

## Culture, Cognizance and Art Nexus and Connotations in the Muslim Context

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**Abstract:** Society and culture are interlinked that define ways of life of a community, including its rituals and art works. The current study concentrates on undercurrents of the Muslim culture, unique in the sense that it was garnered by the quest for knowledge. The desire was so potent that it originated a path to reconcile certain prohibitions or limitations, imposed by religious authorities on the making of images, but led to evolve a style of art that could not come at clash with the interdictions. It emerged so strong rooted that could withstand vicissitudes of many different influences, so, lasted for a century. Its parameters were clear even at its initiation. Though, a bit deviation from religious boundaries occurred in its earliest stages due to the variety of influences it encountered. But quickly shaped its dimensions and evolved independent aesthetics of its own along with autonomous style of image making, not based just on corporeal vision but on intellectual cerebration. In this context substrate of Muslim culture will be sorted out in this paper, along with concentration upon the early wall paintings of Umayyad period and a few miniatures of Abbasid era, linked with knowledge and learning.

**Keywords:** Culture, Art, Muslim, Ibn Khuldūn

Defining aesthetics of a people, directs to explore many of its domains, culture being one of the essentials. Culture is the phenomenon linked with man when he dwells in groups, the broader scenario of which can be viewed in societies. It is not the concern of isolated individuals. Collective living of the social animal automatically develops certain customs or social systems, providing control for each man to cope effectively with the world around him. Here, he adjusts within the bounds of cultural norms. Seabat defines culture as manmade or artificial environment; consisting of “buildings, tools, equipment, institutions, language, science, religion or the other ways of doing things . . .” It is the social heritage man takes from his antecedents, transmitting to the juveniles (Seabat 1), making it not revealed phenomenon but heart to heart transmission of the time tested standards. Hence Muslim culture lays its substrate on knowledge.

Term culture is derived from the German word *kultur* that means *super-organic* (Ogburn and Nimkoff 1960: 19), since organic is related to the living beings, so super-organic must be linked with man. Among all the creatures of the universe the term culture is specified with human race. Human culture emerges when man does not live in isolation. Franklin ascribes it as learnt behaviour, not instinctive or inborn that emerges from collective living. Each generation inherits, modifies and transmits to his next, so each being a recipient and a carrier of the norms and standards, making it an un-instinctive phenomenon (282). Because, it is instinctive that man learns from the experiences of others, the cause of evolution in human behaviour. While, culture is formulated by aesthetics of its people, this resides in the inner of man. Aesthetics is the trait of human spirit, so innate. Learning can

polish it but it cannot be initiated in un-aesthetic spirits<sup>1</sup>.

So, culture is the way of life of a society, including its moral values, customs, beliefs, philosophies, literature, art, tools, and weapons (Franklin 1950: 281). Hence, the tangible and the intangible elements are within the single umbrella of culture. The intangible is its practicing side whereas tangible are icons or symbols of the practical. Which is categorised by Aziz into two dimensions: the cultural and moral aesthetics in religion, philosophy, literature, art, law and general norms of a society, and the other is ways of life of its people (*Culture* 2-8). The former related to the higher cultural values and aspirations, and the latter, linked with simple values used in the lower spheres of life. But another division of intangible and tangible is practising and symbolic sides of aesthetics. The former can be viewed in morality, values and norms that are practical aspects of aesthetics, while the tangible is its symbolic expression in the form of art works or artefacts. Most conspicuous expression of the former is in the earlier days of Islam when image making was outlawed and considered a crime against religion. But aesthetics was present in its practical aspect in the values and norms of their living. A similar aesthetics, but in its symbolic form emerged a bit latter, expressed through painting, architectural monuments or other art works.

People entitled as cultured, keep elegant and polite manners along with acuteness of art and literature, when applied on a society it defines its culture. Thus etiquettes and manners combined with aesthetics, which manifest through arts of a society is its culture. It encompasses, in this context, civil behaviour with talent for creativity.

<sup>1</sup>Un-aesthetic are the lower spirits, lower than the spirit of man.

Defining a culture is actually the portrayal of a society with its beliefs, likings disliking, traditions, ways of expression, including the general living of its people. How do they eat, dress up, or perform ceremonies? The research will focus Muslim culture in the above context, concentrating its sophisticated along with trivial domains. Arabic word for culture is *thaqāfat*, etymology of it is *thaqaf*<sup>2</sup>, which stands for intelligence or acuteness (*Firuz al-lūghāt*; Arabic Urdu dictionary 68). Another word parallel to *thaqaf* in Arabic is *tahdhīb*, derived from *hadhab* that means to trim or cut a tree (*al-Munjid: jadīd Arabic-Urdu Lūghāt* 1417), to reform, correct or make chaste (*Miṣbah al-lūghāt* 973). Thus culture is linked with contemplative activity of brain, and *tahdhīb*<sup>3</sup> is chastity, piety, good and gentle manners. Dr. Jālibi has used word culture as combined essence of *tahdhīb* and *thaqāfat* (42), thus domains of culture encircles all the activities of man, whether mental, physical, inner or outer. Cultured societies combine etiquettes of men along with their skill in creative realms, thus linking it with refinement of manners and taste.

Faiz Ahmad Faiz<sup>4</sup> defines two domains of culture in the inner and outer aspects of life. The former reflective in religious beliefs, norms, rituals, and day today proverbs, while its refined framework he perceives in art, literature, music, painting and film, etc. But Akhtar considers it a very broad definition where culture and civilisation are not differentiated. He compares civilisation with a river that emanates from remote past, and its waves with culture. The

<sup>2</sup>*Thaqifa*; an Arabic word means, *to be victorious or to comprehend anything quickly*, *thaqafa*, on the other hand stands for *wisdom*, and *thaqqafa* is translated as *to tame something or to educate or to make civilised* (*Firuz al-lūghāt* 68).

<sup>3</sup>*Tahdhīb* is the civilised stance of man.

<sup>4</sup>He is a renowned poet of Pakistan and his name is pronounced Faiz Ahmad Faiz.

waves or ripples work like multi-coloured glass mosaic, fixed in a complex-pattern, from which displacement of a single piece makes it meaningless. Waves of culture will always remain part of the river because the substrate of culture and civilisation is the same (Akhtar 318-321). But actually culture encompassed both, *tahdhīb* and *thaqāfat*. The former manifested fully in the earliest periods of Islam, and the latter developed in the subsequent times, can also be labelled as emblems of Muslim culture. In other words, Muslim aesthetics in its practical shape was present in the former and in its symbolic appearance got conspicuous in the latter, defining its two aspects; intangible and tangible.

Muslim culture best demonstrates unity in diversity, for several ethnic, racial or linguistic groups from different geographical climes are knitted together in spirit with a single cord of religion. As defined by Naṣr:

A traditional civilisation, such as that of Islam, is dominated by a Divine norm, by a 'presiding idea' which leaves its profoundest imprint upon its earthly receptacle; yet each receptacle is given the freedom to develop its own innate possibilities within the tradition into which it is integrated and hence to give birth to a particular 'world' or 'zone' within the general matrix of the tradition in question (*Islamic Life* 39).

Islam is thus a unifying cord of the Muslim culture. Diverse cultures of Arabs, Iranians, Turkish, Malay or Africans, with their complex patterns are united under the aegis of Islam. Islamic culture keeps universal appeal, not restricted to certain groups of people but to the whole community of mankind. Culture being the concern of a society, is not restricted to one generation or a particular group of individuals but its emanation from remote past can absorb anything akin to its mainstream. Cultures usually flourish by diffusion, only a small amount of

theirs is of local origin, rest is foreign or borrowed. Every culture like scientific inventions lays its substrate on already existing modes or preceding inventions, because every new idea emerges from its preceding counterparts.

Javid Iqbal elucidates a similar issue while defining creativity that requires inventive and innovative bent of mind, keeping wonder and novelty in its substrate. In the scientific or technological inventions, he holds, human mind with its multifarious potentials manipulates already existing concepts and objects to produce something new. It differentiates human creativity from that of the Divine, which emerges out of nothingness, while the former rearranges the already existing modes to formulate new things (84). Muslim culture, like all other cultures, grew from already prevailing beliefs of the ancestors along with traditions of nations conquered by Muslims, combined with the traits of religion. Thus, it resulted from cross-fertilisation of Muslim beliefs with the norms of subjugated lands. The very reason that living cultures keep diversity, each having unique ideas and beliefs, revered by its community and transmitted to an extent to the linked cultures. People of each era live in the heritage bequeathed by their ancestors, where they add in something new, to modify the old, to meet the needs of the modern environs.

Besides other components, religion plays a major role in the cultivation of human spirit. Because the substrate of Islam holds Ameer Ali, lies on belief in the immaterial, all encompassing and a merciful Creator, who loves His creatures. It promotes charity brotherhood, subjugation of passion in them, and belief in accountability for their deeds in the hereafter (138). It cultivates human spirit. Oxford dictionary too devises the word 'cultivation' for culture (409).

Culture and agriculture are synonymous for their link with cultivation; the former is cultivation of human mind and intellect, and the latter, of crops. Cultivation is shaping or fashioning elegantly, and culture is superlative degree of taste attained by cultivation of intellectual and physical aesthetics<sup>5</sup>.

Culture is linked with land, needs, resources, and problems, including the whole process of production and sharing of economics, its culmination comes in the acts of creativity. From the sowing of seeds to the bearing of fruits, group culture is required, when all live together, design and produce things according to their needs. Joint living evolves standards, norms or fundamental traditions to bring convenience for its people, customising their beliefs and imagination, the resources of culture.

Cultivation and culture keep analogy, in the sense that both are linked with refinement or improvement (Chambers 305), beneficial for mankind. It may be intellectual refinement resulting from education, whether formal or informal. But it keeps a broader spectrum that brings for men the wealth of material and intellectual erudition. Knowledge makes man skilful in any sphere, eventually bringing sagacity and wisdom that encompasses tranquillity in his conduct and behaviour. Serenity is the civilised stance, usually not possessed by illiterates but by suave individuals. Culture, learning, knowledge, *thaqāfat*, civilisation or *tahdhīb* are interlinked phenomena. Muslim culture too is not apart from knowledge or learning that cultivates human life. The Holy Qur'ān lays tremendous stress on acquiring of knowledge, and the substrate of Muslim culture too, is laid on this

<sup>5</sup> Intellectual aesthetics is cultivation of vision and physical is its symbolic expression in the form of art works or artefacts, the former its practical side and the latter symbolic.

dictum, whether one views the practical side of Muslim culture or its symbolic manifestation.

“Acquiring of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim”, is a famous *ḥadīth*<sup>6</sup> described by ibn Māja<sup>7</sup>. There is no discrimination of being male or female, every Muslim is stressed to gain knowledge, and field of knowledge is not limited to religion only. It is knowledge of any sort, for utilitarian motives or betterment of humanity. There are many *aḥādīth* that exalt the status of those who strive for knowledge, for example: “the one who goes out to gain knowledge is considered to be in the path of Allāh, until he comes back<sup>8</sup>”. Islam stresses to strive for the betterment or improvement in every field. There is no gender discrimination in the spheres of knowledge. Its importance is stressed for the culture of community because communal living requires certain norms and standards to develop group culture. These standards are evolved by the highbrow, who are exalted by the Holy Prophet (PBUH) for *ḥikmah* or wisdom that they retain. The Prophet (PBUH) says a learned, wise and intelligent person is better than a pious, absorbed in adoration. A similar query is raised in the Holy Qur'ān by Allāh when He asks whether literates and illiterates can be placed on equal footing<sup>9</sup>. Because a learned person ponders and draws conclusions than an illiterate who is incapable to do so. It is the very reason that erudition of knowledge is bestowed by Allāh to the chosen ones, whom He calls possessors of *ḥikmah*. For a famous saying of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) that *ḥikmah* is the lost commodity of true followers of the faith, he is rightful to take it from anywhere he finds<sup>10</sup>”.

<sup>6</sup> Saying of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) is called *ḥadīth* and *aḥādīth* is plural of it.

<sup>7</sup> *Sunnan-i ibn Māja, ḥadīth* No: 220.

<sup>8</sup> *Sunnan-i al-Tirmidhi, ḥadīth*: No: 2591.

<sup>9</sup> Holy Qur'ān, *sūrah xxxix (al-Zumar)*, 9

<sup>10</sup> *Sunnan-i al-Tirmidhi, ḥadīth*: No: 2631.

Thus acquirers of wisdom and a true Muslim are not two things apart, rather considered as two sobriquets of a single reality.

Thus contemplative minds are placed superior than the narrow minded theologians whose limited vision hinders progress. It lays stress, not on dogmatic belief but on contemplative interpretations of the esoteric meaning of religion. The very reason that the Prophet (PBUH) emphasises on pondering of God's creations, an hour's contemplation is placed better than a year's adoration<sup>11</sup>. The Holy Qur'ān too repeatedly emphasises to see and admire, thirty one times in *sūrah al-Raḥmān* only: "which of the bounties of thy Lord will you deny". Though the Holy Qur'ān and *aḥādīth* do not suggest discrimination among men, all placed on equal footing but the only discrimination is for the possessors of knowledge. "Are those who have knowledge on equality with those who have no knowledge" or "preferment of a learned man above a devotee is as my preferment above the lowest among you<sup>12</sup>", says the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Thus, knowledge and pondering is essential for a scholar to convert dogma into practice. This is the essence of Muslim culture. Knowledge without comprehension of practical utility resembles a donkey carrying burden of books, because impractical knowledge equals ignorance.

Ibn *Khuldūn* elucidates a similar concept while narrating man as a thinking animal for which he uses the term *fikr*<sup>13</sup>. It is the power that provides him understanding to fulfil requisites of life, along with etiquettes, that develop the culture of cooperative living, in other words, human community. *Fikr* guides man to accept divine revelations, formulating his religious beliefs.

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Fawā'id al-Majmū'ah, ḥadīth* No: 740.

<sup>12</sup> *Sunnan-i al-Tirmidhi, ḥadīth*: No: 2629.

<sup>13</sup> *Fikr* is an Arabic word for contemplation.

Thus, the three main functions of *fikr* explicated by Ibn *Khuldūn* are; to attain respectable subsistence, to maintain cooperation, and to capacitate to accept divine revelations. The triangle systematises a better livelihood, without which man cannot be distinguished from the other animals (Ahmad Epistemology 21-22).

Pickthall gives a succinct view when he acclaims that Muslim culture is not meant to adorn or improve accessories of life but to elevate human life (*Culture* 3). It can be done so with the *fikr* of Ibn *Khuldūn*. It is related to promoting the faculties of man that lead to progress, not of a single or a group of individuals but of the whole human race. All technical progress in science is not concealed by its owners but used as public wealth to facilitate man. Works on science, writes Pickthall, existed in the East but kept hidden by the inventors to promote them as "wonder-workers". But affluent experimentation of Muslims on Greek science was publicised by them (66), because they wanted to promote it for public utility, not for self-projection. All happened in a period when Europe was sunk in the darkness of medieval ages. Its sudden Renaissance is also based on the beacons kindled by the Muslim-east.

Another point raised by Pickthall is related to the inductive method<sup>14</sup>, much promoted in modern times in the field of research by the West, was actually introduced by Muslims. All experimentations by Muslims on the acquired knowledge<sup>15</sup> were done through this method, whether consciously or sub-consciously. They did not jump from first step to the final conclusions, but by moving gradually from the

<sup>14</sup> Through inductive Method unknown phenomenon is explored to induce new things. It is simple and straight forward method, where a researcher moves from cause to effect.

<sup>15</sup> Knowledge acquired by Muslims from various sources, especially from Greece.

natural phenomenon, postulating one after the other (66), reaching the last rung to draw empirical assertions. On the other hand, Ameer Ali also attributes deductive method<sup>16</sup> of research to Muslims, about which West is considered as the soul initiator (373). Greek knowledge was at the disposal of Muslims; they further experimented and accepted only the results of their empirical testing, and also added many new findings into it. Thus, Muslims served not as isolated mediators to transmit Greek knowledge to the West, but passed on the refreshed knowledge of the ancients by making use of inductive along with deductive methods of research.

Taking only the process of tracing of *aḥādīth*, one finds that the modern researcher must have followed this precedence. Authenticity of research depends on reaching its fountain head, which was marvellously achieved by Muslim *Muḥaddithīn*<sup>17</sup>, who traced the complete chain, reaching the main source that is the Holy Prophet (PBUH). It happened only through the habit of contemplation, prompted by the Holy Scripture, and on which the substrate of Islam, its aesthetics and culture lies.

Islam stresses reason to cultivate human faculties that defines Muslim culture. One hour's devoted meditation on the work of the Creator is placed better by the Holy Prophet (PBUH), than a year's prayer. So, Islam is not a dogmatic religion but serves to bring tenets into practice. Contemplative apprehension of religion deciphers esoteric meaning, which unveils the realities of right and wrong. Goethe, the German poet exclaims after studying a translation of the Holy Qur'ān, "If this is Islam, then every thinking man among us is, in fact a Muslim"

(Pickthall *Cultural* 16). Contemplative vision or *fikr* is required to get a better living. Prophet's Life was a nucleus of an educational institution, says Ameer Ali, the archetype of all the later universities of Baghdad and the rest of the world. He quotes a saying of Ḥaḍrat 'Ali, "the greatest ornament of a man is erudition" (362), a faculty that exalts every aspect of human life, and it is linked with education. Its first stage is learning, and knowledge is its erudition. In pre-Islamic Arabia, writes Dr. Afzal<sup>18</sup>, a person who knew writing, swimming and shooting, was called a perfect man (Afzal 123). Perfection from the ancient times was linked with learning, substrate of which is *fikr*.

Islam sprang from the desert of Arabia, resided by Bedouins, labelled as uncivilised and uncultured, for certain traditional practises of *jāhiliyyah*<sup>19</sup> period. One of the most heinous being infanticide, a Bedouin got extremely dismayed at the birth of a daughter, who was usually buried alive. Another formidable activity was that of feud. Conflicts emerged out of trivial matters that took decades of war, killing generations. This was the culture of Arabia based on exaggerated pride, prior to the advent of Islam that changed rapidly with the new faith. An atmosphere of beauty pervaded where each being received due respect, whether male or female. The Prophet (PBUH) respected and loved his daughter Ḥaḍrat Faṭīma so much so that he used to spread specially, a sheet of cloth for her whenever she came to visit him. This is the culture of Islam.

Each code of conduct devised by Islam is related to facilitate human life; nothing is just theoretical, because there is no discrimination

<sup>16</sup> By deductive method unknown realms are explored through the known. It moves from effect to cause.

<sup>17</sup> *Muḥaddithīn* is the plural of *muḥaddith*; he is the one who collects and compiles *aḥādīth*.

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Afzal

<sup>19</sup> *Jāhiliyyah*, the term used for Arabia prior to the advent of Islam. The term is derived from *jahal* which means stupidity, vanity, exaggerated pride or conceit (Afzal Iqbal 53).

between religious or secular life. Muslim culture holds Mubārakpūri, emerged with all the traits of perfection in Madīna (244), where Muslims came in comparatively safe and peaceful state. Its entire developed traits; ethical, social, economic, political, along with jurisprudence were settled there. Thus a culture, distinct from *jāhilīyyah* period emerged with norms of a perfect civilisation. It did not happen at once, but through a gradual process, basis of which were laid by the Holy Prophet (PBUH).

Among the five pillars of Islam, the third one, *zakāt*<sup>20</sup> is of pragmatic value. *Zakāt* means *cultivation by pruning or causing to grow straight* (Pickthall 6). It is a sort of tax imposed on the rich only, to be distributed among poor to avoid imbalance of wealth in a community. This dictum keeps highly functional appeal. Since, betterment of humanity is the culture of Islam. So, money collected from the rich, is distributed among the destitute. It is considered as an act of piety that cleanses wealth. Cleanliness is an essential trait of the culture of Islam. Ablution, five times a day is a feature of good health. *Ḥammāms*<sup>21</sup> were very common in Muslim cities, at a period when Europe had no concept of cleansing. French-men say that they learnt the art of bathing from Muslims.

Generosity is the culture of Islam, the communal aspect of which can be viewed when *mahājirīn*<sup>22</sup> of Makkah reached Madīna and came in contact with *anṣār*<sup>23</sup>. The penniless immigrants were provided with riches by Madinites, a euphoric state experienced by both, the practical aspect of beauty. There are numerous examples when

destitute were supported affluently, helping them in such a way that they could not feel even a glimpse of humiliation. Because the Holy Prophet (PBUH) brought them under the bonds of brotherhood<sup>24</sup>, that they would always commensurate with each other like brothers, and even share in inheritance (Mubārakpūri 256). Though inheritance was revoked later but it brought a decisive impact to overcome their ancient animosities and feuds, because they helped each other like more than brothers.

Though *anṣār* showed enough generosity but *mahājirīns* were not avaricious too and they took help only to get stable. Asad ascribes generosity to Bedouins who were nature's child. Their unsophisticated living was free from greed of any kind. Fear accompanies greed; un-covetousness is isolated from avarice (36). But the generosity that was practised after the commandments of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was novel of its kind.

Equality of men, with no discrimination of cast or status, stressed by Islam, contributed to prompt brotherhood in the whole community. Even slaves were treated as equals, ordained by the Prophet (PBUH) to give them food and clothes of similar value. Releasing them from slavery was an act of great virtue, and a cause that abandoned slavery.

Major role in Muslim culture is played by religion, for all the decisions were taken from *Masjid-i Nabavi*<sup>25</sup>, which was not only a place to prostrate before Allāh, rather a platform for

<sup>20</sup> 1/40<sup>th</sup> part of the accumulated wealth is given in charity to the poor and needy.

<sup>21</sup> *Ḥammām* is a public bath.

<sup>22</sup> The Muslims of Makkah migrated to Madīna, after the brutal threatening of those against Islam, are called *mahājirīn*.

<sup>23</sup> *Anṣār* were the people of Madīna, who welcomed and protected the immigrant Makkan Muslims.

<sup>24</sup> It is said that there were ninety men gathered in the house of Ḥaḍrat Ans bin Mālik, half of them were *mahājirīns* and half *anṣār*, along with the Prophet (PBUH). Each *anṣār* took one *mahājir* as his brother, who had to share everything with him like a real brother, even his inheritance. But later, sharing in of inheritance was revoked by the Holy Qur'ān, *sūrah vi (al-An'ām)*, 33.

<sup>25</sup> The first mosque erected by the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in Madīna.

making all sorts of decisions and for social gatherings as well. So, it served the function of a university or a parliament where Muslims acquired knowledge of every sort. Civilised culture of Islam sprang from there, a centre to regulate the affairs of government, where meetings of the highbrow were held with the Prophet (PBUH), decisions were made unanimously and orders issued. Moreover, it served the function of an inn, for the homeless and lonely people. Thus religious or secular, both affairs were consulted in mosques.

Beauty of progress in life is generally related to its material improvement, linked with making life comfortable. In the worship of material progress, ethics the comfort of inner-self is often ignored, eliminating discrimination between good and evil. When morality is linked with utilitarian motives, automatically material success becomes the standard of judgement. Viewing modern era; the emblem of the material progress, swiftly improving human standards of living but is unable to bring in satisfaction or happiness. Aesthetics of man has become crippled, unable to produce serenity of soul. Inner serenity was present in Muslims in the period of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and that of the four caliphs when their spirits were saturated with blissful feelings. Material progress can make life comfortable, not beautiful in complete sense of meaning. Though comforts of life evoke pleasure but not the bliss aroused in spirit. Asad rightly asserts that “the weightless serenity of soul” is impossible to be attained with material progress (72). It is concealed in the ethical and moral values that nourish human spirit.

The spiritual nourishment is best perceptible in the lives of *Ṣuḥābah*<sup>26</sup>. But it turned from spiritual to mundane in the times to come, taking

<sup>26</sup> *Ṣuḥābah* are the companions of the Holy Prophets (PBUH).

its symbolic form in the guise of artefact and artworks. In its spiritual form it keeps the rhythm of life and in its mundane states still it retains rhythm, the hallmark of Islamic art and culture. This is the culture of Islam in its real or spiritual, and mundane states. But the question arises about manifestation of its mundane state when strict interdictions of the Prophet (PBUH) already exist. It is quoted in a *ḥādīth* that making of images of animate beings is strictly prohibited. Violators of the rule will be severely punished on the day of judgement, and he will be asked to put life in the dead images<sup>27</sup>. Another *ḥādīth* is attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, who stressed that every *muṣawwir*; artist will be thrown into hell for the images he made. A person will be appointed on guard to put wrath on him. So, he suggested an artist to capture trees or plants, if he wants to make an image, for tree does not have spirit in it<sup>28</sup>. Many other similar *aḥādīth* strictly interdict image making, Ḥaḍrat ‘Ā’iṣḥa described that the Prophet (PBUH) said that on the day of judgement most severe punishment would be for those who make a mimetic representation of Allāh’s creations<sup>29</sup>. But not a single verse related to the prohibition exists in the Holy Qur’ān, although a great many strictly interdict image worship. It is a proof that Islam is the religion closer to human nature. It refrains to interdict directly because creativity is instinctive in man with which he cannot apart. Art works of the primitive and prehistoric man is a proof of it. He had simple and unsophisticated living, but could not avoid making of images<sup>30</sup>. Though, he had not received training of any sort in this field or viewed any of its precedence. So, Islam being the religion of nature and Qur’ān, its code of conduct, ignored interdictions on art works. But stress on its severe avoidance

<sup>27</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, aḥādīth* No: 5530, 5673.

<sup>28</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, ḥādīth* No: 2110

<sup>29</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī ḥādīth* No: 5954

<sup>30</sup> See the caves of Lascaux and Altamira in France.



through *aḥādīth* was essential to promote contempt in people for idol-worship, which was saturated in the culture of ancient Arabia. As a result calligraphy, and geometric or floral designs developed fully, highest manifestation of which is arabesques. Ameer Ali writes that Ḥaḍrat ‘Ali and his cousin Ibn ‘Abbās used to deliver lectures on poetry, grammar, history and mathematics, while others taught recitation or elocution<sup>31</sup> along with calligraphy (363). But gradually, animate beings especially human figure also emerged and became essential feature of the miniature painting. It raises a fundamental question that how religious interdictions were overpowered by the Muslim artists? Pondering or mental cerebration is respected much than dogmatic belief, when every action is valued for the intentions of its beholder<sup>32</sup>. Image making in Islamic art is also linked with it.

Acquiring of knowledge is considered as greatest virtue, and the earliest images in miniature painting also kept affinity with knowledge. It emerged, at the earliest in the Abbasid period, when Māmūn al-Raḥīd (ruled: 813/197-833/218) collected Greek books of knowledge, mostly on science, and got them translated to spread the wealth of knowledge in the Muslim world. In the course of translation small diagrams, used in the source material to demonstrate the subjects were also copied. It served as the first drop of water in the barren climes of art. Since these diagrams were linked with imparting of knowledge, so, did not face opposition from religious circles. For, realms of knowledge are not restricted to the religion only. After the conquest of Makkah, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) gave the imprisoned enemies a choice

to get free without paying *fidīya*<sup>33</sup>, only by making at least ten Muslim children proficient to read and write. The knowledge they had to provide was not religious, for they were all non-Muslims. So acquiring and imparting of knowledge was so much respected that even worst enemies were provided forgiveness on its basis. Restrictions on art also underwent a similar change when its manifestation was linked with imparting of knowledge.

*To know* breaks the bounds of religious interdictions on image making. Earliest Muslim miniature paintings are illustrations of the scientific texts translated from Greek books. These are actually diagrams taken from the source material to demonstrate the subjects translated. Mechanical diagrams are either devoid of animate beings or they are part of the diagrams, but everything is linked with imparting of knowledge, thus protected from criticism. Taking a few earliest examples we see that al-Jazari’s treatise *Automata*<sup>34</sup> (1206/603), provides almost hundred and fifty diagrams of mechanical devices he invented, mostly to entertain the court society. Though intended to entertain, these diagrams are the proto-scientific inventions of the modern world. Human figure is used here daringly, but never came at clash with religious principles, for being knowledge inducing. For instance, a miniature titled *Servant with water ewer* is actually diagram of a hand-washing machine, *fig.1*. It is so designed that the man holding an ewer in his right hand, starts functioning with the singing of bird, placed at the lid of the ewer. Water at once, is poured

<sup>31</sup> It is called *khuṭbah*, which is like speech, a religious savant delivers in public usually before *Jumm‘ah* or ‘*īd* prayer.

<sup>32</sup> A *ḥadīth* that merit of every conduct of man is defined by his *nīyyāh* that is intentions.

<sup>33</sup> *Fidīya* is a sort of tax non-Muslims pay to live in Muslim lands. It also serves to protect them.

<sup>34</sup> Originally named: *al-Ja‘mi al-‘Ilm wa al-‘Amal al-Naf‘i fī Ṣinā‘at al-ḥiyāl*, translated *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices*, but commonly known as *Treatise on Automata* by al-Shaiḫ Ra‘īs al-‘A mal Badī‘ al-Zamān abu al-‘Izz ibn Ismā‘īl ibn al-Razzāq al-Jazari, commonly known as al-Jazari.

down from a water-tank fixed in the breast of the man. It also moves forward its left hand, holding a towel and a mirror. With the towel and mirror placed back after use, the left-arm returns to its original place, pouring of water stops and the figure again gets placid. It is a completely draped figure wearing an upper gown and a lower one with turban covering its head, not a portrait of mechanical robot, although it is one of the earliest manifestations of robot. Though, a bit of mechanism is indicated above its drapery that combines inner and outer harmoniously (Gladiss 195).

Another folio of the same book represents a *Mechanical boat with small figurines*, fig.2, designed to entertain at royal parties, includes ten human figures. Another folio contains an *Elephant clock*, with two human figures actively participating to process its functions, fig.3. The miniatures illustrating al-Jazari's treatise, are frequently added with human figures, though breaking strictly the prohibited domain of images making, but here it serves the respected function of spreading of knowledge. In this way human figure entered the miniature painting of illustrated manuscripts, without encountering objections.

Illustrations of other treatises, like *De Materia Medica*<sup>35</sup>, (1229/626), and *the Choicest Maxims and Finest Sayings*, are mostly based on human figures. Various Greek scholars are delineated, conversing with their students, either explaining the details of any herb, engrossed in discussion or absorbed in meditation after the queries of their students, for instance, in *The Book of Medicines*, and in *Choicest Maxims and Finest Sayings: figs.4-5, Dioscorides and a student*, and *Socrates and Students*, includes many other similar examples. Students of Socrates have raised some issues, and the philosopher is

contemplating to respond. It defines the intellectual milieu of the Golden Age of Muslim culture when acquirers of knowledge showed inquisitiveness and its honest imparting by teachers were practised. Socrates amidst flowers and vegetation, seated on a mound, engrossed in thought to respond to their questions. The painting includes three human figures, a mound with a few flowers at its base, while two figures included in the *Dioscorides and a student*. The images of animate beings have nothing to do with idol worship, rather inclined to the milieu of learning that provides approval for their representation. For instance an illustration, fig.7, titled a *Physician guiding a snake-bitten man* from Pseudo Galen's *The Book of Antidotes*, the physician is guiding him to kill and eat the reptile along with berries of the Laurel tree as an antidote of poison. It is not delineation of a story but linked with imparting of knowledge to a poison-affected man, for Laurel tree and its fruits are also represented here. Thus, it could not come at clash with religious restrictions about depiction of animate beings especially human figure.

Similarly various fields of learning were not isolated domains; medicine was closely linked with philosophy. They viewed man from medical and philosophical point of view. Muḥammad ibn Zakrīya al-Rāzī (865/251-925/313), a philosopher cum doctor, established hospitals in Baghdad and Rayy and compiled a medical Encyclopaedia based on his experimentations on clinical cases. So, books on medicine were provided, similarly, with useful illustrations, elaborately defining the subjects, for example, *Anatomy of the eye*, from one of the ten treatises on eye by Hunayn (1200/597), fig.7. It is not only defined through words but the diagram too elucidates its anatomy, including the inner structure (Sabra 165). Similar was the case of ibn-Sīna, who successfully operated cataracts in 1000 A.D, without any of the

<sup>35</sup> The Book of Medicines by Dioscorides

modern equipment. Al-Jazari's *Bloodletting machine* is defined by a complete mechanism, topped by two human figures, *fig.8*. So, animate beings penetrated slowly but firmly in the Muslim realms of image making, and their firm presence in miniature painting functioned as a tool to elucidate various fields of learning. But when esoteric meanings were attached with religious doctrines, it directed man to view each reality with its intrinsic meaning. Thus human figures, part of the scientific treatises, were not rendered with all corporeal traits; devoid of their particular characterisations, any definite source of light and vision, or the auxiliary help of shadow to provide solidity to them. Though, they were humans but not embodied with all corporeal accessories, to make them just symbols of men that performed all functions of the narratives.

Then from scientific, it turned to the moral uplift of its people, again linked with the field of learning. Certain books of entertainment such as *Kalīla wa Dimna* and *Maqāmāt-i Harīri* that keep ethical lessons were illustrated. After getting strong footing, human figure was excessively used in every miniature, by acquiring a shape not evolved just from corporeal vision but from the realms of intellect. In this way art penetrated into the Muslim culture gaining implied approval from religion.

Intrinsic meaning of religious dogmas started emerging from the very beginning, in the period of the Prophet (PBUH) and the caliphs, especially by Ḥadrat 'Alī. Under Umayyad dynasty (661-750) scholars gathered around Ja'far al-Ṣādiq<sup>36</sup> in Madīna, from where sprang earliest sciences and literature of the Muslim world (Ameer Ali 365). Which then took strong hold, first in Damascus and then in Baghdād

under Manṣūr (reigned: 754/137-775/158) and Māmūn (reigned: 813/197-833/218); the Abbasid caliphs. Knowledge of the west<sup>37</sup> in this way mingled with eastern scholarship, because wealth of knowledge was collected from every part of the world. Academies, schools, libraries free for every learner, were established in all parts of the Muslim empire, and with generosity ancient philosophers<sup>38</sup> and the Holy Qur'ān, writes Ameer Ali, were taught side by side (371) in *madrassas*<sup>39</sup>. In Baghdad not only theology but medicine and philosophy were also taught, because the school of Baghdad from the day first was characterised by scientific spirit and freedom of thought. This city had more than thirty-five libraries at the disposal of scholars, and attracted students of every sector school of thought. This was the cultural milieu of Baghdad under the Abbasids.

It means religious and secular knowledge were not discriminated, which brings into mind a splendid literary culture that pervaded in the Muslim lands. Hence, the earliest cultural movement was literary, followed by pure arts.

Lavishness or extravagance was not liked by the Prophet (PBUH), for its affinity with pride. But he never prompted to abstain from beauty of any sort, as is mostly promulgated by critics and historians. Though he disdained luxury linked with vanity, which is disallowed in the passages of the Holy Qur'ān as well. An incident is quoted in this respect by Shibli Nu'māni about a handsome man with affluent riches, heard from the Prophet (PBUH) that Allāh dislikes vainglory or even minor feeling of pride, and such a person would not enter Eden. He inquired

<sup>37</sup> It is Greek knowledge.

<sup>38</sup> Galen, Dioscoride, Themistius, Aristotle, Plato, Euclid, Ptolemy, Apollonius, etc, were western sages brought to the Muslim lands.

<sup>39</sup> *Madrassas* are academic institutions, and in earliest times of Islam Mosques served the function of academic institutions as well.

<sup>36</sup> Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq was born in 80-83 Hijra, was teacher of *Sharī'ah* and *Tarīqat*. He is famous for his humbleness and truthful nature.

about his fate, for he loved to wear beautiful costumes and shoes. The Prophet quickly responded that “Allāh loves beauty<sup>40</sup>” (Nu‘māni 657, vol: vi). It is elaborated at another place: Abī Sa‘īd quotes the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who says that Allāh is beautiful, He loves beauty and He expects from His creatures to be reflective of the bounties bestowed to them by their Lord<sup>41</sup>. In another place, it is written with a little change of words, attributed to Sa‘īd bin al-Masīb, who was a *Tāba‘i*, says: “Allāh is beautiful, He loves beauty. He is generous, he loves generosity. He is neat and clean, He loves cleanliness<sup>42</sup>”. Generosity, cleanliness and beauty are thus synonymous to aesthetics, for it adorns the physical of man along with his spiritual. *Sharī‘ah* interdicts only on those matters that provoke pride in man. The Prophet further advised people to tie their loincloth in such a way that it should not fall on ground, for; it evokes vanity in man which Allāh likes not<sup>43</sup>.

Monumental architecture was also discouraged by him. At the advent of Islam Makkah and Madīna did not have much noticeable architectural traditions or any recognisable artefact except Ka‘ba, which was also a simple brick structure with *Ḥajr-i Aswad*; the black stone in its centre. History proves that nations and social groups of people erect monumental buildings as landmarks of their conquests. Nothing can enhance their pomp and show, to the extent a monumental building does. Muslims did it very late, except *Dome of the Rock*<sup>44</sup>. Neither the Prophet (PBUH) nor any of his

successors encouraged such an act. An incident, in this respect is referred to Ibn Sa‘d<sup>45</sup>, the grandson of Abū Salma<sup>46</sup>, who was told by Abū Salma that the Prophet (PBUH) was greatly annoyed after seeing the expanded *hujra* with a baked brick wall, which she built in his absence. He (PBUH) objected and proclaimed that the most unprofitable thing that engulfs wealth of the pious is buildings. (Sayyid Ahmad Khan 29-30). Similar stance was taken by the four caliphs, so no monumental building survives of their times except mosques. Ibn *Khuldūn* (732/114-808/192) describes while discussing the period of Ḥaḍrat ‘Umar that houses of Muslims once caught fire at Kūfa. In the rebuilding of the city, Ḥaḍrat ‘Umar did not allow any family to erect more than three rooms, even restricting the height of houses, to avoid vanity (*Khuldūn Muqaddama* 30). Neither Muslims of Arabia were deficient in aesthetics nor Islam against beauty but the only thing restricted was personal pride, and also to refrain them from idol worship because these elements come at clash with the omnipotence of Allāh.

But this is unreasonable to think that the Arabs, before the expansion of the Muslim Empire outside the Arab Peninsula, had no culture of their own or had no aesthetics. Ibn *Khuldūn* believes that man, by nature, is attracted to group living, and a society springs from the civilised stance of individuals. Though, group living is instinctively present in animals too, and any particular species of animals is by nature

<sup>40</sup> This *ḥadīth* is quoted in *Abū-Da‘ūd, Kitāb: al-libās, Bāb: Mājā’ fi Asbāb al-Azār*.

<sup>41</sup> *Kanz al-‘Ummāl, kitāb al-Zīnat*, referred by *Shahab al-‘Imān Bahīqi, ḥadīth* No: 17166.

<sup>42</sup> It is quoted in *Kanz al-‘Ummāl, Kitāb: al-Zīnat, ḥadīth* No: 41500.

<sup>43</sup> Muṭā’ Imām Mālik vol-II, *ḥadīth* No: 2654

<sup>44</sup> It was erected under the first Muslim dynasty; Umayyad, not by the immediate successors of the Prophet (PBUH).

<sup>45</sup> Muḥammad bin Sa‘d bin Munī’ al-Baṣāri al-Zāri, commonly known as Ibn Sa‘d, quotes this incident in his book *Kitāb al-Ṭabqāt al-Kibrīya*, which Sir Sayed Aḥmad *Khān* quotes in *Aḥār al-Ṣanādīd*. It is written that the incident was narrated by the grandson of Abū Salma to ‘Abd Allāh ibn Yazīd, who went to Madīna in 707 A.D.

<sup>46</sup> Umm-i Salma was one of the wives of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), and Abū Salma was her husband prior to her marriage with the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH).

inclined to its own fellows. But man's group living is, though instinctive but results from his intellectual cerebration. Because group or city culture, holds Ibn Khuldūn is based on outer along with inner factors. The former include religious beliefs, climate and geography and the latter comprised of those factors that emerge through group living and effect the formation of its culture (Khuldūn Muqaddama 39). The inner factor evolves norms, and intellectual and artistic taste, which was not lacking in the Muslims of Arabia. It is recorded that Ḥaḍrat 'Ā'ishā's wedding dress was most sumptuous of all, and women used to take it from her as a sample to stitch their own. Not only this but musical instrument like *daff*<sup>47</sup> was also appreciated on ceremonial occasions. At the migration of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) from Makkah to Madīna, he was welcomed by girls who were singing and playing on *daff*. Similar enjoyments were present at *'Īd* or marriage ceremonies. Thus, it was not a barren culture at its earliest but confined within the restrictions of morality, which was its greatest virtue.

It gradually turned to extravagance when encountered with affluent riches of the other cultures. Lavishness started entering in its domains, forgetting the stance of the Prophet (PBUH) about the transitory stay of man in this world. For, permanent life is of the hereafter<sup>48</sup>. But as the Muslim Empire expanded they got away from its nucleus, less appurtenant it remained with its centre. Many secular elements entered into its very culture, considered necessary to cope with the circumstances and to consolidate the vast empire. Turning point of the Muslim culture came with the arrival of the Umayyad Dynasty, who erected desert palaces,

used as summer houses, lavishly decorated with paintings and even sculptures. Mu'āwīya, writes Hitti, introduced *maqsūrah* in the mosque, a sort of bower, exclusively for use of the caliph, isolating him from the general public (198), which had never been done before. Although, mosque had been a place of social gathering from the times of the Prophet (PBUH), and people used to gather in his company to gain knowledge and blessings.

Ibn Khuldūn views this as historical and psychological states, when he says every nation or group of people passes through three stages or periods, the first stage he labels *badawi*, second *ghazawi* and third *ḥaḍari*. Each nation have some tribes who live in deserts or valleys, calling them *badawi*, but then gradually start progressing, and become *ghazawi*, when they come at clash with nations less civilised than their own. In the third stage they get civilised, inhabit in cities, religions emerge; formulate laws, and their learning and arts progress, he calls them *ḥaḍari*. Eventually they get luxury loving and start avoiding resistance or wars, and get weaker and weaker till another warrior tribe overpowers them (Khuldūn Muqaddama 43). Similar course of history is followed by the Muslim nation, but in the second stage it encountered more civilised milieus of the conquered lands, which were only physically strong, not in their spiritual side.

Thus, the earliest manifestations of art in the desert palaces of Umayyad are baffled imitations of Byzantine or Sassanian prototypes. Recession, depth, or three-dimensionality, with representations of even female-nudes in the bath-houses was very common, *figs.9-11*. It is related to the second stage of development, defined by Ibn Khuldūn. It is a phase completely deficient of contemplative modes, where blind-fold imitation from models of the subjugated lands was done. But it could not last long,

<sup>47</sup> It is a musical instrument, a sort of small half drum.

<sup>48</sup> It ascribed in the Holy Qur'ān *sūrah xviii (al-kahaf)*, 8 (tr.): *Verily what is on earth, We shall make but as dust and dry soil.*

because interdictions of the faith were altogether ignored, so vanished quickly for not being compatible with the Divine Law. But as the art progressed to developed phases it overthrew the jacket of influences, setting its own aesthetics. Despite all, it absorbed lavishness from secular cultures of the conquered lands, to formulate its own under the aegis of Islam by devising independent parameters, to make it distinct from all the rest that was to remain its lasting feature.

Inspiration from any source was moulded according to the tenets of religion by the institutions of the Muslim culture, for its being closer to human nature. High quality traditions of living developed, elevating human respect, condemning inequality of tribes, complexions, or status. Morality was their virtue. In day today toils too, similar stance was adopted. For instance, Muslim physicians laid stress on fresh air, especially in hospitals, with perfect hygiene, resulting from the tradition of ablution, five times a day. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) said cleanliness is half of the faith<sup>49</sup>. Muslims were first to establish hospitals, even forming separate wards for patients of various diseases. Simple relations too had peculiar expressions linked with goodwill for every-being, like the greeting gesture. A Hindu raises hands in apology and utters *Rām Rām*, a European says good morning, etc, or takes off hat while greeting a lady, but a Muslim will pray for long life of the person he meets, whether male or female, by saying *Assalām-u ‘Alaikum*, meaning *may you live long*. Thus, it keeps a gesture of good will for the whole human race and this is beauty of the culture of that community.

Truth and beauty are inter-linked if there is no truth there will be no beauty. When things are in harmony with life they are beautiful. So, Muslim culture is the culture of beauty. Nourishment of

soul does not constrain vision to see beauty in external features only, for it resides in the inner of man, in the guise of ethics or morality, linked with *tahdhīb*. Etymology of *ḥusn* and *iḥsān* is one, *iḥsān* stands for doing what is good, beneficial or in other words beautiful for the fellow beings and *ḥusn* is beauty. Thus, beauty is central to Islam. Burckhardt too interlinks utility and beauty, as he says “use and beauty go hand in hand in traditional arts; they are two inseparable aspects of perfection”. Supreme excellence is the hallmark of every creation of God, and the Prophet (PBUH) says that Allah has prescribed perfection for all things<sup>50</sup> (Burckhardt *Language* 196). *Iḥsān* and perfection are synonymous in this sense, because both serve utilitarian functions for humanity, and the end product of both is beauty. Muslim art too, is concerned with supreme excellence, whether architectural monuments or miniature paintings, calligraphy, or ornamental designs like arabesques are concerned, all reflect beauty of its culture.

Perfection of any sort demands devotion, substrate of which is truth. Thus dexterity of the artists of Muslim community is based on this dictum. Miniature painting too follows a similar stance, where contemplation and skill are conjoint to produce fine works of creation. Cultivation linked with culture, final phase of which is perfection is not restricted to any single domain but prompted in each sphere of the Muslim culture. Numerating a few cultivated individuals, as representatives of the whole community, cannot be taken as an example, considered enough to declare the whole race as cultured. But it is aimed at developing each individual of the society because Muslim culture is not restricted to modify the living essentials but bedecking life itself. It can be acquired through contemplative mode of thinking.

<sup>49</sup> *Saḥīḥ al-Muslim, ḥadīth* No: 432.

<sup>50</sup> *Kanz al-‘Ummāl, ḥadīth* No: 9128

Contemplation deciphers at the spur of a moment, truths hidden under numerous veils. The voyage of spiritual to mundane beauties<sup>51</sup> is covered through the source of contemplation, overpowering all religious interdictions. Burckhardt views it in *ṣūfism* that approaches where “love and knowledge” meet (Burckhardt *Language* 197), the essence of which is devoted contemplation that leads to esotericism. It caused to flourish art in the theo-centric culture of Islam. For instance, sculpting an image is highly forbidden. But an artist while making a portrait bust will realise and confess the greatness of Allāh, far more than a devotee does. Allah says “be and it is<sup>52</sup>”, not one but numerous of the kind He desires. Artist then realises himself as trivial and ephemeral being, who feels hard to make a dead imitation of His creations. Here, in a single moment’s cerebration, he recognises the greatness of God. It is like epiphany of a *ṣūfi*. Therefore, Muslim culture is theo-centric whether in its spiritual or in physical aspects. Thus, Muslim culture or art were devised within the parameters of religion Islam.

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<sup>51</sup> Spiritual to mundane beauties, means from moral and ethical beauty to its physical manifestation in art works.

<sup>52</sup> *Kun Fayakūn*, Holy Qur’ān, *sūrah xxxvi (Yāsīn)*, 82

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