

Civilization in the western and Islamic cultural traditions;

A conceptual historical approach

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ملخص

تناقش هذه الورقة مفهوم الحضارة في التقاليد الثقافية الإسلامية والغربية. وتستعمل المقترَب المفاهيمي التاريخي لتحليل مختلف المعاني التي أعطيت للحضارة في السياقين الثقافيين الإسلامي والغربي وفي مختلف المراحل التاريخية. وخلصت الورقة إلى أن المفهوم عرف تطوراً تاريخياً وتغيراً في المعنى والدلالة من سياق إلى آخر. غير أن ذلك الاختلاف لم يمنع مفهوم الحضارة من أن يكون له عناصر مشتركة بغض النظر عن الاختلافات الثقافية أو اختلاف الحقول البحثية. كما خلصت الورقة إلى أن الحضارة مفهوم معقد مركب لظاهرة معقدة ومركبة مما يستدعي استخدام منهج يوظف مجموعة علوم مشتركة لمعالجة مختلف جوانب ظاهرة الحضارة.

Abstract.

This paper discusses the concept of civilization within the Islamic and Western cultural traditions. It uses the conceptual historical approach to analyze the various meanings assigned to civilization in both different cultural contexts and various historical eras.

The paper found that civilization as concept witnessed historical development and changing vocabulary from one context to another. However that diversity does not prevent that concept from having common elements regardless the cultural differences or fields variety.

It found also that civilization is a complex concept of complex phenomenon which needs an interdisciplinary approach to tackle its various aspects.

INTRODUCTION: The purpose of this paper is to present a conceptual historical approach to civilization within the Western and Islamic cultural traditions. It tries to find out some definitions of what we mean by "civilization" and "being civilized".

The paper argues that an investigation into the development of the concept of "civilization" throughout history seems to be of great importance and can help to develop sound approach to world civilization in order to understand their genesis and characteristics. However, to undertake such a task, two difficulties face the researcher to present the development of the conceptualizations of civilization.

First, there is a problem in determining the concept of civilization which arises from the diversity of cultural and linguistic traditions in various civilizations, especially those of the Western and Muslim traditions.

The second difficulty is the controversies between the various definitions assigned to civilization by different writers. For instance, historians, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and others define civilization in different ways with respect to their areas of concentration¹. Therefore, they differ on the concept, the essential ingredients of civilization and its course in history. Hence, it is useful to provide a general overview of the different perspectives used to approach civilization in different fields of research².

Taking those mentioned difficulties into consideration, the following sections are an attempt to elaborate on the changing vocabulary of the concept of civilization.

1. The Concept of Civilization: A Changing Vocabulary.

It would be pleasant to be able to define the word "civilization" simply and precisely, as one defines a straight line, a triangle or a chemical element³. However, the term "civilization" is widely used by historians, anthropologists, and other workers in the social sciences, but it has no single, fixed meaning. Thus, any discussion of the concept must begin with the question of definition.

Unfortunately, the humanities and the social sciences have yet to define their terms and concepts as precisely as the natural sciences. Not because the humanities and social sciences are not yet sciences, but

because of the complexity of the social phenomena which the social sciences, in particular, take as the subject matter for their investigation⁴. In addition to the wide and frequent variations in the meaning of the simplest words within the Social Sciences.

The previous passage suggests that an investigation into the meaning assigned to "civilization" within the Western and Muslim scientific traditions may contribute to specifying what is meant by civilization.

2. Civilization in the Western Scientific Tradition:

2.1. The Literal Definition of Civilization:

Literally speaking, the root of "civilization" in Greek is to lie, lie outstretched, and be located. A city is thus a *lie*, in which the citizen makes his bed on which he must lie down. The term civilization is also derived from the Latin word *civites* which means a city and *Civis* which means the inhabitant of a city, or *Civilis* that means civility or what is related to the inhabitant of a city. It means also a citizen⁵. Despite its literal Greek-Latin origins, the word "civilization" is relatively new. It emerged late, and unobtrusively, in eighteenth-century France. It was formed from "civilized" and "to civilize", which had long existed and were in general use in sixteenth century Europe⁶.

In The Oxford English Dictionary civilization is "a developed or advanced state of human society; a particular stage or a particular type of this". It is also the humanization of man in society ... to civilize is to bring out of a state of barbarism, to instruct in the arts of life and thus elevate in the scale of humanity; to enlighten, refine, and polish. In another instance, to civilize is to domesticate. It is the act of domestication. Furthermore, civilization is the action or process of civilizing or being civilized. Another term which is derived from civilization is civility. The latter has many meanings; such as conformity to the principles of social order, behaviour befitting a citizen; a good citizenship. Civility also means behaviour proper to the interaction of civilized people; ordinary courtesy or politeness, as opposed to rudeness of behaviour⁷. Moreover, The Oxford Thesaurus helps in clarifying the meanings of civilization in English usage. In this book, five terms are interlinked; first, the city which is the metropolis, the municipality, the town. Second is the citizen who is the resident, the inhabitant and the dweller of the city or the town. Third is civility which means courtesy, politeness, respect, urbanity, amiability... fourth is

civilization which has two meanings; on the one hand, it is refinement, cultivation, enlightenment, edification, sophistication, polished. On the other hand, it is culture, mores, customs. Fifth, is the verb "civilize" which means enlightened, refined, polished, edified, educated and acculturate on the one side. On the other side, it means to tame, domesticate, broaden, elevate, and acculturate⁸.

From the linguistic analysis of the term civilization presented previously, it is clear that those various meanings revolve around a few concepts such as the city, the dwelling, politeness and refinement, cultured and the elevation of the human condition as well as the existence of a group of people who are involved in acquiring such characteristics to enable them to be at a higher stage of development according to such social order or customs. The inherited meanings were, however, joined by others. Indeed, since the Eighteenth century the term civilization has been accompanied by different and broader connotations. Those connotations, acquired throughout the last two centuries in the civilizational history of the West, have influenced peoples' conception of civilization in Europe, in particular, and in the West, in general⁹.

2.2. The Terminological Definition of Civilization:

A number of definitions of civilization in the Oxford English Dictionary and Oxford Thesaurus reflect the impact of the cultural traditions and the civilizational history of the West on the formulation of those various definitions. In this regard, a historical conceptual analysis may help us to understand the historical development of the term within Occidental history.

In the same context, the main meanings assigned to civilization since the eighteenth century in the West, Especially in Europe revolve around a few meanings.

a. Civilization as possession of good manners and advanced stage of growth:

The idea of civilization was, first, conceived and developed by the eighteenth century French writers as the opposite of the concept of "barbarism"¹⁰. Civilized society is the society which possesses good manners and an advanced stage of development. The idea of civilization, here, refers to the state of being civilized, that is, to the possession of good manners, politeness courtesy and mores which are signs of an advanced stage of the human condition. That is opposite to

barbarity or barbarism and in accordance with civility. This conception, in fact, was firstly introduced by the French writers of the eighteenth century and then borrowed by English writers¹¹.

It was during the zeal of European expansion over the world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the Western powers promoted the civilization of the West as the standard of human development. In this context, civilization used to refer to achievements in such aesthetic and intellectual pursuits as architecture, painting, literature, sculpture, music, philosophy, and science and to the success which a people has in establishing control over their human and physical environment¹².

However, the degree of civilization, according to Clough, is related to the extent to which a group of people provides physical and social security for its members. If a group of people produces aesthetic and intellectual works of high merit and provides physical and social security for its members, then they can be considered as civilized. And conversely, the less a group of people realizes either quality or quantity as tenets of civilization, the less civilized it is ¹³. Accordingly, Clough introduces the concept of physical and social security as two main factors playing an important role in the civilizing process.

In other words, "the concept of civilization provided a standard by which to judge societies, and during the nineteenth century, Europeans devoted much intellectual, diplomatic, and political energy to elaborating the criteria by which non-European societies might be judged" ¹⁴. In the same line, Taylor has defined civilization as a "degree of advanced culture, in which the arts and sciences, as well as political life are well developed" ¹⁵. Here, civilization is accompanied by another word, "culture", which was first introduced to English by Taylor who used "culture" and "civilization" virtually as equivalent terms ¹⁶.

Another protagonist of the modernist anthropologists who provided concept to civilization in accordance to the progressive thought of the nineteenth century was Childe. He, for instance, sees the essential characteristics of civilization as internal social hierarchies, specialization, cities and large populations and the growth of mathematics and writing ¹⁷.

The eighteenth and nineteenth century thought in Europe confined civilization to Europe. That is to say, the civilization conceived as "the ideal" rather than "an ideal" for human development. In line

with this, Europe promoted itself as the civilization in contrast to pre-civilized societies outside Europe. Therefore, civilization was used in its singular form because in the European modernist thought of that time, Europe was synonymous to civilization and vice versa¹⁸.

Aware of its bias, the Western intellectuals tried to avoid the use of civilization in its singular form, especially after the development of cultural anthropological studies on various peoples and societies of the world outside Europe. Hence, the singular use of civilization had given way to the plural use of the term. Accordingly, civilization lost its prestige and the recognition of the existence of many civilizations paved the way for two notions regarding the understanding of civilization; first, Europe moved from being "the ideal" to be "an ideal", among many ideals, for civilization side by side with other civilizations. Second, the use of civilization as an advanced stage of human development gave way to the conception of civilization as a cultural identity which distinguishes such society from another and denotes a way of organizing that society¹⁹.

Therefore, civilization began to be understood on two levels; if used in its singular sense, it denotes the conception of a universal framework for understanding the human conditions and the course of historical transformations witnessed by humankind since the dawn of history. However, when used in its plural sense it denotes the identities of various societies or cultures²⁰.

The development of the eighteenth and nineteenth century conception of civilization in Europe was partly due to the development of cultural anthropological studies on various societies outside Europe by European scientists. It was partly also due to another European tradition which contributed to the development of the term "civilization", that was the German intellectual traditions and the German intellectuals who brought new meanings to "civilization". Therefore, the following section is a discussion of the German contribution to the development of the concept of civilization in Western cultural traditions.

b. The German influence on the development of the concept:

While French and English writers developed the conception of civilization that means an advanced stage of development and standard for other societies to follow, German thinkers distinguished between two terms. They drew a sharp distinction between civilization and

Kultur (culture). Thus, they influenced English usage of the word. They also stressed the uniqueness of the German culture, and thus, they consider that every nation has its own civilization and culture. Therefore, they contributed to the plural usage of civilization ²¹.

In this regard, many writers began to write about the courses of different civilizations; German, Roman, Hebrew, American, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, or Egyptian civilizations, instead of talking about the universal process of civilization as in the French and English traditions of the Eighteenth century.

Among the thinkers who undertook an investigation of the concept of civilization in both traditions within the Western scientific traditions, Norbert Elias, in his *The Civilizing Process*, stood as one of the most prominent thinkers ²². The German concept of Kultur, according to Elias, refers essentially to intellectual, artistic, and religious facts, and has a tendency to draw a sharp dividing line between facts of this sort, on the one hand, and political, economic, and social facts, on the other. Civilization in French and English usage describes a process or at least the result of process. It refers to something which is constantly in motion, constantly moving forward. The German concept of Kultur has a different relation to motion. It refers to human products which are like "flowers of the field" to works of art, books, religious or philosophical systems, in which the individuality of a people expresses itself ²³. Within the differences between the two concepts, there is a common meaning, which indicates the social dimension of both concepts. The two concepts bear the stamp not of sects or families but of whole peoples, or perhaps only of certain classes of these peoples²⁴. This denotes that civilization is the accomplishment of the society while the previous refers to the dynamic character of civilization and intellectuality of Kultur.

In line with Elias's conception of civilization, Huntington sees a civilization as a cultural entity on a higher level. He considers that civilization is the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species²⁵. Not only that, but throughout history, civilizations have provided the broadest identifications for people²⁶.

In fact, he speaks of "levels of identity" because, as he claims, villages, regions, ethnic groups, nationalities, religious groups, all have distinct cultures at different levels of cultural heterogeneity. But a civilization is the broadest cultural entity ²⁷.

For Huntington, most researchers agree that civilizations are the broadest cultural entities. They are comprehensive, that is, none of their constituent units can be fully understood without reference to the encompassing civilization. Civilizations are mortal but also long-lived; they evolve, adapt, and are the most enduring of human associations. They are dynamic; they rise and fall; they merge and divide; they also disappear. Finally, scholars generally agree on their identification of the major civilizations in history and on those that exist in the modern world²⁸. Moreover, he asserts that "of all the objective elements which define civilizations, however, the most important usually is religion ... to a very large degree, the major civilizations in human history have been closely identified with the world's great religions" ²⁹.

Before concluding the discussion of the various connotations of the term "civilization" in the Western traditions, it is important to mention here that there are a number of meanings in common use today. Accordingly, that diversity in meanings shows the dynamism of civilization, the complexity of the phenomenon and the wide range of connotations which civilization may have within one cultural tradition.

3. Civilization in the Muslim Scientific Tradition:

3.1. The Literal Meaning of Civilization:

To begin with, in Arabic, the current usage of the term *hadharah* is used as a synonym of the English word "civilization". In *Lisan al-Arab*, it means presence as opposed to absence...Sedentary vis-a-vis Bedouin. It has a relationship with the term *hadhirah* which means a city or big community³⁰. It also means staying in a city as opposed to Bedouin...also the inhabitant of the cities and villages³¹.

Hadharah, is also used to mean a land or house inhabited, peopled, and well peopled. It means a land in a flourishing state, in a state contrary to desolation, waste or ruin. Another meaning is a land colonized and cultivated or well cultivated. In addition, it means a house in a state of repair³².

This definition denotes two aspects of civilization in the Arabic context. First, stabilizing or settling in a place or land or house. Second, civilization is a state of development and richness.

Hadharah means also "a building, a structure, an edifice; or perhaps the act of building"³³. This definition emphasizes the significance of the structuring and the act of building. In other words,

civilization can be a process of constructing and an act of establishing a prosperous life for mankind.

That is to say, when men no longer have to submit to brute necessity but begin instead to dominate their environment, they are at last in a position to remould their patterns of living and to transmit a common social heritage. When this process continues to the point where men exert a wide control over nature and have developed a highly complex culture pattern –including an urban structure superimposed upon an agricultural base they can be said to possess a civilization. In the Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic³⁴, the reader finds that the word *hadharah* and its related derived words used in six meanings; first, *hadhara* (verb) which means to be present or be in the presence. The second term is *hadharah* (noun) which means to be settled, sedentary (in a civilized region, as opposed to leading a nomadic existence). Third, *hadhar* (noun) which means a civilized region with towns and villages and a settled population (as opposed to desert. Steppe); settled population, town dwellers. Fourth is *hadhari* (adj) which means settled, sedentary, resident, not nomadic, non-Bedouin, urban, and town dweller. Fifth is *hadharah* (noun) which means a civilization; culture; settledness, sedentariness. Sixth is *hadhirah* (noun), which means a capital city, metropolis; city (as a centre of civilization) ³⁵.

Furthermore, other terms which have close links with *hadharah* are *madaniyah*, *tamaddun* and *tamdin*. In fact, the word *Tamaddun* is derived from the Arabic word *Madinah* (literally, “city” or “town”) and *Tamaddun* (literally, urbanization). Close to the latter terms, there is also the term *Madaniyah* which, literally, means urbanism³⁶. The three interrelated terms of city, urbanization, and urbanism denote that the city is the starting point of the urbanization process to achieve the state of urbanism. In the same context, *madinah* and *hadhirah* are identical, and both mean a city and a town.

However, regarding the modern usage of the terms in the Muslim traditions, there are some differences. Since the late nineteenth century, modern thinkers and writers in the Muslim world have been using certain terms in contrast with the term civilization used by the Europeans. They used a variety of terms such as *'umran*, *hadharah*, *madaniyah*, *nahdhah*, *tamaddun*, and *madaniyat*³⁷. Despite the different terms used to denote the English-French term of civilization, the most famous and popularly used term in Arabic is *Hadharah*.

However, one may agree with Beg's note that the popular term for civilization in some Muslim countries is not Hadharah but Tamaddun or Tamadun. The latter is widely used in Malay culture and language³⁸.

In other words, the city is the starting point of any civilizing process, and there are arguments amongst archaeologists, pre-historians, ancient historians and sociologists over the origins of civilization and the place of cities within the civilizing process³⁹. Thus, the Prophet Muhammad (P.U.H), as the founder of a new society and a new civilization, realized that there must be some development of urban society. That is, of city life, so that the culture is not nomadic, tribal, dispersed, and thus unable to leave significant and surviving physical remains of its presence. In this regard, he established the city of Madinah since his first day of migration, for Madinah was meant to be the nucleus for the civilizational transformation that took place after the advent of Islam.

In cultural terms, it is evident that the notion of "city", as being indicative of a discrete way of life, was available throughout the history in the Muslim world since the establishment of Madinah. In this regard, there can be little doubt that Islamic as well as all civilizations in world history have developed significant central places in which key social functions are located and where the population have congregated. For example, we can mention the establishment of Koufah, Basrah, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Bukhara and other cities in the Muslim world, for these cities to be centers of civilized sedentary life. Furthermore, it is clear also that many Islamic traditions are focused on the city (or Madinah) with its mosque, bathhouse, and markets as the locality wherein a devout life could be achieved⁴⁰.

3.2. *The Terminological Definition of Civilization:*

The terminological definition of the term "civilization" within the Muslim cultural traditions witnessed two stages in its definition. It was first conceived by Ibn Khaldun in the early fourteenth century. The second stage started as early as the late nineteenth. The following two sections are a discussion of both stages.

A. The First Stage:

The term civilization was first conceived in the Muslim world as early as the fourteenth century AD/ eighth century of the Muslim era by Ibn Khaldun. In addition, Ibn Khaldun introduced three terms; the first two terms are Hadharah and 'Umran, comparable with the Western term civilization, the third term is "Ilm Al-'Umran" which could be translated as "the science of civilization". He considered civilization as a quality peculiar to man. This means that human beings have to dwell and settle together in cities and hamlets for the comforts of companionship and for the satisfaction of human needs⁴¹. He also gave another meaning to the term civilization as "the necessary character of human social organization"⁴². In this definition, Ibn Khaldun focused on the social dimension of the term. However, in the previous definition, he focused on the settlement in cities in a collective manner. Thus, Ibn Khaldun's conception underlies the social dimension as well as the dynamic character of the phenomenon of civilization in the course of human development.

In mentioning Ibn Khaldun, one must not, however, neglect the contributions of other Muslim historians and philosophers who came both before and after him. Names like al-Farabi (259-339 A.H), Tabari (224-310 A.H), Al-Mas'udi (D. 346 A.H), Ibn Hazm (D. 456 A.H), and others were of great importance for Ibn Khaldun in developing his theory of civilization. However, unlike him they did not develop theories regarding the subject matter of the present study. Indeed, Ibn Khaldun is an outstanding figure to be dealt with in matters of civilization and its rise and fall, and could be classified as representing the first stage in the development of the Islamic concept of civilization⁴³.

B. The Second Stage:

The second stage in the development of the concept of civilization among Muslim scientists, scholars, academicians, activists, and intellectuals in general began in the late nineteenth century with the first confrontations with modern Europe and the emergence of Islamic revivalism. In this second stage, two trends in the Arab world emerged to translate the term "civilization" into two terms. On the one hand, we find writers of the early nineteenth century translating civilization into the Arabic term Madaniyah and its synonym Tamaddun, including among others, Rifa'ah al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), Mohammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Redha (1865-1935). These and other writers

have used the terms Madaniyah and Tamaddun to mean civilization⁴⁴. On the other hand, as early as the second quarter of the twentieth century, the term Hadharah had been used to mean civilization. It became the popular term among different scientific and intellectual circles in the Arab world. In this line, Bennabi was a pioneer in choosing the term Hadharah to denote the term civilization since the early days of his intellectual career which began with the publication of *The Qur'anic Phenomenon* in 1947. Furthermore, Bennabi gave the series the title *Mushkilat al-Hadharah* (the problems of civilization) with a specific title for each book of the series.

In other languages of the Muslim world, the term used is Madaniyah or its derivations. In this regard, Beg notes:

"The Persian intellectuals have coined two terms for civilization, namely, madaniyat and tamadun... the Turks, on the other hand, use the term medeniyet and also medeniyeti in the meaning of civilization... in East Africa, the speakers of the Swahili language have been using the term Utamaduni as the term for civilization... The speakers of Urdu and Bengali have been using two words (sometimes interchangeably) to express the sense of culture and civilization, viz., tahzib (tahdhib) and tamadun. Some Pakistani Urdu lexicographers use the term tahzib in the dual sense of culture and civilization, but they restrict the use of tamadun in the sense of civilization... Bangali Muslim intellectuals have used the word tamadun in the sense of culture. They also use the word tahzib in the sense of civilization... on the other hand, the Malays of Malaysia and Indonesia unanimously use the word tamaddun (popularly spelt as tamadun) as the term for civilization"⁴⁵.

Taking into consideration the different terms used to mean civilization in the Muslim cultural traditions, it is important to mention that all the terms used are derived from Arabic. However, despite the differences in the use of the terms, their meanings tend to converge to denote civilization, with a specific focus for each term on certain aspects of civilization.

It is also worth mentioning that, at first, the modern usage was tamadun and madaniyat, but after rediscovering the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldun, the Arabs used to prefer the term hadharah, being influenced by Ibn Khaldun's usage. However, other non-Arab Muslims preferred the use of madaniyat and tamadun which are close in meaning to the term hadharah, which is used by Arabs.

In the quest for an appropriate term for civilization in the Muslim scientific and cultural traditions, *hadharah*, *tamadun* or *tamadun* are the various terms used. However, Ibn Khaldun's term *hadharah* is the most appropriate one to express the concept of civilization in its modern sense. Linguistically speaking, *hadharah* is related to the civilizing and urbanization processes. It is also related to the city and its spirit. It has social content, as well as the connotations of the presence, the sedentary and the inhabitation, which means if people inhabit and stay in such a place, some sort of social relationships and interchange will be developed. So, they cooperate and organize themselves, and build cities and institutions. Thus, *hadharah*, in its linguistic usage, focuses upon the social aspect. Furthermore, it means that civilization cannot emerge unless there are social relationships among people resulting in the cooperation, organization and order in a specific place, which is the city.

4. Conclusion: the complexity of civilization and the need for an interdisciplinary approach

To sum up the different definitions attributed to civilization, it is important to mention that various definitions agree on certain fundamental elements of civilization. They agree that civilization involves the presence of several (though not necessarily all) conditions within society or group of independent societies. And there are some conditions which could be given as criteria for any society entitled to be called a "civilization"⁴⁶.

The various definitions and conceptions within both cultural traditions agree about the very basic elements of civilization which are the followings;

First, there will be some development of urban society, that is, of city life, so that the culture is not nomadic, dispersed. In other words, the presence of the city, the order or organization and the sedentary life of its inhabitants. This is because the human being, using Ibn Khaldun's term, is a social being by its nature⁴⁷. This is part of the human instinct that governs human behaviour in its social and civilizational sphere. This has always been a human objective throughout the history of mankind.

Second, there will be some forms of government by which people administer their political needs and responsibilities.

Third, a form of literacy will develop, so that one group may communicate with another, and more importantly, one generation may communicate with another generation in writing.

Fourth, human beings will become toolmakers, able to transform, however modestly, their physical environment, and thus, their social, intellectual, economic, political, moral, as well as spiritual lives.

Fifth, some degree of specialization of functions will have begun, usually at the work place, so that pride, place, and purpose function as cohesive elements in the society.

Sixth, a network of social relationships will have emerged to transform the spiritual values into social values.

Last, there will be a belief system and concept of God or a higher being, though not necessarily through revealed religion, from which people obtain the authenticity and the reason d'être for their existence, as well as the vision which leads them beyond everyday life. In other words, there will be a worldview based on the religious idea in its broadest sense, i.e. revealed religion, human-made religion, or ideologies.

To conclude with, it is evident that although the various definitions agree that certain features or conditions must be available to call such a phenomenon a civilization, they gave way to many approaches to civilization. Therefore, many attempts by many scholars and fields of research have tried to develop different approaches according to their perspectives and paradigms they used to study civilization.

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