

# The Forgotten Cultures of the Qur'an

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Can cultures assert a residual influence on civilisations analogous to the experience of individuals, in whom a repressed element of their personal or family life-journey can etch a trace, or even provoke a psychological disturbance in their present? Is it possible in both these cases to advance the hypothesis that inadequately resolved conflicts from the past, whose origins are 'forgotten' in the sense of having been repressed, can re-emerge in the present in the form of disorders, antagonisms or powerful feelings which, while they cannot obviously be entirely attributed to these 'forgotten factors', nevertheless are made considerably more complex by them. In his monograph *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud (1939: 152) asserts that 'the forgotten material is not extinguished, only "repressed"'. To wish to pose such questions in relation to the origins of Islam is certainly presumptuous, and for that reason these pages will limit themselves to presenting a number of issues as avenues for reflection.

The principal argument will be that the words of the Qur'an when examined in their literal sense sometimes appear to connect with languages or cultures other than those acknowledged by traditional Muslim apologetics and thus may be echoing origins that this apologetics has dismissed from its discourse. The fundamental question is in fact this one: was the prophet's life spent within a relatively isolated Arab context, as is suggested by the translation of the term *أُمِّي* ('who can neither read nor write') (Qur'an VII: 157) as is held by some, or did he live within an environment of different cultures to which he had access (the translation of *أُمِّي* would in such a case be rather 'Gentile' in the Pauline sense of 'pagan'). Where Jacqueline Chabbi (1997), and perhaps Blachère (1991: 6–12) seem to have opted for the first hypothesis, many authors accept that the prophet, far from being illiterate, was in contact with other languages and other cultures, a circumstance which later Islamic apologists, in their concern to preserve the originality of Islam, would have discarded.

It was the gradual establishment of the definitive Qur'anic text over a period of two centuries which allowed this process of occultation to take place, as if it had been a matter of purging the sacred text of its impurities, of any trace element that might cause harm to its originality or its authenticity. Research in recent years has

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challenged the official version of text's establishment by the third caliph Uthman (644–656) who was assassinated and of whom it is said that this particular undertaking was one of the causes of his assassination (since he was believed to have brought together all the versions in circulation, made a compilation from them and had the other versions destroyed). Subsequently, in the reign of Abd-al-Malik (685–705), son of Marwan, it is probable that the governor of Iraq established a version of the Qur'an out of that of Uthman and had the other existing versions destroyed (such destruction of other codices is a recurrent theme). Al-Mahdi (775–785), the third Abbasid caliph, had a Qur'anic codex brought to Medina which was substituted for that of Hajjaj ibn Yusuf. The work on and debates around the text came to an end in the first half of the 10th century, according to the research of Alfred-Louis de Prémare (2004: 12).

The current text, whose arrangement is arbitrary (based largely around the length of the surahs, the longer preceding the shorter, without this order ever having been explained), even if it doubtless contains many elements subsequently added for doctrinal or political reasons, nevertheless echoes, and no doubt records verbatim, words pronounced by the prophet Mohammed from 610 onwards and up till his death in 632. In a new translation (into French) of the Qur'an, Youssef Seddik (2002) has attempted, by for the first time setting aside this traditional order, to rediscover the original thrust of this preaching.

Throughout the long work of construction which lasted for nearly two centuries, the Muslim exegetes strove to produce a text (the Qur'an) that would appear as the word of Allah as revealed to his messenger and thus to present the new religion as a new entity, independent of and superior to the religious practices of the societies out of which Islam was born: the pre-Islamic culture current among the nomadic Arabs, the Jewish and Christian religions that were spread through its environment and the Hellenic culture. It should be added that this religious structure needed to underpin and legitimise a political authority. That was why the commentators strove to efface the trace of any foreign elements or to minimise them when this was not entirely possible. But Youssef Seddik (2005: 59) quotes in relation to this the following remark by Freud: 'The same situation is involved in deforming a text as with a murder. The difficulty lies not in carrying out the act as in eliminating the traces.'

In pursuit of this repression exerted on outside contextual influences, I shall explore three avenues: the pre-Islamic culture of the nomadic Arabs, the Judeo-Christian culture and the Hellenic culture.

### **The pre-Islamic Culture of the Nomadic Arabs**

This culture from a period labelled as *الجاهلية* (ignorance, impetuosity, violence) is the object of universal detestation among Muslim commentators and, following them, from Muslim opinion. It was the era of paganism and disorder to which the prophet had come to put an end in a story that is well known.<sup>1</sup>

From a thesis submitted in 1989 by Manaf Sami under the title of *The economics and politics of Arab nomadism*, it transpires that the culture of the nomadic Arabs represented an ideal which was directly opposite to that which Islam was propounding,

and that Muslim apologetics sought to combat this attitude by misrepresenting and concealing it. The focal issue was a practice, called *maysir* (المَيْسِر), which is prohibited in the Qur'an along with wine and which is translated as 'game of chance'. The prohibition is formulated in the following terms in the Qur'an (Surah V, 90-91):

O you who believe! Strong drink and games of chance and idols and divining arrows are only an infamy of Satan's handiwork. Leave it aside . . . Satan seeks only to cast among you enmity and hatred by means of strong drink and games of chance . . .

Another passage recognises there is some usefulness in the practice, but nevertheless rejects it entirely:

They question you about strong drink and games of chance. Say: in both is great sin, and (some) utility for men, but the sin of them is greater than their usefulness, (Surah II: 219).

The weight of the interdict prompts a question about the nature of this practice. If traditional exegesis clouded this question, that was because there was an important issue at stake. It did so by reducing the *maysir* to a game of chance, like backgammon, and by conflating into one two different practices using short arrows: the use of a set of three arrows called *zalam* (زَلَمَ, plural: أَزْلَامَ, *azlâm*) for divination purposes in sanctuaries, and the use for the *maysir* of a set of ten arrows called *qidh* (قِدْحَ, plural: قِدَاحَ, *qidâh*), of which seven bore the names of persons entitled to a number of portions of meat. The Arab authors of the period were well aware of this reality. Ibn Qutayba wrote an epistle on the subject entitled *كتاب الميسرو القداح* (*Treatise on the maysir and the quidâh*) from which Manaf Sami drew his analysis.

In passing, it is necessary to explain the real context of the period in which the prophet was conducting his mission. The Arab society of Mecca and its neighbourhood was made up of three elements. First, an urban society devoted to commerce with its associated cults and seasonal rhythms: periods when trading expeditions were mounted during the holy months with their safety secured by truces, periods of pilgrimage (الحجّ and العُمْرَة), subsequently taken up by Islam as well) and fairs for commercial purposes. Second, a society that was equally sedentary, though devoted for their part to agricultural and pastoral activities, and who shared the same polytheist pantheon as the city-dwellers. The third sector was made up of nomads living in the desert with their camel herds within the ambience of a specific tribal culture; it was to this *milieu* alone that the *maysir* applied. In contrast with the sedentary dwellers, the nomads had no gods: in place of religion they substituted a set of behaviour principles that was handed down embedded in their poetry. In their desert they lived a harsh life, alternating between dispersion and coming together following the seasons and the availability of resources, in a social context where violence was esteemed according to a sharply honed sense of honour. The annual socio-economic organisation of their way of life covered three phases:

- a 'generative' phase during the spring, when pasture was abundant and the she-camels were calving: the holy month of *rajab* (رَجَب) forbade any violence.
- a 'redistributive' period during the summer: this was the time of the *razzia* (الرَّزْوُ) or cattle-raid, which consisted of rustling camels from other groups. This activity

- was considered to be neither theft nor warfare: the raids were carried out without human casualties, but a group's – and a man's – honour was established by demonstrating their strength and prestige by carrying off camels from others.
- a 'destructive' period, when the *maysir* occurred. This is the winter, when the groups have joined together, the pasture resources are reduced, the previous staples (milk and dates) are no longer available and are replaced by the meat of slaughtered camels. Far from wanting to accumulate as much stock per head as possible, the nomad will make it a boastful point of honour to destroy them, showing thereby that he is confident of acquiring more in the future through his raids. But there is a preliminary stage, which is the sharing of the available food and which is considered in this sense as a charitable act. A camel is slaughtered, the meat is divided into ten portions which will be distributed by drawing of lots: ten arrows, called (قِداح) are placed into a leather bag. Each arrow has marked on it a number of portions and the name of the person to whom these will go. The drawing of lots is done by shaking the bag. The beneficiary of a draw goes off with his share, then other arrows are drawn until the supply of meat is exhausted, with the non-beneficiaries supporting the cost of the operation. Through this process, the *maysir* permitted a consumption of meat linked to a game of chance, but also a distribution in favour of the needy. The advantage accruing to the organiser of the *maysir* is the prestige drawn from an act of generosity. The size of the *maysir* can vary according to the number of camels included and the number of participants within an atmosphere of competition for prestige. An air of exuberance (الإفاضة) mounts as the stakes build up, amplified by the consumption of wine, and another stage can then be reached with the *mo'aqara* (المُعاقرة) which is the gratuitous slaughter of camels through a challenge thrown down to a rival: this confrontation occurs between larger groups via the person of their chief (السيد). A challenge is put down by the slaughter of a hundred camels, for example, daring the rival to do better, slaughtering a higher number of them. This type of challenge may easily run out of control, potentially leading to ruin, but the chief who cannot pick up the challenge thereby forfeits his honour and that of his group. This practice has similarities to the North American *potlatch* ceremonies well known by ethnologists. History records that such challenges (المُعاقرات) continued even well after the establishment of Islam and up to the time of the caliph Ali. Significant destruction of livestock would take place amid an atmosphere of intoxication and wild exuberance, and it is such excesses that the Qur'anic verses condemn, by encompassing the whole of this custom (both the reasonable as well as the excessive practice) under the term of *maysir* and associating with it the prohibition on wine.

Reset within its ethical context, the *maysir* and especially the *mo'aqara* which extended it corresponded to a model which was radically contradictory to Islam, and above all to the sedentary model. For the sedentary dweller, the nomad is a danger, whereas for the nomad the sedentary dweller is a 'blight on the world'. The nomad's ethic is based on the rejection of work as a mode of subsistence; work demeans a man and makes him a slave. Had not a nomad challenged the prophet by asking him: 'Who are these slaves around you?' The only noble act is to seize one's

source of subsistence from another through the *razzia*, in doing so affirming one's strength and one's contempt for danger. But this wealth acquired through violence is not intended for accumulation: honour consists to the contrary in increasing one's store of prestige, by sharing one's wealth certainly, but also by destroying it, demonstrating in doing so one's confidence in an ability to acquire more through raiding. The poetry of the nomads upholds and lauds this model. There are panegyrics to its greatest exponents. But within this poetry there is no trace of religion: all that counts is the violent and proud man at the heart of a prestigious group.

In contrast to this ideal, the sedentary dweller, whether a merchant or a farmer, creates his wealth by his toil and accumulates property by which his prestige is conferred. He renders worship to his gods and becomes their servant. The nomads who attended the great gatherings of the sedentary populace did not go there for trading purposes or for cultic sacrifices, their only concern being their high reputation (المُفَاخِرَة) and their interest in certain negotiations.

From this sedentary model Islam will lay its foundation but will evolve it further. The world of the nomad stood in contradiction to this. But that world could not be challenged head on because it was upon it that Islam would build its expansion. The model would thus be reshaped: by conflating the use of arrows in different circumstances (*qidâh* and *azlâm*), and by reducing the *maysir* (that is, the whole nomadic socio-economic structure) to games of chance, whereas the underlying values (pride, boastfulness, violence, scorn for the weak) would not be attacked head-on. Those who undertook these distortions in Islam's first two centuries did so in full awareness of their actions. There were treatises decrying the nomadic life-style: we have already quoted Ibn Qutayba. The reshaping began with the commentators of the Qur'an who, like Tabari, reduced the *maysir* to قِمَار (a game of chance). The great *Lisân al-'Arab* dictionary describes it as 'a game with arrows'.

After the reshaping came the stage of hiding away. Reducing the *maysir* to something like a game of backgammon and associating its practice with relics from the pagan era invaded the whole of the exegetic tradition for a long time, up to and including the respectable *Encyclopédie de l'islam*. In his recent translation into French of the Qur'an, to which are appended commentaries, Sheikh Hamza Boubakeur (1994: I, 226) wrote:

The game of chance, *maysir*, a popular game among the ancients Arabs, to which Ibn Qutayba [*he is thus well informed* . . .] devoted a whole work. But it is not simply a prohibition against this type of game alone. Here, according to all the commentators, the particular has a general value: all games of chance are prohibited to Muslims and in general everything arising from chance.

It is not here a matter of attempting to rehabilitate the nomadic model, but rather of observing that its existence has been repressed. It was certainly antithetical to the sedentary model, which subsequently became the Muslim one. But it should be realised that, in its first phase, the expansion of Islam depended upon the nomadic tribes whose values were progressively concealed by the veil of Islam under the form of the 'struggle for the faith', the *jihad* (الجهاد). As Hamadi Redissi states (2004: 86):

If it is true that one is shaped in advance by the world of language, it is reasonable to wonder if 'the historically effected consciousness' as Hans-Georg Gadamer called it did not carry from the very early period the threat that the intrepid warrior Khaled ibn al-Walid bellowed at each sally during the war with the apostates who had rejected Islam just after the death of the Prophet (632–634). To the Eastern Christians and other disparate and peaceable communities, he cried: 'By Allah, I am coming for you with more avid for death than you are for life', or further with men 'loving death as furiously as you love wine'. The spokesman for al Qaeda, Suleiman abu al-Gaith, echoed this cry when appearing on the Al-Jazeera news service on the 10th October 2001 when he said: 'Thousands of the young of our Umma want as much to die as the Americans want to live!'

There is no better description than that for the nomadic model. As for *jihad* (الجهاد), the Muslim tradition is still in doubt up to the present as to its true nature: is it an armed struggle for the faith or a struggle within each individual to acquire virtue?

### The Jewish and Christian Cultures of the Prophet's Era

The Biblical sources that are common to Jews and Christians are abundantly quoted in the text of the Qur'an. The preaching of Mohammed followed on along the path previously traced by these religions in order to complete their revelation, or even to bring them back from their error. The significance of the interactions is attested in the tradition by certain names which, though they may designate people whose factual existence remains uncertain, nevertheless bear strong witness to the reality of these contacts. Waraqa b. Nawfal, said to be a Christian, perhaps even a priest, belonged to the family of Khadija, the prophet's first wife: he was acquainted with the Torah and the Gospel, and could translate from them into Arabic whatever was asked of him. The Syrian monk Bahira had recognised in Mohammed the marks of prophecy. There was also the Jewish rabbi of Yathrib, Salman the Persian, who converted to Islam. He had originally been a Zoroastrian and had come to Islam by way of Judaism and Christianity. After quoting these names, the Orientalist de Prémare (2002: 329) writes:

Behind all of these reassembled figures emerge the emblematic outlines, within the multi-faceted milieu of a prior period, of a group of people who each bore the distinct cultural imprints of their origins along with the sacred texts of their earlier traditions. They were well versed in these texts and traditions, and they effected the integration of these within their new sphere of adherence by facilitating the appropriate adjustments, notably to serve apologetic and polemical purposes.

In the Abbasid era there appeared among Muslim commentators the concern to sharply distinguish the originality of Islam as a new religion. Certainly a broad appropriation of Judaic and Christian sources had been made through the transcription into Arabic of the *Traditions of the Israelites* (الإسرائيليات), notably by Wahb ibn Munabbih (who died around 732). These traditions were revisited by the Qur'anic commentators such as al-Tabari and authors of stories of the prophets (قصص الأنبياء). Subsequently, a critical attitude towards this literature tended in the same way to emphasise the centrality of Islam.

It was in this context that focal figures in the Bible came to be interpreted as representations of Mohammed. This is notably true of Joseph, Jacob's son, whose story is related at length in the Qur'an via a sort of identification with the prophet. Reference can be made for this to the fine analysis undertaken by Alfred-Louis de Prémare (1989), and in a broader sense, to Jacqueline Chabbi's 2008 study relating to the Biblical figures in Arabia.

### The Syriac Scriptures

A number of years ago a German academic with an excellent knowledge of both Arabic and Syriac, writing under the pseudonym of Christoph Luxenberg (2000), propounded a philological approach which, after meeting all the standard pre-requisites, would suggest that certain linguistically contestable passages of the Qur'anic text could be interpreted in the light of the Syriac language whose script co-existed with that of Arabic. Through the hypotheses that he put forward, the author aroused a certain curiosity whose contours have been well defined by Rémi Brague (2003).

In the close review that he made of the work, Claude Gilliot (2003: 387–388) examines how valid this hypothesis might be.

Christoph Luxenberg takes as his point of departure the linguistic situation which is presumed to have prevailed in the Arabia of Mohammed during the first decades of the seventh century. The ambiguous lettering of the Arabic alphabet in use at that time could in effect, as we have seen, lead to different readings. But, besides that, Syro-Aramaic was then the dominant language of culture throughout all of western Asia, and Luxenberg considers that it must have exercised an influence on the other languages of the region which were not yet written languages. We will add that Mecca had links with the city of Hira, an Aramaic name, which was in the south of present-day Iraq, and which was an episcopal see from 410. Further, according to certain Muslim sources,<sup>2</sup> the inhabitants of Ta'if and the Quraishi learned 'the art of writing' from the Christians of that city, with the first Quraishi to learn it thought to be Sufyân b. Umayya.

The possible confusion between the Arabic and Syriac languages is attributable to the imprecision of notation of the two languages, since the diacritical points which allowed the consonants and vowels to be distinguished were not marked in the era of the prophet and the early caliphs. In confirmation of his argument, Claude Gilliot (2003: 390) goes on:

At this point, the reader may wonder how Mohammed and certain of his Companions could have had access to a Syriac script. The links which Mecca maintained with Hira and the city of Anbar may well be significant here, as well as the relations between Mecca and Aramaic Syria. Further, a tradition attributed to Mohammed might suggest it; Luxenberg quotes one of the versions, but at second hand; we can provide another direct from a source. Indeed, according to one of the scribes of the revelations granted to Mohammed, Zayd Ibn Thabit: 'The Messenger of God said: "Some writings (كُتِبَ) have come to me, and I do not wish for each and all to read them, are you able to learn the script of Hebrew, or else he said, of Syriac?" I replied: "Yes" and I learned it in seventeen days!' Which leads one to think that this scribe who also contributed to the edition of the Qur'an under Uthman and, it is thought, also from the caliphate of Abu Bakr, was already well versed in Syriac.

These few incomplete indications serve to recall the intense level of two-way contacts that took place between Muslims, Jews and Christians during the early centuries, as well as the concealment that these contacts were subsequently the object of, to the extent that Muslims of later centuries gradually lost all trace of them, as is apparent in the exegesis of the time. Were they forgotten? Repressed? Did they have no influence over history? Throughout the latter and up to the present day, the great journey of these brethren at odds with each other is clearly marked out with salient markers: conquests, crusades, various persecutions and political conflicts, a proximity so close that it cannot but exacerbate the differences if not the hatreds.

### A Forgotten Hellenic Presence

In a thesis submitted in 1995, the anthropologist Youssef Seddik, who has an excellent knowledge of both Arabic and Greek, devoted his study to the presence of the latter in the Qur'an. In a series of publications which emerged from this work, this author has been able to elucidate a number of passages of the holy text which had till that point remained hermetic to commentators. His research has revealed a strong Hellenic presence in the environment of the prophet, a presence which, through being forgotten or denied, had been little evident up till now. The following examples are intended simply to give some idea of the extent of the issue.

#### *i. Greek terms in the Qur'an*

The existence of Greek terms in the Qur'an is attested, even if it is not always acknowledged by the exegetes. Ali Merad provides a list of them with the commentary that: '*Vocabulary borrowings were a source of embarrassment for the classical authors, steeped as they were in the certainty of the pure Arabicity of the Qur'anic text*' (Merad 1998: 29–30). Among the expressions in this list is the term *λόγος*, from which was derived *لغة* (language, spoken word), which came to displace the Arabic term *لسان*.

The total inventory however is far from fully established. Youssef Seddik has discerned further examples, and in doing so has shed light on the meaning of terms not accurately understood by commentators, a fact which has often led them to be translated (or interpreted) in a fanciful manner:

- Surah CVIII (سورة الكوثر, Abundance), regarded as the 'translators' stumbling block' includes a term *الْكُوْثِرُ* which the Arabic language cannot account for. Seddik (2002: 62) relates it to the Greek *κάθαρσις*, in the same way that another term in the same verse, *الْأَيْتَرُ* (sterile) is derived from the Greek *ἄπτερος* (wingless, without male progeny). Interpreted thus, the verse presents the following form:

We have granted thee the Katharsis  
Therefore address a prayer to your Lord, then offer a sacrifice.  
It is he who insults you who shall be the wingless one.

إِنَّا أَعْطَيْنَاكَ الْكُوْثِرُ  
فَصَلِّ لِرَبِّكَ وَأَنْحَرْ  
مَنْ شَاتَنَكَ هُوَ الْأَيْتَرُ

The surah thus takes the form of a consolation brought by God to his prophet who is being insulted by his enemies over the fact that he has no male heir.

- In Surah VIII (سورة الأنفال, the Spoils of War): from the Greek νηφάλιος, libation (which has nothing to do with the spoils of war) (Seddik, 2002: 70).
- In Surah CV, سورة الفيل, the Elephant) (Seddik, 2002: 153) the term أَبَابيل, that for Berque means ‘flights of birds’ recalling Babel, comes indeed from the Greek βάλλω meaning ‘hurl’: ‘pelting birds’.
- In the Surah of the Star (LIII: 19–20): after verse 20 there appeared the notorious ‘Satanic verses’<sup>3</sup> in which the three goddesses were called ‘cranes’ غُرَانِيْق, a term that has never been explained. This word transcribes the Greek γέρανος, geranium or crane, and relates back to the sacred dances (called crane dances) performed at Delos, and no doubt also at Mecca (Seddik, 2004: 236–237).

### ii. Characters, practices and myths

The *character Alexander* (سورة الكهف, Surah of the Cave, XVIII, 83ff.) (Seddik 2002: 185–187) The fact that Alexander the Great (whose tutor was Aristotle) was charged with a mission by Allah in the Qur’an (v. 86) aroused the astonishment of certain commentators who refused to identify the character named ذُو الْقَرْنَيْنِي with Alexander the Great. The name means ‘the two-horned man’. Youssef Seddik sees in this here a direct reference to the *Deeds of Alexander* (attributed to Callisthenes) which may have been the source for the whole of the Qur’anic passage.

The *Poem of Parmenides*. Surah CXII (سورة التوحيد) appears identical to the beginning of Fragment VIII of the Poem of Parmenides (Seddik, 2002: 87).

*Reference to cultic practice (crane dance)*. In addition to what has been mentioned above re غُرَانِيْق, Surah VIII: 35 (سورة الأنفال) declares concerning the non-believers: ‘Their worship at the House is nothing but bellowing and drumming’ (Seddik, 2002: 138). From these words of the Qur’an, Seddik (2004: 230–240) has derived the strong presence in the environment close to the prophet in Mecca of pagan cults very similar to those identified with Delos and one of whose elements, involving ‘bellowing and drumming’, was a component of the ‘dance of the cranes’ mentioned in the ‘Satanic verses’.

### iii. The loss of awareness of Greek language influence

The preceding evidence attests the presence of Greek language elements in the Qur’an and within its socio-cultural and religious environment. They thus go to show that components of a Mediterranean culture were present during the very early years of Islam. But it is equally apparent that the Qur’anic commentators did not draw upon this in their commentaries. Certainly the tendency became progressively established to eliminate any putative foreign influence that may have contributed to the emergence of the revelation, as Ali Mérad points out. Nevertheless, for several decades Greek remained the language of administration in the conquered provinces, and the use of Arabic was not introduced for administrative purposes (ديوان) until the reign

of Abd-al-Malik (685–705) or of his son Hisham (724–743), as shown by Dimitri Gutas (2005: 53). This particular author distinguishes two periods covering Muslim association with Greek culture. During the Umayyad era, in reference to the Byzantine bureaucracy of Damascus taken over by the caliphs, he writes:

This high Byzantine culture showed a hostile indifference to pagan Greek science . . . Hellenism was the vanquished foe that had to be treated with contemptuous disregard, because it was no longer relevant . . . This attitude of denigration towards Hellenism is likely to have been shared by the Greek-speaking Christians under Umayyad rule, even by groups . . . who prior to the coming of Islam were monotheists. (Gutas, 2005: 47)

With the advent of the Abbasid dynasty and the transfer of the capital to Baghdad, the animosity towards Greek science disappeared:

Thus, the transfer of the caliphate from Damascus to the centre of Iraq – that is, from a Greek-speaking region to one where Greek was not spoken – had the paradoxical effect of facilitating the preservation of the heritage of Classical Greece which the Byzantines had almost entirely rooted out. (Gutas 2005: 49)

That this heritage was subsequently brought to Europe through the medium of Arabic translations does not directly concern our argument here but rather the issue of how the Arab and Western cultures became linked. The fact that in this transmission of knowledge the Arabs were much more than simple translators is attested by the prestigious list of their philosophers, and is well recognised by many authors among whom is Dimitri Gutas.

This Arab involvement though has recently been challenged in a book by Gougenheim (2008), with the opposite point of view subsequently being argued in a collective work (Büttgen et al., 2009): the matter has provoked passionate debate to which an article by Rémi Brague (2008–2009) seems in my view to have offered a rational conclusion.

To return to our theme, it might be wondered why various generations who were competent users of Greek and who had assimilated its cultural essence were unable to 'hear' the echo of its presence in the Qur'an through the words and allusions that we have partially identified. The apparent cause is that the milieu which were steeped in Hellenism and those which generated the Quran'ic commentaries were different, and even diametrically opposed. The first key aspect was the paganism and unbelief that the religious leaders perceived in the Greeks and those who adopted their practices. The second was the stringent opposition that these religious leaders erected towards philosophy (فلسفة), towards rational thought (which emerged only briefly with the *mu'tazilite* current of thought and the dispute around whether the Qur'an was created or uncreated) and finally towards the exercise of freedom in commentaries on the prophetic message. This attitude is symbolised in the works of al-Ghâzali, a famous theologian with a thorough knowledge of *falsafa*, whose precepts he denounced in his tome تهاافت الفلاسفة (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*) which appeared around 1091.

It thus came about quite naturally, through the deprecation of the Byzantines, then by the rejection of *falsafa*, that the Greek language was thrust aside from the cradle of

Islam, to the extent that the Qur'anic commentators did not even consider looking to it. The welcome initiative of Youssef Seddik has reopened this field of study, but it seems to be encountering strong resistance among traditionalist apologues.

### Conclusion

Whereas traditional exegesis has generally tended to limit the Qur'an exclusively to the Arabic language as sufficient guarantee by itself of its authenticity, the words of the text reveal a linguistic and cultural multiplicity which demonstrates the richness of its roots. Those languages which go wilfully unrecognised, those practices whose recollection is passed over, prove on the contrary to be of great assistance which it comes to understanding the sense of certain verses. Far from damaging the originality of the Qur'anic edifice, they serve to bring out how deeply it was grounded. In that regard one can do no better than quote what was written by the Orientalist Jacques Berque (1970: 35–36):

Is not every culture constructed, like the mosque of Kairouan, of component parts drawn from far and wide, from the most diverse of chronological strata or social and geographical distances? . . . Thus the mosque of Kairouan, in bringing together its disparate materials, builds its own unique message. But it does not limit itself simply to organising these materials, compacting them into a shape. What would it be without the fervent history of the Arab conquest and the propagation of a new faith in North Africa?

How might one assess the significance of this occultation in the cultural torrent carried by the Qur'anic text? The Arabic language itself provides us with the seeds of a reply. The concealment of something does not mean its erasure, it is the postponement of its action. In Arabic there is a root نَسَا which has the general meaning of 'put back, postpone'. When applied to women it means the delay of the menstrual flow, which leads the woman to think she may be pregnant (Kazimirski II: 1244). Closely related to this is another root نَسِيَ which has the general sense of wilful forgetfulness; a derivative cites, among the things that are wilfully forgotten 'the bed-linen soiled by menstrual blood and thrown out'. From this root are derived the terms نِسْوَةٌ and نِيسَاءٌ which collectively designate women (Kazimirski II: 1254). Forgetting is thus associated with delay, postponement, and women – through the link to the delayed menstrual period. Forgetting is like the period which does not come but which by its absence gives hope for a new life. Forgetting, putting something on stand-by, is associated with the female, with the feminine, whereas memory, the repeated reference, recall, is associated with the male, with the masculine: the root ذَكَرَ in effect denotes memory, quotation, the masculine, the male sex organ. These associations from the Arabic language remind us that a rushing stream allows only a part of what it carries to be seen, and that a text is the bearer of other things that what appears on its surface.

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## Notes

1. This denunciation of the *Jâhiliyya* is one of the recurrent themes of the Wahhabi discourse since its origin in Saudi Arabia. It is true that, like Islam itself at its origins, the kingdom was founded within a context of nomadic tribes jealous of their autonomy and whose identity was closely tied to their sense of honour.
2. One can cite al-Balâdhuri (1987: 659–661), translated into French by de Prémare (2002: 442–443).
3. These were verses revealed then suppressed recognising the three goddesses of Mecca (Surah of the Star, LIII, 19–20). For this issue see Grandguillaume (1991).

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