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The Desert Near the Threshold
(Forms of Time and Space in Islamic Culture)

The Arabs, who have lived in deserts for centuries, obviously owe a lot of the good and the bad to it. From time immemorial—from the “deepest” *ǧāhiliyya* (the epoch of the pre-Islamic unawareness)—utterly set into the desert environment, they derived the fundamental life patterns from it, first of all the ways of conceiving time, space and motion. These forms have turned out to be not so prone to changes and seem to continue to be a live issue.

Because of unbearable living conditions in the desert the latter's subdivision into own and alien space ran quite dramatically; disputes were carried on over the boundaries between the two areas since they were tantamount to the boundaries between tribal territories. During fighting with the desert and with the strangers the motif of an absolute tribal or group solidarity has been shaped, even though its rules varied. Smaller groups stood in against larger groups, for example families or clans against the tribe, giving up the quarrels (obviously what I am talking about here are model situations), when they faced the conflict with another tribe. The echoes of this phenomenon still sound in the contemporary Arabic proverb: *Anā ma'a aḥī ǧidd ibn 'ammī, ana wa-ibn 'ammī ǧidd ǧarīb* (I fight with my brother, but I stand shoulder to shoulder with my brother against my cousin).

Habits that were shaped in the conditions of living in the desert—apart from tribal solidarity, the obligation of obedience to the group, as well as such features as courage, nobleness, helpfulness, hospitality, generosity and eloquence, regarded as qualities of an “ideal” Bedouin, have survived till today and seem to be more or less attractive in our times.

Two types of time and of personality

Edward Hall distinguished in his works the so-called monochronic time and polychronic time, which seems to be particularly useful for considerations on temporal order existing in the Islamic world. It may be worthwhile recalling that the former is carefully planned and runs ahead from one action to another, and from one point to another along the shortest possible line. The latter consists in carrying out many activities, where some of them interrupt others; the motion takes place in various directions at the same time, but it stays within the same plane; people are more relaxed and less susceptible to the pressure of time-limit. Obviously, the first type of time is connected with the so-called modern lifestyle (perhaps with American culture most). The second one can be associated with traditional cultures, including the desert-rooted culture.¹

In order to grasp the temporal order which originated in the desert we can also use Jerzy Chłopecki's concept who introduced the category of quality time: "It is not only in primitive cultures, but also in pre-industrial societies in general that time has a quality and definite character and not the abstract one (...) This is the quality time as it were by nature because there is a better and worse time as well as definite time ascribed to the particular activities, determined by the sequence of those activities and relationships among them. (...) The quality time is the time of nature but also of tradition, habit and religion."²

Here are two pictures from the Sahara outlined by Carl Gustav Jung in his memoirs from a short travel to the Sahara in 1920; they show how the time in the desert was shaped and is being shaped now. Here is the first description:

"As we approached the oasis, a single rider, wholly swathed in white came towards us. With proud bearing he rode by without offering us any greeting, mounted on a black mule whose harness was banded and studded with silver. He made an impressive, elegant figure. Here was a man who certainly possessed no pocket watch, let alone a wrist watch; for he was obviously and unselfconsciously the person he had always been."³

¹ See Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York 1996, p. 173 ff.

² Jerzy Chłopecki, *Ciągłość, zmiana i powrót. Szkice z socjologii wychowania* (Continuity, Change and Return. Studies in Sociology of Behaviour), Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej, Rzeszów 1997.

³ C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffe), Collins and Roulledge & Kegan Paul, London 1963, p. 227.

It is worthwhile adding that Jung experienced there a specific sense of slowing down time: because of heat he had an impression that he indulged in day-dreams. The more he forced his way into the desert, the more the time was coming to a dead stop, which he associated with the sense of eternal existence. Later on, he recalled his watch and “accelerated time” of a European.

How different are Jung’s impressions from his stay in a nearby oasis in which the locals gathered for a feast which he described as follows:

“Early the next morning I was awakened by the various unfamiliar noises outside my inn. There was a large open square which had been empty the night before, but which was now crowded with people, camels, mules, and donkeys. The camels groaned and manifested in manifold variations of tone their chronic discontent, and the donkeys competed with cacophonous screams. The people ran around in a great state of excitement, shouting and gesticulating. They looked savage and rather alarming.”⁴

Two pictures—two ways of time organisation and different kinds of personality. The differences manifest themselves in the ways of moving and reacting which stem from the acceptance of a given temporal order. The time of a lonely rider, “the person he had always been,” is the primeval time, but since this figure brings out the majesty and magnitude of the desert as the important values, it is also—to put it in Chłopecki’s words—the quality time. The type of personality which is connected with this type of time is characterised by discretion and peaceful mind, physical beauty and dexterity, thus it seems to be the embodiment of the virtues of body and mind.

The people who live in the oasis are different; by virtue of the rate and kind of their activity and their impetuosity they function in a different time; this time should rather be called polychronic in accordance with Hall’s typology.

The former, the quality time, seems to be the time of nature, when man communed with nature in the simplest and best possible way. The second type of time is the time of culture, when people disturbed the rhythm of nature with their newer and newer ideas. They designated the approximate hours of activity in which they moved freely—faster or slower, which seems to correspond to the exigencies of the polychronic time. Freedom and optional character of activity (as described by Hall) may lead to disturbances or anxiety and hence discordant and violent moving of excited people observed by Jung in the Sahara oasis.

⁴ Ibid., p. 227.

The two forms of time and two types of personality can be seen today in the desert, but now that half the population of the Near East live in towns,⁵ the kind of their connection with urban culture is more and more important.

The urban space

According to Hall⁶, the Arabs peopled towns under the pressure of the desert and today's huge cities having more than a dozen inhabitants, such as Cairo, may have originated from the fact that the Arabs willingly and in great number exchanged their tents and pastures for houses and streets. People abandoned the desert physically but took to the towns their tradition and symbolical culture that had been shaped in the conditions of the life in deserts. Today, urban areas are also divided according to the old desert schemata: own space continues to be the territory inhabited by kinsmen, relatives or tribesmen. When one day I asked a dweller of southern Egypt how many relatives he had, he answered: 500 persons. Those were the inhabitants of his native town who in successive generations were relatives and maintained the sense of tribal ties. In the consciousness of the contemporary Arabs the group of relatives may number hundreds of persons who feel and share mutual solidarity and loyalty. As in the past in the desert, the space understood as common place is of key importance. The presence of one's relative in a given place almost automatically authorises one to stay and live with him, but he is also expected to give as much help as he can. That is why those who move from villages to towns are followed by a number of closer and more distant relatives seeking their place in the huge urban areas by the side of the "chief" emigrant. In own space in towns people are crowded. If there is no whole "tribal" group there, there lives one multi-generation and numerous family, that is why in Arab countries one has to have a large house or vast flat. According to Edward Hall, in this flat there should be some 300 m of free space, ceilings must be situated high and the windows should give on a space with an unshaded view.⁷

⁵ Elizabeth Fernea, *The Challenges for Middle Eastern Women in the 21st Century*, Middle East Journal, Volume 54, Number 2, Spring 2000, p. 189.

⁶ E.T. Hall, op. cit., p. 158.

⁷ Ibid., p. 162.

Culture clash

However, the contemporary Arab towns face a characteristic paradox: a vast space of flats is at variance with the crowded streets, since two cultural patterns clash here, to use Jerzy Chłopecki's language—"culture of communities" and "culture of associations."

"(...) community is marked by spatial concentration of its members inhabiting a common territory, which is not indispensable in the case of an association. The community has no specific goal and its members share a broad system of relationships. (...) Unlike associations, communities have a goalless character. Inasmuch as the community is a natural group, as it were given to man, about which one can say that it is not man that creates it but it is the community that creates man, the association from the beginning to the end is a «product» of man's social output", writes Jerzy Chłopecki.⁸

In the streets of Arab towns, which pretend to be modern (just to mention means of transport) designed for the "associations," there rule communities of relatives with their traditional attachment to own territory.

The issue of distance

"Highly involved people apparently require higher densities than less involved people, and they may also require more protection or screening from outsiders,"⁹ holds Edward Hall. Coherence of the community levels the distance, weakens the sense of privacy, which can be proved by behavioural standards observed by this researcher. Thus Arabs come close to the interlocutor, touch other persons in a familiar fashion, raise their voice.¹⁰ Generally, they are very straightforward, ask questions which may be regarded by outsiders as embarrassing or indiscrete: about marital status, job, wages.

Language shows the levelling tendency; it often (even too often for an European) uses a possessive pronoun! Talking about another person one needs to make her closer, which is best done by way of this pronoun. For example, if we say "a friend," it will sound too dryly and vaguely, so it has to be defined by a pronoun "your" or "my." Even if the siblings talk about

⁸ J. Chłopecki, *op. cit.*, pp. 77 and 80.

⁹ Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

their mother, one of them will say to the other “your” mother or “my” mother, depending on which relationship is more important. Ties between people are emphasised by the words “brother” and “sister” to such an extent that in Libya these words turned to be the synonyms of basic polite forms of address such as “Mr” or “Mrs.”

Ties become closer thanks to common religious rites and popular habits. The simplest one is the consumption of meals during which, traditionally in more conservative milieus, people sit on a mat on the floor and eat using their fingers; if somebody happens to reach out for a spoon or a chair or if he rejects the hand of a host who moves more tasty bites towards him, he will increase his distance towards the others.

But in the life of communities in today’s Muslim towns this distance can be seen at least in two fields.

Certainly it occurs in the relationships of the two sexes, women and men, which encourages to seek contacts with persons of the own sex. Women are on familiar terms with one another since in conservative milieus they cannot expose their beauty to the world and they compensate this fact in their own circle by dressing beautifully and smartly and by behaving in a more free fashion.

Outsiders may be shocked when they see men holding hands, but this does not mean they are homosexual; it is a form of satisfying one’s need of a closer contact and compensation for limited relationships with women.

Cafés for men, their favourite asylums in which they spend much time, are a phenomenon on the scale of each Arab town.

The distance between parents and children (which may require a separate study) seems to be a more complicated problem. Even today in Egypt one can hear a characteristic expression *ḥadritak* (which means almost the same as “Mr”), by which a grown-up son will address his father. This gives rise to the distance. The streets of Arab towns surprise us with a lack of perambulators, although the more wealthy people do not spare money for modern equipment and try to catch up with the achievements of world technology. Cannot the children deserve the perambulators? Can this simple device point to a too individualistic attitude towards offspring, which cannot be accepted by the collectivist-oriented old-style communities rampaging over the towns? The answer to these questions lies in the hands of researchers.

Urban time

The influences of the desert culture can be seen in the space of towns; one may also expect to see there the forms of temporal order derived from the desert, for which I have adapted the expressions of quality time and polychronic time.

Quality time

The first one, “time of nature, but also of tradition, habit and religion” is both the time of a primeval rider travelling across the desert, tribal magician or priest as well as of a Muslim saying his prayer. Islam took over this form of time, recognized its “excellence” and ordered the Muslims to live in it. Their whole time was expected to belong to faith, and in Muslim areas, according to Islamic teaching, there is no lay zone and the sacral law (*šarī‘at*) is binding. However, as J. Chłopecki holds, the time in question is a “better” time; if so, it is “better” than something. Despite Islam’s resistance towards life desacralisation, everyday life and the ensuing sphere of lay behaviour have turned out to be this form. Nevertheless, the quality time has preserved its superior character and Islam has come to be a regulator of annual, weekly and daily cycle of the Muslim’s life.

During the year, the most important period is the month of fasting—Ramaḍān to which one must always adapt his/her lifestyle. However, as compared to other cultures, holidays are not demonised; the Muslims do not insist they must necessarily spend their holidays in a place chosen beforehand. The rhythm of the week goes obviously from Friday to Friday and the rhythm of the day is determined by the successive Muslim prayers five times a day.

However, quality time does not concern faith only but also all values important in the given area; the past is the value which is treated by the Muslims with special reverence.

“It is worthwhile distinguishing between national consciousness and magic tribal consciousness. For the former characteristic is the knowledge that the past is a bygone time which may and should be uncovered but which does not need to have its continuation. We are not obliged to worship what our predecessors did, love what they loved and hate what they hated.

For the latter type of consciousness, the past continues to be a live issue, nothing in the past goes away.. (...),” writes J. Chłopecki.¹¹

For contemporary Arabs, the past has preserved its topicality and is very close, and they sometimes speak about 9th- or 10th-century events as if they occurred several months or several years earlier, somewhere in the neighbouring street or in a neighbouring town; complicated biographies of the caliphs or sultans did not fall into oblivion and maxims of thinkers from old epochs are still remembered. Legends are as important as well-documented facts; what counts is their position and rank in tradition and culture. The Arabs identify themselves with the past so much that sometimes they overlook their own birth. Magic consciousness is not formalised and exact dates are not important. As recently as in the first half of the 20th century many families and offices did not care about the record of an exact date of birth of infants, which is reflected in life histories of some of today’s men of fifty.

Thanks to magic consciousness, the above-mentioned behavioural patterns function today: obligation of mutual solidarity and loyalty of relatives, hospitality and helpfulness, norms which lie behind the ideal of a noble Bedouin, as presented in *ǧāhiliyya*. The same consciousness is held responsible for the vitality of pre-Muslim and mediaeval aesthetic canons, first of all the cult of Bedouin poetry, which is still being considered—despite changes occurring throughout centuries in the Arabic language—as a unique literary pattern in which everybody delights; Arabs are always ready to recite beautiful fragments of long and difficult *qaṣīdas*. The magic of the past affects the contemporary people in various ways. It also has a bearing on the future.

As Jerzy Chłopecki proves, “the present is perceived by us through double glasses—those of memory and those of expectations...”¹²

This attitude is invariably reflected—even nowadays—in Arabic science of names, which gives the ties of parents and children a symbolical and ritualised character (ritualisation increases the above-mentioned distance between the former and the latter). The ties maintain due to magic words *ibn*—son and *abū*—father, Muḥammad Ibn Ḥasan—Muḥammad, Son of Ḥasan; this fundamental form of the Arabic name indicates that throughout the lifetime of the son the father will be remembered and together with him the past will also be remembered, and this fact acquires a magic shade.

¹¹ J. Chłopecki, op. cit., p. 108.

¹² Ibid., p. 110.

Arabs also look into the future because if Muḥammad has a son and calls him Muṣṭafā, he will automatically receive a by-name Abū Muṣṭafā—Father of Muṣṭafā, which means that the family or clan will survive and it has a future ahead. These linguistic forms are the key to the community and they make people remember a powerful force which unites this community, that is genealogy. Based on legends and oral accounts from generation to generation and—less frequently—scrupulously made documents, genealogy makes one believe in their unflagging importance, therefore it requires magic consciousness.

Thanks to the latter, old values are transmitted into the future. However, the future is first of all the awaiting of a favourable turn of things on the border of faith and hope, which, being at variance with rationalism, seems to be another “trick” of magic consciousness. Hence specific understanding of awaiting as an indivisible and extending process which seems to have no end.

“In the Arab world it is almost impossible to get someone to experience the difference between waiting a long time and a very long time. Arabs simply do not make this temporal distinction”—writes Edward Hall.¹³

Patient waiting is a popular motif in the mentality of inhabitants of this world and its expression is enhanced by official slogans. Buses in Cairo carry characteristic inscriptions: *aṣ-ṣabr ḡamīl* (patience is beautiful) or *aṣ-ṣabr ṭayyib* (patience is good). The same or similar inscriptions can be seen on the walls of flats beside a beautifully engraved word *Allāh* (God).

This motif is consistent with both magic consciousness and Islamic teaching, as it supports its order to full submission to God’s will, in which patience seems to be indispensable.

Just as in the case of the inhabitants of deserts, the quality time affects the town dwellers. Man who acts to its rhythm, turned towards what is most important and the best one, is expected to become more perfect, thus being intellectually and physically fit. If this is successful, he will be as perfect as a majestic rider of the Sahara desert.

Time of everyday life

Quality time penetrated everyday life that is why, among other things, the motif of waiting is clearly expressed in the preservation of aimless

¹³ Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York, n.d. p. 176.

communities which are dominant in Arab streets, where there is no hierarchy of goals or successive more and more ambitious tasks; one often awaits opportunities or chances and when they arise, one should make his best to avail oneself of them. Merchants and traders in front of their shops wait for the customers and when they see that their goods attract interest, they are importunate, try to make the transaction as advantageous as possible and that is why they bargain obstinately. In the streets there are crowds of people in traditional robes—those are porters, street-sweepers, windscreen cleaners, real estate agents who look out for their chance. A newcomer may be surprised by the Arabic word “tomorrow,” if the corresponding time starts to extend distressingly; by understanding this adverb literally one fails to see that it happens to be an expression of a never-ending process of waiting.

A solemn and “better” quality time affects the course of a Muslim day thanks to the prayer said five times a day. The hours of prayer are approximate, for example a *muezzin* in the old district of Tunis always calls for a midday prayer at 12.30 p.m. In accordance with the nature of quality time, one cannot require exactness or strictness.

The motif of waiting and the approximate hours of prayers can be reconciled with everyday reality if—using the language of Hall—polychronic (and not monochronic) time prevails in it. Indeed, according to its rhythm, aimless communities stick to their habits which do not have to be observed exactly. What counts is the time and not the hour; one may announce one’s visit for the afternoon, evening or a weekday or one may not announce it at all, etc. But when the communities clash with “associations,” that is groups moving in a purposeful fashion, there is confusion, traffic jams, crowds and noise and people get excited; their gestures may become violent and discordant and emotions determine the modes of behaving. Hence in the Arab towns there emerges a second type of personality which generally corresponds to the characteristics of hot-tempered people running about in the Sahara oasis.

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Obviously, in the Arab and Muslim world of today there are more and more “associations”—groups and figures acting in accordance with the formula of monochronic time. This formula must be accepted when modern

technologies and industries are at stake which make one count time by the hour and minute and not by the morning and the afternoon. Temporal order often changes during the day: from a monochronic time in the office or enterprise one passes to polychronic time at home, among relatives and friends.

Contemporary Arabs and Muslims have not left the desert completely and its echoes sound today in towns and direct people's steps. The old fierce fighting with the desert conducted in a physically measurable way is now going on within the framework of symbolical culture and it has an intellectual dimension.