

The kunya is an honorific name. It is not part of a person's formal name and would seldom be found in print. The kunya is used as an informal form of address and respect, much as we use "aunt" and "uncle". It indicates that the man or woman is the father or mother of a particular person, the birth of a child being considered praiseworthy and deserving of recognition. For

example, *Umm* or *Oum Kulthum* means "mother of Kulthum", and *Abu Kulthum* means "father of Kulthum". If the first child is a daughter, the kunya would probably be changed later to acknowledge a son born after the daughter. The kunya is such an important name that even a childless person may be granted a kunya that makes him or her symbolically the parent of some quality, such as "father of good deeds", or *Abu el Jamail.* In countries such as Iraq, the "father/mother of" denotation is generally left out.

The nasab is the patronymic and starts with *bin* or *ibn,* which means "son of", or *bint,* which means "daughter of". It acknowledges the father of the child. Matronymics are not used in Arabic. The nasab often follows the ism, so that you have, for example, *Fahad ibn Abdul Aziz,* which means "Fahad, son of Abdul Aziz". A daughter would be *Maryam bint Abdul Aziz.* If someone wishes to acknowledge the grandfather and great-grandfather as well, these names may be added. So one could have *Khalid ibn Faisal ibn Abdul Aziz.* It is rare for more than three nasabs to be included in the name. The use of bin and ibn varies greatly. For example, in Iraq and some other countries, the nasab is simply omitted: *Saddam Hussein* means "Saddam, son of Hussein". Strictly speaking, Hussein is not Saddam's surname, although it is used as such in English.

The laqab is defined most simply as an epithet, usually a religious or descriptive one. For example, *al-Rashid* means "the rightly guided" and *al-Fadl* means "the prominent". In general, the laqab also follows the ism. For example, one might have *Khalid al-Rashid ibn Abdul Aziz,* which would be translated "Khalid, the rightly guided son of Abdul Aziz". A laqab that has its own prefix is *Abd*; it means "servant of" and is followed by one of the 99 names, or attributes, of Allah. *Abdul,* which is derived from *Abd,* is not an ism and is not

used alone. Like *Abd*, it always precedes one of the 99 names of *Allah*; examples are *Abdul Rahman* or *Abdul Qader*. The feminine form of this laqab is *Amat*.

The nisba is similar to what people in the West call the surname. (Again, the use of this term varies greatly: in Egypt and Lebanon, for example, nisba is not used at all; instead, laqab incorporates its meaning.) The nisba is often used as the last name, although its use has decreased in some areas. It usually stands for an occupation, a geographic location, or a tribe or family. Names that indicate a profession include *al-Uqlidsi*, "the studier of Euclid", and *al-Attar*, "the spice vendor". Examples of names that indicate the geographic origins of a family are *al-Baghdadi*, "the (people of) Baghdad", *al-Madini*, "of Medina", and *al-Makki*, "of Mecca". Examples of tribal names include *al-Rashidi*, *al-Harbi*, and *al-Makhzumi*. (*Al Sa'ud*, by the way, means "the family of Sa'ud"—*Sa'ud* is an ism—and thus is written differently.). One difference from Western practice is that Arabic women do not take their husband's names when they marry. They retain the names they were given at birth. Children, however, do take their father's name.

One problem faced by editors is that the spelling of a particular Arabic name can vary because of inconsistent transliteration from the Arabic. Thus, you can get *Mecca*, *Makkah*, and *Mekkah*, all referring to Islam's holiest site. Another example is the many spellings of *Mohammed*: *Mohammad*, *Mohamad*, *Mahmad*, *Muhammad*, *Mohamed*, *Mahmed*, and *Muhammed*. As T E Lawrence noted to his publisher, "Arabic names won't go into English, exactly, for their consonants are not the same as ours, and their words, like ours, vary from district to district." The same goes for vowels and the special characters used in transliterated names. Editors should therefore encourage Arabic authors to make sure that their names are spelled consistently in all documents to ensure that literature searches bring up all their publications.

Arabs who live in the West are accustomed to seeing their nasabs and laqabs dropped to conform with Western custom and the practice of keeping names short. In alphabetizing Arabic names, *The Chicago Manual of Style* advises dropping the *al-* or *el-*, which is essentially the article *the* in Arabic, and having the element that follows determine the alphabetical order. For example, *Samir al-Badawi* would be printed *Badawi, Samir al-* or *al-Badawi, Samir*, and alphabetized in the Bs. However, as with other features of the Arabic naming system, this one has exceptions and is often dictated by personal preference.

As naming practices differ among Arab cultures, so are there many exceptions to naming practices within cultures. In the space allowed here, it is difficult to achieve a balance between oversimplification and a thorough description of Arabic naming practices. Suffice it to say that you should not be at all surprised to come across Arabic names that do not conform strictly to the system outlined here. ◉

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