

ARABIC NOMENCLATURE

A summary guide for beginners

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In pre-Islamic times and in the beginnings of Islam, it was customary for a person to be addressed by his (or her) personal name, the *ism*. But if a man was asked his identity, he would ordinarily give his *ism* followed by his *nasab*: the latter is a genealogical chain in the form ‘son of A, son of B, son of C, etc.’. These chains were no doubt historically correct statements of ancestry for some half-dozen or so links above the individual in question, but beyond that they tended to verge into the realm of the legendary; and they always end with the theoretical ancestor of the whole tribe. In referring to third persons, the common practice was to mention the *ism* plus the tribal designation; on occasion, there might be inserted between these two the patronymic, i.e., the first member of the *nasab* chain, the *ism* of the individual’s own father. In this type of nomenclature, the tribal designation commonly takes the form of a *nisba* (with the termination *-ī*). Hence a man who would say in response to an inquiry, ‘I am al-Ḥārith ibn Asad ibn Zayd ibn Thābit ibn Aws (etc., etc.) ibn Bakr’ (Bakr being the legendary ancestor of the Bakr tribe), would ordinarily be referred to by others as al-Ḥārith al-Bakrī or al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Bakrī.

In addition to his personal *ism*, an individual might have also a nickname, which is his *laqab*. This, when it existed, was commonly used for third-person reference to him in preference to his *ism*. Biographical notices therefore usually begin by stating what such a person’s ‘real’ name was: one will read that the poet ordinarily spoken of by his *laqab* of Al-Shanfarā was properly Thābit Ibn Aws al-Adzī (his own *ism* being Thābit, his father’s *ism* Aws, and he belonged to the tribe of Azd). The tribal *nisba* might be added to the *laqab* if further clarity is needed: one has to distinguish between several poets all having the *laqab* al-Nābigha as al-Nābigha al-Dhubayānī, al-Nābigha al-Jaḍī, etc.

Another type of name which is also in a sense a nickname, in that it is additional to the personal proper name (*ism*), is a type called a *kunya*. This is a compound form in which the first element is Abū ‘father of’ (or, in the case of a woman, Umm ‘mother of’) while the second element may be either an *ism* or a word denoting some abstract idea or physical object associated with the person (as in, e.g. Abū Burda ‘father of a cloak’, or ‘the cloaked one’). It can be presumed that the Abū+*ism* type of *kunya* had its origin in actual realities and indeed meant that the person in question had a son whose *ism* was incorporated in his own *kunya*. One of the Prophet’s uncles, whose *ism* was ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā, had two *kunyas*, Abū Lahab ‘father of

a flame' given him because of his flame-like handsomeness, and Abū 'Utba since 'Utba was the *ism* of his eldest son (though it is as Abū Lahab that he is always known to history). After the time of the Prophet, however, the Abū+*ism* type of *kunya* became a pure convention which did not necessarily imply that the bearer of the *kunya* had a son so named: the *kunya* was often bestowed at an early age, before the individual had begotten any sons at all, nor when he did have children was he obliged to name one in conformity with his own *kunya*.

It is not uncommon for such a person to be referred to by mention of both his *kunya* and his *ism*, and in such cases the *kunya* precedes the *ism*.

There is one curious anomaly in this system. Bakr, the name of the legendary ancestor of the Bakr tribe, has never in historical times been given to an individual as his *ism*; it functions exclusively as a tribal designation. The style Abū Bakr therefore cannot imply possession of a son named Bakr. Nevertheless, the style Abū Bakr is employed both as a *kunya* (as in a form such as Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zayd), and even more commonly as an *ism*, so that a man could be e.g. Abū Muḥammad Abū Bakr ibn Zayd, where his *ism* is Abū Bakr and his *kunya* Abū Muḥammad.

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From the second century of Islam onwards, it became decidedly impolite to address a person to his or her face by the *ism* unless the speaker was very much the social superior (a member of the upper classes might address a slave or peasant so, and the Caliph addressed everyone so). In speaking to superiors, equals or near-equals, it was obligatory to use the *kunya* only. This leads to difficulties in reading historical narratives which incorporate; recorded conversations; for while the historian refers to the characters in his narrative by *ism* or *laqab*, with patronymic, *nisba*, etc., yet in the recorded conversations they address each other only by *kunya*, so that the reader is obliged to be familiar with each character's *kunya* in order to understand who is being addressed.

Around the end of the second century, the caliphs (and later the sultans) began bestowing on distinguished individuals as marks of honour (similar functionally to 'honours' in the western world) titles compounded with al-Dīn, al-Dawla or al-Mulk, such as Majd al-Dīn 'glory of the faith', Sayf al-Dawla 'sword of the state', Niẓām al-Mulk 'orderer of the realm', etc.; and sometimes these were elaborated into forms such as... al-Dunyā wal-Dīn 'X

of the secular world and of the faith'. Before very long, the use of such a title ceased to be necessarily an officially conferred honour, and became something claimed by everyone with any social pretensions. The term *laqab* is also applied to a name of this kind, so that for the Islamic age it is an 'honorific' rather than a nickname. In the full citation of a person's nomenclature the honorific *laqab* comes most often right at the beginning, before *kunya* and *ism*, though occasionally it will be mentioned right at the end, after the *nisba*.

Urbanization and the decay of the tribal system led to the growth, alongside the old tribal *nisbas*, of *nisbas* based on geography (al-Ḥalabī 'of Aleppo', al-Baṣrī 'of Basra', etc.), or *madhhab* (al-Shāfi'ī, al-Mālikī, etc.), or having reference to a profession or trade. Obviously a tribal *nisba* has the characteristic of a family name in that it necessarily continues from father to son through successive generations; the same is to a great extent true of a *nisba* denoting *madhhab*, since it was not common for a man to adopt a *madhhab* different from that in which he had been brought up by his father. Geographical *nisbas*, on the other hand, normally reflect the bearer's own place of birth or residence. But professional *nisbas* showed in medieval times a considerable tendency to evolve into family names transmitted through several generations irrespective of the bearer's actual profession (as has happened in the West with names like Fowler, Baker, Butcher). The famous writer al-Ḥarīrī was not himself a silk-merchant, nor was his father—the name had become purely familial.

These familial names not uncommonly reflect the variation in form which occurs in tribal designations, and so may appear as Ibn XXX rather than al-XXXī. There was thus a family known as the Banū al-ʿAssāl, each member of the family being A ibn B Ibn al-ʿAssāl ('Honeyman').

Many individuals have more than one *nisba*: e.g. geographical+*madhhab*, *madhhab*+familial, etc. A fully evolved nomenclature consists of (in this order) *laqab*, *kunya*, *ism*, patronymic (with or without further *nasab*), *nisba(s)*, as with Fakhr al-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar ibn al-Ḥusayn Ibn al-Khaṭīb al-Rāzī, where Ibn al-Khaṭīb ('descendant of the preacher') is a familial name, and Rāzī ('of Rayy') a geographical *nisba*.

Manifestly, such a form is far too cumbrous for common use, and the custom arose of making an arbitrarily selected abbreviation of the full form, namely the *ʿurf* ('conventional name'), by which a man is normally referred to. The *ʿurf* practically

never includes *ism* or patronymic; virtually the only example of that usage is the legist Mālik ibn Anas, ordinarily spoken of as that, or simply by his *ism* as Mālik. In the vast preponderance of cases, the *urf* is either a *nisba* alone, or *nisba* preceded by *laqab* or *kunya*. The individual whose full nomenclature has been cited above is normally referred to either as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī or simply al-Rāzī; the great philosopher Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Sīnā is customarily called Ibn Sīnā or Abū ‘Alī Ibn Sīnā (this illustrating a common case where the *urf* has the form of a *nasab* item, citing one of the individual’s ancestors and hence parallel to the ancient tribal designation by tribal ancestor). There are, however, instances where the *urf* is a *kunya*: the most conspicuous of these being the legist Abū Ḥanīfa, always so known; and medieval writers, in contrast to later practice, often allude to Ibn Sīnā as ‘shaykh Abū ‘Alī’.

Brockelmann’s great bibliographical encyclopedia the ‘Geschichte der arabischen Literatur’ attempts to distinguish the *urf* from the rest of the full nomenclature by the use of italics, or in the second edition by spaced type. These indications must be used with some caution: they are not in every instance a reliable guide to the convention in actual use. The employment of spaced type in lieu of italics is particularly regrettable and confusing in connection with an *urf* of the Ibn...type, given that the common convention of abbreviating ibn to ‘b.’ is also used, since this is not susceptible of the distinctive spacing; the reader has to appreciate that ‘b.’ immediately before a spaced-type name has to be reckoned as part of the *urf*, so that the second-edition entry ‘Abū Bakr M. b. ‘Abdalmalik b. Q o z m ā n’ in fact indicates the author’s *urf* as Ibn Quzmān.

The early Abbasid caliphs initiated (somewhat sporadically at first) a practice of adopting on their accession to the caliphate a regnal title, also termed a *laqab*, signifying the claim to supreme authority in the Muslim state. This practice became standard subsequently, right down to the early modern period, with all caliphs of whatever dynasty, and even with pretenders to caliphial authority, however limited the actual sphere of their power. In the form as it ultimately developed (the earliest examples do not always exactly conform to the pattern) the title has a pietistic implication and in its proper form always includes the name of God. Historians, however, normally abbreviate these titles by the omission of God’s name; hence al-Mutawakkil ‘alā Allāh ‘he who relies on God’, al-Mustanşir billāh ‘he who seeks victory in God’, al-Dā‘ī ilā Allāh ‘he who summons to God’ are commonly referred to as al-Mutawakkil, al-Mustanşir, al-Dā‘ī.

The Ayyubid and Mamluk sultans similarly adopted, on their accession to the sultanate, regnal *laqabs* of which the first element was al-Malik ‘the king’ and the second a laudatory epithet, such as al-Malik al-Ṣaliḥ ‘the good king’, al-Malik al-Afḍal ‘the very excellent king’, etc. Here too historians usually abbreviate by omitting the common element and write simply of al-Ṣaliḥ, al-Afḍal, etc.

Clients (*mawālī*) ordinarily used the same *nisba* as their patrons. But there are numerous cases where a client’s *nisba* is based on an abbreviated form of the patron’s *laqab*. Thus the *nisba* al-Sayfī indicates its bearer as a client of a patron who had the *laqab* Sayf al-Dīn or Sayf al-Dawla; the famous calligrapher Yāqūt al-Mustaṣimī takes his *nisba* from the regnal *laqab* of the last Abbasid caliph al-Mustaṣim [billāh].

Nisbas of this kind, from abbreviated *laqabs*, were also employed outside the framework of personal nomenclature. Al-Fakhrī is the title of a book dedicated to a governor of Mosul, Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Isā; the great college in Baghdad founded in 459 A.H. by the Seljuq minister Nizām al-Mulk Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī al-Ṭūsī is called *al-madrasa al-nizāmīya*; and *al-khizāna al-‘adūdīya* would signify a library belonging to someone with the *laqab* ‘Aḍūd al-Dīn or ‘Aḍūd al-Dawla.

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In modern times the elaborate form of classical nomenclature has fallen out of use. The educated classes use names modelled on the European pattern, consisting simply of given name(s) plus surname. With this development, *laqab* has acquired yet another connotation, being now applied to a surname in the European sense. But there are indications that the development has not yet achieved a thoroughgoing victory. The European habit of abbreviating given name(s) to initials is rarely encountered in Arabic script, and a man who will not hesitate to call himself ‘M. M. Qadri’ in a European context will still normally sign himself, and be referred to, in Arabic script as Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Qadrī. The Cairo telephone directory is not alphabetized by surnames, but by given names, so that it is impossible to look up M. M. Qadri unless one knows what the initials stand for.

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It is a convention of classical Arabic spelling that *ibn* should be spelt with an *alif* in all cases except when it immediately follows the *ism*: one should therefore write the *ibn* of Abū ‘Alī Ibn Sīnā with *alif*, but the *ibn* in Maḥmūd ibn Zayd without

one. Further more, an *ism* which in full vocalization ends with *tanwīn* loses the *tanwīn* when an *ism* immediately follows: *laqītu Maḥmūdān* ‘I met Mahmud’ contrasts with *laqītu Maḥmūda bna Zaydin*.

The *ism* ‘Amr is spelt with a conventional and unpronounced *wāw* at the end in the nominative and genitive (‘Amrun and ‘Amrin) in order to distinguish it from ‘Umar, with which it would otherwise be graphically identical in unvowelled script. This distinction is not needed, and not used, in the accusative, because ‘Umar is ‘diptote’ and does not take the *alif* which is characteristic of triptote accusatives, so that ‘ayn - mīm - rā - *alif* can only denote ‘Amran and not ‘Umara.

The beginner should also remember that the addition of the *nisba* ending *-ī* sometimes entails changes in the body of the name: al-Qurashī is a member of the Quraysh tribe, al-Muzanī one of the tribe Muzayna, al-Ṭāī one of the tribe Ṭayyi.

Since it is possible to vary the formula ‘whose name is’ by ‘named so-and-so’, one frequently encounters in connection with a *laqab* or *kunya* the formulæ *al-mulaqqab bi-*, *al-mukannā bi-*. But a similar formula in connection with an *ism* is rarely if ever used: the normal usage being exemplified by *yuqālu lahu Maḥmūdun* (‘[the name] Maḥmūd is said to him’). For a *nisba*, the comparable formula is *al-mansūb ilā* followed by the basic word from which the *nisba* is derived: thus the way of indicating that someone has the *nisba* of al-Rāzī is *al-mansūb ilā Rayy*. The citation of an ‘urf as such is normally given in the form *al-ma:rūf bi-*.