

## Arab Names

*Mu'jam asmā' al-ʿArab* [Dictionary of Arab Names] 2 vols.; and *Sijil asmā' al-ʿArab* [Treasury of Arab Names] 4 vols. Muscat: Sultan Qaboos University, and Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1991.

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Personal names are important indicators of the bearer's cultural identity. These names, therefore, have always attracted scholarly attention and have been carefully investigated in a number of cultures. A lot of published literature on Arab names is available. This matériel, however, consists entirely of either biographical dictionaries or of directories of names for selection purposes. Arab personal names as entities have rarely been studied. An Arab writer laments that "there does not exist a scholarly tradition of studying names in Arabic."<sup>1</sup>

Interest in Arab and Islamic names is evident from the work done by Caetani and Gabrieli, Garcin de Tassy, Colebrooke and Schimmel; and Korkis' work on Iraqi, and Abdur Rahman Doi's study of Nigerian names.<sup>2</sup> It is unfortunate that Arab, and for that matter even Muslim, names have not been subjected to a comprehensive scientific analysis and study.

This gap has recently been filled, and very ably so, by two publications which have been issued as a part of the *Sultan Qaboos Encyclopedia of Arab Names*. The *Dictionary* and the *Treasury* of Arab names, which compliment each other, are the result of a scholarly endeavour which, as far as the present reviewer is aware, has never been undertaken at such a vast scale. These two publications for the first time present a comprehensive and scientific study of Arab personal names.

The names for this study were collected from 12 Arab countries, i.e., Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, U.A.E., and Yemen, through local scholars using a variety of sources. The names thus collected were then coded and treated according to a pre-defined method of analysis, classification, and interpretation with the help of a computer programme. The methodology of treatment and analysis is described in detail in the introduction to each work.

The total number of three-part personal names collected from the 12 countries was 2,604,845 producing a raw data of 7,540,510 single

personal names. These single names were then tested and reduced to 4,197,004 names which became the corpus of the study. This corpus was subjected to further analysis which yielded 103,916 unique names. Each of these names was then analysed as to its total frequency, frequency in the first, second, or third position in the three-part name and classification according to gender. Geographical distribution of the most popular one hundred male and female names was also determined.

The 103,916 names were divided into two groups: (1) high frequency names which occurred 10 or more times each, and (2) low frequency names which occurred 9 or less times each. The high frequency group of 13,783 single names which is only 13.3 percent of the unique names represents 95.7 percent of the corpus of the study whereas the low frequency group of 90,133 which is 87.7 percent of the unique group represents only 4.3 percent of the corpus. This indicates the popularity of a small group of names among Arabs. The mean use for the unique names is 40.4. It is interesting to note that the name Muhammad, which forms only 0.00096 percent of the unique names, is used 424,298 times in all the three positions and accounts for 10.11 percent of the total corpus of 4,197,004 and proves to be the most popular name among Arabs.

Names in both the publications are arranged in alphabetical order. The *Dictionary* covers the high frequency group and the female names. Each name in the *Dictionary* is treated in detail consisting of the name with its variants, frequency of use in each of the three positions, linguistic origin, social significance, and biographical documentation. The descriptive details about each name vary from a few lines to a page or more. The *Treasury* lists low frequency names giving only their linguistic origins.

Although several Arab countries, e.g., Lebanon, Syria, Libya, Algeria, are not covered in this study, it does not in any way diminish the significance of the work. This is the most important work produced so far dealing with Arab names. The research group that carried out this work needs to be commended for the quality of the work done. I wish personal names of other Muslim cultural groups are studied in the same fashion.

The physical production and layout of the publications is of good quality. These publications must be made available in any library which caters to the needs of those with an interest in Arab/Islamic culture.

**Notes**

1. Mona Bakr, "Common Names in the Arab World" in *A Dictionary of First Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 351.
2. See Leone Caetani and Guiseppe Gabrieli, *Onomasticon Arabicum* (Rome: 1915); M. Garcin de Tassy, *Memoire sur noms propres et les titres Muslmans* (Paris: Imprimerie Imperiale, 1854); T.E. Colebrooke, "On the Proper Names of the Mohammadans," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, (N.S.), 11 (1879):171-237, and 13 (1881): 237-280; Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Names* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989); Awad Korkis, *'Ashtāt lughwiyyah* (Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1990); and Abdur Rahman Doi, *Nigerian Muslim Names* (Ahmedabad: Muslim Publishing House, 1978).