Islam, Culture and Identity

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As a global ideal, an important quality of Islam is that it envisions a unifying system for Muslims to relate to each other and the world in which they live, while also allowing diverse peoples to flourish within that system with little interference or direct homogenization into a monolithic entity. At the same time, if we are honest with ourselves, we can also find instances when Islamic societies acted against those ideals and operated according to social or environmental needs, in the name of things like tribal loyalties or survival in the face of natural disasters.

In fact, it is often difficult to put the pure ideals into full practice on a broad scale. Therefore, Muslims have evolved a variety of ways to live in different times and places. The place where the ideals of Islam have intersected with existing social and environmental contexts is called "culture."

When talking about culture, it is important to make clear distinctions about what culture can and cannot do. Generally speaking, there can be no single culture, since culture, as generally understood by social scientists today, refers to the way of life of a particular people at a particular time and place, and how those people make meaning of the world. Culture also has two dimensions, the material dimension and the symbolic dimension.

The material dimension of culture refers to artifacts, behaviors and creative works that are passed down over time, often understood in terms of "tradition" or even "folklore," although "culture" gives a more inclusive way of talking about all of that. The material dimension of culture is historical and inherited, learned from one's parents, families, communities, and also from the artifacts, including writings, left by ancestors. To the extent that that material dimension of culture is informed by Islamic ideals, it can indeed contribute to making an "Islamic culture." But to be a useful term for analysis, and not just a tool for da'wah or public relations, it also needs to be understood that culture changes, and that Muslim cultures throughout the centuries have taken many shapes and forms, both ebbing and flowing according to specific circumstances.

The second dimension of culture, and the one that is more complex, is the symbolic dimension. This refers more or less to how people construct meanings of the world, how they interpret events, actions, ideas; this for the most part is present-oriented. Take something like a hand salute or the wink of an eye, and run this across cultures – including Muslim cultures – and

immediately an array of conflicting meanings can be found.

Taken together, the material and the symbolic dimensions of culture can create what might be called Muslim cultures, which are never purely "Islamic" but which reflect different emphases and combinations of different elements. In this sense, there can be no pure culture, and therefore for the purpose of understanding the present it would not be useful to talk about a single Islamic culture, because that immediately leads to specious and often fruitless arguments. The more interesting question is, "How do cultures form and why are they maintained?"

Again, it is important to keep the distinction here between Islam as a religion – and even within that there are many ways to live an Islamic lifestyle – and Muslim culture as a living or lived entity that reflects the worldview of a people at a given time and place, and which is made up of the ideals intermingled in different ways with social and environmental realities.

While it is true that conventional social science, both in the West and elsewhere, generally understands culture in this way, one might also wish to ask how Muslim thinkers, such as Ibn Khaldun and others, have defined culture, and how these concepts of culture vary from "culture" as understood today.

The present social-science definition is useful to a certain extent as a tool to try to understand the ways in which different peoples apprehend the reality with which they are faced. For views from the past, one would need to do a detailed textual analysis of the Arabic to find out what people like Ibn Khaldun thought about culture, especially since there is no agreement on which word we would be looking for.

Is it thaqafah? Or hadarah and tamaddun? Or umran? Or akhlaq and adab? All of these carry some part of the concept of "culture" as understood today. Ibn Khaldun wrote primarily about hadarah, which can be taken to mean the ethical dimension of life, and tamaddun, which can be seen as the material dimension of life. Sometimes they are understood, respectively, as "civilization" and "urbanization."

But Ibn Khaldun was concerned with many things related to both concepts, especially his famed supposition that urban life is liable to be corrupted and often in need of reform, which can only come from the more "pure" people of the rural areas. Statements like this lead some to see him as the first sociologist, since sociology is concerned with large groups of people, usually within a given location (e.g. a city). But sociology is less concerned with diversity and the symbolic dimension of culture, which is primarily what anthropologists have come round to studying during the past century.

Suffice for now to say that "culture" can often be misunderstood, and can be pressed into

service to explain almost anything, in which case it really explains nothing. So the question of how people now understand culture and society, or civilization and urbanization, and how they were understood by someone who lived centuries ago, is really a complex set of questions, and there are no easy answers. There have been attempts, of course, most notably by Akbar Ahmad, to create an "Islamic anthropology," but these often fall down on the same problem of what one means by culture.

If a humanistic perspective is taken, then the way culture is understood by anthropology is useful, despite being limited to a relativist outlook. If one takes a more religious perspective, culture takes on different meanings, but then gets intertwined with what is "correct" culture, moving it much closer to ethics and morality. Since culture presently is a relativistic term, it is more useful for comparison of dissimilar ways of life, which at the same time have some commonalities (e.g., marriage traditions seen comparatively across cultures), but it is less useful as a tool to make a moral or ethical point, which is perhaps why the Islamic-anthropology movement never got very far. In any event, although many peoples of the world live in the here and now, with an eye to the past and future, there are vast complexities of cultures among Muslims, not to mention other peoples. Many people think that culture is someone's music, food, drink and dress, and when they attend various "cultural" exhibitions that is what they see there. They want to know how Muslims, especially those in the West, can show-case culture in a richer way without just dealing with these material aspects, but instead trying to hold exhibitions or activities where people can delve a little deeper into the core of a culture. But anything that is put on stage or in a showcase proceeds from a rather limited, and perhaps even destructive, concept of culture. It assumes that culture is only the material artifacts and observable behaviors produced by a particular people.

Even with that, putting it "on stage" seems to solidify it in a way that makes it somehow unreal. Culture has a symbolic dimension, and this cannot be easily put on display. One can only really apprehend the symbolic dimension of a culture by living it. The benefits of anthropology as presently practised in a relativistic sense can be debated from various perspectives, but one thing stands out in the end: that anthropologists (at their best) take the time to learn the language of the people they are studying, and they often dedicate several years of their lives to living among people of a very different cultural outlook to gain insights into the way those people apprehend the world. But in today's superficial media culture, how much of that can really be squeezed between two commercials on TV or fit into a stage show for an hour and a half? It almost seems foolish when looked at

that way. While this might not be the desired analysis for those committed to da'wah and public relations, the best way to really know about another culture – especially its crucial symbolic dimension – is to live in that culture.

Stage shows and the like pose the added danger of creating an illusion that Muslims are somehow "protecting" or "preserving" their culture. That leaves little to talk about how people actually live their lives and, more importantly for understanding culture, how they make meaning.

Many Muslims, especially those living in Europe and America, get caught up in trying to reconcile their European or American identity and their Muslim or ethnic identity, often wondering if there is a necessary "clash of cultures," and whether there is a way to remedy this situation. In a way, this issue is faced by many immigrant populations, not just Muslims. But somehow, identity seems to be taking on an altered meaning today when faced with other identities, especially those that are politicized. Assimilation can sometimes happen in this situation, and, for better or worse, is a useful survival tactic. There does not necessarily have to be conflict, but there are those who wish to "purify" or "protect" what they perceive as being under some sort of threat. This puts tremendous pressure on the newcomer to assimilate, although pressures come and go with the times.

For example, it should be remembered that what is now called "Independence Day" in America (July 4) was once called "Americanization Day", and arose out of concerns related to security and loyalty during the first "world war". It hit immigrants worst, and for a long time (several decades) newcomers worked very hard to forget who they were and conform to the dominant culture.

In the 1960s the rise of nationalism eased this trend a bit, and then came the new concepts of multiculturalism and pluralism, which seem to be saying that there can be differences side by side and that they need not fight nor conform. But that has problems, too, as it can quickly become politics.

In fact, at different times and places, Muslim identity has become politicized, just like African identity and Hispanic identity at other times and places. There is no easy answer to this question, and no simple solution, but for now one can reflect on what it means to live with difference and diversity. One way to deal with that is to exterminate diversity, the other way is to live with it.

Who controls how that works is more complex, but it is probably safe to say that most people are against extermination as an option for dealing with diversity. That leaves co-existence. One way to reconcile this tension is to find common interests, across cultures, and create an

identity that is first and foremost human.

This sounds strange, but one does not have to look far today to find many examples of utterly inhuman behavior, on battlefields, in corporate boardrooms, and in many other situations. So perhaps it can be useful to concentrate first on a common sense of humanity, which at any rate seems more pronounced in recent years with the rise of globalist thinking, but also to reflect on how people are in some sense even losing their humanity through addictions to various forms of technology and bureaucracy.

In other words, without human survival, cultural survival becomes meaningless. This may not be easy to comprehend, but the key to cultural survival today, beyond putting on shows and programmes, or setting up clubs to "protect" specific identities, is to find our common humanity and then go into the Islamic tradition and interrogate that tradition for what it has to offer this common sense of humanity.