

The Islamic Naming System

By Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips

<http://members.tripod.com/>

(an excerpt from Tafseer Soorah Al-Hujuraat A Commentary on the 49th Chapter of The Qur'aan by Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips)

The second aspect of mutual acquaintance refers to man's division into tribes and clans wherein family ties are established. These ties define the boundaries of marriage and incest, delineate family obligations and protect weaker members of society by inheritance. Consequently, Islaam places great emphasis on the clear identification of family relationships. The Prophet (S) himself said, "Learn enough about your lineages to know your blood relatives and treat them accordingly." (at-Tirmidhee and authenticated by al-Albaanee) That is, family lines should be known well enough to prevent marriages within the forbidden degrees and to determine blood and family obligations.

Although it is the duty of the Islamic state to take care of its citizens, the primary responsibility lies first and foremost on family members. Therefore, according to Islamic law, blood relationships should be clearly defined and any tampering with them is strictly forbidden. This is clearly stressed in the Islamic naming system in which each name and its sequence implies a specific genealogical relationship. For example, the name Khaalid ibn 'Abdullaah ibn Zakee al-Harbee, which in present times is written Khaalid 'Abdullaah Zakee al-Harbee, means Khaalid the son of 'Abdullaah, the son of Zakee, from the tribe of Harb. This system of naming people after their fathers and forefathers has appeared in most cultures. Even in English, George, the son of John in time became George, John's son and eventually became George Johnson. In pre-Islaamic times, the Arabs used to change the lineage of their adopted sons to their own lineage and this practice also occurred during the early stages of Muhammad's prophethood (S). However, Allaah forbade it during the Madeenan stage of prophethood in which the majority of the religious, social and economic laws of Islaam were revealed. Ibn 'Umar reported that after the Prophet (S) freed Zayd ibn Haarithah and adopted him, people used to refer to him as Zayd ibn Muhammad until the verse, "**Call them by their father's names, it is more just to Allaah,**" (33:5) was revealed (Bukhaaree, Muslim, and Abu Daawood). Once this principle became part of the divine law, the Prophet (S) was instructed to further emphasize it by a series of warnings. For example, on one occasion he said, "He who knowingly attributed his fatherhood to someone other than his real father will be excluded from paradise." (Bukhaaree, Muslim, and Abu Daawood) Abu Dharr also related that he heard the Prophet (S) say, "He who deliberately lets himself be called the son of someone other than his father is guilty of disbelief (Kufr)." (Bukhaaree, Muslim, and Abu Daawood) Thus, the Arabic system of naming people according to their fathers' names which was endorsed by the Prophet (S) and approved of by Allaah is considered the Islamic naming system. Islamic law is comprehensive. It regulates all aspects of human life in order to establish a social system in which human welfare is looked after and the worship of God is enshrined. Consequently, although some facets of the Islamic naming system may be more important than

others, none are so irrelevant or unimportant that whether it is done or not makes no difference. The fact that European colonialism has managed to corrupt the application of the Islamic naming system especially among non-Arab Muslims does not in any way alter its validity. By colonial times the western naming system had degenerated into a meaningless jumble of names followed by a family name. Influenced by the Greco-Roman culture in which women were considered to be the property of men, western society erased a woman's family name upon marriage and replaced it by that of her husband. In the Islamic system she retains her father's name as it indicates her true lineage. However, both of these degenerative Western trends have been widely adopted in Muslim lands along with other un-Islamic cultural trappings of European colonialism. New Muslims, unaware of the Islamic naming system, often adopt Arabic names in the chaotic European style. In fact, those of African descent often erase even their family names on the basis that these names are remnants from the days of slavery. That is, those of their ancestors who were slaves usually adopted the family name of their slave masters and it was the slave masters' name which was handed down from generation to generation. Hence, an individual who may have been called Clive Baron Williams while his father's name was George Herbert Williams may, upon entering Islaam, rename himself Faisal 'Umar Nkruma Mahdi. However, his name according to the Islamic naming system should have been Faisal George Williams, that is, Faisal the son of George Williams. Whether "Williams" was the name of his ancestors' plantation owner or not is of no consequence. Since his father's name was George Williams, he is, according to the Islamic naming system, the son of George Williams. That much of his father's name is necessary to determine who his relatives are in order to avoid incestuous marriages, discharge inheritance rights and fulfill general responsibilities to blood relations.

This becomes especially important in the West where premarital and extra-marital relations are common leading to generations of illegitimate inter-related children. Consequently, when some of these half-brothers and sisters enter Islaam under different assumed family names, there exists a very real possibility that some of them may unintentionally contract incestuous marriages. The practice among new Muslims of deleting their family names has frequently created deep resentment among their non-Muslim families which could have been easily avoided if the Islamic naming system had been adopted. Actually, the new Muslim is under no obligation to change even his or her "Christian name" unless it contains an un-Islamic meaning. Thus, the given name Clive, which means cliff-dweller need not have been changed whereas "Dennis" (Fr. Denys), a variation of Dionysius which means He of Dionysus (the Greek god of wine and fertility who was worshipped with orgiastic rites) would have to be changed. Similarly, female names like Lois, which means desirable, or Ann or its diminutive forms Annie and Nancy which mean grace, need not be changed while names like Ingrid, which means daughter of Ing (a god in Germanic mythology), or Laverne, taken from the name of the Roman goddess of spring and grain, would also have to be changed. However, it is perfectly acceptable for a Muslim, whether a recent convert or not, to change his or her first name. It was the Prophet's practice to change peoples first names if they were too assuming, negative or un-Islamic. One of the Prophet's wives was originally named Barrah (pious) and he changed it to Zaynab (Bukhaaree, Muslim, and Abu Daawood) as Allaah had said in the Qur'aan, **"Do not claim piety for yourselves for He knows best who is God-fearing."**(53:32) Ibn 'Abbaas reported that another of the Prophet's wives was also named Barrah and he changed it to Juwayreeyah (Muslim). Ibn 'Umar reported that his father, 'Umar, had a

daughter named 'Aasiyah (disobedient) whom the Prophet (S) renamed Jameelah (beautiful) (reported by Muslim). Jaabir ibn 'Abdullaah reported that the Prophet (S) decided to forbid names like Ya'laa (elevated), Barakah (blessing), Aflah (successful), Yasaar (wealth) and Naafi' (beneficial) (Reported by Muslim).

However, Allaah's messenger (S) never changed the names of people's fathers, no matter how un-Islaamic they may have been. For example, when the Sahaabee 'Abdu Shams ibn Sakhr accepted Islaam, the Prophet (S) cancelled his given name, Abdu Shams (slave of a sun) and renamed him "Abdur-Rahman" ibn Sakhr (al-Asqalaanee). His father's name, Sakhr (rock), was left untouched. Likewise, the Sahaabee, Abu Salamah's name was changed to 'Abdullaah ibn 'Abdul-Asad, leaving his father's name 'Abdul-Asad (slave of the lion) unchanged (Ibn al-Jawzee). Thus, it can be concluded that erasing one's family name is against both the letter and the spirit of Islamic law. The father's first and last name should be retained and if the father is unknown, the mother's first and last name should follow the Muslim's given or chosen name.

However, it should be noted, that there are other titles and descriptive names which may be added to either or both the beginning and the end of a person's actual name. According to the Islaamic naming system, prefixed names known as Kunyah consist of Abu (the father/owner of) in the case of males and Umm (the mother of) in the case of women followed by the name of the person's oldest child or male child, a child wished for or a trait the person is noted for. Some people became so well known by their Kuniyahs that their actual names are almost forgotten. For example, among the Sahaabah: Abu Bakr ('Abdulla ibn 'Uthmaan), Abu Hurayrah (Abdur-Rahmaan ibn Sakhr) and Abu Laylaa (Bilal al-Ansaaree); and among the legists: Abu Haneefah (Nu'maan ibn Thaabit). The suffixed titles are of two types, the Laqab, a descriptive trait, for example, Abu Bakr was titled by the Prophet (S) "as-Siddeeq" (the truthful) and 'Umar "al-Farooq" (the discernor). The second type is known as Nisbah which refers to the place or tribe with which one is associated. For example, the Sahaabee, abu Dharr "al-Ghifaree" (from the tribe of Ghifaar) and Hadeeth scholars such as al-Bukhaaree (Muhammad ibn Ismaa'eel) from the city of Bukhaaraa and at-Tirmidhee (Muhammad ibn 'Eesaa) from the city of Tirmidh. The Nisbah suffix may also refer to a profession.

Care should also be taken in naming girls, as the practice of giving girls two or three female names before the family name is a fairly recent western practice which is inconsistent with the Islaamic naming system. For example, a girl named Asmaa Jameelah Zaynab 'Abdullaah whose father's name was Zayd 'Abdullaah should really be called Asmaa Zayd 'Abdullaah, that is, Asmaa the daughter of Zayd 'Abdullaah. This principle is due to the fact that a man's or woman's given name, according to the Islaamic naming system should only be followed by the name of his or her mother if the father was unknown or the child was illegitimate and the parents were not married. Thus, the name Asmaa Jameelah Zaynab 'Abdullaah in the Islaamic naming system means Asmaa was the illegitimate daughter of Jameelah and her mother Jameelah was also the illegitimate daughter of Zaynab, the daughter of 'Abdulla