

The term “Civilization” in the Muslim intellectual Traditions: Changing Vocabulary and Varied Conceptions

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present an investigation on the use of the term “civilization” in Muslim intellectual traditions; that is to look for the terms used in various languages used by Muslim peoples to mean civilization. It tries to find out some definition of what we mean by “civilization” as well as what we mean by “being civilized” in Islamic intellectual traditions.

Therefore, the methodology adopted to achieve the paper's objective is to analyze the various literal and terminological words and terms used to denote civilization in various Muslim languages.

The paper finds that in the Muslim scientific and cultural traditions, hadarah, tamaddun or tamadun are the various terms used. However, Ibn Khaldun's term hadarah is the most appropriate one to express the concept of civilization in its modern sense.

It is also clear that the mentioned usages of term “civilization” agree on certain rudimentary elements of civilization, that is, the presence of the city, the order or organization and the sedentary life of its inhabitants.

Keywords: Civilization, Hadarah, Tamadun, Ibn Khaldun, Muslim, Arab, Persian, Malay, Turkish.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present an investigation on the use of the term “civilization” in Muslim intellectual traditions; that is to look for the terms used in various languages used by Muslim peoples to mean civilization. It tries to find out some definition of what we mean by “civilization” as well as what we mean by “being civilized” in Islamic intellectual traditions.

However, to undertake such a task, two difficulties face us; First, there is a problem in determining the concept of civilization which arises from the diversity of cultural and linguistic traditions, on one hand. On the other hand, the term civilization has other synonyms used in different languages of the Muslim worldⁱ.

The second difficulty is the controversies between the various definitions assigned to civilization by different writers. It would be pleasant, as Braudelⁱⁱ asserts, to be able to define the word “civilization” simply and precisely, as one defines a straight line, a triangle or a chemical element. However, the term “civilization” is widely used by historians, anthropologists, and other workers in the social sciences, but it has no single, fixed meaningⁱⁱⁱ.

Taking those mentioned difficulties into consideration, the following sections are an attempt to elaborate on both the changing vocabulary of the term and the concept of civilization in Muslim intellectual traditions.

1. The Literal Meaning of Civilization:

To begin with, in Arabic, the current usage of the term *Hadarah* is used as a synonym of the English word "civilization". In the famous traditional dictionary of the Arabic language *Lisān al-'Arab*, it means presence as opposed to absence...Sedentary vis-a-vis Bedouin. It has a relationship with the term *Hadirah* which means a city or big community^{iv}. It also means staying in a city as opposed to Bedouin...also the inhabitant of the cities and villages^v.

In his *An Arabic English Lexicon*, Lane mentioned that the Arabic term *Hadarah* is used to mean a land or house inhabited, peopled, and well peopled. It means a land in a flourishing state, in a state contrary to desolation, waste or ruin. Another meaning is a land colonized and cultivated or well cultivated. In addition, it means a house in a state of repair^{vi}. This definition denotes two aspects of civilization in the Arabic context. First, stabilizing or settling in a place or land or house. Second, civilization is a state of development and richness.

Hadarah means also "a building, a structure, an edifice; or perhaps the act of building"^{vii}. This definition emphasizes the significance of the structuring and the act of building. In other words, civilization can be a process of constructing and an act of establishing a prosperous life for mankind.

That is to say, when men no longer have to submit to brute necessity but begin instead to dominate their environment, they are at last in a position to remould their patterns of living and to transmit a common social heritage. When this process continues to the point where men exert a wide control over nature and have developed a highly complex culture pattern – including an urban structure superimposed upon an agricultural base they can be said to possess a civilization

In the *Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, the reader finds a thorough analysis of the word *Hadarah* and its related derived words^{viii}. In this book, six terms are interlinked and may help in clarifying the meanings of civilization in Arabic usage; first, *hadara* (verb) which means to be present or be in the presence. The second term is *hadarah* (noun) which means to be settled, sedentary (in a civilized region, as opposed to leading a nomadic existence). Third, *hadr* (noun) which means a civilized region with towns and villages and a settled population (as opposed to desert. Steppe); settled population, town dwellers. Fourth is *hadari* (adj) which means settled, sedentary, resident, not nomadic, non-Bedouin, urban, and town dweller. Fifth is *hadarah* (noun) which means a civilization; culture; settledness, sedentariness. Sixth is *hādīra* (noun), which means a capital city, metropolis; city (as a centre of civilization)^{ix}.

Furthermore, other terms which have close links with *hadarah* are *madaniyyah*, *tamaddun* and *tamdīn*. In fact, the word *tamaddun* is derived from the Arabic word *Madinah* (literally, "city" or "town") and *tamaddun* (literally, urbanization). Close to the latter terms, there is also the term *madaniyyah* which, literally, means urbanism^x. The three interrelated terms of city, urbanization, and urbanism denote that

the city is the starting point of the urbanization process to achieve the state of urbanism. In the same context, *madinah* and *ḥāḍirah* are identical, and both mean a city and a town.

However, regarding the modern usage of the terms in the Muslim traditions, there are some differences. Since the late nineteenth century, modern thinkers and writers in the Muslim world have been using certain terms in contrast with the term civilization used by the Europeans. They used a variety of terms such as '*Umrān, hadarah, madaniyyah, nahḍah, tamaddun, and madaniyat*^{xi}. Despite the different terms used to denote the English-French term of civilization, the most famous and popularly used term in Arabic is *hadarah*. However, the researcher agrees with Beg's note that the popular term for civilization in some Muslim countries is not *hadarah* but *tamaddun* or *tamadun*. The latter is widely used in Malay culture and language^{xii}.

Historically speaking, one could mention the first changes brought to the Arab society by the coming of Islam, especially by the migration (hijrah) of the Prophet Muhammad (SWS)^{xiii} from Makkah to Madinah. He changed the name of the city of *Yathrib* to Madinah (a city). Furthermore, he made changes in the basis of the social relationships. Instead of the tribal based relationships, he based it on an idea. It is the religious idea of brotherhood that brought together different people from a different social status and different ethnic groups to form a new web of social relationships. This later transformed the culture of people from Bedouin, tribal paganism into a civil ideational Islamic culture, which made the input for a new civilizing process and new civilizational entity.

In other words, the city is the starting point of any civilizing process, and there are arguments amongst archaeologists, pre-historians, ancient historians and sociologists over the origins of civilization and the place of cities within the civilizing process^{xiv}. Thus, the Prophet (SWS), as the founder of a new society and a new civilization, realized that there must be some development of urban society. That is, of city life, so that the culture is not nomadic, tribal, dispersed, and thus unable to leave significant and surviving physical remains of its presence. In this regard, he established the city of Madinah since his first day of migration, for Madinah was meant to be the nucleus for the civilizational transformation that took place after the advent of Islam.

In cultural terms, it is evident that the notion of "city", as being indicative of a discrete way of life, was available throughout the history in the Muslim world since the establishment of Madinah. In this regard, there can be little doubt that Islamic as well as all civilizations in world history have developed significant central places in which key social functions are located and where the population have congregated. For example, we can mention the establishment of *Kūfah, Baṣrah, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Bukhārā* and other cities in the Muslim world, for these cities to be centers of civilized sedentary life. Furthermore, it is clear also that many Islamic traditions are focused on the city (or madinah) with its mosque, bathhouse, and markets as the locality wherein a devout life could be achieved^{xv}.

2. The Terminological Definition of Civilization:

The terminological definition of the term "civilization" within the Muslim cultural traditions witnessed two stages in its definition. It was first conceived by Ibn Khaldun in the early fourteenth century. The

second stage started as early as the late nineteenth. The following two sections are a discussion of both stages.

1.1. The First Stage:

The term civilization was first conceived in the Muslim world as early as the fourteenth century AC/ eighth century of the Muslim era by Ibn Khaldun. In addition, Ibn Khaldun introduced three terms; the first two terms are *hadarah* and *'Umrān*, comparable with the Western term civilization, the third term is "*'Ilm al-'Umrān*" which could be translated as "the science of civilization". He considered civilization as a quality peculiar to man. This means that human beings have to dwell and settle together in cities and hamlets for the comforts of companionship and for the satisfaction of human needs^{xvi}. He also gave another meaning to the term civilization as "the necessary character of human social organization"^{xvii}. In this definition, Ibn Khaldun focused on the social dimension of the term. However, in the previous definition, he focused on the settlement in cities in a collective manner. Thus, Ibn Khaldun's conception underlies the social dimension as well as the dynamic character of the phenomenon of civilization in the course of human development.

In mentioning Ibn Khaldun, one must not, however, neglect the contributions of other Muslim historians and philosophers who came both before and after him. Names like al-Fārābī (259-339 AH / 872-950 AC), al-Ṭabarī (224-310 AH / 838-922 AC), al-Mas'ūdī (d. 346 AH / 957 AC), Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 AH / 1063 AC), and others were of great importance for Ibn Khaldun in developing his theory of civilization. However, unlike him they did not develop theories regarding the subject matter of the present study. Indeed, Ibn Khaldun is an outstanding figure to be dealt with in matters of civilization and its rise and fall, and could be classified as representing the first stage in the development of the Islamic concept of civilization^{xviii}.

2.2. The Second Stage:

The second stage in the development of the concept of civilization among Muslim scientists, scholars, academicians, activists, and intellectuals in general began in the late nineteenth century with the first confrontations with modern Europe and the emergence of Islamic revivalism.

In this second stage, two trends in the Arab world emerged to translate the term "civilization" into two terms. On the one hand, we find writers of the early nineteenth century translating civilization into the Arabic term *madaniyyah* and its synonym *tamaddun*, including among others, Rifā'ah al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1801-1873), Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashīd Reḍā (1865-1935). These and other writers have used the terms *madaniyyah* and *tamaddun* to mean civilization^{xix}. On the other hand, as early as the second quarter of the twentieth century, the term *hadarah* had been used to mean civilization. It became the popular term among different scientific and intellectual circles in the Arab world. In this line, Bennabi was a pioneer in choosing the term *hadarah* to denote the term civilization since the early days of his intellectual career which began with the publication of *The Qur'anic Phenomenon* in 1947. Furthermore, Bennabi gave the series the title *Mushkilāt al-Hadah* (the problems of civilization) with a specific title for each book of the series.

In other languages of the Muslim world, the term used is *madaniyyah* or its derivations. In this regard, Beg notes:

The Persian intellectuals have coined two terms for civilization, namely, *madaniyah* and *tamadun*... the Turks, on the other hand, use the term *medeniyet* and also *medeniyeti* in the meaning of civilization... in East Africa, the speakers of the Swahili language have been using the term *Utamaduni* (derived from Arabic *tamadun*) as the term for civilization... in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh there is no universally accepted term for civilization. The speakers of Urdu and Bengali have been using two words (sometimes interchangeably) to express the sense of culture and civilization, viz., *tahzib* (*tahdhib*) and *tamadun*. Some Pakistani Urdu lexicographers use the term *tahzib* in the dual sense of culture and civilization, but they restrict the use of *tamadun* in the sense of civilization... Bangali Muslim intellectuals have used the word *tamadun* in the sense of culture. They also use the word *tahzib* in the sense of civilization... on the other hand, the Malays of Malaysia and Indonesia unanimously use the word *tamaddun* (popularly spelt as *tamadun*) as the term for civilization^{xx}.

Taking into consideration the different terms used to mean civilization in the Muslim cultural traditions, it is important to mention that all the terms used are derived from Arabic. However, despite the differences in the use of the terms, their meanings tend to converge to denote civilization, with a specific focus for each term on certain aspects of civilization.

It is also worth mentioning that, at first, the modern usage was *tamadun* and *madaniyat*, but after rediscovering the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldun, the Arabs used to prefer the term *hadarah*, being influenced by Ibn Khaldun's usage. However, other non-Arab Muslims preferred the use of *madaniyat* and *tamadun* which are close in meaning to the term *hadarah*, which is used by Arabs.

3. Conclusion:

To conclude with, we can say that in the quest for an appropriate term for civilization in the Muslim scientific and cultural traditions, *hadarah*, *tamaddun* or *tamadun* are the various terms used. However, Ibn Khaldun's term *hadarah* is the most appropriate one to express the concept of civilization in its modern sense.

Linguistically speaking, *hadarah* is related to the civilizing and urbanization processes. It is also related to the city and its spirit. It has social content, as well as the connotations of the presence, the sedentary and the inhabitation, which means if people inhabit and stay in such a place, some sort of social relationships and interchange will be developed. So, they cooperate and organize themselves, and build cities and institutions.

Thus, *hadarah*, in its linguistic usage, focuses upon the social aspect. Furthermore, it means that civilization cannot emerge unless there are social relationships among people resulting in the cooperation, organization and order in a specific place, which is the city.

It is also clear that the mentioned usages of term "civilization" agree on certain rudimentary elements of civilization, that is, the presence of the city, the order or organization and the sedentary life of its inhabitants. This is because the human being, using Ibn Khaldun's term, is a social being by its nature^{xxi}. In other words, he has the desire to live in an organized and orderly community. This is part of the human

instinct that governs human behavior in its social and civilizational sphere. This has always been a human objective throughout the history of mankind.

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- ^{iv} Ibn Manzūr, Abu al-Faraj. *Lisān al-‘Arab (The Arab’s Language)*. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968, pp. 4/196-197.
- ^v Bustani, Butrus. *Kitāb Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ*. Beirut: Maktabat Lubnan, 1970, p. 175.
- ^{vi} Lane, Edward William. *An Arabic English Lexicon*. Lahore: Islamic Book Center, 1968, p. 2155.
- ^{vii} Lane, *An Arabic English Lexicon*, p. 2156.
- ^{viii} Cowan, J. Milton. *Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Beirut: Librairie Du Liban & London: MacDonald and Evans Ltd, 1974, pp.183-185, 898-899.
- ^{ix} Cowan, *Hans Wehr Dictionary*, pp. 183-185.
- ^x Beg, *Perspectives of Civilization*, p. 28; Cowan, *Hans Wehr Dictionary*, p. 899.
- ^{xi} Byle, J.A. *A Practical Dictionary of the Persian Language*. London, 1949, pp. 44-150.
- ^{xii} Beg, *Islamic and Western Concepts of Civilization*.
- ^{xiii} The abbreviation of *salla Allah ‘alayhi wa sallam*; (Allah's prayers and blessing upon Him)
- ^{xiv} Holton, R. J. *Cities, Capitalism and Civilization*. London: Allen & Unwin Publishers Ltd, 1986, p. 2.
- ^{xv} Holton, *Cities, Capitalism and Civilization*, pp. 120-121.
- ^{xvi} Ibn Khaldun, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. *The Muqaddima: An Introduction to History*. Translated from arabic by: Franz Rosenthal. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 1/84.
- ^{xvii} Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddima*, p. 1/89.
- ^{xviii} Beg, *Perspectives of Civilization*, p. 30.
- ^{xix} ‘Arif, *Hadarah, Thaqāfa, Madaniyya*, pp. 42-45; Beg, *Perspectives of Civilization*, p. 28.
- ^{xx} Beg, *Islamic and Western Concepts of Civilization*, p. 20.
- ^{xxi} Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddima*.