

Islam And Culture

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Abstract: Over the centuries, Islam has been a force for the rapprochement of cultures, and provided a framework within which different cultures have grown and related. The basis of Muslim culture is Islam, and any interpretation of culture which is against the basic concepts of Muslims is not acceptable. Thus, an integral part of understanding Islam is to consider its many political and cultural embodiments, especially its connection to Arab culture and history. In some countries, Islam is deeply intertwined with the local culture, making some Muslim more active in the practice of their faith than others. This work identifies as a problem the struggle of Muslims adherents to practice their faith in a radically changed socio-cultural context of today's world. It acknowledges the deep respect shown by the Holy Prophet Mohammed to the culture of his host Arab community, and other ethnic groups. Recognise that the accommodation of indigenous culture by the Holy Prophet made it possible for Islam to lay strong roots in many nations. Concludes that among several others, accommodation, tolerant, and openness should be tools for religious interactions with cultures today.

Keywords: Islam, Culture, Prophet Mohammed, Accommodation

I. INTRODUCTION

Muslims believe that Islam governs the entire life of a Muslim, – politics, economic, social interactions, ethics, and morals. Islamic practices and beliefs are those that have roots in the Quran (which Muslims believe to be the last and unchanged revelation of God) and the S'unnah (tradition) of Prophet Muhammed. Culture has been defined as “the totality of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristic of a community or a population. It is the set of shared beliefs, attitudes, values, and behavioural patterns of a group or organisations” (212).

No religion can claim to encompass the totality of culture as no culture is solely the product of a religion. Islam like many other religions claim to be universal, accommodating within its fold, the culture of all its adherents provided that the bounds of the religious laws are not transgressed. Islam has broad parameters of rules and regulations and within these parameters an African can remain as much a muslim as a Pakistani or a Bangladeshi or an Englishman or an American or any individual from any country anywhere in the world. Islam contain a common set of fundamental culture and beliefs

that are described as articles of faith and considered as the foundation of Islamic belief system, namely; belief in one God, belief in angels, belief in prophets, belief in divine books, belief in day of judgement and belief in destiny and divine decree.

II. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ISLAMIC RELIGION

Islam is one of the major religions of the world today. It enjoys this status because of the large number of its adherents the world over, the number of countries where it is practiced (about 60) and the impact it has made on global socio-political, economic, cultural and religious activities, policies and way of life. The religion was found by Muhammed (A.D 570-632) who was born in Mecca and died in Medina, all in the present day Saudi Arabia. Muhammed is usually referred to as the Holy Prophet and messenger of God (Rusulullah) by the adherents of the Islamic faith. The word ‘Islam’ itself literally means “submission’ or ‘surrender’ to the will of God. It is derived from the word ‘salam’ or ‘silm’ which refer to “making peace, being in a mutually peaceful environment, keeping away from trouble and disaster.” An adherent of the

Islamic faith is called a “Muslim” which literary means “one who submits to the will of Allah.” The basic tenets of the Islamic religion are contained in the Islamic Holy scripture – the Qur’an and in the Sunnāh (guidance) of the prophet Muhammad himself.

Three fundamental elements make up the Islamic creed. First is the “submission – islam” which every Muslim is called to give to Allah. It constitutes the core value system of the faith around which other values revolve and from which the faith derives its name. Faith (Imām) and good personal conduct (ihsān – righteousness or piety), constitute the second and third element respectively. The first element submitting to Allah (islām) can be done in five different ways which traditionally have been termed the five pillars of Islam. These five pillars are – first, the shahadā – a twofold declaration testifying that only Allāh is God and that Muhammed is his prophet (messenger), second the Salāt – the performance of the five daily prayers, third the annual payment of specific tax (zakāt); fourth the Ramadan fast (Sawn); and fifth, the pilgrimage (hāj) to Mecca at least once in a lifetime for those who can afford it.

The second element of the Islamic creed, also known as iman or faith consists in belief in God, his angels, his books, his messengers, the final day and the divine origin of all form of life. Such faith according to the prophet himself involved “knowing with the heart, voicing with the tongue and expressing with the body” (Khalid).

The third element is ihsan, and it consists in living a personal life of righteousness and piety before Allah with the knowledge that he sees us even when we do not see him because Allah is ever present and ever watchful. Such piety goes beyond ritual prayers and is always construed as an act of worship. Islam is not just a religion, it is a world viewed and a way of life, that is, a way of relating with oneself, other human beings and with the world in which we live.

III. THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

The encyclopedia Britannica describes the pillars of Islam, Arabic Arkan al-islam as the five duties incumbent on every muslim. There are Shahādah; salāt; zakat; Sawn and Haij.

- ✓ *SHAHADĀH* (faith) or belief in the oneness of God and the finality of the prophet hood of Muhammed. “There is none worthy of worship except God and Muhammed is the messenger of God”. This declaration of faith is called the Shahadah, a simple formula that all the faithful pronounce. The significance of this declaration is the belief that the only purpose of life is to serve and obey God and it is achieved through the teaching practices of the last prophet Muhammed.
- ✓ *SALĀT*: Is the obligatory prayers that are performed five times a day in a prescribed manner. There are a direct link between the worshippers and God. Islam has no hierarchical authority and there are no priests. Prayers are led by one who knows the Qur’an and chosen by the congregation. Prayers are said at dawn, midday, late afternoon, sunset and nightfall. These five prescribed prayers contain verses from the Qur’an and said in

Arabic. Although it is preferable to worship together in a mosque a muslim may pray anywhere.

- ✓ *ZAKAH*: Is the financial obligation upon muslims, the alms tax levied to benefit the poor and the needy. Islam believes that everything belongs to God and that wealth is therefore held by human beings in trust. The word Zakah means both “purification” and “growth”. What we own is purified by setting aside a proportion for those in need and for society. Each muslim calculate his own zakah individually. it is the annual payment of a fortieth of one’s capital outside permanent property. In the case of Sadaqah, one may give as much as he or she pleases, and does so in secret. The prophet said “charity is a necessity for every muslim.”
- ✓ *DAWN (FASTING)*: Every year in the month of Ramadan, every muslim must fast from dawn until sundown, abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relation with their spouses. Fasting is a means of self-purification and self-restraint, by depriving oneself of worldly things, one focuses more on God and doing good. The Holy Qur’an states: “O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you that you may learn self-restraint” (2: 183).
The sick, elderly or those on a journey, and women who are menstruating, pregnant or nursing are permitted to break the fast and make up an equal number of days later in the year if healthy and able.
- ✓ *HAJJ (PILGRIMAGE)*: For every muslim who has the financial and physical capacity, a pilgrimage to makkah is an obligation at least once in a life time. The annual hajj begins in the twelfth month of the Islamic year. Pilgrims wear simple garments that strip away distinctions of class and culture so that all stand equal before God. The hajj rites are of Abrahamic origin, these include going around the Ka’bah seven times and going seven times between the hills of safa and Marwa as did Hagar searching for water. The Pilgrims then pray on the plains of Arafat and the hajj come to a close with the festival of ‘id al Adha.

IV. CULTURE – A DEFINITION

ETYMOLOGY

Culture is from the Latin word *Cultura* derived from the verb *Colere* meaning “to cultivate” or “to tend” or “to till” among other things (Tucker 3). It can take objects such as *ager*, hence *agricultura*, - “filled tilling”, or take the verb *colo* meaning *animus* (character) – the cultivation of human character. Thus, the Latin noun *culura* can be associated with education and refinement.

For many researchers and practitioners, culture is “the C-word, mysterious, frightening, and to be avoided” (Berry 2). Culture is a notoriously difficult terms to be defined (Spencer – Oatey 1). This is so because of its multiple meaning. But to compound matters, the difficulties are not merely conceptual or semantic. All of the usages and understanding come attached to, or can be attached to, different political, or ideological agendas that, in one form or another, still resonate today (Avruch 21). Consequently, “Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early

1990s no agreement among anthropologies regarding its nature” (Apte 210).

The difficulty of a definition emanate from the different usage of the term as it was employed in the nineteenth century. It was used in three ways. Firstly, as seen in Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1867), culture referred to special intellectual or artistic endeavours or products, what today we might call “high culture” as opposed to “popular culture”. By implication this definition means that only a small portion of any social group “has” culture.

The second as pioneered by Edward Tylor in his 1879 work *Primitive Culture*, defined culture as “that complex whole which include knowledge, belief art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Spencer-Oatey 2). This became the foundational definition for anthropology.

The third usage of culture came to being in the twentieth-century work of Franz Boaz and his students. This was influenced by the eighteenth-century writings of Johann Von Herder. Boaz lays emphasis on the uniqueness of the many and varied cultures of different peoples or societies. For him one should never differentiate high from low culture, and one ought not differentially valorize cultures as savage or civilized.

This formed the foundation of many other definitions of cultures in the decades that followed. For Kroeber and Kluckhohn “culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action” (Adler 14). Aofstede define culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (5).

V. ISLAM AND CULTURAL INTERFACE

Customs haven been practiced by a people over a long period become deeply in-built in them and difficult to distinguish from their basic nature. The customs become a way of life of a people. Changing customary conventions unnecessarily is detrimental to the people, because of the strong connection that exist between customs and societal needs. However, changing or repealing unhealthy customs require wise strategy, wisdom and time. Some muslims randomly challenge the authority of indigenous customs and ethics citing the hadith of the prophet as authority. “Whoever imitate a people belongs to them” (Abu Daud, 4031). This assertion if taken literary could be misleading and capable of causing great disaffection among communities.

While the Hadith condemns the servile imitation of others; it does not condemn healthy cultural interaction or the mere act of resembling other people. The value of such interaction is especially clear when it is done for laudable reasons like living with others harmoniously and building bridges of understanding and cooperation. For Umah Abd-

Allah “The maxim” culture has the weight of law” affirms that Islam is not culturally predatory, and teaches muslims to look upon all cultural heritages with an open mind, especially those where they live and to which they belong” (3). “Once a group of Ethiopia converts began to dance with drums and spears in the prophet’s mosque in celebration of an annual Islamic festival. The companion Umar attempted to stop them, but the prophet intervened and urged them. Play your games, sons of Ethiopia, so that the Jews and Christians know that there is flexibility (Fusha) in our religion” (57). By this and similar acts, the prophet set the precedent of affirming cultural differences and made it clear that, non-Arabs, entering Islam did not require them to give up their own cultural norms for those of the Arabs (umah Abd-Allah, 4). The Qur’an revealed the following verse to the prophet on the eve of his migration to Medina; “Accept from people what comes naturally from them. Commend what is good by custom; and turn away from the ignorant without responding in kind” (7: 199).

Furthermore, the prophet wore various types of non-muslim clothing that were given to him as gifts from Byzantine, Yemen, etc. Islamic law takes an open-minded attitude towards customs and cultural heritages. Customs must be presumed acceptable, permissible, beneficial and good until proven otherwise. The influence of Islam in the culture of its practitioners is so deep, it is seen in every facet of their life and society. In our daily interaction between people, even the language is heavily loaded with islamic phrases – Inshallah (God willing), Al-Hamdullah (praise be to God) and As-salamu Alaykum (peace be unto you). Most of these phrases are used even by non-muslims.

The influence of is also visible in architecture. Although throughout history, Islam does not dictate a set design for mosques, the only necessary architectural element is the availability of an area for prayer. Many Muslims regard minarets as an essential features of the mosque. The prophet’s mosque had not minarets during his lifetime. Domes and minarets were post prophetic cultural innovations in the Muslim world. They were a relatively late development in Islamic architecture, whose primary purpose were ideal for making the call to prayer and beacons for caravan. Muslims in China, Andalusia, North and West Africa did not adopt domes or minarets because they did not suit their environments.

The Prophet while propagating Islam in Arabia showed deep respect to the language of the people. Throughout Arabia, the Arab tribes understood and could speak the Meccan dialect of the prophet’s tribe, Quraysh, which served as the linguistic standard for all. But the prophet propagated the Qur’an in the seven principal dialectical variations (abruf) of Arabic. This was a respectful acknowledgement of each tribe’s cultural identity.

Islamic jurisprudence regards sound cultural norms as constituting an independent and authoritative source of Islamic law. The nature of indigenous cultures and subcultures is fundamentally linked to the wellbeing of the social groups that have adopted them. Muslim jurist hold that it is obligatory to let people follow their customs, usages, and general aspiration in life. To hand down ruling in opposition to them is gross deviation and tyranny. It is this accommodation of indigenous cultures that made it possible for Islam to lay deep roots in Africa and part of Asia.

The influence of Islamic culture is visible among others in the practice of hijab. This practice is common to all Muslims irrespective of national boundaries.

HIJAB

Hijab is an Arabic word meaning barrier or partition. In Islam, however, it has a broader meaning. It is the principle of modesty and includes behaviour as well as dress for both male and female. The most visible form of hijab is the head covering that many Muslim women wear. Hijab however goes beyond the headscarf. "In one popular school of Islamic thought, hijab refers to the complete covering of everything except the hands, face and feet in long, loose and non-see-through garments. A woman who wears hijab is called muhaajaba" (bbc.com 7).

THE QUR'AN AND HIJAB

Islam emphasized strongly the concept of decency and modesty in the interaction between members of the opposite sex. Dress code is part of the overall teaching. In the Holy Qur'an Allah talks about the issue in two classic verses, Chapter 24 known as an-war (the light). In verse 30, Allah commands prophet Muhammed as follows: "Say to the believing men that: they should cast down their private parts (by being chaste). This is better for them" It is a command to Muslim men to avoid lustfully looking at women other than their wives. To cast their glances downward is known as "hijab of the eyes". 24: 31, Allah command the prophet to address the women; "Say to the believing women that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (be being chaste)..."

FIRST VERSE

Then came the order describing the dress code for women: "... and not display their beauty except what is apparent and they should place their khumur over their booms..."

Khumur is plural of khimar, the veil covering the head. Al-Munjid, the most popular dictionary in the Arab world, defines al-khimar as "something with which a woman conceals her head" (Al Munjid 195). The verse goes on to give the list of the mahram male family members in whose presence the hijab is not required, husband, the father, the father in-law, the son(s) and others.

THE SECOND VERSE

In chapter 33 known as al-Ahzab Verse 59, Allah give to Prophet Muhammed the command: "O prophet! say to your wives, your daughters, and the women of the believers that: they should let down upon themselves their Jalab."

Jalabib, is the plural of Jiibab, which means a loose outer garment. Al-munjid, defines jilbab as "the shirt or wide dress" while at al-Turayhi, in majma'uil-Bahraym, defines it as a wide dress, wider than the scarf and shorter than a robe, that a woman puts upon her head and lets it down on her bosom" (Ar-Razi, 179).

There are several arguments among scholars as to the inclusion of a woman's face as part of the body that needs to be compulsorily covered. Two theological schools of thought exist: The Hanafis and Malikis believe that the face and hands are not to be covered, while the followers of Imam shafici and Hanabali maintain that a woman has to be fully veiled. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan hold that although a woman's face is not included in part of the body that need to be compulsorily covered, he suggest however, that it is better to cover it in order to discourage mischief, in view of the general moral degradation of present day society (225).

Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani is of the opinion that the hands are not to be covered; he sustain:

It is clear from the Qur'an, the Hadith and the practice of the companions and tab'un that, whenever a woman steps out of her home, it is incumbent upon her to cover herself completely so as not to show any part of her body except the face and the hands (7).

Al-Albani goes further to give the rules of hijab as:

- ✓ The whole body, except for the exempted parts should be covered.
- ✓ But any veil which in itself becomes an attraction is to be avoided.
- ✓ Garments should not be semi-transparent.
- ✓ Dress should not be tight fitting
- ✓ Garments should not perfumed
- ✓ The form of dress should not in any way resemble that of man
- ✓ It should not resemble that non-believers.
- ✓ Garments should not reflect worldly honour (13)

Hijab protects women from the lust of men. It symbolizes her commitment to only one man. Hijab for moslems help in the preservation and stability of marriages and family, and reduces the chances of extra-marital affairs. Hijab is therefore for moslems not a symbol of oppression. It is introduce by islam as part of the decency and modesty in interaction between members of the opposing sect. The Qur'an says "It is more appropriate so that they may be known (as muslim women) and thus not be harassed (or molested)" (33: 59)

VI. CONCLUSION

The teachings of the Holy Prophet and His attitude towards the cultural norms of the Arab tribes and other ethnic groups is a major precedent and a standard for Islamic jurisprudence. He gave broad endorsement to diverse cultural conventions and only altered them when necessary or when offensive to the new religion. This teaches Muslims to look upon all cultural heritages with an open mind, especially those where they live and to which they belong.

Human beings adopt cultural norms suitable for themselves at the particular circumstance, time, and place in which they live. Islamic legal theory regards sound cultural norms as constituting a independent and authoritative source of islamic law. The nature of indigenous cultures and subcultures is fundamentally linked to the wellbeing of the social group that have adopted them.

Accommodation of indigenous cultures made it possible for islam to lay strong roots in Africa, Indonesia and Europe.

Customs are matters that are firmly established in practice and are now part of a peoples way of life. While islam means voluntary “submission” or “surrender” to the will of God. It includes being in a mutually peaceful environment, keeping away from troubles and disaster. Subsequently, Muslims are obliged to measure every custom with the Qur’an and hadith. Customs are presumed to be permissible, beneficial and good until proven otherwise. The basic rule in custom is exemption.

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