



Center for Comparative Empire
and Transcultural Studies



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Islamication – Islamization

with Michael Cook

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The Islamic Empire created a culture based on a divine revelation and its salvation religion. Culture and religion seem to be inextricably entangled. In other empires the assimilation of regional cultures to the imperial culture, and the conversion to the new religion can be easily separated. In the case of the Roman Empire, we have Romanization and Christianization, and a similar distinction can be made regarding the transcultural aspects of the culture of the Kushan empire and the conversion to Buddhism in Central Asia.

Is there a way to disentangle the cultural and religious aspects of the process in the Islamic case, and if so what terms should we adopt to make the distinction? Arabic does not lend us any useful terms. While the term for conversion, *aslama*, is undisputed, *must'arib*, is always used specifically. In the context of the Arabian peninsula, it distinguishes the real, original Arabs (*al-'Arab al-'āriba*) and the descendants of Ishmael who acquired what was not their ancestral language (*al-'Arab al-musta'riba*). Later in the 11th century, it defines the acculturated non-Muslim in al-Andalus. This term would be utterly misplaced in early Islamic Iran. A similar word formation, *istislām*, is already used for something different: 'submission'.

Carl-Heinrich Becker, one of the founding fathers of Islamic Studies, understood 'Islam', first of all as a civilizational term, not just in the narrow sense of a religion. Despite his postulate of a unified Islamic civilization (Islamische Einheitszivilisation), he already sought to distinguish the political and military process of creating an Islamic civilization from the act and consequence of simply converting to Islam (Der Islam 1910), but more than a century later, we still do not have an established terminology for these separate processes. Marshall Hodgson coined the term 'Islamicate' In the words of Hodgson: 'Islamicate' would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims

(1977, p. 69).” One context, in which Hodgson’s term works well is the adoption of aspects of Islamic civilization by people under Muslim rule who were and remained non-Muslims, not least their reception of literary Arabic as their language of lay and even religious culture. But we still lack a term for the transcultural process of the actual acculturation. Hodgson did not resolve the problem of naming this process. With the recent intervention of Shahab Ahmed (2016), who dismisses the distinction between religion and culture outright, arguing that there are no clear criteria to separate the two, the terminological debate continues.

The workshop in Hamburg has the ambitious aim of pushing this debate on terminology forward by looking at the actual historical transcultural processes across the regions leading to an Islamic yet diverse civilization, including Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Buddhists of various denominations.

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Coin of Al-Andalus (l.) , of al-Balkh (r.) Jena Collection © Heidemann

Abstracts

Michael Cook (Princeton University)

Islamication: the Terminological and Conceptual Problems

Marshall Hodgson famously invented the term “Islamicate” to cover features of Islamic culture that are contingently associated with the religion of Islam, but not part of it. “Islamication”, in contrast to “Islamization”, would then be the process by which people assimilate such features. Is this distinction conceptually coherent? If it is, is it in practice workable? If workable at all, how well does it work? And if the answers to these questions are positive, what is the best way to express the distinction?

Harry Munt (University of York) (online)

Defining Conversion Geographically? The Case of Non-Muslims in ‘Arabia’

In discussions of Islamisation/conversion to Islam, it is often assumed that the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula converted almost entirely (at least, in the Ḥijāz and central Arabia) to Islam astonishingly rapidly. It is also frequently observed that the Ḥijāz (or parts of it) early in Islamic history became off-limits to non-Muslim inhabitants. These are certainly two assumptions that are pushed in many early Islamic histories and other texts, from detailed accounts of various tribal groups’ delegations to the prophet and the agreements they reached to *ḥadīths* reporting the expulsion of non-Muslims from all or parts of the Ḥijāz during the lifetime of the prophet or one of the early caliphs. What is frequently left out of these sources’ accounts, and from some modern scholarship as well, is an attempt to understand what conversion to Islam, Muslim identities (and their overlap with ‘Arabness’) and non-Muslim identities meant in Arabia in the early Islamic centuries. In this paper, I will focus on one aspect of our sources’ discussions of the Islamisation of Arabia: the geography. The paper will explore how discussions of the Islamisation of Arabia often had a primarily geographical focus—debating which particular regions were Islamised—and how this overlapped with corresponding ideas about a ‘land’ or ‘peninsula of the Arabs’.

Peter Webb (Leiden University)

Muslim and non-Arab, Arab and non-Muslim: Some Conundrums from the Early Caliphate

It is intriguing that the two labels most commonly applied to the core identity of the early Caliphate – “Muslim” and “Arab” – are contested terms of uncertain application. By 700 CE, “Muslim” and “Arab” were labels which the Caliphate was using itself, but the nature of belonging to either group was not precisely codified. It is clear that there was considerable crossover

between the terms: on the whole Muslims and Arabs constituted two labels for one elite community in the Caliphate, but they were not synonymous, and one-to-one relation of Arab and Muslim was never achieved, howsoever conceptually close they may be assumed. The lack of this synthesis is perhaps the surest evidence that Arab ethnic and Muslim confessional communal identities were evolving constructs, and the early Caliphate lacked a sufficiently Weberian bureaucracy to do much about it. Nonetheless, the question of labels did matter for real people and had consequences for individuals' status at the time, and the issue of whether one could be Muslim without being Arab or Arab without being Muslim was debated. This paper discusses excerpts from a host of evidence in literature, history, Islamic law, poetry and anecdote where the conundrum of the Arab-Muslim nexus (or lack thereof) caused real consternation in the Caliphate's opening 150 years.

John Nawas (KU Leuven)

A Sociological Approach to Islamization via the Mawālī: A Brief Regional Survey of the First Four Centuries of Islam

Using the general trend of assimilation of the mawālī into the group of 'ulamā' during the first four centuries of Islam, this presentation will compare the general trend to the trend as it is told in the biographical dictionaries for a number of regions of the Islamic Empire (Iraq, al-Shām, al-Ḥijāz, Khurāsān, Miṣr, Ifrīqiya, al-Andalus).

Maribel Fierro (CSIC Madrid)

Terminological Issues in the Study of the Arabization and Islamization of the Iberian Peninsula

The paper is a critical assessment on the terminology frequently employed to analyze or describe the processes of Arabization and Islamization that took place in the Iberian Peninsula after the Muslim conquest. It tests its accuracy and usefulness to understanding adequately such processes, and also their peculiarities compared to the processes that took place in other regions such as in North Africa.

Cyrille Aillet, Université Lyon 2, CIHAM

The invention of the *Maghrib*, from imperial integration to political secession. A reflection on how to look behind the curtain of narrative authority.

In North Africa, at the beginning of the 8th century, the Umayyads had succeeded into integrating a whole cluster of separate polities, placed under Byzantine or local rule, into a new imperial order that soon extended beyond the frontiers of the old Roman realm. Unfortunately,

the observation of this core historical process heavily depends on late and partial narratives composed after the political secession of the western and central provinces, and greatly lacks local or external counter-voices, as well as archaeological evidence. Moreover, the Eastern tradition relies on a highly disparaging treatment of this area, who became the Far West of the new imperial centre. The historical accounts on the conquests and later revolts were completely reshaped by the Abbasid memorialists who introduced their own keys for understanding the failure of the imperial unity. Besides the customary portraits of the Umayyad governors as tyrannical statemen who had reduced unsubmitted people to slavery and plundered the lands, the caliphal narrative enhanced the figure of the Berbers as the main culprits. This newly crafted “nation” of Islam was now associated with primitiveness, religious deviancy and chaos, an image crystallized through their allegiance to “kharijism”. Rebellion against the legitimate ruler meant apostasy and the sincerity of these new Muslims was questioned, just like the *muwalladūn* in al-Andalus.

How can we look behind the curtain of such a powerful narrative? The study of Umayyad sources (material culture, numismatics, papyrology, a few non-Muslim texts) offers a promising way, with its own limits. Another way consists into observing the stage from other perspectives. The Western Ibādī literature, also crafted during the Abbasid era, offers new insights on how the imperial taxonomy was endorsed by dissenting groups who claimed their “berberness” along with their self-conversion to Islam and leading role in its renewal. More broadly, the spread of the new Islamic symbolic order cannot be considered merely a top-down process of acculturation, nor a centralized beam. North Africa rather became a field of experiment where competing interpretations of the imperial legacy paved the way to the building of new Islamic State and tribe formations. The “berberization” (R. Rouighi) of the discourse ranged among an array of many symbolic devices.

Michael Ehrlich (Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv)

Islamication in Syria and al-Andalus: A Comparative Approach

The Arab conquerors in Syria used several methods to disseminate Islam within the subject population. According to Christian and Jewish sources from the conquest period, believers of these two religions considered the Arabs barbarians and culturally inferior. However, despite these attitudes, as time passed, a growing number of these communities' members converted to Islam.

Apart from encouraging people to convert by socio-economic stimuli, Muslims also, directly and indirectly, fostered former elites' emigration. They also changed the provincial capital cities, built glamorous mosques in cities' prime locations, settled organized groups of Arabophone Muslims in main cities' centers, and fostered the use of Arabic .

Umayyad authorities in al-Andalus deemed these methods successful because documental and archaeological evidence suggest that they reused them also there.