

Socio-Anthropological Interpretation of Time and Pathology of Time in Arab-Muslim Society

Prof. Sattam Hamad Khalaf, American University in the Emirates, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Abstract

This paper deals with the three dimensions of time (past, present and future) as one of the important topics relevant in documenting human life. In this research, it is my intention to discuss the dimensions of time reflectively from the perspective of an Arab Muslim who has a different viewpoint different to those of his counterparts in the western societies. In my view as an Arab Muslim, the first realization of time stems from our belief in the moral values that have been passed on to us through the societal socialization or inheritance process from the past generation. This belief is mainly based on the teachings of the Koran (The Holy Book of Islam) and interpreted contextually as occurrence in different times to prove the absolute power of God. The second perception of time is the result of current intellectual and ideological thoughts influenced by modern technology and perhaps, globalization. In this era, communities are transformed to different things when compared with the past and time seems to be controlled purposely to further transform the communities in the future. Despite this transformation of Arab communities and the incorrect use of time, the Arab communities seem to be well-attached to their tradition as passed on to them by their forefathers. So, the call for the Arab-Muslims and their communities to treasure their tradition and adhere to the past legacies represented the values of the Arab-Muslim communities. On the other hand, the call to keep up with new world has created two kinds of conflicting currents of thoughts between the Arab tradition and the western tradition. Consequently, this is considered as an index of pathological behavior (abnormal) to the society. However, it seems difficult to eliminate the effects of these conflicting thoughts from the communities from due to the effective force of time and its extension of its importance as a political dimension of the social thoughts. This, I think, must be taken into consideration in future studies of Sociology and Anthropology alike.

Introduction:

Ethical orientation constitutes the dynamics of Islamic sociological thought. The whole legacy of Islamic sociology from its beginning in the eleventh century up to the present time manifests the ethical features of Arab-Islamic society in the context of space, time and circumstances. Another trend is tangentially removed from the mainstream of Islamic sociological thought, owing to alien influences, is visible too. Yet, its influence has been either peripheral or living and the undercurrents of Islamic sociology remained intact. This trend is represented by the cultural exchange between Arab-Muslim elements during the Abbasid era and later, Ottoman reign. This dynamics is inevitable due to Islamic conception of man as mankind, a member of the human family regardless of race, color, culture, language and religion. This sociological approach to mankind and society cannot be disentangled from the Arab-Muslim conception of time which is powerfully linked to the ethical perception of the world. I am going to point to the characteristics of Islamic conception of time and highlight the points where this conception is related to mankind and society to the effect of unraveling certain anthropological and sociological orientations or distinctive features specified to Arab-Muslim society; and whether this conception of time, that is the temporal structure of Arab-Muslim society, is pathological or normal.

Anthropology:

Anthropology is a science that tackles, besides, the study of the origin of man, human norms, values, religion and “nationality” all are among attributes that are strongly tied with values and norms. It follows the concept of time and temporality which religions harbor is value bound as well.

Thus, we cannot detach the discussion of sociological categories from religious beliefs, nor can we separate the latter from the conception of time and the temporal structure that can be culture bound and social-specific phenomenon which may in turn impact the movement of society.

The idea of progress and the introduction of technology;

Let us begin with a comparison between Islamic sociological thought and its counterpart in the West. Originally, Islamic sociological thought evolved from the Qur'an (Islamic Holy Book) and the Prophetic traditions. The message of the Qur'an is comprehensive. It provides the object from down to earth reality of everyday life. Yet, this objectivity and body-politics of Islam is not human in its origin it cannot be from anyone but God. In contrast, we notice that the Western sociological thought has originally evolved from a mix of different ideas, concepts, attitudes, theories and philosophies that are derived from human origin which not portion or even a marginal place to divine will. It follows the dictum: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God those that belong to God"

Secondly, Islamic sociological thinking is strongly rooted in Islamic ideology, and cannot be isolated from religion while Western sociology belong to the origin of secular philosophies that evolved from the hostile controversy between religion and politics and the assortment of latter with sociology and former with literature. (1)

Another outstanding feature of Islamic sociology is the concept of sovereignty. Islamic sociology rests on the absolute and "eternal" sovereignty of God over mankind. Islamic sociology draws its dynamism from the overpowering predominance of God.

Thus, the activities of human beings are predetermined and supervised by divine will.

A concept that gave birth to the saying "**God's will**". The Qur'an itself admonishes against free will: "**And say not of anything, I am going to do it tomorrow**" (**Wala taqulan Li shai'in inni fa'ilun thalika ghada**) - Qur'an: 18 28).

God is, therefore, the supreme law maker and the society is strongly tied with divine laws laid down by God the almighty. (2)

Another striking feature of Islamic sociology its universality, Islam is primarily universal in its scope and embraces all kinds of linguistic, racial and regional differences. This is quite nature of Islam, since it aims at the unity of mankind. Islamic sociology is to be, therefore, viewed as evolved from a universal background that is antithetical to both parochialism and nationalism of the West.

Islamic sociology avoids racial and religious discrimination, encourages brotherhood of mankind and discourages aggression and ending in racial segregation and genocide. (3) While Islamic sociological thinking remained constant across ages, Western sociological thinking has gone through a process of variation and change. This led us to the conclusion that both sociology and temporality are culture – bound and that the concept of time differs among both individuals and societies.

Different societies have different conceptions of time, and Arab-Islamic- society has its own conception of time, which confines and directs its movement and determines the degree of its acculturation with other communities. Let's first consider how different societies appear from the point of view of their restricted perception of time. Economists traditionally classify societies into preindustrial and nonindustrial or (rural) societies. These societies are preoccupied with the present, while industrial and post-industrial societies are stimulated by the future.

Primarily, both preindustrial and non-industrial (rural) societies are characterized by the outstanding weight of the past. The activities of people in these societies are characteristically repetitive; they depend

on ancestral traditions, mores and values. Consequently, people in these societies are non-innovative and parochial in the sense of adhering to what nature provides without modification or breakthroughs.

They are patterning bound, one-track thinking and politically speaking, they are homogeneous and unified on social consensus. Such societies are hostile to the new and the foreign. They reject any outsider social element which may jeopardize and threaten the integrity of their social structure. Such societies consolidate a strong feeling form of misoneism which is characterized by an extraordinary respect from the ancestral attitudes to time. The most fundamental law is to do what the ancestors did and any amendments, modifications or changes to be affected would then become a perversion and breach of the sacred and the holy from which these static societies derived their inertial dynamism.

In L. Levy Bruhl's words those societies *“resemble organisms which can live for a very long time, provided their external surrounding change very little, but which, if new elements break in, rapidly degenerate and die”*. (4)

Traditions in these societies are the one and locomotives that both generate and regulate behavior. Consequently, they encourage conformity and maintain, in the most active way, the repetition of the social and cultural forms that had been established in the past which might as well be quite forgotten by new generations.(5) It assures that the “past” seems more important than both the present and the future in traditional society. Set off against these “traditional societies” are consumptive societies which are entirely preoccupied with the present. In a consumptive society, the act of consumption becomes more important than the act of production. The consumer is subjected to a decision making mechanism operated in the name of society. He does not need to refer to traditions or the past, and the most important point of reference for him is material needs not history or spiritual values embedded therein.

Thus, the consumptive society is result of mass media and advertising which keeps with the rhythm of ever-renewed present.

In Toraine's words:

“The consumer has usually only very little control over the producer. The only sanction he wields is the refusal to consumes, and even this is weakened as the consumer's attitude becomes more passive; in regard to the cinema for example, when the content of the film is less important than just regularly getting away from the everyday late in a darkened hall”. (6)

The consumptive society rejects the past as a burden and encumbrance. Moreover, the absence of futuristic perspective enhances the significance of the present in relation to the past. The function of this society is not transmission but acquisition. Modern times have brought in a third category. This category is represented by the productive society, the technocratic or the programmed.

In contrast to the traditional and consumptive societies, the productive ones are preoccupied mainly with the future. Such societies drive at the transformation of all the factors of production, all aspects of social life, along precisely determined lines.Using current technology has affected on way of living rapidly, in an unprecedented speed so that it seems as if the present can be kept under control only by keeping constant watch on the future.These are three types of societies to which a particular dimension of time is attributed: **past, present and future**, corresponding to traditional, consumptive and productive societies respectively.

Consequently, it seems quite possible that any break of attitude that runs counter to these respective dimensions are pathological or an abnormality.

It is also quite possible that each society would mature a kind of sociological thinking prevailing in other societies.

Thus, it becomes obviously that each society has a stereotyped attitude to time and temporality and each society has its own temporal structure which stands out as one of the most important determinants of its growth dynamism or stagnation and death. An Arab- Muslim society has undergone complex development particularly during the last decades. The push for secularism has been accompanied by

adherence to the past, and the sporadic development additional into an industrial society has been partial and lopsided. This is because the drive for secularism has always been accompanied by feverish and insistent calls for Islam. Thus, the call for Islamic traditions and the drive towards secularism are two diametrically opposed movements that involve conflicting temporal structures.

The result is that we find in every family that harbors both new copies of the Qur'an laid side by side to video cassettes representing Western life. This reflects a pathological pattern since adopting contradictory value systems, two opposing time dimensions are indicators of abnormal behavior. Durkheim (1858-1917) described as pathological any institution which no longer served a need, and yet survived after its reason for existing was gone. However, applying Durkheim's norm on an Arab mind today would only reveal a paradox because change in certain sectors has not eliminated "unchanged" in other sectors where the past still holds undivided way.

Maurice Halbwachs says to this effect:

"There is hardly any society we have lived in for any length of time that does not survive or at least leave some traces recent groups in which we have mingled. The survival of such traces suffices to explain the persistence and continuity of the time peculiar to that earlier society and the fact that we can adopt new ideas to any thought at any time". (7)

This opinion explains the problem of development which can be analyzed in term of disruptions in the temporal rhythm such as the disparity among the speeds of development of different economic sectors, and the co-existence of artificial modern rhythms with traditional rhythms.

This causes the rural areas to resist invasion by urban complexes. Applying this to an Arab- Muslim society we find that this society, despite regional variations and ethnic margins, preserves its archaic temporal structure while in the same time entering into another sphere of temporality commensurate with Western temporal structure. However, the introduction of another temporal rhythm, is external element imposed from the outside or the inside policy and adaptation. (8) In other words, it is not possible to cast out the temporal structure of a given society those of its aspects that are superimposed upon it and are, at least provincially regarded as pathological or pathogenic.

This reveals the rich dynamism and complexity of time as the fourth dimension that has been long neglected in the discussions of sociological and anthropological scholarships.

Now let's get back to the Islamic verse:

"And say not of anything, I am going to do it tomorrow" (Qur'an:18-24).

It appears from this verse in the **Surah of Kahf** as well as in other verses that Islam recommends the pious not to look ahead into the future, (*Unseen*) and that the knowledge of the future is reserved only to **God**.

"Say; Naught befalleth us save that which Allah (God) hath decreed for us. He is our Protecting Friend. In Allah (God) let believers put their trust" Qur'an, Surah Al-Tawbah: 51

However, this does not eliminate the "future" (*Unseen*) altogether in the Muslim mind for the "future" (*Unseen*) as represented by the world in the afterlife is both created in mind immemorial (*unfathomable past- AL-Mustaqbal'I Sahiq*). (10)

"Say: For myself I have no power to benefit, nor power to hurt, save that which Allah (God) willeth." Qur'an, Surah Al-Araf: 188

For the Muslim mind, writes Massignon;

"Time is consequently not a continuous duration, but a constellation – a milky way of instants just as space does not exist but only as separate points". (11)

Thus, the future is another word for the past in Muslim mentality.

However, Al- Mutakalimun, (Speakers) developed in the first century of the Hijra, (**the journey of Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him from Mecca to Medina**) an idea of time from an occasional

point of view i.e. events follow each other in a particular habitual order willed by **God** which **God** might at any moment suspend.

Mankind in this interpretation of time has no control over future actions, and this explains why any reference to a possible future, by a Muslim should be qualified by the formula “**Insha’a Allah**” (**If god wanted**).

This controversy over free will continued until it reached defining, dichotomization into “**Al-Jabri ya**” or **Determinism** which connected the future with God’s will, and viewed the human being as a powerless being whose action is predetermined by God; and “**Al-Qadariyya**” or **Anti Determinism** which allows the human being a certain degree of freedom which viewed from theological perspective turns to be another form of determinism. From above belief the Muslim People are under the **Al-Jabri ya** or **Determinism** in all things in their life. Human beings in both lines of reasoning should ultimately return to God, and that is to the divine time which has nothing in common with the time on earth.

In fact, the Muslim community continued to use the “Lunar System”, the moon and more precisely, the crescent- the new moon- was of great importance in Muslim life. It is still that the moon is associated with the idea of perfection and the appearance of the new moon at the start of “Lunar Month” on earth, especially at the start of Ramadan (Fasting Month) which must not be calculated astronomically but must be actually observed by two Muslim witnesses, a rule that is still in force in many Muslim states.

The significance of Muslim calendar in general and the month of Ramadan in particular are not derived from the human being, but rather from God. This is because in the “Month of Ramadan” a night which God prefers it to a thousand months, “**The night of destiny is better than a thousand month**” (**Qur’an 97-4**).

It seems determinism for the Muslim, either he is an Arab or non-Arab, and his move, behave, and think in an illusionary time previously determined prior to his existence and personal time.

The present, then, counts nothing, but only as a signpost leading to the future past. (12)

The present which bounds the lifetime of individual Muslim society in general, it’s only value in its being an examination bench leading to either paradise or hell.

It turns out that all forms and manifestations of matters, including nature, history and temporality in this world are only second hand products and mere creation, which existence is instrumental and casual throughout an endless chain of creation and recreation determined by the Supreme Being... that is God.

A Muslim society as such cannot simply adapt itself to the West, and this would explain to us the reason behind many socio-political phenomenon of modern societies, the reasons such as the reluctance of the West to admit Turkey as a full-member the European community as well the unpleasant specter of time as reflected in popular language and literature of Muslim societies. The word “Zaman” (Time) suggests misfortune and pessimism in most regions of the Arab-Muslim world. Arabic language itself harbors so many proverbs, poems and aphorisms in criticism of time. The word “Dahr” (Era) has a very negative association for the expression “Suffering”. Dahr means misfortunes or calamities.

Modern proverbs give time the negative epithets of “treacherous, double-dealer and ugly”.

Certain days, nights and years are metaphorically used to denote boredom and misfortunes.

The attribute of blackness is used to describe bad days “Youm Aswad” (Black Day). The examples seem endless when we revise Arabic poetry in both classical and modern period.

Why?

The confounding of wretchedness and pessimism with time “Al-Zaman” is a very important parameter since it indicates that the Arab mentality, since the birth of Islam and even before, has been modulated to a perception of time as one of the proportional dimensions of human existence.

In other words, temporal structure of the Arab Mind is impressionistic, conceptualized and strongly related to place, seasons and change. Islam has abstracted this structure by way of disrupting spatial relationships. Merleau Ponty, (13) has pointed out that, the temporality of consciousness central for an

individual in the world, a consciousness absorbed in the past belongs to it, and what applies to an individual does equally apply to the society. Islam has proved the temporal quality of the human being is more vulnerable than the spatial quality to the attack of psychosis that prevailed on the whole Arab-Muslim society. As modern technology was introduced to the Arab-Muslim world, traditional wisdom gave way to a pathological apprehension of time. However, it is well-worth pointing out at this junction that pathological apprehension of time was not an outcome of aspects of the newly introduced technological environment and the western morality to the Arab-Muslim world but native ground has already been tilled and prepared to accept pathogenic conceptions of time and space.

It is important at this point to stress the fact that Arab thought had for a long time been used to measure up everything according to a paradigm. Arabic language itself reflects this paradigmatic thinking. When Islam entered **Arab Peninsula**, it gave this paradigmatic thinking new criteria and the divine time generated a Prophetic time fixed at the era of Prophet and his near patriarchal descendants.

The more we become a chronometry of decadence, the Prophet himself confirms that the end of the time will witness the end of morality, the appearance of anti-Christ...etc.

Thus, we conclude that Islam knows no progression on the temporal plan become, therefore, unholy marred and distorted.

However, while human being and society degenerate, institution becomes time-honored. Shrines become more sacred so a demolishing of a Mosque (Masjed- Prayer house) is likely to arouse disputes and cause bloodshed between nations, India and Pakistan recent is a case in point in this respect.

The Mosque is a "timeless" institution and both ancient and contemporary Muslims regard it with awe and infringement of it as a sacrilegious act that calls for horrible punishment.

This explains the agitation which accompanied the fall of caliphate in Turkey in the early thirties and unquestionable sway, the church and during its Middle Ages as well as the fearful associations which the word "Jihad" (holy War) evokes in stable and secular regimes.

But giving over to the past, these institutions do not necessarily entail their disappearance from the minds of the Muslim to be Arabs or non-Arabs and it seems that it is in the minds that pathological perceptions of time crop up. In Euro-American and other similar cultures, time is considered as an entity that runs parallel to being. It travels along simultaneously with people. Time, accordingly, is used or employed for the advantage of human being. It measures up movement that ends up in accomplishing specific acts.

Time is lost or wasted when one stop action or remains inactive for a while. It can also be made up by increased exertion. Time has also commercial value. It is equivalent to money. It can be pressing, precise, obsessive or feverish. All these attributes describe time as perceived by modern secular human being.

Thus, time in Modern Euro- American culture is the mythic, secularized and synchronized with human activity in the present. On the other hand, human being in an Arab-Muslim culture is God made. It centers on either an imaginative past or an illusionary future.

The present in between, is to be "spent" in the service of either mythical ends. Thus, it seems that the Arab-Muslim culture has developed a pathological apprehension of time which evolved passive conception of human being society. Therefore, full awareness of the temporal structure of societies in general and of Arab-Muslim societies in particular, is a prerequisite for the deduction of therapeutic procedures. This becomes inevitable since pathological apprehension of time involves behavioral patterns that do not only negatively affect individuals but the society at large.

And it is in this conjunction that pathological apprehension of time becomes related to sociology. And it is in this direction too, that future studies of temporal structure of societies should be conducted.

CONCLUSIONS:

It emerges from the above mentioned discussion that:

= Sociologist has failed to capture the importance of time dimension and temporal structures, and incorporate it in their studies.

- = Time must be seen as a structure of possibilities rather than as a succession of “now” points that are portioned out into past, present and future. Temporality is central of both human awareness and his behavior.
- = The apperception of time by an Arab-Muslim individual is strongly culture-bound, myth-ethical and traditional. Since place is created time is created too, and both time and being on earth.
- = The introduction of technology to Arab-Muslim societies from predominantly agricultural traditional ones to consumptive ones.
- = The shift affected to the Arab-Muslim world by the result of redirection of time focusing on absorption in the past to absorption in the present. However, the introduction of Western education and the spread of modern mass media and communication have positively influenced Arab-Muslim society, because they have augmented the drive towards consumption, motivated moral decadence and brought about a clash of values that resulted in perversion, crime and juvenile delinquency.
- = Since traditional Arab-Muslim education is **Allah (God)** centered, it is hypothesized that the disillusionment brought about by technology would make time apperception man-centered. But this hypothesis did not hold water as Arab-Muslim people are currently suffering from an identity crisis.
- = It follows that pathological apperception of time replaced normal apperception. Thus, adopting diagnostic procedures becomes more than senility disruptions.
- = Therapeutic approach becomes inevitable to offset the temporal structure and brings in a soft of equilibrium to both man and society in the Arab-Muslim world.

REFERENCES:

- 1- Carly, R. W. et al. **A History of Medieval Political Theory in the West**, 2 Vols. New York 1903.
Smith, A. L. **Church and State in the middle Ages**.OUP, 1913. P.73.
- 2- Ilyas, Ahmad. **Sovereignty in Islam**. Pakistan, Hyderabad, 1958, pp.141-146.
- 3- Predick, Hertz. **Nationality in History and Politics**. London, 1945, p, 4.
- 4- Bruhl, Levy L. **La Mentslite Primitive**. Paris: F. Alcan, 1922, p. 446.
- 5- Balandier, G. **Sens ET Puissance**. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971, p. 105.
- 6- Toraine, Alain, **La Societe Post- Industrielle**. Paris: Deone I, 1969, pp. 270-271.
- 7- Halbwacks, M. **Le Memoire Collective**. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950. Pp. 116-117.
- 8- Ali, Salah salim. **“Neutrality in Science and Technology”**. In L’ Islam Aujourd’hui, No. 7, 1989, pp. 29-30.
- 9- Quoted in Malinovski, B. **The Dynamics of Culture Change**. New Haven: Conn, 1945.p. 82.
- 10- Burgelin, B. L” **Homme ET Le Tempe**. Paris: Aubier, 1945. P. 59.
- 11- Massignon, L. **Essai Sur Les Origines du Lexique Technique de La Mystique Musulmane**. 3rd Ed, Paris: Vrin, 1968, pp. 66-67.
- 12- Sa’id, Ali Ahmed. **The Static and the Dynamic**. Vol, 1, Beirut: Dar Al-Awda, 1980, pp. 36-50.
- 13- Merlean- Ponty, M. **Sens ET Non-Sens**. Paris & Geneva, Editions Nagel. 1961. P. 61.