Animal Names of the Arab Ancestors

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The anthropologist William C. Young recently published a three-volume set entitled *The Animal Names of the Arab Ancestors* (Leiden, Brill, 2024). This is an extraordinary labor of effort and love for a subject long abandoned within anthropology, namely the early fascination with the concept of 'totemism.' This book is not a defense of the idea of totemism as it has evolved well over a century, but offers alternative explanations for the use of animal names for people and groups. It is obvious that the use of terms for animals and plants has widespread relevance in kinship terminology worldwide. This is especially the case for the history of Arabic kinship names for both individuals and tribal groups. As explained by the author at the start of his book:

> In this book, I will argue that the question of Arab 'totemism' is still important for social scientists and historians. It lies at the heart of a broader, universal question: what are the factors that shape intellectual and cultural production and that ultimately explain why culture varies from one society to the next? Answering this question is one of the basic tasks of cultural anthropologists; they seek to describe cultural variation among the human societies of the world and then explain this variation. The distinctive group names and personal names that are found in Arab societies represent a particular cultural variety. My goals in this book are to document this variety and explain why it takes this particular form (p. 4).

Young's effort is a brave effort, bucking a current trend in the discipline of anthropology to ignore the relevance of kinship studies, once a major orientation for all ethnographic research. The importance of kinship studies was recognized as early as 1871, when Lewis Henry Morgan described the difference between descriptive and classificatory systems, adding "As systems of consanguinity each contains a plan, for the description and classification of kindred, the formation of which was an act of intelligence and knowledge (Morgan 1871:vi). In order to engage with cultural groups that the so-called 'civilized' world deemed 'savage,' early ethnographers needed a road map to know how the individuals viewed themselves and their relatives. As a result, learning the local kinship rules and terms was a necessity for anthropologists like Mali-

nowski, Radcliffe-Brown and those who followed. Beyond the pragmatic aspect of mapping, kinship terminology provides a key to better understand a wide range of cultural symbols and practices.

Before addressing the value of revisiting the concept of 'totemism,' at least what the concept sought to explain, a summary of the content in Young's book is in order. This is a monumental effort, published in three volumes, two of which are appendices, covering 1,240 pages. In addition to being an ethnographer who lived among the Rashaayda Bedouins in Sudan (Young 1996), the author is an accomplished Arabist. His work is a comprehensive academic study of Arabic kinship terms related to animals and plants and will be of value to scholars who work on the history of the Arabic language and Arab tribal culture as well as anthropologists who can appreciate the significance of such an intensive range of kinship terms.

The first volume lays out the analysis in nine chapters. The first chapter discusses the use of names for non-human species both in Arabic and for other cultural groups, introducing what has been said about 'totemism' in the past. The second chapter is methodological, explaining how the author compiled a data base of the Arabic terms, drawing mainly from the encyclopaedic ʿAbd-al-Ḥakīm al-Wāʾilī's (2002) *Arabic text on Arab Tribes*. Following this is a chapter that also discusses his methodological approach with a focus on how to interpret bird names in Arabic, drawing mainly on a three-volume lexicon of bird terms by an Iraqi ornithologist. He divides his lists between taxonomic bird terms, e.g. the Arabic term eagle (*ʿuqāb*), and non-taxonomic terms, such as for the age or maturity, sex and aspects associated with birds, e.g., nests. Among the issues he had to tackle was dealing with lexical diglossia due to the many Arabic dialects, past and present. Chapter Four continues his methodological discussion for Arab terms of mammals. This chapter also includes a discussion of the seminal 9th century CE *Kitāb al-Hayawān* of al-Jāḥiẓ on animals. There is an extended discussion of Arabic terms related to camels, including his own linguistic work among the Rashaayda of Sudan. Given the focus on kinship terms, Young addresses several challenges in comparing the animal names to kin terms. Chapter Five continues his methodological analysis in terms of the Arabic terms related to plants, insects, reptiles, and marine life. This is a rather brief chapter that could have been expanded by examining discussion of the plant names in the classic botanical work of Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawarī (1974) and the treatise on animals by al-Damīrī (2005), as well as the thesaurus of Ibn Sīda (1965).

Having laid out his methodologies, in Chapter Six Young assesses five different hypotheses regarding the use of Arabic terms for animals and plants as kinship group names. Firstly, he rejects the totemism argument argued well over a century ago by Robertson Smith as lacking any credible evidence. Secondly, a suggestion by al-Jāḥiẓ and other Arab authors is what Young defines as the 'predatory animals' hypothesis; thus, the name *Asad* is said to refer to the ferocity of the lion and in theory strikes fear in one's enemies. There is a lengthy discussion on how this relates to animal and plant terms in Arabic, with Young concluding that most of the names used are not from predatory animals. The third hypothesis is that these names survived because an original ancestor was so named. Although the evidence collected by Young is at times supportive of this hypothesis, it still begs the question of why the name was given in the first place. Fourth, a similar theory was that personal nicknames were then applied to group names. There is a discussion of why nicknames are chosen, in genera, as well as in Arab tradition. However the author finds that it is not possible to verify this hypothesis through quantifiable methods. Yet a fifth hy-

pothesis is that the early Bedouins would have naturally named their children after 'beasts of the field,' but this is derided by Young as theoretically naïve. There follows a lengthy discussion on Bedouin naming practices.

In Chapter Seven Young provides his own interpretation which he calls the 'obscuring internal cleavages hypothesis.' "My argument," writes Young 2024:252), "is that the members of a Bedouin tribe adopt animal names for the tribe's higher-level segments in order to break the connection between each segment's identity and the tribe's genealogical framework." This is a sociological rather than a naturalistic perspective taking into account the genealogical nesting of tribal units. This chapter follows the Weberian model of distinguishing Bedouin vs sedentary tribes as ideal types. The chapter has a lengthy discussion of various kinds of tribal organization in the Arab world, past and present, including the concept of 'segmentary lineage.' The author explores the ways in which Arab tribes, especially Bedouins, represent their attachment to tribal links. This is done by exploring the metaphors used in ethnographic examples. Examples are given of what is often called patron/client relations, including tables of terms for politically prominent and peripheral tribesmen (Young 2024:319-320). His point is to go beyond seeing the Bedouin tribe as more than a patrilineal descent group. "Instead," argues Young (2024:322),

> it seems more accurate to characterize each Bedouin tribe as a heterogeneous collection of kinship groups of disparate origins who cluster around a *shaykhly* house – or, perhaps, several *shaykhly* houses that vie for status and clients. Given that most Bedouin tribes competed with others for access to pasture, water, and markets, tribe members had good reasons for trying to conceal internal cleavages between core and periphery and to present themselves as a unified bloc to outsiders.

Tests of this hypothesis are explored in Chapter Eight. Again, methodology is the main focus as he discusses the difficulties of making sense of the names and their contexts of us. The final chapter concludes with a brief review of the evidence for and against the five hypotheses about why Arab tribal names use terms for animals and plants. While he admits that each of these hypotheses, apart from totemism, may be useful for certain names, he thinks his own new hypothesis is the best way forward. A number of suggestions are made for future research, including other ways to test his hypothesis of 'obscuring internal cleavages.'

As acknowledged by the author, this book responds to the earlier work of William Robertson Smith, whose *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* was first published in 1885 by Oxford University Press. The writing of Robertson Smith has been praised by a number of anthropologists over the years, such as Edmund Leach (1985:238), who thought it to be sociological unlike the folklore of Frazer. As Alexander Bošković (2021:1) writes, "His concept of the relationship between myth and ritual influenced generations of scholars, both in anthropology and sociology, and in the so-called 'myth and ritual school.'" However, Robertson Smith was a product of his age, when it was assumed that 'primitive' people were more like children and subject to mythic assumptions. At the time, Smith thought the topic of totemism to be of major importance and guided James G. Frazer, a friend and colleague at Cambridge, in writing the article on 'totemism' for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Bošković 2021:19).

While there is much to admire in the sociological focus on Robertson Smiths' work, his application of 'totemism' is mired in the Victorian bias of defining this as "savage ways of thought" in which the Arabs so-named for an animal believe that animal was in a physical sense their ancestor (Robertson Smith 1885:203). Smith's primary sources were textual at a time when

there was virtually no ethnography on Arab tribes apart descriptions from a few travelers. Young is well aware of the limitations of this view of totemism, noting: "I became aware of his two contradictory impulses: first, his determination to force the data into the procrustean bed of his theses – 'ancient matriliny' and 'totemism' – and, second, his intellectual honesty, which compelled him at points to admit that not all of the data fit" (Young 2024:23). While this early concept of totemism has no practical value today, the issue it was meant to explain remains one worth pursuing and that it what inspired Young to write this text.

The best way to describe this book is to note that it is encyclopaedic, not meant to be a narrative flow but rather an exhaustive set of data contextualized by the methodologies for interpreting that data. Young has compiled what is certainly the most comprehensive survey of Arabic names related to animals and plants in a Western language. His sources are both classical and modern Arabic as well as relevant discussion in Western languages. I think it would have been useful to examine more of the earlier Arabic lexical sources. For example, Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004) in his *Majmal al-lugha* quotes a *hadith*, questionable as it may be, of Muhammad regarding the tribe of Asad as the root stock (*jurthūma*) of the Arabs, saying that whoever has lost his lineage should return to this (Ibn Faris 1984:1:96). Here it seems that the meaning of the name is less important than the suggestion that it is the major ancestral link.

The important botanical text of Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dinawarī (1974) was not consulted, nor Ibn Sīda's (1965) *al-Mukhaṣṣaṣ* thesaurus. The latter is especially relevant for tribal terminology as well as names associated with animals and plants. Nor does Young directly quote from several of the major early Arabic lexicons, including the earliest of the 8th century CE Khalīl b. Aḥmad (2003). It is a mistake to rely on the major Arabic-English lexicon of Edward Lane, useful as it is, without returning to the original Arabic lexical source, since Lane does not provide the full information and is incomplete. Nor do I see the value of the 19th century lexicon of al-Bustānī when earlier lexicons provide more relevant information on the terms.

Young's analysis is focused on the variety of ways in which Arabs, as well as other groups in the Middle East region, have been and are considered tribal. In anthropology the term 'tribe' requires context, since it has been indiscriminately used for groups of people worldwide at a particular stage or as a pre-state kind of polity. The standard Arabic term translated as tribe is *qabīla*, but there are many terms referring to tribal organization at all levels. The focus on genealogy, whether assumed to be real or fictive, has been the dominant assumption of what it means to be tribal. There is an indigenous Arabic genre of such genealogy (*nasab*); its development in the early Islamic era was thoroughly political as was the case of the biblical and other early Near Eastern genealogies. A case in point is the genealogy of the prophet Muhammad, linking him back to Abraham via a nesting of 'Arab' segments (Varisco 1995). The main problem Young faced in his research is that the textual sources are all in hindsight and subject to bias. It is not possible to analyze the terms in early sources as they were actually used, as one has the opportunity to do in ethnography. Thus, the ultimate understanding of why certain names were chosen by the early Arabs must rely on later opinions, which are often anecdotal.

As is the case with most studies in historical anthropology, ethnographic observations and specific anthropological methodological insights can suggest potential and at times likely scenarios for events that are only described in textual sources. However, what is written in a text is not necessarily documentary, even if it becomes standard as time goes by. The reasons Arabs or

members of any cultural group originally chose specific names, no matter what the terms mean, can only be surmised by reliance on what later written sources say. Ethnography can provide clues, especially in contexts without formal writing systems, but the present is always a precarious perch for understanding the past, as the historian Herbert Butterfield (1931) argued in his *The Whig Interpretation of History.*

One issue that I think deserves more attention is the variable nature of what is called 'tribalism' in Arabic sources. Young's hypothesis of 'obscuring internal cleavages' rests in large part on what are called 'Bedouin' tribes, a concept that is overloaded with stereotypes of nomadism. By the time that Arabic became a formal language the major economic livelihood in the Middle East region was settled agriculture, so it cannot be assumed that the earliest 'Arab' naming practices were by Bedouin or even that the tribal genealogical nesting in the Arabic literature was designed for Bedouin tribes. I believe Young is correct to point out that there have been some hierarchical aspects to tribal organization, although this is difficult to isolate given that Bedouins would have been in contact with settled populations. This hypothesis rests on the idea that there was a need to separate the 'true' members of a genealogical group "to prevent the proliferation of revenge killings after a homicide has been committed" (Young 2024:259). This assumes that would have been detailed knowledge in the past of the genealogical ancestry, but in an oral society it is more likely that tribal members knew only a few generations back and after that simply fused with remote ancestral names. Young admits that most tribal members only have knowledge of immediate family members. It may be the case that some ethnographic examples have individuals with more detailed knowledge, but can it be shown that such was the case in the past? Tribal customary law has options for revenge killing, so it seems unlikely that revenge would always require accurate knowledge of a man's tribal ancestry if that man was living with that tribe.

I do not find the analysis of the term "*Quraysh*' as an animal nickname for an ancestral group of the prophet Muhammad" convincing. The early lexicographer Khalīl b. Aḥmad (2002:3:375) defines Quraysh as meaning *tajammu'* (brought together) in reference to the conquest of Mecca by Quṣayy b. Kilāb, as Young notes. There are other definitions that link the name to a shark, but it is common for early Arab writers to offer their own ideas, some of which are quite wild. The idea of an ocean-going shark as a meaningful tribal segment name makes little sense for Mecca, when the term has a well-recognized meaning of gathering together. In either case someone outside the group would not know the ancestor in question. However, the genealogy of Muhammad's ancestors is fictitious with no historical evidence of the specific individuals going back in time (Varisco 1995:151).

In sum, Young's work provides both a data base and methodological suggestions for further analysis and that is what makes this an important book for Arabists and anthropologists alike. Hopefully this work still stimulate further research on the topic, especially by Arabists.

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