المجلة العربية لعلم الترجمة
Arabic Journal for Translation Studies
Vol. 5 / N° 17 (2026)
ISSN: 2750-6142
OPEN ACCESS

Significance of Names in Hassaniya Culture: An Anthropological and Linguistic Approach

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Received	Accepted	Published online
19/5/2026	3/10/2026	30/10/2026

: 10.63939/ajts.c2maha66

Cite this article as: Bouam, N. (2026). Significance of Names in Hassaniya Culture: An Anthropological and Linguistic Approach. *Arabic Journal for Translation Studies, 5*(17), 76-85. https://doi.org/10.63939/ajts.c2maha66

Abstract

This study examines the meanings and connotations of names in Hassaniya culture, viewing them as a semiotic system that reflects worldviews and social values. The distinctiveness of Hassaniya anthroponymy lies in its predominantly verbal character, whereby names function as prayers and expressions of wishes, while also preserving the memory of the moment of birth and its social context. The study aims to explore the syntactic and semantic structures of Hassaniya names and their social functions within a comparative framework encompassing Arab and Islamic naming systems. It adopts a descriptive-analytical approach, drawing on selected tools and concepts from linguistic anthropology. The study concludes that a Hassaniya name is not merely a marker of identity but rather a condensed text imbued with religious, social, and psychological dimensions. These dimensions reflect the depth of the Hassaniya community's cultural experience and reveal a distinctive model of naming practices within the Arab-Islamic cultural sphere.

Keywords: Semantics of Names, Hassaniya Culture, Anthroponymy, Supplication, Linguistic Structure, Social Identity

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1. Introduction

In human cultures, names represent more than mere means of identification; they serve as textual thresholds that embody worldviews, collective histories, and social values. The study of personal names (anthroponymy) has attracted considerable attention in anthropology, linguistics, and sociology, as names function as mirrors reflecting cultural transformations and identities. The study of names in Hassaniya culture is particularly significant because it presents a distinctive model of naming practices within the Arab-Islamic cultural sphere, characterized by remarkable structural and semantic deviations from the naming patterns of Classical Arabic.

While traditional Arabic personal names tend to be descriptive, adjectival, or derived from verbal nouns, Hassaniya anthroponymy is distinguished by its predominantly verbal and supplicatory character, whereby verbal sentences and complex nominal constructions are transformed into personal proper names. This distinctive feature raises several research questions: What syntactic structures characterize personal names in Hassaniya culture? What semantic meanings do these names convey? How do they reflect social values, kinship relationships, and religious beliefs? And how can this naming system be situated within the broader context of Arab and Islamic anthroponymy?

These research questions give rise to the following hypotheses. First, the verbal character of Hassaniya names reflects a dynamic conception of identity, in which the self is perceived not as a fixed essence but as an evolving expression of action, desire, and renewed supplication. Second, Hassaniya names perform multiple social functions that extend beyond identification to the expression of social status, the establishment of kinship relationships, and the preservation of family memory. Third, this naming system represents a distinctive cultural phenomenon within the Islamic sphere, closely associated with the historical formation of Hassaniya society, its patterns of religious practice, and its tribal organization.

This study aims to explore the meanings and connotations of names in Hassaniya culture through an approach that combines structural linguistic analysis with anthropological interpretation. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, situated at the intersection of anthropology and linguistics, the study adopts a descriptive-analytical methodology based on collecting, classifying, and examining personal names from both structural and semantic perspectives.

The study sample consists of a selection of personal names commonly used within Hassaniya society. These names were selected according to specific criteria, particularly their frequency and prevalence within the community, the clarity of their linguistic and social meanings, and the diversity of their syntactic structures (single-word names, verbal sentences, and nominal sentences).

The sample comprises 50 personal names, collected within the geographical areas of Tindouf, Nouakchott, and the Sahrawi refugee camps through field interviews with elderly community members and heads of households, who provided explanations regarding the

circumstances surrounding the naming process and the meanings associated with individual names. Additional material was drawn from the book [title to be specified] by Abdullah López, in which the author compiled numerous [details to be specified].

The collected names were analyzed at three complementary levels:

1. Structural Level: Examination of the morphological and syntactic structure of each name, determining whether it takes the form of a single noun, a verbal sentence, or a nominal sentence.
2. Semantic Level: Analysis of the linguistic meaning of each name, together with the social and religious contexts in which it was originally given.
3. Functional Level: Identification of the social functions performed by personal names, including supplication, documentation and preservation of collective or family memory, indication of social status, and expression of gender.

2. Syntactic Structure of Hassaniya Personal Names

2.1. The Verbal Character: Names as Actions and Supplications

The most distinctive feature of Hassaniya anthroponymy lies in its predominantly verbal character, which represents a clear departure from traditional Arabic naming practices, which tend to favor adjectives and underived nouns. In Hassaniya culture, verbs are extensively employed in the formation of personal names, such as تبرى (tabra): "May she recover," تسلم (taslam): "May she remain safe," تغلى (taghla): "May she be cherished," يهديه (yahdih): "May God guide him," يسلمو (yaslamuh): "May God protect him," and يباركها (yabarkuh): "May God bless him" (Al-Salma, 2026). This linguistic feature endows personal names with a dynamic and performative dimension, whereby a name does not merely describe an individual or indicate their lineage but becomes an expression of supplication, aspiration, and continuous action.

The transformation of a verb into a personal proper name carries profound significance. It suggests that an individual's identity is not merely a fixed attribute or an immutable genealogical affiliation, but rather an evolving aspiration and an ongoing process, as though the individual enters the world accompanied by a continuous invocation for safety, recovery, or dignity. This reflects a dynamic conception of existence and identity, in which the human being is not perceived as a fully constituted essence but as a being in the process of becoming, continually dependent on supplication and divine protection (Ahmedou, 2013, pp. 36-54).

2.2. Sentential Constructions: Names as Complete Sentences

In addition to verbs, Hassaniya anthroponymy is characterized by the use of nominal constructions and complete verbal sentences as personal names, a feature that is relatively uncommon in other Arabic naming systems (Chaouch, 2015, pp. 112-134).

Examples of nominal constructions include منت أخوالها (mint akhwalha): "Daughter of her maternal uncles," أم لخوت (Om lakhut): "Mother of her siblings," منت بوها (mint bouha):

"Her father's daughter," and وأختها (ukhtaha): "Her sister." These constructions convey explicit references to kinship relationships and the individual's position and role within the family structure.

Examples of complete verbal sentences include بسم الله عليها (basmallaheliha): "In the name of God, may she be protected," مرّبي ربه (mrabbih rabbu): "His Lord has raised him," جازاه الله (jazah allah): "May God reward him," and وشكر الله له (shukr allah lahu): "May God acknowledge his gratitude." These expressions reflect reliance on God, divine invocation, and supplication, thereby transforming personal names into continuous expressions of religious devotion.

The use of complete sentences as personal names constitutes one of the most distinctive characteristics of Hassaniya anthroponymy. It demonstrates the extent to which personal names are imbued with religious and supplicatory meanings while revealing the capacity of Hassaniya culture to transform ordinary linguistic structures into meaningful markers of identity.

3. Semantic Dimensions of Hassaniya Personal Names

3.1. Supplication and Aspiration: Names as Continuous Prayers

The category of supplication and aspiration constitutes the core of Hassaniya anthroponymy. Personal names are not merely labels but rather prayers and expressions of hope through which parents accompany their children throughout their lives (Ahmedou, 2013). This phenomenon is particularly evident in names given to children born into families that have previously experienced the loss of other children, where naming becomes an invocation for survival and continued life.

For instance, the names تسلم (Taslam), meaning "May she remain safe," and يانجا (Yanja), meaning "May he survive," are often given to children whose siblings have previously died, expressing the parents' hope that the newborn will survive. Similarly, تبرى (Tabra) represents a prayer for recovery and healing, while تغلى (Taghla) expresses the wish that the child may be cherished and highly valued. The name يسلمه (Yaslamuh), meanwhile, constitutes a supplication for protection from all forms of harm (Zainab, 2026).

This phenomenon extends beyond the act of naming to encompass beliefs associated with envy and the evil eye. In certain circumstances, names conveying notions of insignificance, weakness, or ambiguity may be deliberately chosen to ward off envy and protect the child from the evil eye. One example is لغضف (Laghḍaf), associated with the meanings of "weakness" or "softness."

Naming a child in a manner that suggests weakness or vulnerability may thus function as a symbolic protective strategy, intended to shield the child from envy by diminishing their apparent importance or attractiveness. However, this practice appears to be relatively limited in Hassaniya culture compared with certain other Arab cultural traditions (Abdelrahman, 2003, p. 56).

3.2. Timing and Circumstances: Names as Memories of the Moment of Birth

Hassaniya personal names sometimes capture the very moment of birth or its social context, transforming these circumstances into an integral part of an individual's identity. For instance, the name أقبلناها (agbalnaha), meaning "We have welcomed her," reflects the family's joy and warm reception of a newborn girl, potentially contrasting with certain cultural traditions in which the birth of a female child may be met with relative indifference. Similarly, names such as نبغوها (nabghuha), meaning "We love her" or "We want her," express an explicit desire for the newborn, thereby endowing the name with emotional and commemorative significance.

Other names reflect particular circumstances surrounding a child's birth, such as being born during a journey, amid economic hardship, or being named after a grandfather who passed away before the child's birth. Such naming practices transform the moment of birth from a purely biological event into a social narrative that is continuously retold through the repetition of the name and the recollection of its meaning.

3.3. Social Connotations: Names as Expressions of Status and Belonging

Hassaniya personal names are not limited to expressions of supplication or references to circumstances surrounding birth; they also convey nuanced social meanings that indicate an individual's position within the family and the broader community (Ahmed, 2018, p. 126).

For instance, the name سيدمو (sidammu), meaning "Master of his mother" or "Leader of his mother," confers a special status upon the child, often the firstborn son. It reflects the family's aspirations for authority and leadership or expresses the emotional role the child is expected to play in relation to his mother. Similarly, the name سعد بود (saed buh), meaning "His father's happiness," suggests that the child is a source of joy and blessing to his father, thereby assigning him a distinguished position within the family.

Names such as منت أخوالها (mint akhwalha), meaning "Daughter of her maternal uncles," emphasize the importance of kinship ties, particularly relationships with maternal uncles. Such a name may be interpreted as expressing an expectation that the girl will play a significant role in her maternal uncles' lives or that she will be raised under their care and protection.

Likewise, the name الهيبه وهيبتنا (elhaiba haibatna), meaning "Honor and our honor" or "Dignity and our dignity," conveys the idea that the child embodies the honor and dignity of the entire family. Such dignity is not merely bestowed as a gift but is earned through acts of courage, wisdom, and service to the community (Zainab, 2026).

These naming practices reflect the extended family structure characteristic of Hassaniya society, where individuals are not perceived in isolation from their kinship ties and social relationships. Rather, their identities are understood and constructed through the intricate network of familial and communal relationships that define their social belonging.

3.4. Gender-Specific Connotations

Certain Hassaniya personal names convey meanings that vary according to the gender of the newborn. While male names frequently express notions of leadership, pride, and aspiration, such as سيدمو (sidammu), غايتنا (ghayatna), meaning "Our ultimate goal," هبتنا (hibatna), meaning "Our gift," and مرادنا (muradna), meaning "Our aspiration" or "Our desired one," female names are often associated with beauty, acceptance, and joy.

Examples include تفرح (tafarah), meaning "May she rejoice," غلاجيلها (aghlajilha), meaning "The precious one of her generation," مغلاها (maghlaha), meaning "How precious she is!" (an exclamatory expression), and تمنى (tomana), meaning "She wished" or "She desired" (Al-Salek, 2025).

However, this gender-based distinction is not absolute. Certain names express supplications for safety and recovery that transcend gender boundaries, such as تبرى (tabra), meaning "May she recover," and تسلم (taslam), meaning "May she remain safe." Although these names may take grammatically feminine forms, their underlying meanings reflect concerns that are not inherently gender-specific. This suggests that, in certain contexts, prayers for health, survival, and protection take precedence over gender-related considerations in Hassaniya naming practices.

4. Hassaniya Anthroponymy in the Arab-Islamic Context

4.1. Arabic Naming Structures: An Overview

Arabic personal names generally consist of five main elements: the ism (personal given name), the kunya (teknonym, such as "Abu" or "Umm" followed by a name), the nasab (patronymic lineage, such as "Ibn" followed by the father's name), the laqab (descriptive epithet or title), and the nisba (an attributive designation indicating geographical origin, tribal affiliation, or profession) (Ibn Manzur, 1990, entry "K-N-Y").

In Islamic culture, naming practices are governed by general religious and cultural conventions, including a preference for commendable names, such as those of prophets and the Prophet Muhammad's companions, as well as names formed by combining ʿAbd ("servant of") with one of the divine names, such as عبد الرحمن (Abd al-Rahman), عبد الله (Abd Allah), and عبد القادر (Abd al-Qadir) (Abdelrahman, 2003, p. 51).

In Classical Arabic naming traditions, personal names frequently take the form of adjectives, such as حسن (Hasan), meaning "handsome" or "good," جميل (Jamil), meaning "beautiful," and كريم (Karim), meaning "generous"; abstract nouns or verbal nouns, such as إيمان (Iman), meaning "faith," نهى (Nuha), meaning "intellect" or "wisdom," and رجاء (Raja), meaning "hope"; or simple lexical nouns conveying specific meanings, such as أسد (Asad), meaning "lion," بدر (Badr), meaning "full moon," and ريم (Reem), meaning "gazelle."

Furthermore, Arab naming traditions employ kunyas (teknonyms) and laqabs (epithets or titles) to indicate social identity, genealogical affiliation, and familial status, particularly within tribal and urban contexts.

4.2. Similarities and Differences

To situate Hassaniya anthroponymy within the broader Arab-Islamic context, it is essential to compare it with other Arabic and Islamic naming systems. Several key similarities and differences can be identified:

First: Verbal Character versus Descriptive Character. While Classical Arabic personal names tend to take the form of adjectives, verbal nouns, or underived nouns, Hassaniya names exhibit a strong preference for direct verbal forms, such as تبرى (tabra), تسلم (taslam), and يهديه (yahdih). This characteristic endows Hassaniya names with a temporal and dynamic dimension, as they function not merely as static descriptions but as renewed supplications and expressions of continuous action. By contrast, Classical Arabic contains a relatively limited number of verb-based personal names, such as يزيد (Yazid), يحيى (Yahya), and تغلب (Taghlib). Although these names are derived from verbal forms, they do not convey the same explicit supplicatory dimension that characterizes Hassaniya personal names (Saeed, 2012, p. 45).

Second: Sentential Constructions. The use of complete verbal sentences as personal names is relatively rare in Classical Arabic, apart from a few exceptions, whereas it is comparatively common in Hassaniya naming practices. Examples include مرّبي ربه (mrabbih rabbu), meaning "His Lord has raised him," and جازاه الله (jazah allah), meaning "May God reward him." This phenomenon highlights the deeply rooted oral and supplicatory character of Hassaniya naming traditions and demonstrates the capacity of Hassaniya culture to incorporate complex linguistic structures into its system of personal names (Al-Salma, 2026).

Third: The Relative Absence of the Kunya and Nisba as Primary Elements in Everyday Naming Practices. Unlike other Arabic naming traditions, in which the kunya (such as "Abu" followed by a personal name) and the nisba (an attributive designation indicating lineage, origin, or affiliation) are frequently used in social introductions and identification, everyday Hassaniya naming practices tend to emphasize the supplicatory personal name, with relatively less prominence given to other components of the traditional Arabic naming system. Nevertheless, such elements continue to be employed in formal contexts. This tendency reflects the relative priority accorded to the supplicatory and spiritual dimensions over genealogical and social-hierarchical considerations in Hassaniya naming practices (Ahmed, 2018, p. 133).

Fourth: The Strong Presence of Religious Dimensions. Hassaniya personal names share with broader Arab-Islamic naming traditions a pronounced religious dimension, although they differ in the ways this dimension is linguistically expressed. While Classical Arabic names frequently convey religious meanings through constructions involving the divine names, such as عبد الله (Abd Allah), meaning "Servant of God," or through the adoption of prophets' names, Hassaniya names often express religious devotion through supplicatory sentences that directly invoke divine action and intervention.

5. Additional Dimensions: The Evil Eye, Calculation, and Enumeration

Hassaniya personal names intersect with broader Arab cultural practices, particularly those associated with beliefs in the evil eye and envy. In Arab cultures, names conveying notions of low social status, insignificance, or ambiguity have sometimes been used to ward off the evil eye and protect children from envy, especially male children. Examples include الحرطاني (Al-Hartani), العبد (Al-Abd), and قجمولة (Qajmoula) (Fatima, 2026).

This practice is particularly evident among families that have experienced the repeated loss of newborn children, where such names are believed to provide symbolic protection and contribute to the child's survival. Similarly, names such as لغضف (Laghḍaf), meaning "weakness" or "softness," may carry a protective connotation. Naming a child in a way that suggests weakness or vulnerability may thus serve as a cultural strategy intended to shield the child from envy by symbolically diminishing their apparent importance or social prominence.

6. Conclusion

Personal names in Hassaniya culture represent a distinctive model of linguistic, social, and religious creativity. They are not merely markers of identification but rather condensed texts that embody profound philosophical, social, and spiritual perspectives. The essence of this distinctiveness lies in the predominantly verbal and supplicatory character of personal names, the incorporation of the moment of birth and its social circumstances into individual identity, and the expression of social status and kinship relationships. These dimensions are articulated through linguistic structures characterized by sentential constructions that are relatively uncommon in Classical Arabic anthroponymy.

The study has reached several key findings:

1. Hassaniya anthroponymy is characterized by its verbal and supplicatory nature, whereby personal names function as prayers and expressions of hope that accompany individuals throughout their lives. This reflects a dynamic conception of identity and human existence.
2. Hassaniya personal names perform multiple social functions that extend beyond mere identification to encompass the indication of social status, the expression of kinship relationships, the preservation of family memory, and the reflection of cultural values.
3. The Hassaniya naming system represents a distinctive cultural phenomenon within the Islamic sphere, shaped by the historical formation of Hassaniya society, its tribal organization, and its religious traditions. It differs from Classical Arabic naming systems in terms of linguistic structure, semantic significance, and social function.
4. The comparative analysis demonstrates that Hassaniya personal names constitute an alternative model of naming practices, distinguished by the use of complete verbal sentences, the predominance of supplicatory expressions, and the direct articulation of kinship relationships and social status.

The study of Hassaniya personal names not only provides insight into a distinctive linguistic system but also offers a conceptual map of the values, beliefs, and cultural perceptions that have shaped Hassaniya society throughout its history.

The study therefore recommends conducting further field research to document and preserve this anthroponymic heritage, examine it within its broader social and cultural contexts, and compare it with other naming systems across the Arab and African cultural spheres. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural diversity within the Islamic world.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses her gratitude to the community members, particularly the elders and heads of households, who shared their knowledge of Hassaniya naming practices. Their explanations of the meanings, circumstances, and cultural significance of personal names contributed to the linguistic and anthropological analysis presented in this study.

Ethical approval

The study was conducted with respect for participants' dignity, privacy, and cultural traditions. Before each interview, participants were informed of the research objectives, the intended use of their contributions, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Oral informed consent was obtained, and participants were free to decline questions or discontinue the interview without consequence. Particular attention was given to the cultural sensitivity of personal names, family narratives, and naming practices. Identifying information was included only with the explicit permission of the individuals concerned.

Author contributions

Nadjat Bouam: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, organization of the collected material, linguistic and anthropological analysis, writing of the original draft, and manuscript revision.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest relevant to this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

About the author

Nadjat Bouam is affiliated with the University of Tindouf, Tindouf, Algeria. In this article, she examines Hassaniya personal names through an approach combining linguistic

analysis and anthropological interpretation, with particular attention to supplication, kinship, social identity, and the preservation of collective and family memory.

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Data Availability Statement

The article includes the personal-name examples discussed in the analysis. Any sharing of underlying interview materials must respect participants' consent and applicable confidentiality requirements. Enquiries concerning the supporting research materials should be addressed to the corresponding author.

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