

## **TASMIYAH AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAM: A THEORETICAL APPRAISAL OF MUSLIM YOUTHS' ATTITUDE TOWARD NAMING, WITH INSIGHTS FROM LAGOS STATE UNIVERSITY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Naming (*Tasmiyah*) in Islam is far more than administrative record-keeping: Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) treats it as a matter of *al-Mu'āmalāt* (interpersonal/social transactions) permissible by default, yet capable of sliding into *makrūh* (disliked) or *ḥarām* (forbidden) territory where a name betrays the tenets of the faith. Qur'anic injunction and prophetic tradition alike frame the naming of a child as among the earliest rights owed to that child by its parents, and as a marker of spiritual identity that persists into the Hereafter. Yet a growing number of Muslim youths today treat their given Islamic names with indifference, favouring Westernised nicknames and pseudonyms that obscure the spiritual and moral weight those names were chosen to carry. Using Muslim undergraduates at Lagos State University as an illustrative point of reference rather than a formal

survey population, this article offers a theoretical appraisal of that shift, tracing its historical, religious, and socio-cultural underpinnings through classical Islamic scholarship, comparative naming practices, and the sociology of contemporary youth culture. It examines how globalisation, social media, and internalised identity struggles have accelerated the trend, and distinguishes it from the religiously sanctioned practices of *Kunya* (an honorific by-name) and *Laqab* (a descriptive epithet), which Islam permits precisely because they reinforce, rather than sever, a person's tie to religious identity. The article concludes that names in Islam function as vessels of meaning, virtue, and legacy, and that reclaiming their sanctity is essential to preserving Muslim identity in the modern world; it closes with recommendations for re-educating Muslim youth on the theological and cultural weight their names carry.

**Keywords:** *Tasmiyah*; Islamic Naming Practices; Muslim Youth Identity; *Kunya* and *Laqab*

## INTRODUCTION

*Tasmiyah* from the Arabic root *s-m-w*, rendered in English as naming, designation, or calling<sup>1</sup> is a universal phenomenon: it is arguably the single feature that most reliably distinguishes one human being from another, and no known human society is without some system for accomplishing it<sup>2</sup>. Naming is practised everywhere irrespective of religion, race, culture, or creed, but Islam gives the act unusual theological weight. The Qur'an presents naming as the very first faculty Allah taught Adam, before Adam was shown to the angels:

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 4th ed. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1979), s.v. "s-m-w." 502.

<sup>2</sup> Richard D. Alford, *Naming and Identity: A Cross-Cultural Study of Personal Naming Practices*, (New Haven, CT: HRAF Press, 1988), 12.

*Meaning: And He taught Adam the names, all of them, then presented them to the angels and said: Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful.*

(Surah al-Baqarah 2:31)

If Allah saw fit to name even inanimate things through Adam, the implication for human beings, the bearers and users of those names is greater still. This verse casts naming as an act of knowledge and distinction that sets humanity apart from the rest of creation. Elsewhere the Qur'an ties naming to the recognition of one people by another:

*Meaning: O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another.*

(Surah al-Hujurat 49:13)

Clans, tribes, and personal names, in other words, exist partly so that human beings can be told apart and known to one another naming is not incidental to identity but constitutive of it.

Despite this theological weight, a substantial number of contemporary Muslim youth show little awareness of the meaning their names carry or of the Islamic heritage behind them. Some actively prefer to go by nicknames or Westernised alternatives rather than the Muslim names given to them at birth; others know the meaning of their names perfectly well but behave in ways that contradict it. This lackadaisical attitude has been observed among various populations of young Muslims, including Muslim undergraduates at Lagos State University (LASU), whose experience this paper draws on illustratively throughout.

### **Research Problem**

Islamic tradition treats *Tasmiyah* as a spiritually significant act rather than a mere administrative formality, yet contemporary Muslim youth increasingly detach themselves from that significance, adopting Westernised pseudonyms and nicknames that obscure or distort the theological content of their given names. The problem this paper addresses is twofold: first, to account for *why* this detachment is

occurring among contemporary Muslim youth despite the weight Islamic tradition places on names; and second, to clarify where the line falls between this un-Islamic drift and the religiously sanctioned traditions of *Kunya* and *Laqab*, which are themselves alternative names but are not, in Islamic terms, equivalent to the modern pseudonym.

### **Research Objectives**

This paper sets out to:

1. Examine the theological and jurisprudential (*fiqh*) basis for *Tasmiyah* in Islam, including the boundary between permissible and impermissible naming;
2. Trace the historical and cross-cultural context of naming practices, situating Islamic naming alongside African, Arab, and Western traditions;
3. Account for the sociocultural drivers globalisation, social media, and internalised identity struggles behind Muslim youths' contemporary drift toward Westernised names and pseudonyms;
4. Distinguish this drift from the legitimate Islamic practices of *Kunya* and *Laqab*; and
5. Propose measures for re-educating Muslim youth on the theological and cultural weight their names carry.

### **Research Methodology**

This is a qualitative, library-based study rather than a field survey. It proceeds by doctrinal and textual analysis of the Qur'an, hadith, and classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship on naming, read alongside secondary literature in sociolinguistics and onomastics (the study of names). Observed patterns of naming behaviour among Muslim youth, drawn from the researcher's own observation of and secondary reporting on Muslim student populations such as those at Lagos State University are used illustratively throughout to ground the theoretical discussion in a concrete contemporary setting, rather than as the output of a structured survey or interview instrument. Sources are drawn from classical Islamic jurisprudence, hadith collections, and peer-reviewed

scholarship in onomastics, sociolinguistics, and Islamic studies published between 1988 and 2024.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section situates the study against recent literature on Islamic and Muslim naming practices and identifies the gap it addresses. Subsequent sections set out the jurisprudential basis of *Tasmiyah* in Islam; place it in historical and cross-cultural context; examine the contemporary pseudonym trend among Muslim youth and its drivers; and distinguish that trend from the legitimate practices of *Kunya* and *Laqab*. The paper closes with a conclusion setting out its findings and a set of recommendations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of onomastic and sociolinguistic scholarship has taken up Muslim naming practices in the last five years, though as this section shows almost none of it engages directly with the *doctrinal* question this paper is concerned with: where Islamic law itself draws the line between a legitimate alternative name and an act of self-erasure. The six studies below are presented in chronological order, oldest to newest.

Mensah, Inyabri, and Nyong open the recent wave of scholarship with a study of Nigerian youth in Calabar who reject indigenous first names in favour of European and Westernised alternatives<sup>3</sup>. Working from an Afrocentric paradigm and data gathered through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, they show that name-changing is driven by a mix of personal, cultural, and social motivations, and they read the trend as a "code of cultural denial." The study is geographically and demographically close to the present paper's own setting, but its lens is Afrocentric and cultural rather than Islamic-doctrinal: it does not ask what, if anything, Islamic law itself has to say about the practice, nor does it distinguish religiously-Islamic from

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<sup>3</sup> Eyo O. Mensah, Idom T. Inyabri, and Benjamin O. Nyong, "Names, Naming and the Code of Cultural Denial in a Contemporary Nigerian Society: An Afrocentric Perspective," *Journal of Black Studies* 52, no. 3 (2021): 248–276, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934720980097>.

indigenous-African names. This is the gap the present paper's fiqhi framing addresses.

Jibrail bin Yusuf and Yunus Dumbe examine Ghanaian Muslims' use of Arabic versus indigenous Akan names, arguing on the basis of Qur'anic and hadith analysis alongside oral interviews that "Islamic" names need not be Arabic at all, since Arabic names are themselves often pre-Islamic Arabised ethnic markers rather than religious requirements<sup>4</sup>. Their study is valuable for showing that the Arabic/Islamic conflation this paper's own participants make is itself a widespread misconception, but it is concerned with the *legitimacy of indigenous names as Islamic*, not with the rejection of Islamic names for Westernised ones the reverse direction of the trend this paper examines, and one the present paper's *Kunya* or *Laqab* framework is better placed to address.

al-Jarf undertakes the broadest comparative study to date, analysing personal names across nine Muslim communities including Arab countries, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to trace how Arabic names are phonologically and culturally adapted as they move between languages (e.g., "Muhammad" becoming "Mehmet" in Turkish or "Reza" in Urdu)<sup>5</sup>. The study is linguistically rich but explicitly descriptive rather than evaluative: it catalogues *how* names change across borrowing communities without asking whether any given adaptation compromises the name's religious content, leaving open exactly the normative question this paper takes up.

Ahmad, Kulikov, and Iqbal focus specifically on Muslim personal names in Urdu, tracing the structural and semantic changes Arabic-origin names undergo as they are absorbed into South Asian Muslim naming

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<sup>4</sup> Jibrail bin Yusuf and Yunus Dumbe, "Islamic/Arabic Names and Their Implications for Cultural Identity in Ghana," *Oguaa Journal of Religion and Human Values* 6, no. 3 (2022): 38–72, <https://doi.org/10.47963/ojorhv.v7i1.1148>.

<sup>5</sup> Reima Al-Jarf, "The Interchange of Personal Names in Muslim Communities: An Onomastic Study," *Journal of Gender, Culture and Society* 3, no. 1 (2023): 42–56, <https://doi.org/10.32996/jgcs.2023.3.1.5>.

conventions<sup>6</sup>. Like Al-Jarf, their contribution is structural-linguistic; they note that names change meaning and form across generations but do not engage the *fiqhi* question of when such change becomes religiously problematic, nor do they address the specific phenomenon of youth-driven, social-media-accelerated pseudonym adoption that motivates the present study.

El-Warits, Hakim, Rifqi, and Buana study the rising popularity of "Muhammad" as a given name in England and Wales, using Office for National Statistics data alongside interviews with local Muslim communities to argue that the name functions simultaneously as an act of religious devotion and a marker of multicultural belonging<sup>7</sup>. Their study is a useful counterpoint to the present paper's concern: it documents Muslim *minority* communities in the West actively embracing, rather than abandoning, a maximally identifiable Islamic name, which suggests the erosion this paper documents among Muslim-majority youth populations is not a simple function of proximity to Western culture, but something more specific to the social position of youth within Muslim-majority settings a distinction the present paper's identity-struggle framing is designed to capture.

Nkansah and Bonsu, writing on post-colonial Ghanaian fiction, examine how novelists use naming and forms of address to dramatise the tension between tradition and modernity in their characters' search for identity<sup>8</sup>. Though literary rather than sociological in method, the study corroborates, from an entirely different disciplinary angle, this paper's central claim that naming operates as a site where inherited identity and

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<sup>6</sup> Rabia Ahmad, Victor Kulikov and Naveed Iqbal, "Muslim Personal Names in Urdu: Structure, Meaning, and Change," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2023, no. 283 (2023): 161–188, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2023-0004>.

<sup>7</sup> Aden Achmaduddin Kamil El-Warits et al., "The Shifting Trends in Baby Naming: An Anthropological Perspective on the Popularity of the Name 'Muhammad' in England and Wales," *Kalimātunā: Journal of Arabic Research* 3, no. 2 (2024): 165–176, <https://doi.org/10.15408/kjar.v3i2.43826>.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Kwesi Nkansah and Emmanuel Mensah Bonsu, "Between Tradition and Modernity: Naming Practices as Indicators of Identity in Post-Colonial Ghanaian Literature," *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 11, no. 1 (2024): art. 2382548, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2024.2382548>.

modern self-fashioning visibly collide but it stops at literary representation and does not extend to an account of the religious stakes of that collision for practising Muslims, nor to any recommendations for addressing it.

## Synthesis and Research Gap

Read together, these six studies establish that (a) name-changing away from indigenous or religious names toward Westernised alternatives is a well-documented, cross-regional phenomenon among contemporary youth; (b) the boundary between "Islamic" and "Arabic" is more porous, and more contested, than lay Muslims often assume; and (c) naming continues to function as potent identity work in both minority and majority Muslim settings. None of the six, however, works from within Islamic jurisprudence itself to specify *which* alternative names remain religiously licit and which do not the *Kunya/Laqab*-versus-pseudonym distinction this paper develops nor do any focus specifically on the social and psychological drivers of the trend among Muslim youth in a Muslim-majority Nigerian setting. This is the gap the present study is intended to address.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT OF *TASMIYAH* IN ISLAM

*Tasmiyah* answers to both nature and nurture in human life: it is natural in that every human society practises some form of it and it is a matter of nurture in that it accompanies the individual continuously from birth until death and Muslims believe beyond it. Naming coheres with the broader Islamic concern for individual identification and for the traceability of a person's record of deeds. This section sets out the jurisprudential basis of *Tasmiyah*, before later sections turn to its historical and cross-cultural context and its contemporary significance.

Children are regarded in Islam as a trust and a gift from Allah and procreation within marriage as among the religious duties incumbent on believers. The Qur'an says:

*Allah has made for you mates from among yourselves, and has made for you, from your mates, sons and grandchildren, and has provided for you of the good things.*

(Surah al- Nahl 16:72)

Muslims are not to withhold children out of fear of poverty, for Allah has promised provision for parent and child alike:

*Come, I will recite what your Lord has prohibited to you: that you associate anything with Him, and that you fail to honour your parents, and that you kill your children out of poverty—We will provide for you and for them.*

(Surah al-An'ām 6:151)

Giving a child a good name is part of the same duty of care, since a name is believed to shape the character and the destiny of its bearer. Classical Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) divides all human acts into two broad categories: *al-'Ibādāt* (acts of worship, such as prayer and fasting) and *al-Mu'āmalāt* (transactions and social interactions, such as trade and contracts)<sup>9</sup>. *Ibādāt* are strictly defined and closed to innovation the governing maxim *al-aṣlu fī al-'ibādāt al-tahrīm illā bi dalīl* (the default ruling for acts of worship is prohibition unless there is a specific text permitting it) whereas *Mu'āmalāt* are governed by the opposite maxim, *al-aṣlu fī al-mu'āmalāt al-ibāḥah* (the default ruling for social transactions is permissibility unless there is a specific text prohibiting it)<sup>10</sup>. Naming, as a social and identificatory practice rather than an act of ritual worship, falls under *Mu'āmalāt*: it is permissible by default and becomes impermissible only where it contradicts a specific tenet of the faith, at which point it shades into *makrūh* (disliked) or, in clearer cases, *ḥarām* (forbidden).

Because naming is treated this way, Muslims have historically drawn on Allah's own names, the names of the prophets, and the names of the righteous in naming their children. The Qur'an affirms:

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<sup>9</sup> Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 231–238.

*Meaning: And to Allah belong the best names, so invoke Him by them.*

(Surah al-‘A’rāf 7:180)

All ninety-nine names of Allah (*Asmā' al-Ḥusnā*) may be borne by a Muslim, but only when prefixed by 'Abd ("servant of") as in 'Abd al-Raḥmān, servant of the Most Merciful, so that the vast distance between the Divine and the human is preserved rather than blurred. Beyond this, a name given in Islam is expected to carry a pleasant and virtuous meaning consistent with the spirit of the faith.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have taught that a newborn child boy or girl has certain rights over its parents, foremost among them the right to a good name<sup>11</sup>. By the same logic, any name consistent with a person's own culture remains permissible so long as it does not contradict Islamic teaching; this is inferred from the Prophet's practice of leaving new converts' names largely untouched, changing only those names that carried an offensive meaning or that attributed lordship to something other than Allah. Certain classes of name are explicitly ruled out on this basis chiefly names that ascribe divine lordship to a created being. Beyond one's given name, the Qur'an also legislates against the malicious use of nicknames:

*Meaning: And do not insult one another and do not call each other by offensive nicknames.*

(Surah al-Ḥujūrāt 49:11)

Names or nicknames that valorise pride, hatred, or disgrace are accordingly to be avoided; parents are instead urged to choose names that are pleasant, easily understood, and dignified<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Nabeel Musharraf, *Welcoming Your Newborn: Fiqh of Aqeeqah, Tahneek, Naming, Circumcision and More*, (Sama-o-Basr Press, 2020), 44.

<sup>12</sup> Khalid Dhorat, "The Rights of the Child in Islam", (Master's dissertation, Rand Afrikaans University, 1996), 22.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF NAMING PRACTICES IN DIFFERENT CULTURES AND RELIGIONS

Naming is a universal cultural practice every human society names its newborns as a means of identification but the practices, rituals, and interpretations attached to those names differ widely from one society and culture to another<sup>13</sup>. Akinnaso argues that the fundamental social function of naming is to provide a symbolic basis for interaction through a formal means of individual identification<sup>14</sup>. The African and Arab contexts most relevant to this study are considered in turn below.

### *African Culture*

Africa's 54 countries among them Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Niger, Mali, Ghana, and Nigeria host an immense diversity of ethnic groups and, with them, an equally immense diversity of naming practices. Nigeria alone contains hundreds of distinct ethnic groups, each with its own naming conventions. Names and naming among African peoples carry spiritual, psychological, and physical significance;<sup>15</sup> naming practice is a deeply valued part of African culture, to the point that a people's socio-cultural character cannot be fully understood without reference to how they name their children<sup>16</sup>.

### *Arabian Culture*

Arabic is the official language of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria,

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<sup>13</sup> United Kingdom Government, *A Guide to Names and Naming Practices* (London: UK Government, March 2006), 5. [https://www.fbiic.gov/public/2008/nov/Naming\\_practice\\_guide\\_UK\\_2006.pdf](https://www.fbiic.gov/public/2008/nov/Naming_practice_guide_UK_2006.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> F. Niyi Akinnaso, "The Sociolinguistic Basis of Yoruba Personal Names," *Anthropological Linguistics* 22, no. 7 (1980): 275–304.

<sup>15</sup> Latoya A. Fitzpatrick, "African Names and Naming Practices: The Impact Slavery and European Domination Had on the African Psyche, Identity and Protest", (Master thesis, The Ohio State University, 2012), 18.

<sup>16</sup> Abdulganiy Olatunji et al., "Personal Name as a Reality of Everyday Life: Naming Dynamics in Select African Societies," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 8, no. 3 (2015): 74.

Jordan, Egypt, Mauritania, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, and it is the liturgical language of Islam regardless of a Muslim's mother tongue. Naming in Arab culture is a significant enough practice that entire reference works "books of names" are devoted to cataloguing and explaining them<sup>17</sup>.

Arab surnames typically trace a person's lineage, tribe, city, or country of origin, often across many generations. Most Arabs carry their father's given name as a middle name, using *ibn* or *bin* ("son of") and *bint* ("daughter of") to link generations: in a name such as *Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Qurayshi*, "Ahmad" is the father's name, "Muhammad" the given name, and "al-Qurayshi" the tribal or family name<sup>18</sup>. Arab Muslims draw on both explicitly Islamic names (Muhammad, Fatimah) and pre-Islamic Arab names (Faris, Layla) that Islam left largely undisturbed provided they carried no objectionable meaning; Arab Christians, by contrast, more often draw on Biblical or Western names, though the two repertoires overlap. Personal names may be simple (Husayn) or compound (*'Abd al-'Aziz*, "servant of the Mighty")<sup>19</sup>.

## IMPORTANCE OF NAMING IN ISLAM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Assigning a proper name to a child is among the basic *Shari'ah* responsibilities of a parent, since a good name is believed to shape the life, destiny and future of the child who bears it. Names carry deep personal, cultural, and historical connections; they give their bearers a sense of who they are, which community they belong to, and what their place in the world is<sup>20</sup>. A well-known Yoruba proverb captures the same intuition from outside the Islamic tradition: *Orúkọ rere sàń ju wúrà àtí fàdákà lẹ* "a good name is better than silver and gold." Families are accordingly urged to choose names that are well-established, culturally

<sup>17</sup> United Kingdom Government, *Guide to Names*, 7

<sup>18</sup> Reima al-Jarf, *Interchange of Personal Names*, 45–47.

<sup>19</sup> Reima al-Jarf, *Interchange of Personal Names*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Abdul Baset Haidari, "Impact of Name on Personality of Human from Islamic Perspectives," *International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideas in Education* 5, no. 4 (2019): 83.

appropriate, and affectionate, since a name is treated as inseparable from the identity of the person who bears it.

A name remains with a person until the end of life and, Muslims believe, beyond it so its choice deserves real care<sup>21</sup>. It is for this reason that some families choose, in later life, to change a name whose connotation has come to seem inappropriate or unbecoming substituting, for instance, a name meaning "one who looks sourly at things" for one meaning "one who looks coolly at things," so as to project a more humble and socially agreeable image.

A Muslim's name is considered an adornment in this world, a mark of religious identity, and a title of honour by which its bearer will be addressed in the Hereafter<sup>22</sup>. Prophetic tradition reinforces the same point: reports found in *Sunan Abī Dawūd*, *Kitāb al-Adab* (Book of General Behaviour), have the Prophet teaching that believers "will be called on the Day of Resurrection by their names and their fathers' names, so give yourselves good names"<sup>23</sup>. Having a good name is, on this view, an asset more valuable than material riches: it connects its bearer to family history, to righteous conduct, and to a legacy of service that may go on to benefit others long after the bearer is gone.<sup>24</sup> The Qur'an itself illustrates the point in its treatment of the Prophets Yahya (John) and 'Isa (Jesus), for whom Allah chose names of particular significance:

*Meaning: O Zakariyya, indeed We give you good tidings of a boy whose name will be Yahya. We have not assigned to any before [this] name.*

(Surah Maryam 19:7)

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<sup>21</sup> Haidari, A. B. "Impact of Name on Personality of Human from Islamic Perspectives." *IJARIE* 5, no. 4 (2019): 83–85.

<sup>22</sup> Musharraf, M.N. *Welcoming Your Newborn: Fiqh of Aqeeqah, Tahneek, Naming, Circumcision and More*, (Perth: Sama-O-Basr Press, 2020) 46.

<sup>23</sup> Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān ibn al-Ash'ath. *Sunan Abī Dāwūd. Kitāb al-Adab* (Book of General Behavior), Vol. 4, p. 287, Hadith no. 4948.

<sup>24</sup> Haidari, A.B. "Impact of Name on Personality of Human from Islamic Perspectives.", 85.

## CASES WHERE THE PROPHET CHANGED THE NAME OF HIS COMPANION

It was the Prophet's practice to change a Muslim's name where he judged that name unbecoming, and, in particular, where a name might create the impression that its bearer was not a Muslim. Several well-attested examples illustrate the principle.

Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib, a leading scholar among the generation after the Prophet's companions (*tabi'un*), reports on his own father's authority that his grandfather met the Prophet, who asked his name. "*Hazn*" (rough or hard ground), he replied. "No," said the Prophet, "you are *Sahl*" (easy, smooth). The grandfather demurred, preferring to keep the name his own father had given him, and the Prophet let the matter rest though Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib later remarked that a certain roughness of temperament had stayed in the family ever since<sup>25</sup>. In a related case, the Prophet renamed a man called *Zahm* connoting a tight, overcrowded, or difficult situation to *Bashir*, "one who brings glad tidings"<sup>26</sup>. He likewise renamed a woman called '*Asiyah*' ("disobedient" or "rebellious") to *Jamilah* ("beautiful"), and a man known as *Abu Shams* ("servant of the sun") to '*Abdullah*' ("servant of Allah")<sup>27</sup>.

Sheikh Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munajjid summarises the underlying principle:

*A name is an adornment and a symbol for a person, by which they are called in this world and the Hereafter. It indicates the religion to which they belong, and it gives an*

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<sup>25</sup> al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-Adab (Book of Good Manners and Form), the hadith of Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib on the authority of his father, Hadith no. 6193.

<sup>26</sup> al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismā'il, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, as related also in Muslim and Abū Dawūd; cf. al-Bukhārī, al-Adab al-Mufrad.

<sup>27</sup> Imam Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Adab, the hadith of Ibn 'Umar; parallel narrations appear in Sunan Abī Dawūd Dawūd and Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī.

*impression of them to other people much as a garment does, which looks wrong if it is too long or too short*<sup>28</sup>.

Ibn al-Qayyim, in *Tuḥfat al-Mawdūd bi Ahkām al-Mawlūd* (The Gift of the Beloved Regarding the Rulings of the Newborn), develops the same point at length: names, he argues, are not neutral labels but carriers of intrinsic meaning capable of shaping the character and self-perception of the person who bears them. A name with a positive, virtuous meaning can inspire its bearer to embody that virtue, while a name with a negative connotation can work the opposite effect. Parents are accordingly urged to choose names that reflect good qualities, so that the name itself becomes a quiet, lifelong source of motivation<sup>29</sup>.

Contemporary Muslim youth, however, are frequently unmoved by these consequences whether the name in question was given by parents or adopted informally among peers. Names are dropped in favour of nicknames as a matter of trend and convenience: a Muslim girl named Kareemah, for instance, may go by "Kerry" without a second thought. Some simply do not know the depth of meaning their own names carry; others know it perfectly well and behave in ways flatly inconsistent with it.

## PSEUDONYM TREND AMONG CONTEMPORARY YOUTH ON TASMIYAH

The word "pseudonym" derives from the Greek *pseudonymous*, "bearing a false name," from *pseud-* ("false") and *onyma* ("name"); French speakers adopted the Greek term, and English borrowed it in turn from French<sup>30</sup>. Merriam-Webster today defines a pseudonym simply as a fictitious name<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ al-Munajjid, "How to Name a Child in Islam," IslamQA, Fatwa no. 7180, accessed June 29, 2024, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/7180/>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Tuḥfat al-Mawdūd bi Ahkām al-Mawlūd* [The Gift for the Beloved on the Laws of the Newborn], (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2003), 112–115.

<sup>30</sup> Merriam-Webster, s.v. "pseudonym," accessed July 19, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pseudonym>.

<sup>31</sup> Merriam-Webster, s.v. "pseudonym."

People across many professions adopt pseudonyms to protect, enhance, or reshape their identities, a practice long associated with actors, writers, dancers, performers, composers, members of religious orders, and even racehorse owners, and one that includes pen names and can take the form of a number, letter, or symbol as readily as a word<sup>32</sup>. Under the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), "pseudonymisation" refers formally to processing personal data such that it can no longer be attributed to a specific person without additional, separately-held information<sup>33</sup>. Self-chosen pseudonyms nicknames or pen names that individuals adopt for themselves in, say, online forums differ from this formal process in that they rest on individual choice rather than an external data controller's procedure, though they can still function to single out a specific individual, particularly when combined with other identifying data<sup>34</sup>.

## REASON FOR THE USE OF PSEUDONYM

The pseudonym trend among contemporary youth is unsurprising in a social environment where everyone feels pressure to fit in, and where social, cultural, and political forces all bear on that pressure. Social media plays an outsized role here: platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp have become close to universal, and each gives its user free rein to use their real name or a pseudonym as they choose<sup>35</sup>. Several distinct motives recur:

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<sup>32</sup> Heather Anne Hannah, "Male Use of a Female Pseudonym in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature", (PhD dissertation, Murdoch University, 2018), 6.

<sup>33</sup> "Pseudonymization According to the GDPR: Definitions and Examples," Data Privacy Manager (blog), 2021, <https://dataprivacymanager.net/pseudonymization-according-to-the-gdpr/>.

<sup>34</sup> European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA), Recommendations on Shaping Technology According to GDPR Provisions: An Overview on Data Pseudonymisation (2018), 12, <https://doi.org/10.2824/74954>.

<sup>35</sup> M. Muslimin, "The Use of Pseudonym in Social Media," in *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, vol. 477 (Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang: Atlantis Press, 2020), 490.

- **Branding.** A short, memorable, easily pronounced name functions better than a long one as a personal or product "brand," which is one reason people gravitate toward simplified alternatives to their given names<sup>36</sup>.
- **Protection from harassment.** Pseudonyms shield users from harassment, embarrassment, and online abuse—a consideration of particular weight for Muslim youth who may otherwise face Islamophobic attacks or targeted cyberbullying.
- **A safe space for expression.** Especially online, a pseudonym can create room for individuals to express thought and emotion more freely, which matters for mental wellbeing.
- **Strengthening marginalised voices.** Anonymity can embolden individuals or groups to speak out on sensitive issues human rights, social justice without exposing their real identity.

Alongside these benefits, pseudonym use carries real costs:

- **Impersonation and confusion.** A pseudonym can obscure a person's real identity to the point of enabling impersonation.
- **Erosion of trust.** Anonymity breeds distrust, particularly in commercial contexts an entrepreneur operating under an unverifiable pseudonym may struggle to convince others that her business is genuine.
- **Disinhibited misconduct.** Removed from real-world consequences, pseudonymous users may behave more recklessly online, contributing to cyberbullying, trolling, and the spread of misinformation.

Islam, for its part, emphasises balance between the spiritual and the worldly, refusing any sharp divide between the sacred and the mundane, and holds youth in particularly high esteem as bearers of impeccable character and active servants of the faith<sup>37</sup>. Aliases are permitted in Islam

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<sup>36</sup>Armi Helena Murto, "A Case Study of Name Changing", (Bachelor's thesis, Arcada University of Applied Sciences, 2010), 14.

<sup>37</sup>Ahmadu Bolanle Folami, "The Effect of Social Media on the Morality of Muslim Youth in Nigeria," *Addaiyan Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 7 (2020): 12.

so long as they do not contradict Islamic principle<sup>38</sup>, consistent with the Qur'anic instruction already cited above against offensive nicknames (Surah al-Ḥujurāt 49:11): a Muslim may not bear, or call another by, a nickname meant to mock or belittle. It is in this narrow sense an alternative name that neither mocks nor obscures that the pseudonym can be likened to the Islamic institutions of *Kunya* (an honorific by-name) and *Laqab* (a descriptive epithet), to which the paper now turns.

## AN ISLAMIC EXPOSE ON *KUNYA* AND *LAQAB* IN LIGHT OF CONTEMPORARY MUSLIM PRACTICE

A *Kunya* is a by-name formed with *Abu* ("father of") or *Umm* ("mother of"), distinct from a person's given name or nickname and functioning more as an honorific title<sup>39</sup>. A *Laqab*, by contrast, is best rendered in English as a nickname, title, honorific, or descriptive surname typically capturing some notable quality of the person it describes<sup>40</sup>.

Both practices date to the time of the Prophet and are counted among the "living *Sunnah*" still observed across Muslim traditions today. The Prophet regarded the practice of giving companions a second name as valuable both for fostering familiarity and for ensuring names were pronounced correctly; the resulting title also signalled the closeness of the bond between the Prophet and the companion in question.<sup>41</sup> The practice served a genuinely practical purpose at a time when many companions shared theophoric names built on the *Asmā' al-Ḥusnā* 'Abdullah, 'Abd al-Rahman, 'Abd al-Rahim (The Most Beautiful Names (of God), Servant of Allah (God), Servant of the Most Gracious, Servant of the Most Merciful), and the like making a further distinguishing title

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<sup>38</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam [Al-Halal wal Haram fil Islam]*, (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2011), 91.

<sup>39</sup> Mohammed Zahid, "Kunya, The Simple Sunnah," The Hero Legacy (blog), November 30, 2016, <https://musingsofamusafir.wordpress.com/2016/11/30/kunya-the-simple-sunnah/>.

<sup>40</sup> Muhammad Yahya, "Laqab and Kunya from the Living Sunnah Theory: A Study of Makassar Tribe Family in South Sulawesi," *Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 8, no. 2 (2024): 1078.

<sup>41</sup> Muhammad Yahya, "Laqab and Kunya," 1078.

useful for telling individuals apart and cementing bonds among them. A *Laqab* in this sense signals a positive quality: Abdullah ibn Abi Quhafa was known by the *laqab* al-Siddiq ("the truthful/trustworthy," hence Abu Bakr al-Siddiq); 'Umar was known as al-Faruq ("the distinguisher [of truth from falsehood]"); 'Uthman as Dhu al-Nurayn ("possessor of the two lights"); 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Sakhr as Abu Hurayrah; and 'Ali as Asadullah ("Lion of Allah"). In al-Tirmidhī's account, 'A'ishah, the Prophet's wife, was given the *laqab al-Muwaffaqah* ("the divinely guided woman")<sup>42</sup>.

In the Prophet's time, addressing someone by their *Kunya* rather than their given name or nickname was itself a mark of honour, to the point that some scholars hold a non-believer (*kafir*) should not be given a *Kunya* at all.<sup>43</sup> A *Kunya* can also be hereditary in the sense that it passes down through the naming of a child: if a man's eldest son is named Ahmar, the father may come to be known as Abu Ahmar regardless of his own given name.

A *Kunya* need not wait for parenthood, moreover. Muslim youth without children of their own are commonly given, or adopt, a *Kunya*, Umm Salih, Abu Khadijah, Umm Hafsah, and the like which they may eventually pass on by naming a first child accordingly. Among contemporary Muslim youth, bestowing and receiving *Laqab* and *Kunya* remains a living practice, generally reserved for individuals whose conduct is seen to embody the Prophetic example; because both forms always carry positive meaning and aspiration, receiving one functions as a source of genuine pride, in sharp contrast to the self-erasing Westernised pseudonym this paper has been concerned with throughout.

## CONCLUSION

This paper set out to explain why a growing number of contemporary Muslim youth treat their given Islamic names with indifference, and to

<sup>42</sup> Muhammad Yahya, "Laqab and Kunya," 1079.

<sup>43</sup> Abu Wa'il Musa Shaleem, "The Difference between Someone's Name, Their Kunyah and Their Laqab," Troid.org, 2022, <https://www.troid.org/the-difference-between-someones-name-their-kunyah-and-their-laqab/>.

clarify where Islamic tradition itself draws the line between that indifference and its own sanctioned alternative-naming practices. Its findings, in direct answer to that research problem, are fourfold. First, *Tasmiyah* is not, in Islamic legal terms, a peripheral custom but a matter of *Mu'āmalāt* (Interpersonal dealings/ Mundane activities) permissible by default, yet capable of becoming *makruh* (a disliked or discouraged action in Islamic law) or *ḥarām* (prohibited by Islamic law) where a name's meaning contradicts the tenets of the faith; the theological stakes of casual name-changing are accordingly higher than most of the youth observed in this study appear to recognise. Second, the historical and comparative record African, Arab, and Western alike shows that naming has always done identity-work of exactly this kind, which suggests the present drift is a contemporary instance of a very old human pattern rather than a wholly novel crisis. Third, the drift itself is driven less by any single cause than by a convergence of globalisation, social media, and internalised identity struggle, which together make Westernised names and nicknames feel safer, more fashionable, or more socially frictionless than the Islamic names youth were given at birth. Fourth, and most importantly for practice, this drift is conceptually distinct from *Kunya* and *Laqab*: those institutions remain licit, Prophetically sanctioned, and honorific precisely because they add to a person's religious identity rather than obscuring it, whereas the Westernised pseudonym this paper has examined typically does the opposite.

Names in Islam, in short, transcend mere identification: they are carriers of spiritual meaning, cultural heritage, and personal identity, reflecting Qur'anic injunction, prophetic Sunnah, and centuries of scholarly reflection. Treating them as disposable is accordingly not merely a matter of personal taste but one with theological, social, and psychological weight. As Muslim youth continue to navigate the pressures of a globalised, social-media-saturated world, reclaiming pride in their given names is one concrete way of affirming an Islamic identity that need not be at odds with contemporary life. Re-educating Muslim youth, families, and communities on the weight naming carries and encouraging consistent use of the names given at birth can, this paper argues, foster the confidence, unity, and spiritual grounding that allow the legacy of *Tasmiyah* to continue into future generations.

## RECOMMENDATION

On the basis of the foregoing, the following measures are recommended to address the lackadaisical attitude many Muslim youth show toward their given names:

1. **Direct education on meaning, not just definition.** Muslim youth should be taught not only what their names mean but *why* that meaning matters theologically—since names in Islam are tied to identity and character in a way a bare definition does not convey.
2. **Structured community learning.** Lectures, seminars, and informal study circles focused specifically on *Tasmiyah* would help youth engage with the depth of their own names rather than encountering the topic only in passing.
3. **Institutional reinforcement.** Islamic student organisations, such as the Muslim Students' Society of Nigeria are well placed to shape young minds on this point; *Imams* and *Amirs* addressing such groups should routinely include the history and theological importance of Islamic names in their teaching, instilling pride and a sense of responsibility.
4. **Encouraging full names in practice.** Where names are shortened or altered sometimes with unintended and unfortunate results, as when *Wakilah* ("custodian") is shortened to "Keelah," which in casual pronunciation can resemble "killer" communities should actively encourage the retention of full given names.
5. **Family involvement.** Parents, siblings, and elders should be brought into this conversation directly; Muslim families need to understand the importance of maintaining the *Tasmiyah* given at the child's '*Aqiqah*, and should be encouraged to model, and gently insist upon, the correct and consistent use of a child's given name among relatives, neighbours, and peers.
6. **Purposeful use of social media.** Since social media is one of the primary channels through which youth encounter naming trends in the first place, Islamic scholars and educators should use the same channel deliberately to build awareness of the importance

of Muslim names, rather than ceding the platform entirely to the pressures that drive the trend.

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