

REPLY TO VARISCO'S REVIEW 24 JULY 2024 OF BOOK BY WILLIAM C. YOUNG

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Daniel Varisco's excellent review raises an interesting question about the place of my book in kinship studies. He notes the connection between my topic – the *names* given to individuals and groups – and the *terms* applied to categories of kin. Kin terms have frequently been studied by anthropologists but the relationship of names to kin terms is less often examined. At the abstract level, there is an absolute distinction between a kin term and a personal name. Kin terms are never bestowed as personal names in any society; there are no people named “uncle” or “aunt.” But at the level of discourse, kin terms are regularly combined with personal names. Thus, in Arab societies one can certainly hear phrases such as “my paternal uncle Lion” (*amm-ī asad*) or “my maternal aunt White Antelope” (*khālat-ī rīm*). In the Arab world, such discursive links between kin terms and terms for animals never imply that there are kinship relationships between humans and natural species. But in other societies – that is, societies previously regarded as “totemic” – mythological discourses often suggest that human beings are “relatives” of natural species. Why such mythological discourses have never been present in Arab societies is an important question for historians. For anthropologists, the connections among kin terms, kinship relationships and names are of theoretical interest.

As Varisco carefully points out, my goal in writing the book was to advance the status of the problem of Arab kinship group names. I hoped to raise the level of discussion from its current bemused perplexity – according to which all of the proposed solutions seem more or less plausible – to the level of hypothesis testing. Although the new hypothesis that I presented may not (or may, depending on further testing) solve the problem, I have at least used empirical data to evaluate it. Varisco's review accurately captures my goal and the organization of my book.

Varisco is quite right to suggest that I could have used older lexicographical works in Arabic. He mentions three works – one by Abū Ḥanīfa al-Dīnawarī, a second by al-Damīrī, and a third by Ibn Sīda – that I did not know about. I thank Varisco for pointing them out; a quick glance at the Arabic work by Ibn Sīda convinces me that it is a rich source of data. Perhaps I can deal with these three sources in another publication.

However, my suspicion is that a more extensive search of the Arabic lexicon for species terms and group names may only have diminishing returns at this point. I have already found 2,052 groups named after natural species and used this baseline figure for hypothesis testing. Unless I can add hundreds of new cases to the baseline figure, the results of my tests will not be significantly altered.

I might add that the method of immersing ourselves in the scholarly world of the early Arab lexicographers could produce a kind of myopia, leading us to follow the paths of inquiry already trodden by these scholars and lose sight of wider perspectives. To avoid this, I tried to apply an ethnological view by placing some of the lexical materials in a cross-cultural context. For example, I suggested new interpretations of the words ‘*Adnān* and *Qaḥṭān*. These lexemes appear in the classical genealogies uninterpreted, as the names of the ancient ancestors of the Arabs. By linking the contrast between ‘*Adnān* and *Qaḥṭān* to a binary opposition between moieties – a kind of opposition that is characteristic of the thought of indigenous South American societies – I came up with new readings. I suggest that ‘*Adnān* means “people of the garden (*‘adn*)” while *Qaḥṭān* means “people of the drought (*qaḥṭ*)” (see pp. 21-23 of my book). In other words, these lexemes are not just personal names; they are indirect references to cosmological phenomena and are symbolically opposed to each other. Whatever the merits of these new translations, they are fresh and they are not found in the classical Arabic lexicons. Although these lexicons are important sources of data, it should be noted that they have their limitations.