

Alternative Discourse on the Study of Culture

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Abstract: This article presents a different view of the concept of culture as studied by contemporary anthropology and sociology. It proposes an alternative discourse on culture based on the author's personal analysis and discovery of the nature of culture as well as the Islamic outlook. It makes explicit and implicit criticism of the study of culture by today's social sciences and shows how the alternative approach helps promote the credibility of social scientists' understanding of the complex concept of culture. As such, it is legitimate for Third World social scientists to question their continuing dependency on modern social sciences. This could lead to the development of new compatible concepts and theories with the realities of developing societies. and Consequently this may create a shift by which social sciences in the North would be keen to learn from the social sciences of the South.

Key words: Alternative discourse, Culture, North and South social sciences.

Introduction: my attempt to create a theoretical social science perspective:

My story with the study of culture began around 1990. I was then flirting with the idea of establishing my own perspective or a paradigm or a theory which can help comprehend and explain both the behaviors of human individuals as well as the dynamics of human societies and civilizations.

Such an ambitious research would require from me *a suitable methodology* that could put me on solid grounds for this work. I told myself that my best methodology would be to chart, so to speak, those

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traits/characteristics which radically and categorically distinguish the human race from other species. Because I assumed that such a perspective, or a paradigm or a theory, which is based on *fundamental human distinct traits/characteristics*, would strongly and more likely qualify to be greatly credible and reliable as far as understanding and explaining the behaviors of the individuals and the social dynamics of human societies and civilizations. In other words, I was convinced that such human distinct traits/characteristics must be *square one* where I should begin my research in attempting to build a valid theoretical social science framework for the understanding and explanation of human affairs. Thus, I considered such a set of the human distinct traits/characteristics as *the major key* for seeking a theoretical articulate understanding and explanation of what goes on in the human world.

The comparative charting process of common and uncommon traits/characteristics between the human race and the other living species has led me to realize that the human race has certainly *some features* which the other species either do not have or they have a lower level of them. These are what I call *Human Symbols/HS*: spoken and written language, thought, religion, knowledge/science, myths, laws, cultural values and norms. My concept of HS/culture is to be explored in the rest of this paper in order to show how my vision of culture constitutes *an alternative perspective* to the common approach of the majority of Western anthropologists and sociologists.

I-Subject and Purpose of the Study:

This study is aimed at carrying out in-depth basic research on the essence and foundation of HS/culture from *an alternative viewpoint*, which differs from its equivalents in the contemporary Western social sciences. The alternative perspective on culture to be presented in this paper is made of two parts:

- 1 - The findings of my own research on the concept of culture and
- 2 - The Islamic epistemological view of culture.

However, that cannot be accomplished without first addressing the concept of culture in contemporary anthropological and sociological literature, which has been investigating culture and its manifestation since the nineteenth century.

Such a methodology will naturally prompt me to compare the

concept of culture as seen from my own and the Islamic epistemological viewpoints and from its prevailing equivalent. This should shed fresh light on phenomena that may be difficult for the social sciences to understand and explain, and thus help scientific knowledge to move forward. This is the primary goal that the researcher seeks to attain. My ambition here is above all to help to build a solid background for what has been called *Culturology* (White and Dillingham 1973: 32-33) which, in my view requires a critical examination encompassing epistemology, theories and concepts dealing with the concept of culture in contemporary anthropology and sociology.

II-The Unclear Definitions of Culture in Modern Social Sciences:

Modern Western anthropologists and sociologists have numerous definitions of the concept of culture estimated at 164 at least by recent accounts (Journet 2002:1). This suggests at least two things: either that culture is difficult to define (Edgar, Sedgwick 1999:101) particularly when using the positivist criteria of anthropology and sociology, or that culture is a complex phenomenon in itself.

I limit myself here to *three definitions* from classical anthropology and sociology. The most famous classical definition of the concept of culture was given by the British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (1871): “Culture, or civilisation, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (quoted in Sills and Merton 1991:240).

The American anthropologist Leslie White connects the concept of culture among human beings to their ability to imbue things with meaning, which he calls *the ability to symopl*. This allows individuals to understand the meaning of things and also how they were created and how they are used (White & Dillingham 1973, p.29). This ability in individuals is then defined as culture (White & Dillingham 1973, p.9) and there is no individual without culture, and no culture without individuals.

According to the renowned anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, his American colleagues who studied culture and personality *failed* to give a conclusive and clear definition of the nature of culture. In his view, the debate on the matter remains open despite the work of anthropologists

such as Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Edward Sapir, Ralph Linton, Abram Kardiner, and Franz Boas (Cuche 1996, p.117). Furthermore, for some others the problem is not only the absence of credible anthropological definitions of culture, but there are rather serious questions concerning the difficulty of studying culture in the spirit of modern science and using its methodology. Radcliffe-Brown was of the view that *culture* does not have a material presence, but rather a *very abstract presence*. On that basis, others like him wonder how there can be a science of something that cannot be seen, since there can be no science based on a reality which is neither perceptible nor visible (White and#38; Dillingham 1973, p.26).

For some anthropologists, the difficulty of studying culture goes beyond its definition to encompass other important aspects, such as: does culture exist? Where is culture to be found? There have been various answers to these questions. Some authors have claimed that it is to be found in the behaviour, and yet others say that culture is a manifestation which is separate from behaviour, and there are even *those who deny the existence of culture* altogether. Leslie White holds that culture is located at three different levels: within humans, such as in their thoughts and feeling, in interpersonal behaviour, and in objects, in accordance with his concept that culture consists of objective and actual events that *may be observed*.

Sociologists, on the other hand, have narrowed down the scope of the term “*culture*”, which they take to mean what they call *the main ideas of society*. These include the beliefs, symbols, values and customs of society. This standard sociological definition of culture is current, for instance, in the most US sociological textbooks aimed at university students.

The foregoing brief survey of the concept of culture, in particular in modern anthropology, shows that the notion of culture remains *opaque* and is almost completely *silent* about what I wish here to call *the metaphysical/transcendental aspects of cultural elements*, or what I already have called *HS*, which are language, thought, belief, knowledge, values, cultural usages and myths. In this study I use the concept of *HS* as *slightly different* from the concept of culture widely used in modern social sciences. For me, *HS* represent categorically the main elements that *distinguish the human race* from other living species. This emphasis has

made me change my former terms (Cultural Symbols/CS) to Human Symbols/HS, because recent studies in social and human sciences have attempted to use the word culture in their studies of animals and other living species. In order to avoid confusion in terminology, I prefer to use the HS concept to indicate clearly that HS are strictly human traits/characteristics. As it will be fully shown in this paper, my vision of HS is different at several levels from modern anthropological and sociological view. There is, for instance, an almost complete failure on the part of contemporary anthropologists and sociologists to address the transcendental/metaphysical nature of HS. Only with a small minority of scholars do I find rare and ambiguous terms suggesting that culture is a super-organic human element, as affirmed by the sociologist Herbert Spencer and by Kroeber (White and Dillingham 1973, p.47), or that it is non-biological, as suggested by Tylor, or “extrasomatic”, following White or external and “supra-biological”, to use a term adopted by a number of sociologists.

These few and timid suggestions, that culture is a super-organic and super-biological element, remain ambiguous with regard to the nature and essence of the HS that characterise the human race. Things are hardly better when some anthropologists and sociologists see culture as an “abstraction” or as something that “has no ontological reality” (Journet 2002 : 103- 126, White and Dillingham 1973, p.24 & p.26).

Given the general failure to clarify these terms, contemporary social science literature is *devoid of epistemological theories of the system of HS*. The tremendous intellectual fund of knowledge accumulated by the modern social sciences on culture remains content to describe cultural elements without their transcendental dimensions. Indeed, most anthropologists and sociologists agree that the word of culture differs from the world of human biology, as suggested by the terms used above. Therefore, culture, as a contemporary concept widely used in the social sciences in particular, is not dealt with using the metaphysical point of view that I find both in my own and in the Islamic approaches, as *alternative approaches* to the study of culture in social sciences (Dhaouadi 2009:24-46).

In view of the neglect and absence of metaphysical touches in HS, contemporary social science is hardly objective, in the sense of a cognitive state that allows one to ascertain the truth as such quite independently of

the mind of the researcher, unmarred by prior emotions, values, concepts or desires (Fay 2001: 202-220). The presence of transcendental hallmarks, as will be explained, is an inherent truth that lies at the core of HS. The various individual and social factors affecting the minds of modern researchers in the social sciences have prevented them from undertaking analyses and studies of culture from an epistemological viewpoint that gives full legitimacy to the presence of metaphysical/transcendental touches. Thus, the tremendous body of knowledge accumulated by those social sciences since the nineteenth century offers a deficient reality of the true specifications of HS. Modern social science ultimately says more about itself than it does about the inherent reality of culture.

III-The Making of Alternative View of Culture

My new alternative perspective of culture is essentially founded on my personal thinking and explorations. It exists neither in my book (*Toward Islamic Sociology of Cultural Symbols 1996*) nor in the literature of contemporary social sciences. My search for the nature of culture has taken a *different methodology* from conventional anthropological and sociological approaches. My alternative methodology for the study of culture is based on *my own set of five observations/concepts*:

- 1 - The process of the human body growth and maturation is *very slow* compared with those of other living beings. For instance, on average human babies begin walking at the age of one year, while animal babies may walk immediately after birth or within few hours or days after.
- 2 - In general, humans have *longer lifespan* than those of most of the animals.
- 3 - The human race has a *dominant role* in the administration, management and control of this world.
- 4 - Humans are privileged by what I have called earlier *HS system*: spoken and written language, thought, religion, knowledge/science, laws, myths, cultural values and norms...
- 5 - In my perspective of HS, the human identity is made up of two parts: *the body and HS*. As such, it is fully a dualistic identity which is often referred to in religion and philosophy as an identity made of body and soul.

IV- Potential Explanation of HS Framework

I found myself as a researcher compelled to look for a potential explanatory hypothesis of the slow human body growth and maturation. I discovered that this phenomenon could be accounted for by the assumption which sees that human global growth and maturation involve *two fronts*: The body front and that of HS. In short, the growth and maturation of non-human species are uni-dimensional (body) because of their lack of HS in the most complex human sense of the term. In contrast, the growth and maturation of humans are *bi-dimensional*. That is, they involve two levels: the body level and the HS level. So, the process of two levels is considered, in my hypothesis, to be behind the human slow body growth and maturation. This assumption is based on logical reasoning. Logical reasoning would conclude that the rapid body growth and maturation among the non-humans is assumed to be due to the uni-dimensional/body process of growth and maturation. While the slow body growth and maturation among humans is due to the fact that they go through *two processes of growth and maturation*. In logical reasoning terms, *it takes longer time* for the accomplishment of the two processes of growth and maturation to materialise than for just one single process. That is, the process of human body growth and maturation is slowed down, so to speak, among humans because humans are involved in *a second process* of growth and maturation represented by HS.

Furthermore, the growth and maturation of HS appear to be by their own nature slower than the human body processes of growth and maturation. While the latter reach their peak of growth and maturation in the twenties (Rischer, Easton 1992:423), some features of HS reach their higher and highest stages of growth and maturation much later in human lifespan. For example, humans could hardly reach, before the age of 40 years, the peak of growth and maturation in the fields of thought, religious experience and knowledge and science. This gives strong legitimacy to humans' strong need for longer lifespan as shown in drawing I below. In other words, the human longer lifespan could be seen as the outcome of two factors:

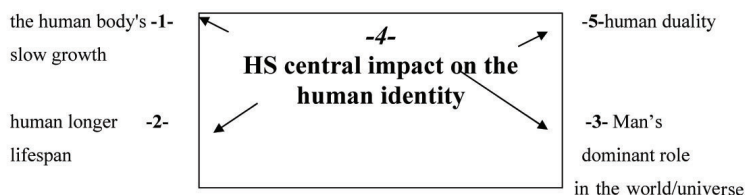
- 1 - The slow human pace of body growth and maturation and
- 2 - The apparent innate tendency of HS to grow and mature slowly.

The human body growth and maturation peak in the twenties helps explain also *two features of human life*:

- a - Athletes are known to often retire after they reach the age of 25 years or so.
- b - On the intellectual/thought level, humans can hardly manifest standard mature thinking before the twenties. This could be explained as follows: once humans have, so to speak, finished the business of their body growth and maturation in the twenties, they can then *concentrate* more on the development and maturation of their HS for the rest of their lives. This should explain as well why real high mature scientific theories and intellectual complex thought can not usually see the light before the age of 40 years.

The following drawing illustrates *the centrality of the HS* in the human identity. This gives legitimacy to my claim that *humans are by nature cultural symbolic beings*. In other words, HS are at the core of the human race's identity, because they strongly influence/determine the remaining four distinctive human features (1, 2, 3, 5) in drawing I. In cultural sociologists' terms, this makes my assumption as having a *very 'strong program'* (Turner 2001:139), because HS /culture are very central to the epistemology of my assumption, to its explanatory perspective as well as to its theorizing about the behaviours of human individuals and the social dynamics of human societies. My strong cultural vision of humans should, thus, qualify to be an avant-garde outlook for today emerging cultural sociology (Spillman, 2007). As elaborated so far, my insight of culture is fully *new* in its conceptualization, its theorizing vision and in its understanding and explanation of human phenomena. In other words, it is *a fresh new alternative vision of the concept of culture* as shown in the following drawing:

The Drawing



HS central position in the human entity as illustrated above leads to the emergence of my new concept which is rather opposite to Sociobiology (Wilson 1975). The new concept is what I would like to call Culturobiology. The latter means that HS have an implicit determinant impact on the human body's biological physiological design like having a slow process of growth and maturation. It is assumed here that the slow body process in question is made so in order to meet the need of HS for a longer human lifespan so they can be fully developed, grown and matured. This is obviously consistent with the idea of the assumed *influence of mind (HS) over matter* or that of the psychological on the organic in humans (Pedler 1981).

V- Cultural Sociology as a Core Discipline

Having established through my analysis that HS are very central to human identity and are also very distinctive of the human race, HS should thus be considered as *first class source/ reference* for social scientists whose studies attempt to understand and explain the behaviors of individuals as well as the social dynamics of human societies and civilizations. There is, therefore, a strong legitimacy for cultural sociology to be established, promoted and defended today by some sociologists. Because this young discipline strongly uses the basic human foundations (HS) for the understanding of human behavior and societies' dynamics. Unlike other branches of sociology, which often deal with peripheral issues in dealing with humans and their societies, *cultural sociology* addresses and focuses its attention deeply on those most fundamental elements (HS) without which neither humans nor their own societies could come into existence as we know them as distinct and leading features in this world (Spillman 2007). Based on this, cultural sociology is strongly qualified to be seen as *the core discipline* not only in the field of sociology but in all other fields of social sciences.

My new alternative methodology in this essay is not limited to show that HS/culture is central to human identity and to the human species' domination in this world, but it allows also to explore *other fundamental features of HS* which are neglected by contemporary social sciences (Kuper, 2000).

VI- HS Transcendental Dimensions:

My attempt to deepen the understanding of the profound nature of HS has led me to discover *other new dimensions* which are hardly outlined, let alone analysed and discussed in modern social science literature (Bauman, 1999). As such, these new dimensions constitute a feature of my alternative perspective in the study of culture. Most of these new dimensions are not present in my previous writings. These new features of HS are expected to enrich and, thus, enhance the outlook of cultural sociology. The new aspects are:

(a) *HS have neither weight nor volume* in the material sense of the word. That is, HS do not have material nature, but they have rather immaterial /transcendental/spiritual nature. Positivist social scientists are very likely to find it strange to use the terms 'weight and volume' in dealing with HS/culture. Nonetheless, neutral objectivity strongly permits the usage of such terms and will give a lot of meaning to this kind of alternative use. It is sufficient to mention in this context few examples to make the point:

1) Why sending letters and documents by fax and e-mail reach their destination much faster than if they were mailed by regular or even rapid/fast mail? The explanation to this, through my concept of weightless and no volume, could be simply put this way: The process of sending letters and documents by e-mail and fax *eliminates* from them the factors of *weight and volume*. This means, that sending by fax and e-mail liberates the sent items from their material parameters (weight and volume) and as such, it returns the HS, so to speak, to their first initial natural state referred to as having neither weight nor volume.

With the absolute innate absence of weight and volume in the natural essence of the HS system, it becomes quite appropriate to understand why HS can move with unbelievable rapid speed through time and space. HS having no material weight and volume may also help explain how it is possible to put the enormous written material of tons of books in few small electronic Flash Disks whose weight and volume are too little! In my alternative vision, this is possible because HS (words of books in this case) having by their very nature no volume and weight *hardly need huge material space to be contained in it*. In philosophical and religious senses, HS belong to the spiritual and immaterial world of humans. HS have their own special characteristics and laws by which

they abide and ultimately make them different from the world which has both weight and volume.

2) The extreme rapid speed of sound is another example which is frequently cited. The Concorde plane's fast speed is often compared to that of the sound. This could be explained by the fact that the transmitted word, through the voice-sound at a short distance between individuals or at a far distance during their phone calls, has at its natural state neither weight nor volume. Consequently, the voiced-sent word is naturally predisposed to move with extreme speed, according to my alternative outlook being developed and elaborated in this article.

b) Because of their immaterial / transcendental nature, HS are not affected by the reduction factor when we give from them to others. For instance, when we give 50 dollars from our capital to others as charity contribution; this act reduces our capital. But the situation is quite different if we give others parts of our thought/ideas, knowledge/science or teach them our languages or spread among them our religious beliefs and cultural symbols (HS).

c) HS have longer lifespan throughout time. Ideas, religious beliefs, cultural values and norms have long lifespan potential of survival which may last for semi-eternity. Written and spoken languages play a fundamental role in the very making of HS, on the one hand, and in their longer lifespan survival, on the other. This is because language is considered in my perspective as *the Mother of all HS*. I mean by this, that HS/ culture system can hardly exist without the presence of the human language in its spoken form at least. As such, one can argue that human language has a potential eternalizing mark/ seal which possesses an impact on all HS and, thus, make them strongly qualified to be spiritual/ transcendentals: that is to say, immaterial in their very deep nature.

The present new outlook on the long lifespan of HS helps explain the phenomena of the so called *semi-eternal human thought* of philosophers, scientists, scholars, religious thinkers of various civilizations since time immemorial. Their thought potential for semi-eternity can be explained, first, by the use of spoken and written languages which have the eternalizing seal as seen before, and, second, by the fact that human thought belongs to the transcendental universe of HS. This

argument will be strengthened later by my explanation of the Qur'an perspective on HS to be outlined in this paper.

d) HS can charge humans with fantastic strong energy potentials that enable them to meet and defy the great challenges in human life. In human long history, cultural values like freedom, equality, justice etc... have proven to charge human individuals, groups and larger communities with great power that defies the enormous material power of their adversary. As an example, the victory of Third World countries in the 20th century in their fight for independence from Western colonial occupation is a valid illustration of the imposing role of HS in the liberation of the colonized societies, though they were weaker militarily and materially than their Western occupiers. The success story of the Tunisian and Egyptian 2011 revolutions can be cited as another case. Here, cultural values against despotic political regimes and in favour of freedom and democracy were in full galvanizing action.

In comparison with my alternative approach to the study of the nature of HS/culture, it is fair to say *that modern social sciences hardly bring up what I call here transcendental/spiritual dimensions of HS/culture*. There is a continuing widespread silence on these very important dimensions of HS despite sociologists' increasing interest today in cultural sociology (Spillman 2007, Smith 1998, Turner 2001: 135-150). My alternative perspective on the study of culture, as shown above, finds solid support in the Islamic vision of culture which I am now to describe, analyse and discuss.

VII- The Concept of Culture from the Islamic Cognitive Viewpoint

When seeking to inquire about the Islamic cognitive view of HS or culture, the best way to determine their contours and meet the challenge of their essential nature is to refer to *the Koran*, the primary source of Islam at all levels. If my modest depth reading will be successful in helping to understand the content of the Koranic verses pertaining to HS, I shall claim to have acquired *the correct Islamic cognitive view of the nature of culture*. And I shall thereby have armed myself with the most valuable Islamic concept of culture, which prompts the researcher to *compare* and possibly to *compete* with the concept of culture as used hitherto and currently in Western contemporary social sciences.

My methodology for revealing HS and their nature in the Koranic text consists of *three sets of questions*:

- 1 - Are there transparent indications in the Koran that distinguish humans from other beings with regard to their capacity to act on behalf of God?
- 2 - Are there Koranic verses that speak with complete frankness about the distinctiveness of the human race from all other living species?
- 3 - To what do these Koranic verses attribute the distinctiveness and superiority of the human race in this world?

Firstly, the Koranic text abounds in verses that accord a special, outstanding place to human beings among all other creatures, whether spiritual entities, such as angels, or animals that share the Earth with them. In other words, the image of the human in the Koran is of a unique being, who occupies first place in importance after God in this universe. Humans thus have no one who can contest their qualification to manage the affairs of this world and to assume the functions of sovereignty (vice-regency, stewardship) in it. I restrict myself here to *five cases* in which the Koran speaks with great clarity of the prominence of humans over other creatures. In al-Baqara(The cow) Sûra/chapter 2:30, the Koran describes the human being Adam as the “vice-regent of God on Earth”: And then, your Lord said to the angels; I am placing a vice-regent on Earth”. There is little need to dwell on the importance of this office (the vice-regency of God on Earth, to which human beings were appointed to the exclusion of the angels and other creatures on Earth). As to the absolute advantages of human beings described in three other verses of the same Sûra (chapter), al-Baqara (The cow) 2:31, 32,33, they consist of God bestowing upon Adam more knowledge and learning than on others, including the angels: “And He taught Adam all the names of beings, and then presented them to the angels and said: Tell me the names of these, if you be truthful” (al-Baqara) (The cow, 2:31). As a result, God commanded the angels *to bow down to Adam* alone, as a third sign of honour and distinction to Adam: “And when we said to the angels: Bow down to Adam, they bowed down, except for Iblîs (Satan), who refused and became arrogant, and was among the disbelievers”.

Al-Isrâ Sûra(The night journey) 17:70 uses the verbs “ennoble” and “give preference” in order to demonstrate the two qualities of human beings as outstanding over other creatures on Earth: “We have ennobled

the children of Adam and carried them by land and sea; We have provided them with good things, and given them clear preference over many of the beings that We have created”.

These Koranic verses clarify beyond the shadow of a doubt that *humans are special beings* who are outstanding and superior to other creatures of the Earth and to angels. The Koranic view of the human race thus represents a complete cognitive (epistemological) break with the theory of evolution of Darwin and his associates, because the creation of *Adam*, in the Koranic view, represents *a special case of creation* which is quite separate both from the angels and from the realms of other creatures here on Earth. The creation of human beings stands apart from all other instances of creation by *the gift of knowledge and learning* that God granted to humans alone. It is because of this *strong cognitive ability* that it was legitimate to make Adam the vice-regent of God by ennobling him and giving him preference on Earth, and having the angels bow down to him.

Two verses from the Koran council the angels' bowing down to Adam to God's blowing of His spirit into him: “And when I have fashioned him and have breathed of my spirit into him, fall down in prostration to him” al-Hijr Sûra (The rocky place) 15:29, Sad Sûra (The letter Sad) 38:72.

It is fully legitimate to query the meaning of the words “*my spirit ruhi*” contained in these two Sûras because the way the verse is structured suggests that the injunction to the angels to bow down to Adam follows the breathing of God's spirit into him. In other words, there is a strong, if not causal, connection between the act of breathing the divine spirit into Adam and God's exhortation to the angels to bow down to him. As it is well known, the word “spirit/ruh” in the Koran has various meanings, first and foremost that of infusing creatures with life. The Tafsir exegesis of the two Jalals states: “Attaching the spirit to him constitutes an ennoblement (an honouring) of Adam. The spirit is a genial body by means of which human beings live, thanks to its influence in them” (al-Mahalli and s-Suyuti, 1993, p.457). The famous modern Syrian Koranic exegesis 'Afif Abdulqadir al-Fattah Tabbara' provides the following exegetic explanation of the words “my spirit/ruhi” in the verse: “I breathed into him of my power, in other words, when I infused him with

spirit whereby he might live, that spirit being of my own doing... fall down to him in prostration” (Tabbara, n.d).

I conclude with the exegesis of Shaikh Mutawalli ash-Sha’rawi, the most famous of Egyptian exegetist in the modern age. He explains the meaning of “the spirit of God” and its being breathed into Adam as follows: The breathing of the spirit of God does not mean that the breathing was done to infuse life by blowing into Adam’s mouth. Rather, this represents the diffusion of the spirit to all parts of the body. Scholars have differed over the definition of the spirit. For my part, I think that *it is safer not to go too deeply into that matter* because the Truth Almighty is He who says: “And they ask you about the spirit, say: The spirit is from the command of my Lord; the knowledge you have been granted is but little” al-Isra (The Night Journey) 17:85 (ash-Sha’rawi, nd, vol.12, p.7, 694).

It is clear from the content of this exegesis that the meaning of the words “my spirit/ruhi” is quite simply the power of God to infuse Adam with life, of whose secrets human beings have no knowledge, which is why Shaikh ash-Sha’rawi advised against going too deeply into that matter.

Sticking to this explanation of the meaning of the words “my spirit/ruhi” does not allow Adam the human being to occupy the office of vice-regent of God on Earth and of the angels to bow down to him in honour of his special and outstanding nature. *God infused not only human beings with life*, but also all living creatures. Hence the mere infusion of human beings with life does not qualify them alone to act as the vice-regents of God on Earth. There is therefore *a need to seek some other meanings of the words “my spirit”* which might strongly suggest the distinctive and superior position of human beings over other creatures by virtue of their stewardship of Earth as the vice-regents of God.

This is where, in my view, *the role of the social sciences* in helping Koranic exegesists comes in to guide them to the appropriate meaning to be given to the words “my spirit/ruhi” in the verses “And when I have fashioned him and have breathed of my spirit into him, fall down in prostration to him” al-Hijr (The rocky place) 15:29; Sad (The letter Sad) 38:72. Many contemporary exegetists draw on the discoveries of modern science in explaining numerous Koranic verses concerning the creation of

human beings and understanding the functioning of the human brain and body, and especially the relationship of human beings to natural phenomena in the universe, such as the sun, the moon, stars, mountains, seas, volcanoes and earthquakes, all of which have served to reinforce the idea of the *unimitability* (I'jaz) of the Koran. There are increasing numbers of publications, symposia and conferences in this field in the modern Islamic world. I support in this respect Dr Zaghlul an-Najjar's stand which stresses that it is not possible to understand many Koranic verses without relying on highly credible scientific discoveries concerning human beings and natural phenomena of the universe.

In the same way and to the same extent, *modern exegetists are also called upon to make use of the fund of contemporary social science* learning concerning the understanding of the behaviours of individuals and communities, and the dynamism of societies and human cultural hallmarks. These disciplines certainly help to get closer to the meaning of the words *my spirit/ruhi* in the verses referred to above. The disciplines of anthropology, sociology and psychology all agree that human beings are distinct from other beings by virtue of what those disciplines call *culture* or what I have termed *HS*: language, thought, knowledge and learning, religion and cultural values and customs, which, from *the alternative perspective* defended here, qualified humanity in the past, and continue to do so in the present and future, to play the role of vice-regent of God on Earth. In other words, the phrase "I have breathed of my spirit/ruhi" means that the divine breathing into Adam is first and foremost *a cultural/HS breathing* in the contemporary sense given by the social sciences to the term culture. The breathing of HS into Adam alone conferred upon him, to the exclusion of others, the function of the stewardship of Earth, and the attendant bowing down of the angels to him. Such a cultural/HS reading of the words *my spirit/ruhi* in these verses makes clear just *how much enhanced credibility* the explanation of Koranic verses has if exegetists draw on modern scientific knowledge.

VIII-The Cognitive Koranic Foundational View of Culture:

It is clear from the foregoing that the Koran has a cognitive (epistemological) view concerning HS as a distinctive feature of the human race. The divine cultural/HS breathing into Adam, to the exclusion of others, is thus a breathing that has, according to the Koranic

view, *metaphysical roots and a metaphysical nature*. Its source is not the world of Earth, but rather the world of the heavens, of which the creatures of Earth were deprived, and which was given to human beings alone. The Koran speaks with complete frankness of the metaphysical nature of the HS/ cultural breathing for which human beings alone were singled out: “And when I have fashioned him and have *breathed of my spirit into him*, fall down in prostration to him”. In other words, the HS breath deep within Adam comes from the divine essence itself. There is thus no room in the Koranic vision for doubt about the essential metaphysical nature of the HS that distinguish the human race from other living species.

On the other hand, as noted, most modern social sciences are almost completely *silent* about the metaphysical aspects of culture. It studies and analyses the cultures of societies using a descriptive or positivist method without bothering to raise cognitive (epistemological) questions about the nature of culture/HS as a unique hallmark of individual humans and of human societies, *shying away* from examining the features of things that are not subject to the world of sensory perception or quantity. *It is an objective, scientific failing to reject the metaphysical despite its strong presence at the heart of HS*, one that restricts understanding of the behaviour of individuals and the dynamism of societies and civilisations. How can one have confidence in the findings of social science research, which studies culture stripped - for reasons of epistemology- of its essential metaphysical hallmarks? Hence, the modern social sciences should not merely study the religious factors involved in understanding the behaviour of individuals and the dynamics of societies (Heath, 2000), but also draw on the cognitive (epistemological) vision of religions as a source of scientific understanding (Ebaugh, 2002), as this study with its alternative approach endeavours to highlight with respect to culture.

HS have a transcendental or metaphysical character that makes them different from the components of the human body and the material world. Humans thus have *a dual identity*: a system of HS, on the one hand, and the body elements, on the other hand. It is the HS that are the most prominent and decisive in the determination of the identity of individuals, and hence their behaviour. I have already outlined above the five most important transcendental/metaphysical traits of HS as outlined here by the present alternative approach to the study of culture.

IX- Human Symbols and Cultures' Dialogue

The HS concept helps put the issue of civilisations' dialogue or clash into perspective. First, based on the centrality of HS in the human identity in the individual and collective senses, it is more appropriate to use the term *culture* instead of civilization in the analysis of the issue of dialogue between today peoples, societies and civilizations. This is, because culture is, on the one hand, *the basic founding element of a given civilization* and, on the other hand, it is the decisive force in determining and encouraging the dialogue process or vice versa between humans. So it is more accurate to speak of *cultures' dialogue* rather than civilizations' dialogue.

Since the end of the 20th century, many books and articles have been published on this subject as well as numerous seminars, colloquium and congresses have been held in different parts of the world. The success of the project of civilizations' dialogue could hardly crystallize and be fruitful without the dialogue of the cultures of human civilizations since cultures/HS represent the core of the identities of human individuals and their societies and civilisations, as stressed above in the argument of my own HS concept.

Given that languages are, according to the assumptions of my HS notion, the essential creating forces of the phenomenon of human cultures, it becomes very appropriate to consider peoples' learning of each other's *languages* as a practical and effective *green visa* that facilitates the process of dialogue between the concerned parties whose civilisations have a wish to dialogue (Bochner 1985:99-126)

However, today Western advanced societies and developing countries are *not equal on the learning scale of each other's languages*. At least some large social groups from the South know fairly well some of the languages of the Western developed countries. English and French are the most widely spread, known, and used Western languages in the Third World. Practically, all social groups and classes of Western advanced societies *do not have* even a limited knowledge of the Third World's languages.

This situation is true of the state of dialogue between the Western world and the Arab Muslim world. Calls in favour of such a dialogue have been getting stronger especially since September 11, 2001. From the

point of view of my HS concept, *the West is less ready and skilled linguistically and, thus, culturally to get into a serious and wide dialogue with the Arab Muslim world*. All Western social classes do not know any of the major languages of the Arab Muslim world which are: Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu. This situation is likely to lead to the *widespread Western ignorance* of the cultures of the Arab Muslim societies (Bochner 1985:5-4, 81-98). This could hardly encourage and enable the West for a wide grass root dialogue with the Arab Muslim world.

In this regard, *Americans* may be considered - in linguistic and cultural terms- less predisposed for dialogue with other cultures. They may be so, because they are *more handicapped* by their wide ignorance of foreign languages than most of the advanced European Western societies. In my own terms, they are massively illiterate of foreign language(s) as *green visa tool* that could solicit them to like to enter into dialogue with others. This may be one of the reason which helps explain why *the slogan of Clash of Civilizations* has come from the *US culture* and not from the European one.

In contrast to that, there is in the Arab and Muslim societies a wide genuine knowledge of Western cultures because of the wide usage particularly of English and French in those societies during Western colonisation and after especially among the elites and the middle and the higher classes of the Arab and Muslim population. As such, my HS concept shows that the desire for civilizations' dialogue *is not equal* between the Western advanced societies and the Arab and Muslim peoples. The greater knowledge of Western languages and cultures among the Arab and Muslim population enable the latter to have greater motivation and aspiration than their Western counterparts to strongly welcome and act in favour of the dialogue with the West.

The Arab Muslim world *scores also better* than the West on the *religious scale knowledge*. On the one hand, Muslims strongly believe in Moses and Jesus as prophets and God's Messengers. The belief in other divine prophets and messengers throughout the ages is a fundamental component of the Muslim faith. Consequently, Christians and Jews are seen by Muslims as the Peoples of the Revealed Books.

On their part, Judaism and Christianity do not preach to their followers to believe in Islam and Mohammad as its prophet and

messenger. In other words, the West shows great ignorance of the Arab Muslim world's languages, religions and cultures. Social psychologists would strongly point out that ignorance of other peoples cultures constitute a major source for *the display of prejudices, stereotyped attitudes and widespread false accusations of them* (Bochner 1985:5-44).

Furthermore, the West remains today the dominant power in the world. Certainly, these two sets of factors have the tendency *to reinforce* each other in order to establish an inferior image of Arabs and Muslims and at the same time a superior image of Westerners.

According to the HS notion, the population of the Western world at large has *more difficulty linguistically and religiously* than its Arab and Muslim counterpart to really engage in *a fair grass root dialogue*. As such, the West is far from being adequately prepared to advocate, in a spontaneous and motivated manner, an open and sincere dialogue with the Arab Muslim world with all respect and equality.

Huntington's thesis does not make mention of the importance of the presence or the absence of linguistic and religious factors in the making of dialogue or Clash of Civilizations. As shown, these factors point out that the Arab Muslim world has greater desire and willingness to engage in dialogue with the Western world.

Furthermore, Huntington's theoretical assumptions display a lot of prejudice and misunderstanding not only toward the Arab Muslim civilization but also toward the Chinese civilization as well. Such an attitude does not surely help the establishment of credible scientific knowledge and science. Huntington's view lacks full presence of a neutral and objective spirit in advancing his theory of the Clash of Civilizations. Consequently, he can not easily claim to be one of those who really have committed themselves to science as their true vocation.

X- Huntington's Theory in Question

Today, as already shown, there is an international wide use of the theory of *Clash of Civilizations* in the media, in intellectual circles and even in the common daily life of men and women around the world. The events of September 11, 2001 may have boosted the popularity of this theory particularly in the US.

The debate on the credibility of Huntington's theory is still waging and out of which *two main camps* could be identified. On the one hand,

one camp strongly believes in the importance of the theory especially for the understanding of the West's relation with the Arab Muslim world. On the other hand, the second camp seriously questions the very credibility of Huntington's theory. It is argued, for instance, that the idea of the Clash of Civilizations is the outcome of a *political situation*. It is an attempt to create a new paradigm which replaces the theory of the Cold War between the former Soviet Union and the Western world led by the USA. As such, the thesis of the theory of the Clash of Civilizations can hardly be considered a scientific one (Huntington 1993). Furthermore, there are those who see Huntington's theory as having *philosophical background* related to the thinking of Thomas Kuhn, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee and Fernand Braudel. This background may have overstretched the application of the assumptions of this theory to the Arab Muslim civilization whose many present parameters oppose the clash with Western civilization, as already pointed out in this paper (Saadi, 2006: 147-161).

XI- The Politics of Conflicts and Tensions between the West and Islam

In modern times, the tensions between the West and Islam are largely of *political nature*. Huntington himself has referred to this: "...however, the age of Muslim wars has its roots in more general causes. These do not include the inherent nature of Islamic doctrine and beliefs...The causes of contemporary Muslim wars lie in politics, not in seventh-century religious doctrines."(Newsweek, 2001-.2002:9)

There is no question today that the Arab and the Muslim world's hostility toward the US is strongly caused by the American administration's often unconditional support for Israel against the Palestinians, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and the siege of Gaza. All signs could make one easily predict that the relations between the Arab and Muslim population and the US will take a positive radical change if the US and the West in general adopt *an even handed foreign policy* toward the Arabs and the Israelis and stop the occupation of both Iraq and Afghanistan. The true adoption of that policy by the US and the West will certainly convince all sceptical persons and create a genuine dialogue between American/Western civilization and the Arab Muslim civilization. Following Obama's constructive address in Cairo to the Muslim world, many in the Arab Muslim world and outside of it have become

rather optimistic about the achievement of a genuine solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, thus, to the larger Arab-Israeli conflict. The Obama administration's realization of that would not be positively measured in political terms only but also in *cultural bonuses* which would make Americans closer to both the Arabs and the Muslims. Then, a positive attitude toward the US by today over one Billion Arab and Muslim population would be America's Master card to change its bad image of the Bush era for the better not only in the Muslim world but over the entire world. Can Obama's leadership and his administration meet this enormous challenge and put an end to the clash between America and the world at large?

As argued in this paper, *HS are the Basics of Basics to the process of civilizations dialogue* whether between Islam and the West or between the USA and the rest of the world. The Obama administration's bargain is how to change for the better America's image in the Arab Muslim world and in the world at large. That would require a positive and consistent solid action on the ground and soft and cleaver diplomacy framed in a good standing and articulate HS perspective. Without cultural understanding and respect of each other, human societies, nations and civilizations are bound to *fail the real dialogue test* between them.

The 2011 unexpected Arab revolts and uprisings should prompt the West to understand better the secrets of the Arab world culture. As underlined in this article, the wide public learning of the Arabic language, its culture and Islam by a majority of Western citizens would improve dialogue between the West and the Arab world. This is bound to reduce at least political conflicts between them.

Conclusion

As shown in this essay, my research on HS since 1990s has led me in an almost fully independent way to *new visions and concepts in the HS universe*. This may resemble somewhat the way Ibn Khaldun had discovered his New Science of in his Prolegomena/Muqaddimah. The similarity between Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddimah and my work in this paper is confined to the assumption that both works put forward new perspectives for understanding and explaining the phenomena in question. The author of the Muqaddimah had established a new science to understand and explain the events and the social phenomena of

human civilization and social organization in the Arab Muslim world in particular. The corpus of my own explorations of the HS universe in this article offers plenty of *fair new insights, concepts and theoretical frameworks* relevant to dealing and studying the universe HS/culture. The main features of this paper can be outlined in the following:

- 1 - The basic research of my thesis in the explorations of the HS universe strongly claims that *humans* are profoundly *cultural beings by nature*. That is, the essence of human nature is first and for most a cultural symbolic one. HS are thus the first determining forces of human identity. In other words, the role of HS/culture in shaping the aspects of the identity of the human species' is a central prominent role. This epistemological view of the cultural symbolic nature of human nature hardly finds a similar one among the perspectives and the theories of contemporary social sciences like Marxism, Structural-Functionalism, Behaviourism, Psychoanalysis and even Symbolic Interaction. These Western dominant schools in social sciences do not give a prior central role to the influence of HS on the shaping of human identity and action.
- 2 - This new conceptualization of the symbolic cultural nature of humans finds - through my similar interpretive Geertz approach to the Quran text - strong support which I do not encounter in the discourse of past and modern exegetists (Al Mufasssirun) of the Quran.

The compatibility between the meaning of the HS and that of the word (My Spirit) in the verse is a sort of methodology which combines both the use of reason (Aql) and reliance on sacred knowledge (Naql). The authentic traditional learned intellectual Islamic knowledge/ science is well known for this type of methodology which Ibn Khaldun, among past Muslim scholars and scientists, had adopted in writing his pioneering famous Muqaddimah in the social sciences.

Consequently, this Islamic epistemology of the correspondence between HS and the divine Spirit grants a sound account to the very long duration survival of HS. To my knowledge, this could be considered a new insight very relevant to the understanding of the nature of culture/HS as well as to the study of its dynamics which

have preoccupied especially anthropologists, cultural sociologists and sociologists in the contemporary period.

- 3 - As to the new third feature which I have discovered through my concept of the centrality of HS/culture in the identity of humans, it has to do with my explanation of the slow human body growth as well as the human longer lifespan, in comparison with those of other living beings. As stressed before, HS distinguish the human species. I use HS to explain the two human characteristics just mentioned. The following example shows the credibility of this assumption. On the one hand, we know that the human babies can walk on average a little before or a little after reaching one year of age. On the other hand, animal babies are able to walk at birth or after only few hours or days after their birth. I found that the cause of the walking delay among human babies could be attributed to HS. I believe that the discovery of this link is something *new* whose truth is hardly given credit by common people as well as by most learned men and women. Ibn Khaldun's terms in speaking about his invention of his New Science may be relatively fit to be applied on the link in question here: "It should be known that the discussion of this topic (the link between HS and human babies walking delay here) is something new and extraordinary..."(Dawood, 1974: 39).
- 4 - Another new feature which I have come to discover through my assumption of the HS centrality in human identity is displayed in my new conceptualization of the dual identity of humans. Philosophers, religious men and women and the general public often think of humans as made of body and soul. On my part, I think that I have made a new contribution to the traditional conceptualization of that dual human identity, so I believe it has become *more transparent*. The human common knowledge of the real essence of the human soul is much short of clarity. Consequently, I see fit to replace it by HS in the analysis of the dual human identity. That is, in my alternative perspective the nature of the human dual entity has become: body and HS instead of body and soul. Very likely, this may constitute an *innovative* frame for the charting of the dual human identity. This new insightful outlook should promote more transparency as far as the making of the human identity is concerned. As such, it should enable us more to understand as well

as to *explain the interaction of the two poles* (body and HS) of the human identity and the impact of that on human behaviours of individuals as well as the various patterns of human societies and civilizations' dynamics.

- 5 - My focused research in the layers of HS (language, thought, religion, knowledge/science, myths, cultural values and norms...) has made me discover that they have *neither weight nor volume* in the material sense of things. HS are immaterial elements. They are rather spiritual or transcendental. This is in line with the new concept of immateriality being raised by some modern sciences. My description of HS as having no volume and no weight can be also considered 'something *new* and extraordinary' as Ibn Khaldun saw his New Science.

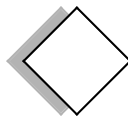
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طرح فكري بديل لدراسة الثقافة

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ملخص: تطرح هذه الدراسة رؤية مختلفة لمفهوم الثقافة كما درسه علماء الأنثروبولوجيا والاجتماع المعاصرون. يقدم المؤلف منظوراً بديلاً لدراسة الثقافة يعتمد على تحليله الشخصي وعلى الرؤية الإسلامية للثقافة. ينتقد البحث بطريقة مباشرة أو غير مباشرة دراسة العلوم الاجتماعية المعاصرة للثقافة، ويبين كيف أن المنظور البديل يساعد على تحسين مصداقية علمي الأنثروبولوجيا والاجتماع في إدراك المفهوم المعقد للثقافة. وعلى هذا الأساس، يجوز للمختصين في العلوم الاجتماعية بالعالم الثالث أن يتحرروا من استمرار تبعيتهم للعلوم الاجتماعية الغربية الحديثة. ومن ثم، يستطيع هذا التوجه أن يؤدي إلى إنشاء مفاهيم ونظريات جديدة أكثر ملاءمة لواقع المجتمعات النامية، ومنه إلى إمكانية إحداث تغيير في علاقة هيمنة العلوم الاجتماعية في مجتمعات الشمال على نظيراتها في مجتمعات الجنوب.

المصطلحات الأساسية: المنظور البديل، الثقافة، العلوم الاجتماعية في مجتمعات الشمال والجنوب.

