

EARLY ORIGINS OF THE TERM *ŠIRK*:
ABOUT AN EQUALITARIAN CONCEPTION DURING THE *ĠĀHILIYYA*

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The present paper is devoted to the origins of the term *širk* within *ġāhili* and early Islamic conceptual milieu. We shall constrain the scope of the inquiry within this term's evolution as a terminological unit depicting the early Islamic view upon certain pre-Islamic concepts of devotion, without proceeding further to its subsequent meanings associated with the advance of Islamic theology and philosophy.

1. The meaning of *širk* within the traditional concept

The holy book of Islam, the Qur'ān, contains many verses that evidently refer to an important world-view category that is depicted either by the term *širk* or by a number of derivatives of the three consonant root "š-r-k". Ancient Arabs are said to have performed *širk*, described as a main point of faith of the early Muslims' precursors:

"Or they shall say: «Certainly, our parents were performing *širk* aforetimes»" (Q.7.173)

Early Arab society, or Muḥammad and his followers at least, seem to have been so familiar with the notion of *širk*, that many Qur'ānic passages do not contain any detail out of which one may elicit plausible information about this fascinating phenomenon¹. Despite the obvious presumption that there was no need to acquaint Muḥammad's audience with a conception ever so embedded in their minds, the Holy Qur'ān is not empty in the least from conceptual patterns that may shed light upon the meaning, yet even genesis, of the term *širk*.

The first and plainly discernible connotation of the term bears an unassailable relation with another crucial early Islamic term: the divine name *Allāh*. In this respect, the Qur'ān states:

"God forgives not a practice of «*širk*» in Him; less than that He forgives to whomsoever He will. Whoso performs «*širk*» in God, has indeed forged a mighty sin"²

¹ If one shall look through the Qur'ānic verses that comprise the derivatives of the root "š-r-k", one should not be at surprise to find that many of these verses introduce the term without any positive implication of clues that may unveil the early content of "*širk*". Thus, in a number of instances reference is made to "*allāḍina ašrakū*", i. e. "those, who perform *širk*", yet the type of *širk* practice is not expounded, save some caveats about their animosity towards adherents of Islam (cf. Q.2.96; 5.82; 6.88, 107, 148; 22.17).

² Q.4.48. This and following translations are taken from Arberry 1983. All words in italics are changed by me. Cf. 16.1-3; 20.31.

The adduced Qur'ānic verse evinces one of the main relational peculiarities of the term *širk* establishing its interaction with the semantic field of Allāh. Furthermore, some of the revelations make an obvious emphasis on an important trait within the meaning of the term, which comes to be related with Allāh not in its own right, but rather through its revealing a connection between Allāh and other objects of devotion in early Islamic Arabia who are called *šurakā'*:

“And when *those who performed «širk»* behold their *«šurakā'»*, they shall say «Our Lord, these are our *«šurakā'»*, on whom we called apart from Thee” (Q. 16.86; cf. 6.22, 137; 10.28, 66; 13.16; 35.40)

Given that old Arabs were appealing to some objects that are depicted by another derivative of the root “š-r-k” — *šurakā'*, one approximates the question: what is the real denotation of this term and, perhaps, what kind of conceptual structures does it refer to. It seems not fortuitous that the Qur'ān affords certain instructive passages that prompt, or even unequivocally state, that those recondite *šurakā'* were, indeed, idols of the heathen era:

“«Do you indeed testify that there are other gods with God?» Say: «I do not testify» Say: «He is only One God, and I am quit of that *you perform of «širk»*” (6.19; cf. 15.94-96; 27.63; 28.87-88; 52.43; 59.23, obliquely in 11.53-54)

It is significant to point that the idol/Allāh related meaning of *širk* is not the only one within the somewhat prevailing quantity of additional meanings dissipated in the Qur'ān.

The other concepts that function within the semantic field of *širk* bear upon certain pre-Islamic and early Islamic notions that lie notably aloof from the traditional vision of the Arabic heathenism as a system of divine pantheon in which the great bulk of deities is subordinate to one high god, namely, Allāh. Thus, there are Qur'ānic verses that present the frightful desert dwellers, the *ǧinn*, as being bound with the relation of *širk* to Allāh (Q.6.100), and, moreover, the star worship or the solar and lunar cults are premeditated by the Islamic revelation as being a substantial fragment of the *širk* tradition (Q.6.75-79, obliquely in 35.13-14). There is a notable relation too between the *širk* conception and Muḥammad's stance towards the question of Jesus Christ's nature: a problem that was perplexing minds during that age even beyond Christendom (Q.5.72; cf. 5.73; 9.30-31; 17.111; 25.2).

Given that the term *širk* is distinguished for its notional heterogeneity, it may seem mere coincidence that only separate terminological meaning was proclaimed exemplary during the ensuing ages.

One should not immerse into scrupulous source review in order to find how Islamic authors construe the term *širk*. The somewhat later commentator Ibn Kaṭīr (d. 774 A.H.) does not hesitate to contend, while encountering verses where the

meaning of *širk* is not so evident, that the term is but a reference to the pre-Islamic belief in *al-asnām*, *al-awtān* and *al-andād*, all standing for the heathen idols³.

The traditional Islamic conception of *širk* was easily swallowed by contemporary western scholars. According to W. Björkman, *širk* is the act of "honouring another [deity, P.P.] besides God, polytheism" (Björkman 1913-36: 378). T. Izutsu remarks that "in the Koran the word *ḥanīf* — which is used many times, particularly in the Medinan Sūras — means «monotheist» in a sharp contradistinction to the «polytheists» or «idol-worshippers» (*mušrikīn*)" (Izutsu, T. 1964: 112).

With the meaning of "poly-theism" conjectured for the original conception underpinning the terminological unfolding of *širk*, some authors prefer to introduce yet another rendering: "association"⁴. This term's significance stems out of its particular connotation which lends to furnish a clue for understanding the real meaning of the historically neutral and, indeed, typologically inapt to the pre-Islamic era, term "polytheism".

The "association" is, seemingly, ushered in as a complementary unit designed to convey the construction of *širk* as advocated by the Islamic authors; they give emphasis to its implication of the phenomenon of associating other, and by assumption lesser, deities to almighty Allāh, who is said to have been the midpoint of Arabs' faith long before the rise of Islam.

Evidently, the efforts to spell the term *širk* out of its interpretations by the Islamic authors lead to an obvious impasse. It occurs, perhaps, because the other meanings of the term presented by the Qur'ān were easily cast aside; yet because the fundamental relational traits that make the essence of the term *širk* were discounted at all.

2. The relational aspect of the *širk* concept

The analysis of the term *širk* has, up to now, shown that the problematic shift in its meaning increased with the dilatation of the temporal span between the period of its actual inception and any of the ensuing explanative efforts. Therefore the earliest stages of the terminological germination of the term *širk* should be examined as a necessary onset for the proper understanding of its content.

We have already discussed Qur'ānic applications of the term and its derivatives, yet the description based upon the subsequent definitions has omitted the relational side. For the term *širk* implies an important connotation which should become plain

³ Ibn Kaṭīr, *Tafsīr* II, 619; cf. the comments on 10.66 (III, 206); 13.16, 33 (III, 332, 345); 27.59 (IV, 357); 28.68 (IV, 395); 35.40 (V, 55).

⁴ Björkman 1913-36: 378; Glase 1976: 370; Arberry 1983: 123, 125, 128, 130, (Q.6.19, 41, 64, 78, 80) etc. The same pattern is frequently employed by Kratshkovsky 1990: 118, 120, 122, 124 (Q.6.19, 41, 64, 78, 80) etc.

out of the appropriate Qur'ānic passages. Thus, in many instances Allāh refers in his Book to the pre-Islamic idols with the compound word *šurakā'* i.e. "the *šurakā'* of Mine" (Q.18.52; cf. 16.27; 28.62, 74; 91.47) — a structure that leaves little room for uncertainty that those *šurakā'* have definitely been connected with Allāh.

Moreover, the *širk* relation is not by any chance restricted within the hypothetical divine hierarchy of the pre-Islamic pantheon. There are luminous indications in the Qur'ān that the relation between god and man during the age of *ġāhiliyya* have been evolving as well under the sway of the *širk* conception. The Islamic revelation speaks about man's *šurakā'* who are designated by the compound *šurakā'ukum* — "the *šurakā'* of yours" (Q.6.22; cf. 10.28), whereupon the notion of relation between god and man is clearly introduced.

With its rich network of connotations, *širk* comes out to be a refined concept of relations between Allāh, the *šurakā'*, and man. It is apparent now that those *šurakā'* have positively been man's idols, who were interrelated with man by the bond of worship; yet they were related with Allāh too, although this relation remains of a rather cryptic nature. Notwithstanding the great significance of the relational quality of the term *širk* having been determinedly established, a question still remains about the intrinsic aspects of this phenomenon. In other words, were the *širk* affiliated sides subordinated as the Islamic authors would prefer to assert, or there was another kind of coherence between man and objects of his faith in a manner consorting to a farther extent with the most intimate traits of the pre-Islamic habit.

It seems, the apposite answers may be found if we look at the beliefs of the pre-Islamic Arabs and the social practices of heathenism, that encompass relations both between the deities themselves and those deities and man.

3. *Širk* and the relation between the heathen deities

At the opening of this section, it is worth evoking once again the traditional postulate that *širk* fundamentally stands for the pre-Islamic type of religion, and, more precisely, it grasps the essence of it as profession of faith in one supreme God, to wit Allāh, with adjoining to him a swarm of less influential deities over whom he was higher in rank. The inception of this vision may be traced back to the sacred utterance that heathen worshippers are said to have been exclaiming during their circumambulation of the *Ka'ba*:

"We hail Thee, Allāh, we hail Thee. We hail Thee, Thou hast no *šarīk*. Save the *šarīk* who is Thy. Thou holdest him an he does not hold."⁵

The conception of Allāh's supremacy over idols has always been viewed an historically established fact, perfect in its structural cohesion with the pre-Islamic

⁵ Ibn Hišām, *Sīra* I, 82; al-Azraqī, *Aḥbār* I, 194; Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb* 7; Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān* X, 450.

cultural phenomena. As a result, no thorough discussion about the relations between the heathen deities was actually undertaken.

Yet, if one ventures to reexamine the primary sources, one should encounter significant cases sufficient to cast distinct light upon a complex of notions, attested up to now rather by the hallowed tradition. These sources contain somewhat scanty, yet quite appreciable, set of facts that can clarify the nature of relation between the heathen deities in pre-Muhammad Arabia. Moreover, one of the most significant sources out of which one may adjudge upon the matter is the Holy Qur'ān itself. Contrary to the strongly endorsed traditional view, the Qur'ān propounds that *šurakā'* still might have been commensurate with Allāh sharing with him one of the most important divine prerogatives — the potency to create:

“Say: «Who is the Lord of the heavens and of the earth?» Say: «God.» Say: «Then have you taken unto you others beside Him to be your protectors, even such as have no power to profit or hurt themselves?» Say: «Are the blind and the seeing man equal, or are the shadows and the light equal? Or have they ascribed to God «*šurakā'*», who created as He created, so that creation is all alike to them.” (Q. 13.16)

The adduced verse is at obvious variance with the assertion of the Islamic commentators who have been unanimous in their opinion that pagans had not questioned by any means the supremacy of Allāh, while ascribing the creative power solely to him. The verse is rich in vivid metaphors that express the resentment of Islam at the equalization of the *šurakā'* and Allāh, for they are wide apart, as the blind is from the seeing, and any equalization would make the question of creation an altogether shadowy one.

Not only had the *šurakā'* been vested with the potency to create, but they encroached, indeed, upon another domain of activities that seemed reserved for the highest pre-Islamic divine authority: the legislation and promulgation of social habits and customs (Q.42.21).

At this point one approximates the inference that even if the theory of Allāh's supremacy should hold intact, for the sake of its traditional legacy as it may be, Allāh should be deemed at least *primus inter pares* within the huge assembly of pre-Islamic deities.

In many cases, Qur'ānic data may be upheld by non-Qur'ānic sources. One could arrive, for instance; at informative results if one takes over the case of Abraha al-Aṣram and his expedition against Mecca sometime around the end of the third quarter of the 6th century A.D. It is known that Abraha, the Abyssinian ruler of Yemen at that time, set forth to destroy the Meccan sanctuary for religious and, perhaps, political reasons. Yet, what is interesting for us is a minute hint touching a detail secondary to the whole story, yet primordial for this analysis. Ibn Hišām relates, on the authority of Ibn Ishāq, that when the Abyssinian soldiers encroached on the town of at-Tā'if, one of the great cultic centres of the renown heathen goddess *al-Lāt*,

a delegation of local potentates headed by Mas'ūd b. Mu'attab came to the Abyssinian commander and held conversation with him. The talks were, without a doubt, about Abraha's expedition and his determination to efface "the sanctuary that all Arabs have been venerating" (al-Azraqī, *Ahbār* I, 132). Contrary to what one might anticipate, if, indeed, a presumption should be made that the *Ka'ba* was at that time "the hallowed abode of Allāh", the highest pre-Islamic deity, the leaders of aṭ-Ṭā'if had not exhibited any sense of cordiality towards the shrine of Mecca, nor had they confronted Abraha's aims in whatsoever manner. They told the Abyssinians that the shrine of *al-Lāt* was not the one they wanted to lay waste, and, what is more, provided them with a skilled guide to alleviate their travel through the desert⁶

The Qur'ānic content, as well as the extra-Qur'ānic accounts, encompass a lot of detail which entitles us to conjecture in a way that seems least gratuitous that the original make-up of the term *širk* was designed to stand for an intrinsically equalitarian conception of the *inter-divine* relations prior to the rise of Islam. The heathen deities had essentially been commensurate *šurakā'* and no one of them is established to have held exceptional sway over the others. One can observe also that other supernatural beings as *ğinn* were also deemed a part of the *širk* relation, a belief that indicates that the whole realm of the somewhat heterogeneous pre-Islamic divine fabulization was subordinated to the conception of *inter-divine equalitarianism*.

4. *Širk* and the equalitarian association between god and man during the *ğāhiliyya*

An important question arises in the wake of the analysis of the term *širk* in its *inter-divine* aspect. If one should concede that the *širk* conception is an unambiguous proof of the equality among the pre-Islamic deities, is one, thereupon, entitled to widen the scope of one's assumptions as to make them encompass the divine-human relation. In other words is there any ground for the supposition that god and man during the *ğāhiliyya* were equal partners as well?

As we have already seen, the relational meaning of *širk* is not confined within the divine realm, for idols are said to have been man's *šurakā'* too. If this relation is, indeed, depicted by the same term, it comes nigh unto mind that it should not differ in its quiddity from that relation. Yet, the speculation must be supported by empirical data in order to be undisputedly attested.

The primary sources contain a plenty of accounts that are relevant to the relation between god and man. Even a perfunctory glance at these accounts would evince certain details, unusual for the monotheistic beholder, of the connection between the idol and his worshippers.

Thus, in his famous "Book of idols", Ibn al-Kalbī relates an illustrious story about the tribal deity of aṭ-Ṭayy, an idol called *Fals*. It happened once that a camel be-

⁶ For details see Ibn Hišām, *Sīra* I, 48, supra; al-Azraqī, *Ahbār* 142, supra; aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḥ* II, 132.

longing to a certain woman from Banū Kalb wandered in the desert and finally reached the sacred territory (*ḥarām*) of the idol. The settled tradition in such a case ultimately demanded that the camel be reckoned among the idol's property. Yet, at this time a certain Mālik b. Kulṭūm, a neighbour of that woman, pledged to redeem the camel. When the man approached the place, and the priest of Fals knew of his intentions, he naturally tried to abet the deity against the offender. At this point Fals proved unable to unleash his divine vehemence, a trice of hesitation that dangerously curtailed his authority, for the worshippers who had already bestowed consecrations and gifts to the idol are said to have not wavered to have them revoked (Ibn al-Kalbī, *Kitāb* 60-61).

Further accounts may be adduced within the same conceptual framework, but the important observation here is that the relation between god and man during the *ḡābiliyya* — a relation that the Qur'ān depicts by the term *širk* too — had been underlain by an ethical presumption that is at full variance with the later ethos of monotheism. Not only were god and man ontologically equal within the heathen realm; what is more, they were connected with each other by an unwritten covenant that we may call "*širka compact*". Each of the sides was charged with palpable obligations, and if one man or, in all likelihood, the idol, was to deviate from the terms stipulated in *širka*, the other was considered entitled to recant the covenant.

The *širka* relation between god and man during the *ḡābiliyya* had a principal flaw. Gravitating to its utmost towards the values of this world (*ḥayāt ad-dunyā*), it was rendering both the *ḡābilī* individual and the authority of his deity quite vulnerable when exposed to the transitivity of mundane affairs. It is that very network of values that Muḥammad and the early Muslims have vigorously attacked, after the prophet embarked on his ministry.

There is an instructive account to this effect, related by Ibn Hišām, about two Muslims who set out to desecrate idols in Mecca shortly after Muḥammad's flight to Medina. In one of the cases the two, Mu'ād b. 'Amr and Mu'ād b. Ḡabal, insisted on profaning the idol of 'Amr b. al-Ḡamūḥ, one of the potentates of Banū Salma clan. Things ended one day with 'Amr b. al-Ḡamūḥ finding his idol hanged in a well with a dead dog attached on his neck, whereupon he "knew that his religion was vanity", converted to Islam and said:

"By Allāh I swear, if thou wert god, thou should not have been in a well with a dog to thee attached" (Ibn Hišām, *Sīra* II, 61-62; Ibn Kaṭīr, *Tafsīr* II, 620)

It is obvious that a tangible proof of the idol's incapability to abide by the terms of *širka* was sufficient to terminate the fragile relation between the *ḡābilī* worshipper and his deity.

Hence we see that the relation between god and man during the *ḡābiliyya* was of an equalitarian nature too. Therefore one may safely adjudge that the term *širk* as a twofold terminological unit, depicting the *inter-divine* as well as the *extra-divine*

relation, conveys the equalitarian quiddity of the pre-Islamic world-view, which obviously had not marshalled ontological phenomena in any subordinated levels.

5. Early genesis of the term *širk* within the opposition between Islam and *ġābiliyya*

After we have evinced the equalitarian nature of both the *inter-divine* and *extra-divine* relations during the *ġābiliyya*, we shall proceed with a succinct review of the genesis of the term *širk*, through which Islam formalized pre-Islamic equalitarian conceptions, crammed them into tangible terminological shape, and opposed them to the Islamic notion of *tawḥīd*: the belief in an authoritarian transcendent God.

Within the steadily developing new conception of God during the early stages of Islam, there was no place for the old pre-Islamic view attaching to god and man proportionate significance. Formally, the notion of the solitary and self-existent God was propounded in its general detail sometimes about the end of the earliest Meccan period of ministration when *Sūrat al-iḥlās* was revealed:

“Say: He is God, One, God, the Everlasting Refuge, Who has not begotten and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not any one” (Q.112)

Alongside its introducing the notion of the absolute existence of Allāh as a solitary, eternal and uncreated divine being, this short *sūra* propounds a new understanding of what we called the *inter-divine* and *extra-divine* relations during the *ġābiliyya*. Most notably Allāh is designated by the phrase “and equal to Him is not any one”: a new conception that abolishes the pre-Islamic equalitarian ethos of the relation both amongst the divine phenomena and between them and man. Now there is ontological realm for only one Supreme Being that has not *šurakāʾ*, nor may be his relation with man based upon the “*širka compact*”.

The use of the term *kufu* — “peer” in *Sūrat al-iḥlās* should be deemed as the earliest appearance of an Islamic endeavour to represent the *ġābilī* equalitarianism as a negative conception opposed to a correlative Islamic positive one. Within similar conceptual setting did the term *širk* appear for the very first time:

“And it is He who originates creation, than brings it back again, and it is very easy for Him. His is the loftiest likeness in the heavens and the earth; He is the All-mighty, the All-wise. He has struck for you a similitude from yourselves; do you have, among that your right hands own [i.e. your slaves, P.P.], *šurakāʾ* in what We have provided for you so that you are equal in regard to it, you fearing them as you fear each other?...” (Q.30.27-28)

One can adjudge from the context of this example that the main conceptual content of the term essentially represents the *pre-Islamic equalitarianism* as a notion antagonistic to the *Islamic divine authoritarianism*. The main accent of the verse is upon the peerlessness of Allāh, for He cannot be commensurate (*sarwāʾ*) with the presumed *šurakāʾ*, as no one of the Arabs could imagine a freeman being equal with his slave.

Last but not least, it is worth returning to the inception of this study, where the question has been raised about the appropriateness of the translation of the term *širk* as “polytheism” or “association”. It may be safely concluded that the mechanical rendering of the term as “polytheism” shifts the main emphasis of the early Islamic message, whose intrinsic nature represented an opposition to the *ğāhili* equalitarianism in the relations both within and beyond the divine realm.

As for the term “association” which is not seldom used to stand for *širk*, it seems more apt with the original equalitarian conception of the *ğāhiliyya*, although its predominant utilization as a notion complementary to “polytheism” almost effaced its advantages, whereupon one can hardly discriminate it from any irrelevant quantitative connotations.

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