

# Culture from a different, Islamic perspective

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## Introduction

There are nowadays a number of reasons to encourage sociologists to study culture in order to seek a deeper understanding of the nature and manifestations of culture in the behaviour of individuals and societies. Globalisation has become a hot topic for all at the beginning of the twenty-first century (al-Khūlī 2000, p.515). In today's world, economic globalisation is particularly prominent. But it is no exaggeration to say that most people on the five continents feel that cultural globalisation is even more present. The information and communication revolutions naturally play a decisive role in the greater prevalence of communication, which serves to disseminate the hallmarks of cultural globalisation to all corners of the globe, east, west, north and south.

With regard to specialised branches of sociology, the study of culture is today one of the most prominent, leading to the emergence in this discipline of a field known as cultural studies, which focuses on the study of the cultural manifestations of human groups (During 1999, p.610; Long 1997, p.529).

With regard to the cutting-edge fields in both psychology and sociology, we find, on the one hand, cognitive psychology (which is closely concerned with the individual, above all as a cultural being) which is a pioneering branch of psychology (Martin and Rumelhart 1999, p.391);

and on the other hand, we find the branch of *cultural sociology* increasingly prominent among sociologists (Bonnell and Hunt 1999, p.350).

These factors alone confer legitimacy on efforts to devote greater attention to the study of culture and its contribution in order to highlight certain aspects that have been neglected by contemporary social science research. As we shall see, these are aspects of crucial importance for undertaking in-depth research on the essence

of culture, which is the prime characteristic of the human race, and which has given it pre-eminence in the universe.

## Subject and purpose of this study

This study is aimed at carrying out in-depth basic research on the essence

and foundations of culture from an Islamic epistemological viewpoint, which differs from its equivalents in the contemporary social sciences. However, that cannot be accomplished without addressing the concept of culture in contemporary western sociological literature, which has been investigating culture and its manifestations since the nineteenth century, especially by means of anthropology and sociology.

Such a methodology will naturally prompt us to compare the concept of culture as seen from the Islamic epistemological viewpoint and from its western equivalent. Comparative

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studies frequently shed fresh light on phenomena that may be difficult for the social sciences to understand and explain, and thus help scientific knowledge to move forward. This is the primary goal that the researcher seeks to attain. Our ambition here is above all to help to build a solid background for what has been called *culturology* (White and Dillingham 1973, pp.32–33) which, in our view requires a critical examination encompassing epistemology, theories and concepts.

## The fogginess of definitions of culture in the social sciences

Anthropologists and sociologists have numerous definitions of the concept of culture. This suggests at least two things: either that culture is difficult to define, particularly when using the positivist criteria of sociology, or that culture is a phenomenon that is in itself complex.

We limit ourselves here to three definitions from anthropology and sociology. The most famous definition of the concept of culture was given by the British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in *Primitive culture* (1871): “Culture, or civilisation, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (quoted in *Encyclopedia of sociology* 1974, p.69).

The American anthropologist Leslie White connects the concept of culture among human beings to their ability to imbue things with meaning, which he calls the ability to symbol. This allows individuals to understand the meaning of things and also how they were created and how they are used (White and Dillingham 1973, p.29). This ability in individuals is then defined as culture (White and Dillingham 1973, p.9) and there is no individual without culture, and no culture without individuals (White and Dillingham 1973, pp. 15–16).

According to the renowned anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, his American colleagues who studied culture and personality failed to give a conclusive and clear definition of the nature of culture. In his view, the debate on the matter

remains open, despite the work of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Edward Sapir, Ralph Linton, Abram Kardiner, and Franz Boas (Cuche 1996, p.117). Furthermore, for some the problem is not only the absence of a credible anthropological definition of culture, but rather, serious questions about the difficulty of studying culture in the spirit of modern science and using its methodology. Radcliffe-Brown was of the view that culture does not have a material presence, but rather a very abstract presence. On that basis, others like him wonder how there can be a science of something that cannot be seen, since there can be no science based on a reality which is neither perceptible nor visible (White and Dillingham 1973, p.26).

For some anthropologists, the difficulty of studying culture goes beyond its definition to encompass other important aspects, such as: does culture exist? Where is culture to be found? There have been various answers to these questions. Some authors have claimed that it is to be found in the mind; others believe that culture is found in behaviour, and yet others say that culture is a manifestation which is separate from of behaviour, and there are even those who deny the existence of culture altogether. White holds that culture is located at three different levels: within humans, such as in their thoughts and feelings, in interpersonal behaviour, and in objects, in accordance with his concept that culture consists of objects and actual events that may be observed.

Sociologists, on the other hand, have narrowed down the scope of the term “culture”, which they take to mean what they call the main ideas of society. These include the beliefs, symbols, values and customs of society. This standard sociological definition of culture is current, for instance, in the most US sociology textbooks aimed at university students.

The foregoing brief survey of the concept of culture, in particular in modern anthropology, shows that the notion of culture remains opaque and is almost completely silent about what we wish here to call the metaphysical aspects (Dhaouadi 1997) of cultural elements, or what we call cultural symbols, which are language, thought, belief, knowledge, values, cultural usages and myths. In this study we use the concept of cultural symbols as a synonym for the concept of culture widely used in modern social

science. For us and for most researchers in the social sciences cultural symbols represent the main elements that distinguish the human race from other living species.

There is, for instance, an almost complete failure on the part of contemporary anthropologists and sociologists to address the metaphysical nature of cultural symbols. Only with a small minority of scholars do we find rare and ambiguous terms suggesting that culture is a super-organic human element, as affirmed by the sociologist Herbert Spencer and by Kroeber (White and Dillingham 1973, p.47), or that it is non-biological, as suggested by Tylor, or “extrasomatic”, following White or external and “supra-biological”, to use a term adopted by a number of sociologists.

These few, timid suggestions that culture is a super-organic and super-biological element remain ambiguous with regard to the nature and essence of the cultural symbols that characterise the human race. Things are little better when some anthropologists and sociologists see culture as an “abstraction” (White and Dillingham, 1973, p.24) or as something that “has no ontological reality” (1973, p.26). Given the general failure to clarify these terms, contemporary social science literature is devoid of epistemological theories of the system of cultural symbols. The tremendous intellectual fund of knowledge accumulated by the modern social sciences on culture remains content to describe cultural elements. Indeed, most anthropologists and sociologists agree that the world of culture differs from the world of human biology, as suggested by the terms used above. Therefore, culture, as a contemporary western concept widely used in the social sciences in particular, is not dealt with using the metaphysical point of view that we find in the Islamic approach.

In view of the neglect and absence of metaphysical touches in cultural symbols, contemporary social science is hardly objective, in the sense of a cognitive state that allows one to ascertain the truth as such quite independently of the mind of the researcher, unmarred by prior emotions, values, concepts or desires (Fay 2001, pp.202–220). The presence of metaphysical hallmarks, as will be shown, is an inherent truth that lies at the core of cultural symbols. The various individual and social factors affecting

the minds of western researchers in the social sciences have prevented them from undertaking analyses and studies of culture from an epistemological viewpoint that gives full legitimacy to the presence of metaphysical touches. Thus, the tremendous body of knowledge accumulated by those sciences since the nineteenth century offers a deficient reality of the true specifications of cultural symbols. Western social science ultimately says more about itself than it does about the inherent reality of culture.

## **The concept of culture from the Islamic cognitive viewpoint**

When inquiring about the Islamic cognitive view of cultural symbols or culture, the best way to determine their contours and meet the challenge of their essential nature is to refer to the Koran, the primary source of Islam at all levels. If our reading is successful in helping to understand the content of the Koranic verses pertaining to cultural symbols, we shall have acquired the correct Islamic cognitive view of the nature of culture. And we shall thereby have armed ourselves with the most valuable Islamic concept of culture, which prompts the researcher to compare and possibly to compete with the concept of culture as used hitherto and currently in contemporary social science.

Our methodology for revealing cultural symbols and their nature in the Koranic text consists of three sets of questions:

1. Are there clear indications in the Koran that distinguish humans from other beings with regard to their capacity to act on behalf of God?
2. Are there Koranic verses that speak with complete frankness about the distinctiveness of the human race from all other living species?
3. To what do these Koranic verses attribute the distinctiveness and superiority of the human race?

Firstly, the Koranic text abounds in verses that accord a special, outstanding place to human beings among all other creatures, whether

spiritual entities, such as angels, or animals that share the Earth with them. In other words, the image of the human in the Koran is of a unique being, who occupies first place in importance after God in this universe. Humans thus have no one who can contest their qualification to manage the affairs of this world and to assume the functions of sovereignty (vice-regency, stewardship) in it. We restrict ourselves here to five cases in which the Koran speaks with great clarity of the pre-eminence of humans over other creatures. In *al-Baqara* (The cow) 2:30, the Koran describes the human being Adam as the “vice-regent of God on Earth”: “And then, your Lord said to the angels: I am placing a vice-regent on Earth”. There is little need to dwell on the importance of this office (the vice-regency of God on Earth, to which human beings were appointed to the exclusion of the angels and other creatures on Earth). As to the absolute advantages of human beings described in three other verses of the same *sūra* (chapter), *al-Baqara* (The cow) 2:31, 32, 33, they consist of God bestowing upon Adam more knowledge and learning than on others, including the angels: “And He taught Adam all the names of beings, and then presented them to the angels and said: Tell me the names of these, if you be truthful” (*al-Baqara* (The cow) 2:31). As a result, God commanded the angels to bow down to Adam alone, as a third sign of honour and distinction to Adam: “And when we said to the angels: Bow down to Adam, they bowed down, except for Ibīs [Satan], who refused and became arrogant, and was among the disbelievers”.

*Al-Isrā'* (The night journey) 17:70 uses the verbs “ennoble” and “give preference” in order to demonstrate the two qualities of human beings as outstanding over other creatures on Earth: “We have ennobled the children of Adam and carried them by land and sea; We have provided them with good things, and given them clear preference over many of the beings that We have created”.

These Koranic verses clarify beyond the shadow of a doubt that humans are special beings who are outstanding and superior to other creatures of the Earth and to angels. The Koranic view of the human race thus represents a complete cognitive (epistemological) break with the theory of evolution of Darwin and his associates, because the creation of Adam, in the

Koranic view, represents a special case of creation which is quite separate both from the angels and from the realms of other creatures here on Earth. The creation of human beings stands apart from all other instances of creation by the gift of knowledge and learning that God granted to humans alone. It is because of this strong cognitive ability that it was legitimate to make Adam the vice-regent of God by ennobling him and giving him preference on Earth, and having the angels bow down to him.

Two verses from the Koran connect the angels' bowing down to Adam to God's blowing of his spirit into him: “And when I have fashioned him and have breathed of my spirit into him, fall down in prostration to him” *al-Hijr* (The rocky place) 15:29; *Sād* (The letter *Sād*) 38:72.

It is fully legitimate to query the meaning of the words “my spirit” contained in these two *sūras* because the way the verse is structured suggests that the injunction to the angels to bow down to Adam follows the breathing of God's spirit into him. In other words, there is a strong, if not causal, connection between the act of breathing the divine spirit into Adam and God's exhortation to the angels to bow down to him. As is well known, the word “spirit” in the Koran has various meanings, first and foremost that of infusing creatures with life. The *tafsīr* exegesis of the two *Jalāls* states: “Attaching the spirit to him constitutes an ennoblement [an honouring] of Adam. The spirit is a genial body by means of which human beings live, thanks to its influence in them” (al-Maḥallī and s-Suyūṭī, 1993, p.457). The celebrated modern Syrian Koranic exegetist 'Afīf 'Abdulqādir al-Fattāh Ṭabbāra provides the following exegetic explanation of the words “my spirit” in the verse: “I breathed into him of my power; in other words, when I infused him with spirit whereby he might live, that spirit being of my own doing . . . fall down to him in prostration” (Ṭabbāra, n.d.).

We conclude with the exegesis of Shaikh Mutawallī ash-Sha'rāwī, the most famous of Egyptian exegetists in the modern age. He explains the meaning of “the spirit of God” and its being breathed into Adam as follows:

The breathing of the spirit of God does not mean that the breathing was done to infuse life by blowing into Adam's mouth. Rather, this represents the diffusion of the spirit to

all parts of the body. Scholars have differed over the definition of the spirit. For my part, I think that it is safer not to go too deeply into that matter because the Truth Almighty is He who says: "And they ask you about the spirit, say: The spirit is from the command of my Lord; the knowledge you have been granted is but little" *al-Isrā'* (The Night Journey) 17:85 (ash-Sha'rāwī, nd, Vol. 12, p.7,694).

It is clear from the content of this exegesis that the meaning of the words "my spirit" is quite simply the power of God to infuse Adam with life, of whose secrets human beings have no knowledge, which is why Shaikh ash-Sha'rāwī advised against going too deeply into that matter.

Sticking to this explanation of the meaning of the words "my spirit" does not allow Adam the human being to occupy the office of vice-regent of God on Earth or the angels to bow down to him in honour of his special and outstanding nature. God infused not only human beings with life, but also all living creatures. Hence the mere infusion of human beings with life does not qualify them alone to act as the vice-regents of God on Earth. There is therefore a need to seek some other meaning of the words "my spirit" which might strongly suggest the distinctive and superior position of human beings over other creatures by virtue of their stewardship of Earth as the vice-regents of God.

This is where, in our view, the role of the social sciences in helping Koranic exegetists comes in to guide them to the appropriate meaning to be given to the words "my spirit" in the verses "And when I have fashioned him and have breathed of my spirit into him, fall down in prostration to him" *al-Hijr* (The rocky place) 15:29; *Ṣād* (The letter *Ṣād*) 38:72. Many contemporary exegetists draw on the discoveries of modern science in explaining numerous Koranic verses concerning the creation of human beings and understanding the functioning of the human brain and body, and especially the relationship of human beings to natural phenomena in the universe, such as the sun, the moon, stars, mountains, seas, volcanoes and earthquakes, all of which have served to reinforce the idea of the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the Koran. There are increasing numbers of publications, symposia and conferences in this field in the modern Islamic world. We agree in this respect with Dr

Zaghlūl an-Najjār, who stresses that it is not possible to understand many Koranic verses without relying on highly credible scientific discoveries concerning human beings and natural phenomena of the universe.

In the same way and to the same extent, modern exegetists are also called upon to make use of the fund of contemporary social science learning concerning the understanding of the behaviour of individuals and communities, and the dynamism of societies and human cultural hallmarks. These disciplines certainly help to get closer to the meaning of the words my spirit in the verses referred to above. The disciplines of anthropology, sociology and psychology all agree that human beings are distinct from other beings by virtue of what those disciplines call culture or what we have termed cultural symbols: language, thought, knowledge and learning, religion and cultural values and customs, which, from the perspective defended here, qualified humanity in the past, and continue to do so in the present and future, to play the role of vice-regent of God on Earth. In other words, the phrase "I have breathed of my spirit" means that the divine breathing into Adam is first and foremost a cultural breathing in the contemporary sense given by the social sciences to the term culture. The breathing of cultural symbols into Adam alone conferred upon him, to the exclusion of others, the function of the stewardship of Earth, and the attendant bowing down of the angels to him. Such a cultural reading of the words my spirit in these verses makes clear just how much enhanced credibility the explanation of Koranic verses has if exegetists draw on modern scientific knowledge.

## The cognitive Koranic foundational view of culture

It is clear from the foregoing that the Koran has a cognitive (epistemological) view concerning cultural symbols as a distinctive feature of the human race. The divine cultural breathing into Adam, to the exclusion of others, is thus a breathing that has, according to the Koranic view, metaphysical roots and a metaphysical nature. Its source is not the world of Earth, but rather the world of the heavens, of which the

creatures of Earth were deprived, and which was given to human beings alone. The Koran speaks with complete frankness of the metaphysical nature of the cultural breathing for which human beings alone were singled out: "And when I have fashioned him and have breathed of my spirit into him, fall down in prostration to him". In other words, the cultural breath deep within Adam comes from the divine essence itself. There is thus no room in the Koranic vision for doubt about the essential metaphysical nature of the cultural symbols that distinguish the human race from other living species.

On the other hand, as noted, most social science western sociological literature is almost completely silent about the metaphysical aspects of culture. It studies and analyses the cultures of societies using a descriptive or positivist method without bothering to raise cognitive (epistemological) questions about the nature of culture as a unique hallmark of individual humans and of human societies, shying away from examining the features of things that are not subject to the world of sensory perception or quantity. It is an objective, scientific failing to reject the metaphysical despite its strong presence at the heart of cultural symbols, one that restricts understanding of the behaviour of individuals and the dynamism of societies and civilisations. How can one have confidence in the findings of social science research, which studies culture stripped – for reasons of epistemology – of its essential metaphysical hallmarks? Hence, the western social sciences should not merely study the religious factors involved in understanding the behaviour of individuals and the dynamics of societies (Heath, 2000), but also draw on the cognitive (epistemological) vision of religions as a source of scientific understanding (Ebaugh, 2002), as this study endeavours to highlight with respect to culture.

Cultural symbols have a transcendental or metaphysical character that makes them different from the components of the human body and the material world. Individuals thus have a dual identity: a system of cultural symbols, on the one hand, and organic biological and physiological elements, on the other hand. It is the cultural symbols that are the most prominent and decisive in the determination of the identity of individuals, and hence their behaviour. The five most important transcendental/metaphysical traits are as follows:

1. Cultural symbols do not have weight or volume, unlike the biological and physiological components of living creatures and the material world.
2. As a direct consequence, cultural symbols enjoy ease and rapidity of transmission over time and space.
3. Cultural symbols are undiminished by sharing, unlike elements of the material world. If we give others something from our knowledge, learning, thought, creed, cultural values, language, and so on we lose nothing.
4. Cultural symbols have a great capacity to survive for long periods of time in human societies. Indeed, through written language, their longevity may even be indefinite. The thought of Akhenaton, Socrates, Aristotle, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), al-Ghazālī, Ibn Khaldūn, Rousseau, Descartes, Hume and other thinkers and scholars would not have survived or enjoyed such a long period of survival if it had not been recorded in the letters and words of the varied languages that enable it to meet the challenge of immortality. Languages have a particularly prominent role to play with regard to the preservation and immortalisation of the collective heritage of human communities. Written languages, especially, enable human communities to record, preserve and immortalise their collective memory despite the extinction of those communities' organic and biological presence as living organisms; despite their changes of place and the fact that successive generations of their members live in different ages from their own. The complete preservation of the language of the *dāḍ* (a letter/sound thought to be unique to Arabic) in the Koranic text is a prime example of the capacity of the language of the immortal text to safeguard the collective memory and heritage from the oblivion that is brought about by the passage of time, changes in the environment, and the temporary nature of corporeal organic biological existence. These transcendental/metaphysical dimensions are not limited to written language alone. The oral use of language is also coupled with transcendental and metaphysical meanings. Humankind's encounter with the metaphysical dimension in its various

manifestations thus becomes inevitable: individuals see it in their dreams, it fills their imagination and they encounter it at close quarters in their religious experiences.

5. Cultural symbols possess an extraordinary power to imbue individuals and societies with enormous energy, enabling those who possess it to triumph over the greatest challenges, in all their many forms. By way of example, the values of freedom, justice and equality have been shown, over the long course of human history, to be cultural symbols capable of endowing individuals and communities with colossal, surging energy similar, to some extent, to overwhelming metaphysical forces which no one can withstand. Such is what the words of the Tunisian Arab poet, Abū l-Qāsim ash-Shābī, suggest: “If, one day, the people choose life, fate must inevitably respond”. The source of peoples’ real volition lies in the world of cultural symbols. That is, when people unite to defend freedom, equality, justice and other human values, and their right to independence and self-respect, their reaction becomes like the reaction of fate, “which neither preserves anything nor leaves anything behind”. This explains why people resort to talking of miracles in respect of certain individual or collective events, which enter the historical record despite the lack of concrete evidence for them. They are manifestations of the decisive impact of cultural symbols in giving birth and momentum to people’s behaviour in human societies and civilisations throughout the ages.

These points about human cultural symbols possessing, in the Koranic view, metaphysical roots needs to be made more concrete in the world of human and social reality so that the metaphysical features of cultural symbols may be used in current field research in the social sciences. The transformation of the abstract notion of the metaphysics of cultural symbols to a down-to-earth formulation of the manifestations of their metaphysical features provides a procedural concept that social science researchers may use in the core of their fieldwork and theoretical research. This procedural concept contributes to beginning the reconciliation of all non-objective factors influencing the behaviour

of the individual and society, which the positivist view, in particular, avoids taking into account in understanding and explaining collective and individual phenomena. The remainder of this article deals with some of the implications of this perspective.

## **The features of some of the transcendental aspects in cultural symbols**

It is not sufficient here to affirm that cultural symbols are a central part of the breathing of the divine cultural spirit into human beings. We need to clarify how the breathing or insufflation of the divine cultural spirit manifests itself in certain cultural symbols. We shall present here three examples of cultural symbols that reflect some features of aspects of the insufflation of the divine cultural spirit.

### **Language and its metaphysical traits**

The Koran affirms the eternal nature of the divine essence: “He is the First and the Last” (*al-Ḥadīd* (The iron) 57:3). “Everyone on Earth must pass away; there shall remain but the face of your Lord, full of glory and munificence” (*ar-Rahmān* [The merciful] 55:26–27). Several cultural symbols are also described as being long lasting or even eternal. Building on the points made in the previous section, let us briefly consider language as the most important of all cultural symbols to see how it is able to prolong or immortalise the life of individuals and human societies.

It is not difficult to establish the features of metaphysical touches in linguistic structures, for language is the mother of all cultural symbols (White 1959). As such, language is better suited than other elements to carry flashes of the non-sensory world, according to the Islamic cognitive view of the world of human cultural symbols. It is possible to confine ourselves to mentioning and defining four features in respect of the identification of the metaphysical features of language as a cultural symbol by which the human race is distinguished.

1. The place occupied by language in the information revolution, which Toffler and

other experts in this field speak about, is well known. The speed of instant communication, carried out in the twinkling of an eye between individuals and societies today is achieved basically by means of the primary unit, which is the linguistic structure as represented by the word (such as the noun, adjective, verb, particle, number and symbol.). The speed of transmission of the written and spoken word in today's world is not only attributable to modern communication technologies, but is also profoundly influenced by the nature of language itself, as humankind's most important cultural symbol. Communication by means of language, in both written and spoken form, has radically transformed our world and improved communication technologies such as telephone, fax and the Internet, have endowed it with the qualities to wonder and marvel at. Human communication and instant news gathering has, despite the enormous distances, become imbued with what we might term the metaphysical dimension of human existence in this world, from which a new expression of the duality of human existence takes shape.

The conventional formulation of the nature of human beings consists in their having a body and a soul. Under the new conception of human existence, crystallised by the information revolution, human beings are bodies, either reposing on the earth's surface or floating in space, but interconnected and present there by means of language at incredible distances either on Earth or in the vastness of space. This new type of duality casts the old metaphysical aspect of human identity (the spirit) in a new guise which, despite its novelty, continues to have strong links to the world of the metaphysical and the intangible, which human beings have been unable, in general, throughout their long history, to eliminate entirely from their perception, intuition and intellectual and scientific thinking (Hunt 1982, pp.315–353).

2. Field data confirm the power of language to immortalise individuals and groups, symbolically, across time and space. At the collective level, written language in particular enables human groups to record, preserve and immortalise their collective memory, despite the evanescence of their organic and

biological existence as groups and despite the possibility of subsequent generations changing their location and mode of life in later times. It is the same with individuals, great writers in particular (Parsons 1966). In short, our linguistic structure permits the stock of a people's memory and the ideas of outstanding individuals to enjoy a greater or lesser degree of the features of immortality and the eternal.

3. The capacity of cultural symbols to enable individuals to enjoy a kind of immortality has improved thanks to successive technological discoveries in the field of advanced electronics. The recording of sound and colour images by the process of digitisation is a lively example of the ability of cultural symbols to immortalise the words, sounds and live, natural images of living beings and inanimate phenomena.
4. At the cultural level the use of language is also coupled with metaphysical meanings. Do individuals of all creeds and religions not use the spoken word in their existential reflections, their supplications and entreaties to their god or to whatever else they believe to be eternal or holy? Set apart from other living beings by language, human beings are able to liberate themselves from the physical constraints of this world and establish relations and links with the metaphysical world. Through its linguistic ability, humankind succeeds in disengaging from worldly and momentary concerns.

### **Metaphysical aspects of the values of freedom, justice and equality**

How is it that individual behaviour, in certain particular cases, is transformed into behaviour that appears to have been influenced by metaphysical forces? To clarify this fully, it is necessary to make several preliminary, basic remarks.

Field observation both of the world of human beings and of the worlds of all the other animals shows, on the one hand, that the behaviour of the latter is profoundly affected by instinct, and that, on the other hand, human behaviour is primarily influenced by cultural symbols. This explains the complete, or nearly

complete, congruence in the behaviour of each species of animal, insect, bird and reptile over successive generations and over time and space. As regards the human race, there is considerable diversity in the patterns of both the principal and marginal types of behaviour from one civilisation to another, from one society to another, and from one generation to another.

Contemporary sociologists and anthropologists agree that such differences in patterns of behaviour among and within human societies is basically attributable to the influence of the world of cultural symbols (culture) upon them, in the form of religions, traditions, customs, values and cognitive systems (Smelser and Smelser 1967, pp.80–87). In other words, human beings, unlike animals, derive freedom of action, freedom of choice and freedom to differ from others from the world of cultural symbols. Traces of the Islamic metaphysical, epistemological aspect are strongly present in this interpretation. The divine essence, in the Islamic cognitive view, has absolute freedom, volition and choice – it acts as it wishes. Thus the phrase “I have breathed of my spirit into him” in the Koranic verse must imply the attributes of choice, freedom and volition – naturally within the relative limits for humankind, as is the case, according to the Islamic view, in respect of the field of human knowledge (“the knowledge you have been granted is but little”). It is not surprising, then, that specialists in human behaviour fail, in many cases, to provide accurate predictions of it.

Psychologists and sociologists often base their predictions of human behaviour on a rigidly deterministic foundation of rules that do not acknowledge the principles of freedom, volition and choice when weighing up the factors influencing human behaviour. This stems from a false epistemological view that causes them to fail to distinguish between the effects of cultural symbols and of instinctual, material factors on the behaviour of members of the human race. Specifically, such an approach does not acknowledge the existence of the metaphysical element, as suggested in this article, at the core of cultural symbols.

In this regard, it is striking that values such as freedom and justice, proclaimed by human beings throughout their long history, have received no attention worth mentioning from

modern scholars of individual and group behaviour. Despite the key role played by these values in driving individual and group behaviour in ancient and modern times, social scientists in general have refrained, and continue to refrain from recognising their roots and the profound significance of their influence on human behaviour. It seems to them that these are metaphysical things, the study of which is the preserve of philosophers, not scientists. This is a further example of the epistemological deficiency from which contemporary positivist science suffers by its aversion to seeking reconciliation between the perceptible world and the metaphysical world, whatever the nature of the latter may be (Philips 1985). Human beings’ unique enjoyment of freedom and the capacity of choice is a characteristic linking individuals to the world of metaphysics. In most religions and beliefs the deity is distinguished by this quality. Human beings are thus unique in partaking of this quality, relatively speaking, with the deity. The Koranic text refers specifically to the metaphysical link, which is the source of individuals’ freedom, volition and the capacity for choice, all of which stem from “And when I have fashioned him and have breathed of my spirit into him.” (*al-Hijr* (The rocky place) 15:29). In the Koranic perspective, conditions were thereby brought together within this rational being (by giving human beings a share of freedom, volition and choice) for him to be the sole candidate for the vice-regency of God by means of the fund of cultural symbols. Specifically, “We offered the trust [of responsibility, freedom of choice] to the heavens and the Earth and the mountains, but they declined to bear it and were afraid of it. But man assumed it. Lo! He has proved a tyrant and a fool” (*al-Ahzāb* (The confederates) 33:72).

### **Cultural symbols that imbue human beings with great energy**

Therefore, neither the world of animals and beasts nor the world of machines and devices endowed with modern artificial intelligence enjoys the quantity and quality of the nature of the world of cultural symbols possessed by human beings.

A representative example, perhaps, of the metaphysical dimensions of the world of values

as cultural symbols is the al-Aqṣā *intifada* waged since 28 September 2000 by the Palestinian Arab people against Israeli occupation and settlement in order to liberate their land and to achieve justice and equality.

Faced with overwhelming Israeli superiority in military equipment the Palestinians have adopted new methods of resistance. The al-Aqṣā *intifada* is, like its predecessor in 1989, called the “revolution of the stones”, because it is with pebbles and stones that Palestinian children and youths face the heavily armed Israeli occupation army. The second innovative strategy consists in young Palestinians turning themselves into human bombs against the Israeli military and the civilian population inside Israel itself. Finally, the Palestinians also fight on Israeli-occupied land with conventional weapons, resisting settlers and the occupation forces with weapons and material that are limited in comparison with the lethal modern weaponry possessed by the opposing forces.

The pressing cognitive question that must be asked is: what are the decisive factors that have resulted in the phenomenon of the *intifada*, its means of resistance and its continuation for a not inconsiderable period of time, despite the fact that the Israeli State has assassinated the leaders of the Palestinian resistance, committed numerous massacres in the towns and villages of Palestine and sought to destroy the mainstays of the infrastructure of Palestinian society? There is little doubt that resistance with pebbles and stones against an army equipped with tanks and lethal modern weaponry is militarily and physically unrealistic. The matter is much worse with regard to those Palestinians who have chosen certain death by turning themselves into human bombs against the occupation. The motives and driving forces for such Palestinian behaviour in combat are certainly not material. They are, rather, high moral forces rooted in the system of Palestinian cultural symbols.

Human beings are by nature the bearers of cultural symbols. This is what explains the logic of individual behaviour and collective actions, which have a proven ability to defy overwhelming physical facts, as we have seen from the example of the Palestinian *intifada*. The resistance of third world liberation movements in the last century is further testimony to the credibility of the capacity of cultural symbols to create,

drive and orient individual and collective human behaviour towards goals that, materially, seem extremely difficult or impossible to achieve. The imprisonment of many third world leaders in the modern era did not prevent them from fighting to withstand the vastly more powerful material forces of the coloniser. There is no more credible explanation for their final victory over the occupiers than the factor of their being armed with moral weapons or the weapons of the world of cultural symbols, in accordance with our concept of cultural symbols in this study. Popular uprisings against oppressors in ancient and modern times merely demonstrate the importance of the ammunition that human beings may derive from the world of cultural symbols, which transform those individuals' energy into a challenge to the greatest military force the tyrant or coloniser may possess.

### **The lack of weight and volume of cultural symbols**

The ease of transmission and spread of cultural symbols throughout the world is due to their lack of certain perceptible material elements, as indicated above. The physical weight and volume of objects represent the basic perceptible elements of the world of substance, and in the final analysis, it requires human effort to convey physical objects from one place to another. While cultural symbols themselves are by their very nature devoid of weight and volume, the artifacts in which they are embodied may well be material. Thus, cultural symbols have volume and weight when printed on paper. The transport of large numbers of encyclopaedias, books, documents, magazines and newspapers across a distance needs considerable time and effort if the distance is great and the means of transport primitive. Modern means of transport have facilitated the transport of the heaviest objects from one place to another, but volume and weight remain two decisive factors in relation to the swift conveyance of things and the physical effort needed to transport them. Nonetheless, cultural symbols can in principle be disembodied, as they are by modern technologies.

The view that cultural symbols possess features which make them similar, to a large

extent, to metaphysical entities closely corresponds with the Koranic vision of the nature of cultural symbols. The mixing of clay with the divine cultural spiritual breath in the creation of Adam gave him a dual nature: substance and spirit. Cultural symbols are, therefore, pregnant with metaphysical transcendental elements in the dual make-up of the nature of human beings. This view of cultural symbols represents the core of the Islamic view of culture. This is the principal and legitimate paradigm in which the sociology of culture should be rooted in the Arab and Islamic world.

## **Towards a sociology of the metaphysics of cultural symbols**

It is clear from the preceding pages of this study that we are in the process of establishing what we might call a sociology of the metaphysics of cultural symbols on an Islamic epistemological foundation. We have derived the metaphysics of cultural symbols, on the one hand, from methodological analysis of the nature of cultural symbols themselves, and on the other hand, by employing the Islamic epistemology of cultural symbols. As such, our vision in this article represents a theoretical framework with cultural foundations and an Islamic epistemology. It is thus a perspective that differs completely from the positivist one. This new view of cultural symbols responds strongly to the growing calls from sociologists to integrate and draw on religion to understand and explain the phenomena under study and establish theoretical thinking at the heart of these sciences (Ebaugh, 2002).

1. The careful study of the essence of cultural symbols must be included in the category of basic scientific research. Cultural symbols, as we have seen, represent the essence of human beings. There is, therefore, little doubt that uncovering their nature and secrets is a priority, as a deep understanding of cultural symbols is conducive to helping us better to understand individual behaviour and the dynamics of human society.
2. Our choice of the Islamic cultural perspective for studying the metaphysical features of the

system of cultural values stems, on the one hand, from the lack of interest and failure of the positivist and other perspectives to investigate this topic, as we have shown in this article. On the other hand, our approach is at the cutting edge, concretising the embedding of religious thought at the heart of the social sciences. In our view, what is important for the advancement of science is not stubborn adherence to a particular perspective and methodology, but using the appropriate perspective and methodology to understand and explain the phenomenon under consideration. There is, then, strong legitimacy for adopting the Islamic cultural perspective as an alternative to the conventional positivist perspective, the principles of which were established in the nineteenth century, and which, in the view of many sociologists today, is no longer adequate. These scholars believe that the time has come for three fundamental changes at the heart of sociology.

Sociologists need to be convinced that there is no single scientific methodology for research in the social sciences. There is a call today to legitimate diversity among the scientific methods that sociologists may employ to study phenomena of interest to them (Risman and Tomaskovic-Devey 1998).

This new approach among sociologists holds that sociology is able to adopt and employ a range of intellectual and theoretical frameworks without thereby prejudicing its central vision (Risman and Tomaskovic-Devey 1998, p.10). Our perspective thus remains faithful, in respect of its object of study, to the core of sociology. This part of the article focuses its analysis on the system of cultural symbols that have always had priority in sociological and anthropological studies. What makes this article particularly faithful to sociology and anthropology is its attempt to impart a new scientific character to the understanding of the system of cultural symbols through its focus on their metaphysics, derived from the cognitive view and from the methodological observations of Islam. Discovering the metaphysical manifestations in the system of cultural symbols justifies what was missing at the core of the cognitive stock of

modern sociology and anthropology, and our understanding is thereby completed of the most important traits that distinguish the members of the human race from other species.

This new generation of sociologists believes that sociology is a science that is characterised epistemologically by creativity and innovation, which qualifies it to be at the cutting edge in proposing new ways of conducting scientific activity. What is important in this regard is not the adoption of a particular method of scientific research, but rather the use of a methodology that is actually capable of building a solid scientific structure. This must first of all be capable of identifying the social and cultural factors that underlie the genesis of the phenomenon under consideration, since the explanation of phenomena by means of social and cultural influences is incorporated into the heart of the sociological perspective. This is what distinguishes the sociological perspective from both the psychological and the biological perspectives in their explanation of human behaviour. Whatever research methodology we choose must have as its ultimate goal the discovery of the cause or causes that have contributed and are contributing to the formation and genesis of the phenomenon. However, the search for the causal factors of social phenomena should not be limited to the quantitative factors stressed by positivism since the nineteenth century. Rather, the search for the causes of social phenomena must also aspire to identify qualitative causes, which positivism has not sought to use.

Comparing it with the perspective of western sociology, our perspective in this article could be placed under the heading of what the American sociologist Randall Collins (1982) has called “non-obvious sociology”, which uncovers hidden processes behind the obvious. It is a discipline that demonstrates that obvious matters are not necessarily the most significant.

Our use of the Islamic cultural perspective, based upon the metaphysical epistemology of cultural symbols, is a new type of paradigm for social scientific research. What we have endeavoured to do in this article is to define a new method for scientific work on what is hidden from the gaze of most contemporary sociologists and anthropologists in their studies of culture. It gives sociology a touch of creativity, allowing it,

as a science, to be innovative in its capacity to define new methods of scientific research.

## **The harmonisation of our perspective with reflexive sociology**

There is little doubt that the Islamic cultural perspective proposed here for the study of culture is one which brings together a number of cognitive viewpoints constituted essentially by sociology, philosophy and religion. This is a formula that is rejected by conventional positivist science but is accepted and welcomed by the new trend at the heart of sociology (Bunge 1999; Risman and Tomaskovic-Devey 1998). Furthermore, the sociology called for by Pierre Bourdieu supports, to a large extent, our approach in this article. Bourdieu’s cognitive intellectual project, termed “reflexive (self-critical) sociology” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp.43–70), has little respect for the boundaries drawn between cognitive specialisations (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.13). Hence, this sociology calls for new methods to be devised that are conducive to understanding and explaining social phenomena with a high degree of credibility. It thus represents a challenge to the current divisions and patterns of thought that are prevalent in the social sciences. Bourdieu urges the adoption and use of multiple methodologies in the study of social phenomena and in the research carried out by sociologists (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.32). He believes that sociology, as a cognitive view, needs to be a total science (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.30). In the words of Marcel Mauss, sociology must provide us with the total social fact capable of restoring the basic unity of scientific research, which has long been torn apart by the boundaries between cognitive specialisations, empirical fields and techniques of observation and analysis. On this basis, Bourdieu is vehemently opposed to separating methodological field-work from theory in sociology, defining *méthodologisme* as the tendency of the researcher to separate the intellectual effort required to devise methodologies from their profitable use in scientific work itself. Bourdieu believes that mastery of research techniques often results in poverty of sociological theorising regarding the phenomenon under consideration. True sociology, then, is that

which always preserves the strong link between method and thought (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp.31–32).

Bourdieu concludes from his defence of a reflexive, self-critical sociology that such an approach is not the enemy of the modern scientific view, but that it does go against numerous positivist conceptions of the social sciences, and also against the absolute separation introduced by the positivist social sciences between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the phenomena studied (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.39). It is thus evident that this model of sociology urges a linkage and dialogue between both sides of the duality, in respect of both the phenomenon studied and sociological practice. The latter must, on the one hand, give priority to the study of both the qualitative and the quantitative aspects of the social phenomenon, and on the other hand, open a dialogue between fieldwork and theoretical work to address the challenge of understanding and explaining social phenomena and processes.

From the above, it may be said that our Islamic cultural perspective on the study of culture falls within the kind of sociology called for by Bourdieu and others (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp.43–70). We sharply criticise contemporary western sociology, which almost completely ignores the metaphysical features of cultural symbols, some of which we have mentioned in this study. Instead, we today call upon Muslim sociologists to desist from merely imitating their western counterparts, both past and present, with respect to epistemology, methodology and theory. Western sociology today suffers from a crisis of epistemological unity, which Wallerstein (1999, pp.1–16) has urged all sociologists to overcome. Sociologists in the Islamic world are fully qualified to respond to this pressing call and implement it in Islamic sociological thought in the twenty-first century. The perspective of Islamic culture is at the cutting edge in this field: the unity of all knowledge and sciences. Consequently, there is no place in this culture for the phenomenon of two cultures and antipathy and hostility between cognitive and scientific specialisations. In other words, Islamic sociology, based on the power of the absolute, unifying epistemology of human knowledge, is well placed to be wholly impervious to the epistemological crisis that western

sociology and other types of knowledge and science are experiencing today.

The study of culture or cultural symbols from the Islamic cultural perspective is entirely legitimate in relation to Islamic sociology, as this study makes clear. On the one hand, it will contribute to rooting this discipline in the perspective and epistemology of the mother culture of Islamic societies, and on the other hand, the metaphysical features of cultural symbols will help to open new, previously unclear, cognitive horizons in the legacy of contemporary sociological thought on culture – that enormous, complex whole, in the words of Tylor.

## The Arab nation and its cultural cohesiveness and solidarity

Our concept of cultural symbols allows Arab sociologists to talk, for example, about the societies of the Arab world as a region whose near and distant parts are united by the principal Arab–Islamic cultural symbols: Islam and the Arabic language, and the culture of both. As such, the Arab nation is, first and foremost, a product of those cultural symbols, which transcend the factors of geographical proximity, economic exchange and military alliance between Arab countries. The spontaneous Arab and Islamic consciousness and solidarity among the masses and the elite in the societies of the Arab world are attributable, in our view, to what might be called, in the words of Ibn Khaldūn, cultural group solidarity. The author of the *Muqaddima* believes that the bond of kinship is the most important basis for solidarity and unity (*‘aṣabīya*) among individuals:

[Respect for] blood ties is something natural among men, with the rarest exceptions. It leads to affections for one’s relations and blood relatives, [the feeling that] no harm ought to befall them nor any destruction come upon them. One feels shame when one’s relatives are treated unjustly or attacked, and one wishes to intervene between them and whatever peril or destruction threatens them. This is a natural urge in man, for as long as there have been human beings. (Ibn Khaldūn, 1993, p.102 [1967, Vol. I, p.264])

Thus, Ibn Khaldūn’s conception of *‘aṣabīya* as solidarity toward those of blood kinship is a

phenomenon with bio-genetic roots. But by cultural solidarity we mean that the sharing by individuals, groups and communities of similar and homogeneous cultural symbols (language, beliefs, ideas and cultural values, norms and customs) automatically inclines them towards rapprochement and solidarity with one another, and makes them passionate supporters and defenders of all those who share those cultural symbols.

What distinguishes cultural solidarity from kinship solidarity is that the former is much more open-hearted and humane than the latter in terms of its capacity to embrace an enormous number of humanity's millions, possibly extending to include all of humankind, from all races, nations, ethnic groups, tribes and clans. The sharing of a single set of cultural symbols by the races of humankind creates, by means of something like a magic wand or what we have called the cultural symbolic soul (Dhaouadi, 1992), a bond of brotherhood, sisterhood and solidarity between individuals, nations and groups that do not know one another and may be separated by hundreds and thousands of miles. Conversely, the sweeping, spontaneous, Arab-Islamic sense of solidarity between the men and women of the societies of the great Arab world cannot be explained by Ibn Khaldūn's narrow concept of kinship solidarity.

It may thus be said that the sense of solidarity between Arab societies, which share key cultural symbols, is an established, objective fact, as long as the Arab peoples maintain their affiliation to homogeneous cultural symbols, at the forefront of which are the Islamic religion and the Arabic language, together with the culture of both. This sense may be now weakened, now strengthened under the pressure of various factors, but it is never extinguished: its nature is eternal, as eternal as the Arab-Islamic cultural symbols among the peoples of the Arab world.

In its weakest state, this sense of solidarity is a latent, silent force in the depths of the collective Arab-Islamic subconscious. In full bloom and vigour, the sense of solidarity among the Arab peoples becomes a raging, roaring force akin to the defiant metaphysical forces in the world of the collective Arab-Islamic consciousness against the enemies of the Arab and Islamic world. There is little doubt that the

manifestations of the strong and quasi-eternal bonds between the Arab peoples find a sound explanation in our cognitive Islamic view of the nature of cultural symbols.

Talk of the issue of Arab unity past and present acquires powerful legitimacy from the strong cultural unity that binds together the societies of the Arab region. The fact that the most of these people speak Arabic and profess the Islamic faith constitutes a foundation which is unequalled in strength, solidity and continuity over time by any economic, military or political union of peoples. Language and religion are thus two key elements of what we have termed cultural symbols (language, thought, knowledge/science, beliefs, cultural values and customs, and myths): all are elements which, on the one hand, have the capacity for longevity across time and space, and may even be eternal. On the other hand, the observations of authoritative social scientists suggest that when individuals, groups and peoples share a common language, faith and culture, this strengthens the bonds of interrelation, affinity and solidarity more than any other factor. Accordingly, it may be said that the propensity of European societies to enjoy long-term unity is weaker than that of Arab societies. The countries of the European Union, for example, speak a variety of languages while Arabic is the common language spoken by Arab societies. We are here in the presence of two different types of unity between peoples.

The European Union represents an attempt to unite its members, particularly at the economic, political and legal levels. It is a unity which strives to serve pressing momentary interests which ensure the course of progress in those societies. The unification of language and religion among these countries is not an issue that is included in the plan for European unity at the present time. Indeed, the constitution of the European Union respects linguistic and religious diversity. Given the absence of linguistic unity and the weak level of the Christian faith (owing to the multiplicity of sects and churches), the European Union that is coming into being is only a circumstantial and temporary union, in whose long-term continuity there can be no confidence. Only complete unification in respect of the key cultural symbols (the big markers of language and religion) qualifies peoples for long-

term and possibly eternal unification at the level of cultural unity.

The countries of the Arab region between the Gulf and the Atlantic Ocean, while lacking many elements of economic, political and legal unity, are, on the other hand, superior to the societies of the European Union at the level of cultural unity, as most of the inhabitants of the Arab world speak Arabic and profess Islam. Hence, the project of Arab unity finds powerful legitimacy in the consciousness of affinity, solidarity and unity among the Arab peoples, thanks to the shared cultural background that has existed between them for many centuries. The fact of cultural unity between the Arab peoples is thus prior to and independent of factors of geographical, economic, military and political unity and the variables of time and place. As seen with regard to the strong ties of cultural unity between the Arab peoples (cultural *'aṣabīya*), the reader of this article will probably not be surprised if we conclude by

affirming that the superiority of cultural symbols over other factors that unite societies and peoples – in terms of the longevity and strength of unity – finds strong legitimacy in our thesis of cultural symbols from an Islamic cognitive perspective, which gives a prominent place to the metaphysical. It thus appears that, on the one hand, the application of our concept of cultural symbols in order to understand and explain the foundations of the enduring solidarity of the Arab nation over the ages, and on the other hand, our in-depth analysis of the nature of culture in the rest of this study, are capable not only of contributing to a renewal of the horizons of Arab–Islamic sociological and anthropological thought (see al-Ansārī 2001), but also of going beyond that to become highly legitimate candidates for influencing the perspectives of modern western sociological and anthropological thought concerned with the study and theory of culture.

*Translated from Arabic*

## Note

1. The words supra-biological, super-organic and supra-organic are used by western anthropologists and sociologists to describe

the cultural aspect of individuals, although in their analyses these scholars do not refer unambiguously to culture as

having metaphysical features, as we demonstrate in this study.

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