

# INDIVIDUALISM, HOLISM AND SELF-CONSCIENCE IN ARAB-MUSLIM SOCIETY

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*Following a socio-linguistic survey of the Arabic terms which can be used to translate the word “individual”, this paper carries out a sociological and anthropological analysis of the concepts of “individual versus society” and “individualism versus holism”, in both Western and Arab-Muslim society. The study shows how the answer to the question of whether the individual exists or not within Arab-Muslim society may be found within the framework of a critical approach to the traditional categories of self-conscience.*

## **1. Introduction**

In modern standard Arabic, the word “individual” can be translated by the term *fard*, which is also used to indicate a sample taken from a set. However it is unlikely that in classical Arabic such a word as *fard* properly describes what would be called an “individual” in English today. It is not because the word now exists with this meaning that the social reality of the Muslim world, today as yesterday, must be interpreted or reinterpreted through this word and the idea that it conveys. In other words, one has to avoid projecting the modern meaning of a word (which can be considered basically as a *calque* or loan translation) onto the old meaning and even more, must not re-read the old reality through the modern meaning of a word, as if the word was creating the object.

We will therefore devote the first part of our argument to a socio-linguistic investigation in order to determine which other Arabic words can perhaps more adequately define the reality which we ourselves call “individual”. Among these words, it is necessary to distinguish those that are connected to identity itself (for example *šahs*) or to an ethnic and/or religious identity (for instance *'ah*). This socio-linguistic enquiry is followed in the second part of the study by a sociological and anthropological investigation, which shows that the answer to the question of whether the individual exists or

not within Arab-Muslim society may be found within the framework of a critical approach to the traditional categories of self-conscience.

## 2. Socio-linguistics

There are many words by which a single person, in his/her individual reality, is generally designated in Arabic: *wāḥid* “one”, *’aḥad* “someone”, *šaḥṣ* “person”, *mahlūq* “creature”, *’aḥ* “brother”. The first term reveals a person’s quality of being one, the second one’s indefinite character, the third one’s psychological complexity and the fourth one’s limits as a creature. The fifth term refers to one’s equal being to all the others. In fact, as stated in the Qur’ān and in the *Ḥadīṭ*, the collection of the sayings of the Islamic prophet Muḥammad: *’innamā al-mu’minūna ’iḥwatun (...)* “the believers are but brothers (...)” (Qur’ān 49:10) and *al-mu’minu ’aḥū al-mu’mini (...)* “a believer is the brother of a believer” (Imām Muslim Ibn al-Ḥaḡḡāḡ, d. 261/875, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book 16 “The Book of Marriage”, *Ḥadīṭ* 66). A sixth word *’abd* “slave, servant; believer, worshipper”, is used to indicate one individual among many others, as a subject determined only by his submission to *Allāh*.

None of these terms refers to the individual as something in oneself, something that is absolute, but each immediately connects the individual to a more general term through which they acquire determination. Thus *wāḥid* indicates the one among many others, the singular as opposed to the plural, while *’aḥad* indicates an indefinite singularity that conflicts with Unity as the Uniqueness of the Divine, the indeterminate nature of the multiple reality of the human singular, against the absolute of the Unity - the divine Uniqueness.

*Šaḥṣ* represents the complexity, contradiction, vulnerability and flimsiness of the human being in front of the perfect denseness and indestructibility of the divine essence (*šamad*). *Mahlūq* contrasts the creature with the Creator, whereas *’aḥ* refers to the equality and interchangeability of every individual within the community, through an idea of belonging which is at the same time: belonging to the clan, to the tribe, to the group, understood as multitude, and adherence to the cultural values peculiar to the group. Even the word

*fard* refers to the dual and the plural because it is only from inside the group that we can define the quality of being one (cf. the grammatical term *mufrad* “let alone” to designate the singular number).

In old Arabic, the word used above all to define the group is *qawm*. This word is the verbal noun (*maṣḍar*) of the *qāma/yaqūmu* verb “to get up”, which explains its etymology. Even if it can indicate the whole group, it designates more particularly the tribesmen within the group who arise to fight. It is worth noting that this etymological meaning is preserved in the Maghrebi Arabic *goum*, which denotes a military unit. Furthermore, the fact that *qawm* can designate men by opposition to women, is attested by the Quranic verse (...) *lā yashhar qawmun min qawmin ‘asā ’an yakūnū ḥayran min-hum wa-lā nisā’un min nisā’in ‘asā ’an yakunna ḥayran min-hunna* (...) “(...) no people shall ridicule other people, for they may be better than they are. Nor shall any women ridicule other women, for they may be better than they are (...)” (Qur’ān 49:11).

This double meaning of *qawm* is acknowledged by the Arabic lexicographers; for example Ibn Manzūr (d. 711/1311) declares, in *Lisān al-‘Arab* (art. QWM), that *qawm* can generally define “the group of the men and the women together” (*al-ḡamā’a min al-riḡāl wa-al-nisā’ ḡami’an*) or especially “the men without the women” (*huwa li-al-riḡāl ḥāṣṣatan dūna al-nisā’*). We also find another mark of this opposition in the famous Quranic verse *al-riḡālu qawwāmūna ‘alā al-nisā’i bi-mā faḍḍala Allāhu ba’ḍa-hum ‘alā ba’ḍin* (...) “Men are made responsible for women, and Allāh has endowed them with certain qualities (...)” (Qur’ān 4:34). However, just as we interpret *qawwām* as “to overcome” or “to be responsible”, we may also note that *qawwām* is an intensive form of the “active participle” (*ism al-fā’il*) of the same verb *qāma/yaqūmu* which carries, with the preposition ‘*alā*, the meaning of “to be in charge of something or somebody”.

The members of the tribe are the ones who, as descendants of the same ancestor, share the same birth: they are, therefore, “sons” (*banū*) of the same father and, as a consequence, “brothers” (sing.: ‘*aḥ*). This double vertical and horizontal relation was then Islami-  
zed: it lies at the roots of the Islamic concept of brotherhood that

binds the members of the same community (*'umma*). The transfer of Arab society to Islamic community can be perceived linguistically if one remembers that to talk about “nation”, in the sense of “nationalism” - i.e. the ideology which legitimizes the State -, we say *'umma*, but when speaking of “nationalism” in the sense of “nation”, the terms *qawm*- and *qawmiyya* are used.

One can say in conclusion that linguistic investigation shows how the individual (who has in fact no specific name) exists here only as a member of a group, in a strictly ethnic and extraordinarily virile and warlike conception, but that to a large extent, this model has then been transferred from the ethnic to the religious domain.

On the other hand the term used to indicate the community is *'umma*. The word *'umma* can be analyzed in terms of a tri-consonantal radical referring to the meaning of “heading toward somebody or something”. Morphologically it is related to *'umm* which designates “the mother, the parent, the origin, the source, the base, the foundation, the matrix”. Thus, *'umma* is used to refer to “the nation, the people, the race, the generation, the collectivity, the community, the family”.

The term *'umma* also bears a historic dimension which makes it oscillate between two values: one is ethnic, and the other supra-ethnic. Even more than an oscillation it is possible to speak about a deeply ambivalent identity which pervades the Arab-Islamic world. Throughout its history the Arab-Islamic world has perceived in this term a global representation of the identity processes; each time, however, and according to circumstances, these give the term very diverse connotations. Cultural anthropology teaches us that the same notion of “ethnic group” and those notions which are correlated to it result from intellectual operations and strategies. In addition, this discipline teaches us that if we speak about ethnicity we move into the field of cultural phenomena, so that instead of being the pure reflection of natural realities in the language, “ethnic group” and “ethnicity” are proper symbolic constructions, the product of specific historical, social and political circumstances. (cf. Fabietti 1995, 17-21)

Furthermore, the notion of *'umma* does not represent a static reality, determined once and for all. On the contrary, the reality that

appears to be solidly fixed by the word *'umma* in practice changes according to circumstances that define and redefine the “collective self” and/or “the other” (cf. Giolfo 1998, 105), on the basis of the balance of power between groups, and through a continual adjustment of identity towards a further differentiation with regard to other identities, or to a merging with the latter. If, on the one hand, Islam marks the movement of group solidarity (*'aṣabiyya*) throughout the “community of the believers” (*'umma*), on the other hand, when confronted at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the challenge of Western modernity, the Arab-Islamic world succeeded in distorting the concept of *'umma* by assimilating it to the European concept of “nation” (something that was completely unfamiliar to Islam), thereby challenging its own identity.

Similarly, the formation of national states did not come about on the basis of strictly territorial conceptions, but also carried with it the idea of recovering an ethnic identity (cf. Giolfo 2000, 196), crowned by the nationalist dream of a unique Arab State that would group several countries together according to a Pan-Arab model. As Arab unity reached a definitive state of crisis at the end of the 1980s, a space then became available for a neo-Pan-Islamism, once again based on the concept of *'umma* but interpreted this time in a religious way (cf. Burgat 1988, Chapter 3): in the search of a deeper motive for a common identity, radical Islam now began to emerge.

The history of the *'umma* concept seems to be pervaded by constant attempts to overcome social fragmentation, and to gather up the pressures into a larger unity.

### **3. Sociology-antropology**

According to the sociological model of Norbert Elias (Elias 1987), which is not a substantialistic and static model but is completely relativistic and dynamic, social relationships are always embedded into a socio-civilizational process. From the moment of conception, we are immersed in such a context, and from the time of our birth we are already the products of a civilization. What we feel as our deepest “self” shapes itself in such socio-civilizational process.

This should not be substantively interpreted as “the individual as a product of the society”, where individual and society would be separate bodies. Elias avoids the basic individual / society dichotomy, emphasizing that in the Western conception of society, the individual is seen as an atom that pre-exists social bonds, whereas in the Oriental conception of society, society pre-exists the individual. He does not ask himself whether the individual pre-exists society, as in the common Western conception, or whether society pre-exists the individual, as in holistic conceptions. Elias is instead convinced that one does not exist without the other. (cf. Elias 1987, Chapter 1.6)

Therefore one no longer asks “Does the individual exist or not?”, but rather, “What are the specific relations, in a given society, between the individual and the collectivity?” (cf. Elias 1987, Chapter 1.1) And, as a consequence, the question for us is: What is the conception of the link between the individual and society within Muslim societies? How does each subject relate its individual consciousness to the network of interpersonal relations, it being understood that, without such a network, it would not even be possible to talk about the individual?

In the quest for the individual in Islam we are always forced to tackle marginal cases - i.e. cases of marginal individuals who live on the edges of society or even beyond it - because we are searching for cases in which the individual brings something novel to the holistic society and is rightly refused by it. The Muslim individual is the exact counterpart of his brother, a concept that takes us a long way from what we wish to specify when we use the word “individual”, by underlining the characteristics attached to the term today: responsibility, freedom, originality. This last feature, however, constitutes an interface with the marginal individual in the Muslim society, without allowing us to forget that in one case we are dealing with a positive originality and in the other a negative one.

The answer to the question “Does the individual exist in Arab-Muslim society?” can only be positive. It is actually stating the obvious that the individual exists in Arab-Muslim society, just as in all societies. Indeed the question may seem badly put, even irrelevant or imaginary. Therefore it is necessary to ask: What is the particular

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relation between the individual and the society in a specific society? If this relation is different from the one that binds the individual and society in the West, it does not mean that the individual does not exist.

Before providing an answer to the above question, it is necessary first to free ourselves from the misleading dichotomous vision according to which the individual in the West would pre-exist society and in the East society would pre-exist the individual. This will enable us to think about the functional links and their specific structure in a given society by forgetting familiar themes referring one to another - either "the individual and society" or "society and the individual" - and by observing the society of individuals, keeping in mind that the connection between the part and the whole is determined by relationship, and nothing else.

The question "Does the individual exist in Arab-Muslim society?" presupposes that the relationship between the plurality of people and the singular that we call the individual, along with the relationship between the singular and the plurality of the people that we call society, is nowadays perfectly clear, at least as far as Western society is concerned. Indeed we are hardly aware of this lack of clarity and the reasons for it. When we use the common term "individual" in the West, we are referring to "the singular" as if they were "a human being" existing completely for themselves, and when we use the term "society", we usually oscillate between two opposite but illusory representations. On the one hand society would be an adjacency, without structure, derived from the sum total of a large number of singular human beings; on the other hand it would be an existing but inexplicable entity beyond these singular beings.

Nevertheless the fact remains that the words supplied by language and the corresponding concepts bring to light the sureness of Western thinking about the fact that the singular, defined as the individual, and the plurality of human beings, presented as society, are two ontologically different entities, a pair of oppositions rather than two aspects of the same human reality. The sociological investigation on the ways in which singular individuals are mutually connected in a plurality requires, in addition to the overtaking of the indivi-

dual / society dichotomy, a dynamic model that takes account of the civilizational process, or, in other words, the process by which singular individuals in their individual development are co-determined from the moment they plunge into the flow of social process. (cf. Elias 1969-1980)

Within such a process, which accompanies the journey of any society of individuals in its transitional stage of balancing between the two aspects - the "We / I" - of the human being, the relationship between the "I"-identity and the "We"-identity of each human being, in any society, is not defined once and for all, but is subject to specific modifications. Such a relationship not only differs from one society to another, but is also different even inside the same community in connection with specific circumstances. Precisely because of the strong imbalance which is peculiar to contemporary Western society between the "I"-identity and the "We"-identity of each individual in favour of the former, it is impossible to represent such a relationship if we imagine a human being - and thus, ourselves and any other individual - as an "I" without a "We".

The orientation of those societies that favour order and the conformity of each element to its role in the community is defined "holism" (cf. Dumont 1977). By stressing the "We"-identity aspect, such societies, including Islamic society and all traditional societies, without excluding Christian ones, conceive of themselves as a unique body. In such societies, too, the individual considers themselves as a cell in a macrocosm that is the living body, for the preservation of which each individual contributes through functional roles. Each human being perceives themselves as the equal of every other singular component of the whole.

In stressing self-identity to an extreme level through enhancing the value of personal freedom as opposed to the functionality of the singular within the whole, other societies, and certainly contemporary Western society, shift the identity axis of the macrocosm of the social organism towards the microcosm of the individual - the embodiment of the whole of humanity - and yet engender another identity awareness in which the egalitarian value belongs to a new di-



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mension: each individual perceives themselves as equal to the whole. This last social orientation is what can be called “individualism”.

If, in the context of a holistic society, the needs of the individual are subordinated to those of the community, in an individualistic context it is those of the society that serve those of the individual. If one defines the imbalance of the individual identity in favour of the “We”-identity as “holism”, and the imbalance in favour of the “I”-identity as “individualism”, one sees that every society brings about a process of interaction between these two factors so that the holism / individualism dichotomy is not always obvious.

Islamic societies display an oppositional tension between holism and individualism (cf. Badie 1986). It is only on the basis of Islam “egalitarian” characteristics that one can speak of “individualism” in the Islamic world, but it is an individualism of a holistic type because it continues to presuppose that the essential condition for the individual is the anthropological and religious community and not freedom. In fact, the intrinsic refusal in Islam of any form of innovation demonstrates how much the identity processes are adjusted by the “We”-identity aspect that is typical of a holistic society and not by the aspect of the “I”-identity that characterizes individualistic societies.

In the societies that the world has known, the holistic type has always prevailed, to such an extent that we can say that the individualistic character of modern Western society seems to be an exception to the norm. The West gave birth to the phenomenon of modernity, which erupted as a dynamic force in History from the moment when the idea of natural law was replaced by the idea of natural freedom. The value of each historic moment is nevertheless reduced by the period which follows. In its totality this phenomenon is what we call progress. Progress requires a new type of human being (cf. Hussein 1993, Chapter 4.2) who has to be the very measure of the world: the individual and his corollary, which is individualism (cf. Badie 1986).

The breaking forth of the Enlightenment did not occur in the Muslim world and it is not possible to understand individualism without the notion of progress or without an evaluation of how the phi-

losophers of the Enlightenment defined progress on the basis of three active principles:

1. a temporal continuity which marks a “before” and an “after”;
2. a logical continuity which brings to light the difference between what is before and what is after;
3. and an axiological continuity which enables the validation of the passage from “before” to “after” as a passage from “less” to “more”.

To evaluate progress means to conceive of everything that comes later as being intrinsically better than what was before. The Enlightenment opposed to the Islamic fear of “corruption” (*fasād*) a feeling of expectation of better things to come.

However, if the individual, understood as a human being projected outside the community and removed from his/her natural bindings, can on the one hand, through his/her freedom, experience a feeling of autonomy, of self-sufficiency, almost of omnipotence, on the other hand they can fall either into Heidegger’s existential solipsism - characterized by anxiety and uncanniness (cf. Heidegger 1927, 188-189) - or into what is described by Sartre - through the revelation of *le Monde tout nu* (cf. Sartre 1943, 170ff) - as the nauseating experience of *the gratuitousness* of human existence.

In the Arab-Muslim world, the individual is never outside the community. Possibly the individual places themselves in opposition to their group but they find the justification for their action in presupposing an equality which is itself based on the group. In any holistic structure the individual does not escape the definition of oneself as a function of one’s group.

In the case of the Arab-Muslim world, too, there exists a multiple holistic component, determined by two different identity matrices which, rather than being set one against the other, are often superposed one over the other, or encapsulated into one another: on the one hand is ethnic identity, and on the other is religious identity. These two matrices allow the individual to realize the perception of themselves within the group: in the *’umma* as a community of believers and/or as an ethnic community. The individualistic component

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of the identity of the individual, based on the authority of the “egalitarian” principles contained in the Qur’ān, is a pure articulation of a deeper identity authority, that of belonging to the group.

These individualistic components of the identity of the individual are founded in the egalitarian characteristics of the individuals inside the community and, because of the holism of the deepest identity matrix, the individualistic centripetal pressures that allow an individual to grow away from the community are excluded. This is perhaps why the work of feminists in Arab countries is going to fit into the context of protecting religious values, and why quite recently a second reading of the project connected with Arabism has begun to clear itself a path among the radical Islamist movements by reassessing the balance of the Islam / Arabism binomial and by settling the unitary factor on the back of the first term, i.e. Islam (cf. Carré 1985).

### **4. Conclusion**

Elias asserts that it is possible that the difficulties we encounter for better harmonizing the dominant representations of human beings as individuals and human beings as society are in the nature of things, that is to say in “human beings in society” as the object of human thought. He also wonders whether these difficulties are peculiar to the kind of thinking we are accustomed to use in thinking about ourselves while being ourselves the object of our reflection. The difficulties we face when thinking about the problems of the human world would depend, at least partly, on the fact that, to resolve such problems, it is necessary to put aside traditional forms of self-awareness, and familiar and over-valued self-perceptions. Elias also wonders whether such difficulties are not bound up with the necessity of carrying out a deep reassessment of our representation of human beings. (cf. Elias 1987, Chapter 2.2)

However, for the moment, by way of a conclusion, we can summarize the differences between these two conceptions of the individual through a droll example. This can be found in the ways that William of Rubruk and Ibn Baṭṭūta went about their travels. The 13<sup>th</sup>-cen-

tury Franciscan monk went on a mission to the Mongol Khan during a journey that took him as far as the Karakorum. He relied exclusively on the Mongols, in particular cursing their “indiscretion”. Thus we already find curiosity about the other and a sense of the dignity of the individual. Conversely, it has been emphasized how Ibn Baṭṭūta, the 14<sup>th</sup>-century traveller from Tangiers, went all the way to China, though without ever moving away from the network of Muslim communities.

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