TRADITIONAL MUSLIM NAMES

Before the introduction of European-style family names in the 20th Century, traditional Muslim names were composed of a number of basic elements: (1) the ism or ‘alam, (2) the kunya, (3) the nasab, (4) the laqab, and (5) the nisba. A person may be referred to by one or more of these components, or by all of them. Note the following example:

ABU AHMAD SHAMS AL-DIN ‘ISA IBN JA’FAR IBN YAZID AL-ANSARI

<table>
<thead>
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<th>kunya</th>
<th>laqab</th>
<th>ism</th>
<th>nasab</th>
<th>nisba</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Abū Ahmad</td>
<td>Shams al-Dīn</td>
<td>‘Īsā</td>
<td>ibn Ja’far ibn Yazīd</td>
<td>al-Anṣārī</td>
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</table>

1. The ism or ‘alam is the personal or “given” name, usually

   a. Arab names—sometimes pre-Islamic, including adjectives or substantives with specific meanings, sometimes with the definite article: Muhammad, Ahmad, Mahmūd, Hāmid (\(\lambda ' A lī, (al-)Hasan, Ḥusayn (\(\lambda ' N S N ' H Ā).)

   b. Biblical-Qur’anic names—Hārūn (Aaron), Ibrāhīm (Abraham), Mūsā (Moses), Yūsuf (Joseph), ‘Īsā (Jesus)


   d. non-Arab, non-Qur’anic names—such as Jamshīd, Iṣfandīyār and Rustam (Persian) and Timūr, Sanjar, and Alp Arslān (Turkish)

2. The kunya is a name compounded of Abū, “father,” or Umm, “mother:” Abū Mūsā ‘Alī, “Ali, the father of Mūsā;” Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm, “Abraham, the father of Isaac;” or Umm Kūltīm, “the mother of Kūltīm.” The kunya always precedes the ism and is usually constructed with the name of the bearer’s oldest offspring. However, the kunya does not necessarily indicate a real parental relationship and is sometimes metaphorical or ironic: Abū al-Fadl, “the father of...” or “the possessor of excellence,” i.e., “the Excellent;” Abū al-Faṭḥ, “the father of victory;” i.e., the Victorious; Abū al-Dawāniq, “the father of pennies,” i.e., “the Miserly.”

3. The nasab is a list of ancestors, each introduced with ibn, “son,” or bint, “daughter,” often given for two or more generations: ‘Īsā ibn Ja’far, ‘Īsā, the son of Ja’far;” Fāṭima bint Muḥammad, “Fāṭima, the daughter of Muḥammad.” Sometimes the
nasab may refer to a remote ancestor, eponym of a clan, or founder of a dynasty: ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khalidūn, not “‘Abd al-Raḥmān, son of Khalidūn,” but “‘Abd al-Raḥmān, member of the clan whose founder was Khalidūn, i.e., the Khalidūnid;” Murād Ibn ‘Uthmān, not “Murād, the son of ‘Uthmān,” but “Murād of the Ottoman dynasty.” Note other forms such as Ziyād ibn Abīhī, “Ziyād, the son of his father, i.e., the Bastard;” or Mamluk names such as Jānībak ibn ‘Abd Allāh, “Jānībak, the son of someone.”

In Persian, ibn is sometimes replaced by -i as in Hasan-i Ṣabbāḥ, “Ḥasan, the son of Ṣabbāḥ” or by —zāda, —zādah, or —zāy as in Qāḏīzāda, “the son of the qāḏī.”

In Turkish, the nasab is constructed with —ughli (oğlu in modern Turkish orthography), as in Mihalğlı, “the son of Michael,” Lâzughlı, “the Lesghians,” (a quarter in Cairo).

4. The laqab is a nickname, descriptive epithet, or honorific, often a title, as

a. physical qualities: al-Ṭawīl, “the tall.”


5. The nisba is an attributive adjective derived from the place of birth, origin, residence, the name of a religious rite, sect, tribe, family, or other form of affiliation; and occasionally from a trade or profession. A person may have several of these nisbas, which in Arabic are almost always preceded by the definite article, as Aḥmād al-ISfahānī, “Aḥmād of ISfahān,” Muḥammad al-Ṣafī ‘i, “Muḥammad, member of the Shāfi’ī school of jurisprudence,” Ḥasan al-Nāṣirī, “Ḥasan, the slave (mamlūk) of al-Malik al-Nāṣir,” ‘Umar-i Khayyām, “Umar the Tentmaker,” Ḥāfīz-i Shīrāzī, Ḥāfīz of Shīrāz. Note that in the last example, the Arabic definite article al- is replaced in Persian by the izāfa construction in –i.

In Turkish, the nisba, ending in -li or -lu, usually precedes the ism: İzmirli Ali, “Ali of Izmir.”

6. A name may also be preceded by a title (‘unwān), which may vary greatly from period to period, from region to region, and from function to function. Examples are: Khwāja, Mawlānā, Mīrzā, Shaykh, Usta, etc.
7. Finally, sometimes an author may have, in addition, a *takhallus* or *makhla*, or pen-name usually in *nisba* form: *Firdawsī*, “paradisiacal;” *Ṣa‘dī*, “protégé of Sa‘d ibn Zangi.”

**Exercise**

Analyze the name Khwāja Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Iṣḥāq al-Ṭūsī, Nizām al-Mulk

**Additional Reading**