Naming Gender and Ideology in Arab Culture

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Introduction

First names have been studied in different settings to identify specific patterns of culture and interaction (Goodenough, 1965), or changes in the political and social arena (Bulliett, 1978). Very few studies, however, have addressed the question of whether names represent ideological structures. This article summarizes the findings of a study on ideology and gender in a specific cultural context by examining first names.

The study attempts to answer the question of whether first names of males and females depict the dichotomy between men/women, culture/nature, private/public, profane/sacred, light/dark, and so on. The distinction between public and private spheres focuses on the fact that while "private refers to relations within the family concerning intimate life, "public" refers to relations between families and thus focuses on political and religious life (Rosaldo, 1974). The polarity of the sexes and its transposition from one level of analysis to another occupies a significant place in the literature on gender. The theoretical origin of the idea is in Lévi-Strauss's paper (1966) where he argues that "the existence of differentiating features is of much greater importance than their content."

> *First names ... identify*
>
> *patterns of culture*
> *patterns of interaction*
> *changes in the politcal arena*
> *changes in the social arena*

Lévi-Strauss considers the system of binary oppositions as a universal intellectual instrument. Starting from binary opposition between male and female, there is an aggregation at each of the two poles of new elements chosen because they stand in opposition to each other. Along the same line, Bourdieu's work (1979) on the Kabyle indicates that the house is divided into the dark, nocturnal, lower part and the light-filled, noble upper part, one as female space and the other as male space. Similarly, Kallab (1983) in her analysis of school books for children, concludes that these view the world as divided into two, male and female, and accordingly, there is a clear delineation of the roles and duties of each sex.

The basic assumption is that first names may, potentially, be representations of parents' commitments to ideological differentiation between the sexes. The definition of ideology adopted in this article is that of Clifford Geertz (1973): "A system of interacting symbols and a pattern of related meanings that has to be reconstructed from disconnected bits and pieces of cultural practices."

The study addresses the question of whether the nature/culture,

MEANING OF FIRST NAMES
USED IN TEXT

NAME: MEANING   NAME: MEANING   NAME: MEANING

Culture/Politics

Fadi:	saviour
Adil:	just
Amin:	loyal
Jihad:	fight
Mahir:	competent
Fawzi:	winner
Fayiz:	winner
Fawaz	winner
Asma:	higher
Malaki:	queen
Fadia:	saviour

Culture/Tribal origin

Ghassan:	an Arab tribe
Adnan:	an Arab tribe
Wail:	man who occupied district
Kalthum:	beautiful face
Hind:	number of camels
Rula:	an Arab tribe
Alya:	high

Culture/Honor qualities

Nabil:	noble
Kamal:	perfection
Afif:	chaste
Wafa:	sincere
Afaf:	chaste
Muna:	hope

Culture/Intimacy

Samir:	companion
Khalil:	close companion
Nadim:	sharer in pleasure
Hanan:	tenderness
Samar:	night talk
Sahar:	charming

Nature/Precious stones

Zumurud:	Emerald
Almaz:	Diamond
Fayruz:	Turquoise
Jad:	Jade

Nature/Animals

Nimr:	tiger
Asad:	lion
Dib:	wolf
Rim:	deer
Yamami:	a type of bird

Nature/Plants

Riad:	garden
Ghusn:	branch
Randa:	branch
Sawsan:	a kind of flower
Yasmin:	Jasmin

Nature/Celestial bodies

Suhayl:	canopus
Nada:	moist, fresh ground
Nazik:	one of the planets
Suhayla:	canopus

Nature/beauty

Lamia:	dark lips
Lama:	dark lips

Nature/beauty (cont.)

Bashir:	handsome
Wadah:	resplendent w/beauty

Nature/color

Asmar:	brown
Lubna:	white

Females have a higher proportion of names reflecting intimacy and companionship

female/male dichotomy is applicable to the analysis of Arab gender ideology, and more precisely if name-pattern analysis is useful in such a cultural context? Specifically, it attempts to answer the following questions: How does the study of names reflect the nature/culture, female/male dichotomy? Are female names closer to nature and male names closer to culture? If so, then do female names change at a slower pace than male names? If gender is part of an ideology, how does it vary with the different religious groups? (This article reports only the results of the study that are related to the first question).

Materials and Methods

The study used a name-pattern analysis of male and female students at the American University of Beirut for every 10th year ranging between 1931 and 1981. Classification of first names into various categories was set according to sex and meaning. Categories illustrating aspects of culture on one hand, and aspects of nature, on the other hand, were carefully distinguished. Thus, categories classified under culture included those that comprise conceptions of religion, politics, interest in public matters and organization, borrowed names of Western origin, names reflecting qualities of honor and other desired human qualities, and names of tribal origin. Categories classified under nature include those that signify conceptions of nature, whether objects or qualities.

The dependent variable consists of first names classified into the above categories, and the independent variables are nationalities, religion and time of use. After coding this information for all AUB students every 10th year ranging from 1931 to 1981, a frequency distribution of the names in each category and cross tabulations between each category and the independent variables were calculated.

Results

The results show that female names under the categories of culture are significantly lower than those of males, as revealed in tableNo. 1.

More specifically, it was found that female names with religious implications are significantly less than those of males. Thus, the percentage of female names in these categories is 6.1% compared to 32.0% for males.

In addition, there are name categories for males implying religion that do not apply to females. These include, in the Islamic tradition, names with the prefix 'abd (servant) added to the 99 names of God mentioned in the Qoran emulating mercy, power, authority and generosity, or the word 'Din (religion) added to certain qualities.

The discrepancy in frequencies between males and females in the categories of religious tradition (Islamic or Christian) and the mere existence of certain classifications for males only, both support the argument that male names are closer to culture than female names. This is also asserted by the prominence of male names in religious categories.

With respect to the male/female dichotomy in names signifying politics, power and authority, 16% of male names fell under this category compared to only 3% of female names. Moreover, relevant female names tend to echo power and authority statutes rather than processes, i.e. the process of achieving status. Frequent male names in these categories include Fadi, 'Adil, Amin, Jihad, Mahir, Fawzi, Fayiz, Fawaz, all of which suggest process and achievement; in contrast to female names, which include Asma, Malaki, Fadia, denoting status. In other words, male names involve performance, and status that have to be

Female names that reflect aspects of culture echo power and authority rather than the processes of achieving power

Table No.1
Distribution of Proportion of Male and Female
in the Nature/culture Dichotomy
from 1931 to 1981

Category	Males %	Females %
I. Culture Categories		
1. Religious categories		
Islamic traditions	22.0	1.7
Christian traditions	10.0	4.4
Sub-Total	32.0	6.1
2. Politics and public figures	16.0	3.0
3. Borrowed names of Western origin	14.0	16.8
4. Names of tribal origin	1.5	5.6
5. Names signifying honor	33.0	35.5
Sub-total	96.5	67.0
II. Nature Categories		
1. Signifying animals	0.5	7.7
2. Signifying plants	1.0	7.0
3. Signifying celestial bodies	0.7	5.2
4. Signifying precious stones	0.05	1.4
5. Names of Tribal original referring to nature	0.5	4.4
6. Others	0.5	7.3
Sub-total	3.5	33.0
Total of Totals	100.0	100.0

achieved rather than ascribed.

Names of tribal origin reflecting culture such as Ghassan, Adnan, Wail among males and Kalthum, Hind, Rula and 'Alya among females seem to have different frequencies. A high proportion of the names of females fall in this category 5.6%, compared to only 1.5% of the males'. The use of tribal names illustrates a kind of nostalgia in going back to the past to ascertain one's identity and status. The higher proportion of females in this category can be interpreted as emphasizing the traditional status of women. It also indicates a slower pace of change in women's names because of their proximity to traditions, to nature which does not change as fast as aspects of culture.

The label of culture also includes categories of names reflecting qualities of honor and other desired qualities of secular significance. These exist for both males and females alike, and can be roughly divided into (1) names reflecting qualities of honor such as Nabil, Kamal, Afif, Wafa, Afaf, Muna, and (2) names reflecting intimacy and companionship such as Samir, Khalil, Nadim, Hanan, Samar and Sahar.

By looking at the percentage distribution of males and females in these categories, one notices that the proportion of these names are almost alike for males (33%) and females (35.5%). However, a closer

examination of the sub-categories shows that females have a higher proportion of names reflecting intimacy, companionship and desired qualities of "secular" implications, while males have a higher proportion of names reflecting honor. The proportions of male names in categories depicting intimacy, companionship and desired qualities are 8.5% and 16.1% respectively; those of females are 11.9% and 21% in the same categories. By contrast, the proportion of male names in categories signifying honor is 8.4% and that of females 2.6%.

There are two observations that can be made concerning these findings: First, females have a higher proportion of names reflecting qualities of intimacy and companionship, which can be considered closer to the private realm. Thus, the private/public, female/male dichotomy seems to apply here. In addition, and unlike what is expected, females have a lower proportion of names reflecting honor. Here, one may refer to Shore's work (1981) which speaks of an intermediate position between nature and culture. He argued that social and cultural controls must be imposed on natural processes in order for facts of nature to be transformed into articrafts of culture. Women, through their sexuality, represent the potential for effecting such a transformation. Thus, women are not dealt with in terms of honor, while men are because they are responsible for imposing the social and cultural controls relating to honor and the protection of women.

Modernization trends are partly symbolized in the use of borrowed names of Western origin. By looking at the percentage distribution of male and female name categories, as shown in the table, one notices that these

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proportions are close to each other, and that there are no major differences between males and females. Yet, when we subdivide names of Western origin into those signifying "secular"/religious traditions and political/historical figures, one finds many interesting distinctions. Female names signifying "secular" traditions outnumber male names -- 4% vs. 0.8% -- whereas male names signifying political and historical figures outnumber female names -- 14.8% vs. 8.8%. It is tolerated for female names to represent only a superficial notion of modernization, e.g. the adoption of names of secular origin, but it is not tolerated for their names to illustrate cultural, political, and religious qualities.

Names illustrating nature categories include those of animals, plants, celestial bodies, precious stones and names reflecting qualities of beauty. As reflected in the table, there is a wide difference between males and females with respect to such names. Differences also seem to exist between males and females with respect to the meanings of those names: male names tend to refer to

animals which are very ferocious and represent male vigor and strength such as Nimr, Asad, Dib, while female names signify more peaceful and tender animals like Rim, and Yamami.

Names classified under categories of nature also include names after plants, celestial bodies, precious stones and names reflecting beauty. Names signifying plants include for males Riad, Ghusn, and for females Randa, Sawsan, Yasmin. While the proportion of female names in this category is 7% that of males is 1%.

Names signifying celestial bodies include for males Suhayl, and for females Nada, Nazik and Suhayla. Again here, one finds a significant difference in the proportion of males and females, 0.7% and 5.2% respectively.

Names designating precious stones include Zumurud, Almaz, Fayruz for females and Jad for males. The percentage distribution is 1.2% for females compared to 0.05% for males.

Other names of nature include those signaling beauty including Lamia, Lama, Lina for females and Bashir and

Wadah for males. Names describing colors are Asmar and Lubna. While the proportion of female names in this category is 5% that of males is 0.4%

The first difference between males and females with respect to names after nature is in terms of percentage distribution between the sexes, with females having a higher proportion than males. The second difference is that there is a bigger number of female names, as such, in these categories. In other words, male names after nature are very few compared to female names, not in terms of their frequency distribution but in terms of name count. This is exactly the opposite of the trend that was found in the categories of names depicting religious attributes, where male names were originally more numerous.

Conclusion

The study of the percentage distribution of males and females among categories reflecting nature and categories reflecting culture leads us to say that the female/male, nature/culture dichotomy seems applicable to Arab gender ideology, based on examination of first names and according to the data presented here. The analysis of our data show that female names tend to be closer to "nature" than male names, while the latter are closer to "culture". An important remark worth mentioning here, however, is that "nature" and "culture" are both symbols, artifacts of

human thought. They do not exist in reality. Therefore and according to this dichotomy, one cannot claim there is a conscious process for naming.

Future studies should include other samples, because the one addressed in this study is taken from a private institution that caters to an upper middle or higher socio-economic class. Thus, we cannot extrapolate or generalize these results to the society at large. Socio-economic class could also be an important determinant of attitudes towards naming.

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