

## THE CONCEPT OF *DAHR* AND ITS HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE ĠĀHILIYYA AND EARLY ISLAM

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Every historical stage through which cultures develop creates its own worldview structure comprising major conceptual elements as well as segments of a lesser totality. When it comes to pre-Islamic culture, there is a common tendency to accept that belief in Allāh represented one of the most significant features of that period. It is frequently depicted in terms leaving little room for doubt that almost all of the Ġāhili concepts stemmed out of the conviction that Allāh had been the creator of the universe, the giver of livelihood and the master of man's life. Nonetheless, it would be worth seeing whether there might have been different categories, which could successfully compete with the notion of Allāh's dominance over the Ġāhili worldview and set the background for an apprehension of fate and history in a way dissimilar to the Islamic one, or at least to what Islam would purport to deem as peculiar to the Ġāhiliyya. Any quest for such a dominant category would inevitably lead to the concept of *dahr*.

In his influential study about the relation between God and man in the Qur'an Izutsu encountered the major question of *dahr*, and came up with a balanced theory which tried to reconcile two apparently contradicting notions. When analyzing the already mentioned theory of Allāh's dominance over the pre-Islamic worldview and the dissimilar conclusions which a thorough review of the *dahr* notion could evince, Izutsu came to the following conceptual argument. "Man, once created by Allāh, severs his ties, so to speak, with his Creator, and his existence on earth is, from that time on, put into the hands of another, far more powerful, Master" (Izutsu 1964:124). As far as this mighty master is *dahr*, the question arises how the two powers, each pretending for ontological totality - Allāh and Fate - could co-exist in such a uniform conflation. The division between the responsibility for creation accorded to Allāh on the one side, and the sway over man's life-span and death conferred on *dahr* on the other, seems to me to spring out of a rather gratuitous foundation. The only legitimate inference from Izutsu's postulates could be that *dahr* was the main ontological power affecting men before the advent of Islam. As to whether the Ġāhili individual was concerned with the matter of his creation or frightened by his grim death-dominated future remains yet to be seen.

While asserting the ubiquity of the *dahr* concept within the Ġāhili worldview, Izutsu is inclined to confine his analysis to the individual aspect of the relation between man and Fate. This aspect is of great significance without any doubt; yet any comprehensive review of the *dahr* concept would reveal a differentiation within its

notional domain. The power of *dahr* does not affect man as much as it involves the whole Universe. It exceeds the field of personal and stretches over to the realm of the whole existence, which is effectively subdued to its unavoidable influence. Hence our analysis should follow the line of cleavage between the individual and supra-individual in the Ġahilī concept of *dahr*.

### The personal aspect of *dahr*

Texts relating to *dahr* abound in the pre-Islamic narrative discourse in such a ubiquity that one could hardly find a single genre of expression devoid of them. Ġāhiliī poets employ the *dahr* notion in major and minor circumstances as if there were no other ontological power holding sway over their lives. Fate is depicted responsible for all that befalls the individual: primarily disasters and misfortunes. The significance of this concept in relation to man and his life is attested by the Qur'an itself:

"*Wa-qālū: mā hiya illā ḥayātunā d-dunyā, namūtu wa-nahyā wa-mā yublikunā illā d-dahrū*": "And they said: there is no other life but our mundane life, we live and we die, and only *dahr* brings our perdition" (Q. XLV: 24).

*Dahr* represents a caliginous force engulfing the whole existential realm of the Ġāhiliyya. Sometimes *dahr* could grant man little respite, but its revenge would inevitably betide him sooner rather than later:

"*Kaḍāka d-dahrū dawlatuhu siġālun, takirru ṣurūfuhā ḥīnan fa-ḥīnā// fa-bayna mā nusarru bihi wa-nardā, wa-law lubisat gaḍāratuhu sinīnā// id inqalabat bihi karrātu dahrin, fa-lfayta l-ūlā ġubitū taḥīnā*": "Thus the power of *dahr* has been ever changing, with its vicissitudes coming and going// and whilst we rejoice and are satisfied with it, and if its goodness should continue for years// when one is smitten by the assault of *dahr*, you shall find those who were happy rendered grind" (Ibn Hišām, *Sīra* IV, 250).

Nothing can avail against the dark power of *dahr*, nor could anything escape from it, for "*dahr* devours all" (al-Maydānī, *Maġma'* II, 240). *Dahr* blindly ambushes man with his deadly arrows coming from every direction, as to make their victim standing powerless at the pale of death. 'Amr ibn Qamī'a reproves the "daughters of *dahr*", who pursue man as merciless hunters:

"*Ramatni banātu d-dahrī min haytu lā arā// fa-kayfa li-man yurmā wa-laysa bi-rāmī*": "The daughters of *dahr* have shot at me from where I cannot see// what can one do, when he is shot at, while being unable to shoot back" (Izutsu 1964:126).

The phrase "*banāt ad-dahr*" evokes parallels with the pre-Islamic belief in the daughters of Allāh and could well be a sign of resemblance between notions attached to both concepts. It may be that this similarity subsequently facilitated the absorption of *dahr* into Allāh.

In addition to their fear from *banāt ad-dahr*, ancient Arabs believed that *dahr* could exhaust man's stamina (al-Maydānī, *Mağmā'* II, 402) and subject him to an ordeal (*ibtilā'*). In this respect Umayya b. Abī ṣ-Salt states (*Dīwān* 36):

"*Wa-man yabtalīhi d-dahru minhu bi-atratin, sayakbū lahā wa-n-nā'ibātu [ta]taraddadū*": "And he who should be subjected to ordeal by *dahr*, would yield to it, for misfortunes are numerous".

Hence any individual, who went through hardship, becomes *qarī'u d-dahri* – *dahr* bitten. What worsened the situation of the pre-Islamic individual facing *dahr* was the ultimate inevitability of its fatal influence. As Zuhayr b. Abī Sulmā says, no rites or worship could deter the ominous power of that villain, which would finally bring about death and plunge man into the sea of eternal nothingness:

"*Wa-mā yuğni tawaqqu'u l-mawti šay'an, wa-lā 'aqdu t-tamā'imi wa-lā l-gadāri*": "The fear of death shall avail nothing, nor [shall avail] attachment of amulets and blue necklaces" (al-Isfahānī, *Ağānī* X, 364).

It is not surprising therefore to find the notions of *dahr* and death co-existing in a largely synonymous context. In many instances *dahr* is juxtaposed with such terms, denoting death, as *maniyya*, *ḥatf*, *manāyā*, *manūn*, *ḥimām* etc. Thus the Ġāhili poet al-Ġatammaš ad-Ḍabbī laments his fellow tribesmen saying:

"*Aḥillā'i law gayru l-ḥimāmi ašābakum 'atabtu wa-lākin mā 'alā d-dahri mā'tabu*": "O, my loved ones, if you were smitten by one save *ḥimām*, I would have reproved, but *dahr* cannot be reproved" (Abū Tammām, *Hamāsa* I, 426).

In general, the personal aspects of the *dahr* concept permeated man's life span from its beginning till its end. It is hard to find any other ontological power which could compete with *dahr* in the sense of worldview significance. The belief in Fate appears to have held its sway over the Ġāhili mind in every respect pertaining to the personal existence. Not surprisingly, Allāh cannot be found to have occupied any important position within the Ġāhili ontology. The theory of Allāh's dominance over man's creation, emphasized in the Qur'ān alone, must still be supported by more external proofs.

### *Dahr* and the destiny of mankind and the world

The oppressive kingdom of *dahr* easily extended its sway beyond the life of the individual to engulf the destiny of his folk, nay the destiny of the whole mankind and universe. The unlimited notional scope of this concept suggests its totality within the Ġāhili worldview, which – as it appears – was prone to assign both human life and the destiny of the world to the sole influence of *dahr*.

Many poetic passages show that *dahr* could effectively bring about the destruction of whole peoples. Thus we find in the pre-Islamic poetry examples of its limitless power, which would subsequently serve as a good basis for the Qur'anic admonitions and homiletic imagery. Sources reveal that the scriptural tales about people who perished due to heavenly damnation owe some or all of their origins to inveterate

pre-Islamic beliefs related to *dahr*. From amongst them we quote the following verse from the *Hamāsa*:

"*Wa-ahlakan tasman wa-ba'dahu// gadiyya bihim wa-dā Ğuduni// wa-abla Ğašin wa-Ma'ribin// wa-hayya Luqmāna wa-t-tuqūni*": "And [*dahr*] damned Tasm and afterwards a lot of cattle, and Dū Ğudun, and the people of Ğaš and Ma'rib, and the folk of Luqmān and the experienced" (Abū Tammām, *Hamāsa* II, 14).

In this particular verse *dahr* acquires broad eschatological attributes unfolding over a vast range of old Arabian mythology and especially over those mythological strata, which are obviously related to the imagery of calamity and perdition. The eschatological flavour of the *dahr* concept is further affirmed by its believed responsibility for the end of the whole creation (*dunyā*) as in the verse of Umayya b. Abī ṣ-Salt:

"*Wa-lam taslami d-dunyā wa in zanna ahluhā// bi-ṣiḥhatihā wa-d-dahru qad yataġarradu*": "This world [*ad-dunyā*] shall not survive, even if its inhabitants would presume its soundness, for *dahr* might show up" (Umayya, *Dīwān* 36).

This second aspect of the *dahr* concept, which went to a great extent unnoticed by students of the Ğāhiliyya, is of greater significance for a proper understanding of the pre-Islamic worldview. The individual aspect of the *dahr*-related categories, which presents a gloomy picture of the Ğāhilī interpretation of the past and future, cannot be assumed to represent a self-sufficient notion standing aloof from any conceptual interaction with other corresponding notions. It represents instead the individual side of the more general eschatological category depicting *dahr* as the ultimate doom of mankind and its world. The individual tragedy of the Ğāhilī man would therefore be only a consequence lacking totality in comparison to the universal extensions that the belief in *dahr* appears to have acquired within the conceptual realm of ancient Arabia.

Having in mind the universal significance of *dahr* during the Ğāhiliyya, one may now ask to what extent stories about the paramount significance of Allah within the Ğāhilī pantheon might be lent credibility. Except for some vague *halq* imagery, attributed to Allah by the Qur'ān but not attested by any source extrinsic to it, efforts would be needed to vindicate any of the presumed powers of that deity before Islam. It seems as if in the case of Allāh and *dahr* we face two typologically different categories pertaining to consecutive diachronic strata, while any synchrony is hard to attest.

### *Dahr* within the conceptual transformation between the Ğāhiliyya and early Islam

Insofar as the concept of *dahr* has enjoyed an obvious totality in the Ğāhiliyya worldview, not only did it leave no substantial realm for any competing notion, but it also could seriously impede a subsequent introduction of such a one. It is therefore not surprising that when in the first quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD Islam appeared with its notion of a high deity, a dangerous conceptual clash occurred.

The gradual formation of the notion of Allāh throughout the earliest period of the activities of the Prophet Muhammad ultimately brought about a new worldview category which was aimed at substituting the concept of *dahr* in its indigenous environment. The high god, introduced by Islam, soon came to be the paramount universal force, which could only in solitude reign over the world and the hereafter and control man's fate both during his life and after death.

It appears from the extant sources about the Ġāhiliyya that Muḥammad probably embarked on some attempts to eliminate the concept of *dahr* from the notional background of the Arabic religious milieu, but his endeavor hardly attained any palpable result. Muḥammad's countrymen could not easily forsake their ancient beliefs, and though some of them embraced Islam, the power of *dahr* continued to evoke their dread. We possess an instructive account to that effect about a Bedouin who came to Muhammad to announce his Islam, and endorsed his decision to accept the new religion by directing his oath towards *dahr*, the changing one (ʿUyayna 1994:II, 28).

With the confusion between the notions of *dahr* and Allāh being capable of endangering the whole future of Muhammad's religion, the Prophet had to take a resolute action to preempt an eventual melting of the concept of High God back into the old belief in *dahr*. He managed to do this suitably and quite ingenuously. On the one hand, he finally resigned to *dahr*'s ubiquitousness and seemed prone to respect it as an independent universal power. On the other hand, though, he defended his own divine concept merely pronouncing that Allāh is *dahr*. In one of his *ḥadīths* the Prophet is quoted to say: "*lā tasubbū d-dahra fa-inna l-lāha ta'ālā huwa d-dahru*": "Do not abuse *dahr*, for God the Lofty one is *dahr*" (Ibn Kaṭīr, *Tafsīr* V, 295).

The reincarnation of *dahr* in Allāh has not been as much a part of Muhammad's political tactics as it was an intrinsic conclusion of the typological transformation between the culture of Ġāhiliyya and the worldview of early Islam. In the new conditions, *dahr* has been preserved as a term, but the concept behind it had already undergone a substantial shift.

It appears that with the advent of Islam Allāh borrowed the fatalistic aspect of *dahr*. Yet it was not a mechanical transition, for what had been the blind Doom now became *qadā'u llāhi* – the wise predestination of the mighty Lord, which according to Hassān b. Tābit is unavoidable:

"*Wa-ta'allam anna l-mulka li-l-lāhi wahdihī wa-anna qadā'a l-lāhi lā budda wāqī'ū*": "You should know that power belongs solely to Allāh, and that Allāh's predestination inevitably happens" (Hassān b. Tābit, *Dīwān* 242, v. 114).

This verse evinces the gradual shift of the Ġāhili *dahr* concept towards the early Islamic notion of divine providence. *Qadā'u l-lāhi* became the conceptual opposite of the blind Doom. Instances of this transformation abound in the Qur'an itself. Thus, if *dahr* had been bound in the Ġāhili mind with the image of a hidden archer, who sends his arrows at random indiscriminately destroying his victims, Allāh be-

came an the epitome of divine wisdom while displaying his power. Now he helps his worshippers and aims his wrath against the infidels as in the battle of Badr:

"*Fa-lam taqtulhum wa-lākinna l-lāha qatalahum wa-mā ramayta id ramayta wa-lākinna l-lāha ramā*": "You did not slay them but Allāh slayed them, and you did not send your arrows when you shot, but Allāh sent them" (Q. 8:17).

In Islam Allāh became the sole master of life and death:

"*Wa-l-lāhu yuhyi wa-yumitu wa-l-lāhu bi-mā ta'malūna baṣīr*": "Allāh brings life and death and Allāh is aware of what you do"<sup>1</sup>.

The concept of Allāh as the wise and mighty Lord, who requites for sins and rewards virtue, has given a new content even to the old tales about the destruction of whole peoples doomed by *dahr*. Now the tribe of 'Ād has not perished due to the caprices of the blind Doom, but because of God's perdition:

"*Fa-ammā 'Ādun fa-stakbarū fi-l-ardi bi-ḡayri l-ḡaqqi wa-qālū man aṣaddu minna quwwatan aw lam yaraw anna l-lāha l-ladī ḡalaqahum huwa aṣaddu minhum quwwatan wa-kānū bi-āyatīnā yaḡhadūn. Fa-arsalnā 'alayhim riḡan ṣarsaran fī ayyāmin nahī-sātin li-nudīqahum 'adāba l-ḡizī fi-l-ḡayāti d-dunya wa-la-'adābu l-āḡhirati aḡzā wa-hum lā yunṣarūn*": "And 'Ād had become presumptuous on Earth without any right and they said "Who is more powerful than us?". Did not they see that Allāh who created them is more powerful and they rejected our signs. And we sent upon them cold wind in ominous days to make them test the torture of humiliation in *ḡayāt ad-dunyā* and verily the torture of thereafter is more disgraceful and they shall receive no help"<sup>2</sup>

The incorporation of *dahr* into the High God concept of Islam represented the core of transition between the two worldview systems. It played a significant role to alleviate the transformation of Ḡāhiliī Arabs to the Islamic faith, which, though rooted to some extent in the ancient Arabian tradition, marked an abrupt departure from a number of values and notional complexes peculiar to the age of heathenism. Finally one can only wonder what could have been the ultimate fate of Islam, should Muḡammad have been reluctant to merge Allāh with *dahr*.

### Islam and the emergence of historical thinking in Arabia

The ubiquity of the *dahr* concept during the Ḡāhiliyya had another important reflection on the worldview patterns of that period. What I mean is the comprehension of history as a systematic vision of the past and the future.

If one looks at the accounts about the Ḡāhiliyya, one should promptly observe two of their main peculiarities. They are essentially non-historically organized on the one hand, and they represent a welter of what contemporary thinking may label as

<sup>1</sup> Q. 3:156, also 2:28, 7:158, 10:56, 50:68.

<sup>2</sup> Q. 41:15, 16. Also in 11:59-67, 51:41, 53:49-53, 69:3-6, 89:5-14.

mere anecdotes on the other. The Islamic authors, who were so firmly devoted to a chronological marshalling of events after the *higra*, appear far from being concerned about defining the time of *yawm al-basūs*, *yawm dāhis wa-l-gabrā'* or almost any other event dating in the times of the Ġāhiliyya.

The main cause for the Ġāhili disinterest in history lies again with the concept of *dahr*. As we have seen, this concept left people alone with the blind Doom, and one can hardly suppose that such an individual, smitten by a constant fear of the vicissitudes of *dahr*, would have any organized vision of his past, or would direct his concern towards the future, where the inevitable perdition would be the only discernible perspective. The whole ontological value of existence was concentrated in the present moment of being. The Ġāhili worldview was intrinsically pessimistic, while change and innovation were ostensibly negative categories. It is not surprising therefore to find that the concept of *dahr* has been closely bound to a number of terms representing change and transition. Umayya b. Abī ṣ-Ṣalt calls it *al-ġadīd* – the new (Umayya, *Dīwān* 28), while Mutammim b. Nuwayra says “*ad-dahru ahdaṭa nakbatan wa-ruz'an*” – “*dahr* afflicted [a new] disaster and suffering” (ad-Dabbī, *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt* 540, v. 36). In another place the term *ḍū l-hidṭān* – “the renewing one” is employed (Uyayna 1994:II, 28), while Ḥassān b. Tābit speaks of *nawā'ibu l-hadaṭān* (Ḥassān b. Tābit, *Dīwān* I12, No. 18) – a locution which strongly resembles the traditional phrase *nawā'ibu d-dahr*, used in Arabic to denote vicissitudes of fortune.

It is apparent from the above fragments that the concept of *dahr* was associated in the Ġāhili mind with the change of things in general. Renewal and transition were not positive categories before Islam, for they were bound with the irreversible flow of time, which had one direction – towards death as the final boundary of existence beyond which there was nothing worth striving for. Any change would only force the Ġāhili individual out of the closed system of his momentary existence with its elusive pleasures, and make his being rather linear. Yet this kind of transformation was unbearable for a state of mind wherein change was akin to death and harmony was relegated to constancy.

Such a kind of worldview can hardly be supposed to comprise any feeling of history. The past was considered already gone and its events worth only an anecdotal recollection, while future was under the wicked sway of *dahr* and any direction of man's pondering towards it would evoke only suffering and pain. The later works of the Islamic authors only follow the main stream of the pre-Islamic worldview in its rejection of transition and change, and hence any account about Ġāhiliyya necessarily came to be a corpus of scattered anecdotes rather than a chronologically marshalled sequence of events.

With the advent of Islam came the ultimate transition from the Ġāhili non-historicity to the Islamic concept of history. Not only did the new religion effect a transformation of the fatalistic notion underlying *dahr* into the providential aspect of Allāh, but also necessitated a new vision of man's past and future. If the Ġāhili

fatalism made pre-Islamic Arabs chary of seeking cause-and-effect relations between events, the Islamic divine providentialism put them between two main axiological poles: the one of divine creation and the other of judgment after the end of *dunyā*. Due to this new feature introduced by Islam, mankind's history not only acquired its traditional chronological shape, but also emerged as a positive ethical and theological category within the divine creational providence.

Along the newly created historical line, Islam introduced another significant feature that lent history additional integrity, though making it at least partially cyclic. According to Muḥammad's religion, Allāh not only created the world and would some day bring about its end, but also sent to mankind numerous messengers, who were responsible to warn men about the coming Judgment Day and to rectify any diversions from God's path. History thus became a cycle of prophecies stretching from Adam, who had been the first messenger of God, to Muḥammad b. Abdallāh, who was the last one (*ḥātim al-anbiyā'*).

The cyclic vision of history during the pre-Islamic period facilitated the revocation of the pagan fatalism, for the *dahr* concept was not only dissolved into the concept of divine providence, but, as such, was easily projected back to the age of the Ġāhiliyya. Thus, the content of the old Arabian fatalism shifted towards the Islamic notion of divine wisdom and was finally subdued to the newly introduced vision of the prophetic history of mankind. With Muḥammad's ministry the cyclic history came to its end, and a linear chronology was introduced that began with the linear move of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina during his *hiġra*. Subsequent events were sequentially marshalled in a chronological chain that would end only when God initiates the final Judgment.

The new Islamic understanding of history, introduced by the divine revelation to Muḥammad, greatly influenced the way Muslims began comprehending facts of their common past. Their vision of these events presupposed an ever-lasting existence of Islam as the fate of the whole humanity from its very creation till the Judgment Day. This being the case the era before Muḥammad's ministry became not a self-standing historical stage in the development of Arabia, but an integral part of the prophetic paradigm ushered in by Islam. For the Islamic consciousness the Ġāhiliyya became a vivid example of how the ancient monotheism declined after the time when people had been one nation.

The global Qur'ānic understanding of the ancient monotheism and the deviation of mankind from it had its particular impact on the emergence of the concept of the Arabs' own digression from monotheism towards idolatry. The history of the Arabic nation had been permeated with monotheism from its very beginning: long before Muḥammad, Arabs had had their prophets Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl, who taught them the principles of monotheism. After Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl died, Arabs professed Islam but gradually erred from its path and added to the one God a number of lesser deities: *ṣurakā'*.

Last but not least, the "digression story" had an enormous influence upon the subsequent development of Islamic concepts about pre-Islamic religion, which for Muslims became a pantheon where Allāh held a superior position, while other deities could not challenge him in terms of power and influence. The notion of the Ġāhili divine pantheon withstood the challenge of time and easily migrated into contemporary studies, where it acquired different methodological shapes and went through a number of analytic paths<sup>1</sup>. But in all cases, the reasoning ensued from a common premise implying that the concept of Allāh somehow managed to acquire a paramount position in the heathen milieu, which nonetheless remained faithful to the idols too. Yet any attempt to prove the existence of a Ġāhili pantheon must consider, before everything else, the Islamic perception of history as an intrinsically monotheistic phenomenon, and its strong influence upon later conceptual developments, which affected not only Islamic history, but easily stretched over the epoch prior to the rise of Islam.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Wellhausen's attempt (1897:218-219) to explain the emergence of the notion of Allāh as a linguistic generalization of the pre-Islamic heathen cults.