Civilised or Savage
The Effect of Colonialism's Dichotomous Language on Views of Prophet Muhammad's Leadership

Mostafa El-Gashingi

Published online: 22 January 2021

Submit your article to this journal

View related and/or other articles in this issue

CIVILISED OR SAVAGE: THE EFFECT OF COLONIALISM'S DICHOTOMOUS LANGUAGE ON VIEWS OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD'S LEADERSHIP

Mostafa El-Gashingi[*]

Abstract: Studying the *sirah* (biography of Prophet Muhammad) in today's world is more than a mere exploration into past events, but a three dimensional and timeless study that is as relevant today as it was previously and will continue to be. Integrating the fields of social psychology and cognitive historiography, this article questions whether Prophet Muhammad 'civilised' a 'savage' society by critiquing the loaded language implicit in the question. This article instead offers that Prophet Muhammad's leadership style was consistent with psychological theories of transformational leadership and not one that was imperialistic nor used the language present in colonialism that divided people into 'civilised' and 'savage.'

Keywords: *social psychology*, *sirah*, *colonialism*, *cognitive historiography*, *transformational leadership*

INTRODUCTION

A common and erroneous reading of history that permeates societies is to divide historical figures into heroes or villains. This dichotomous reading of history is erroneous because it fails to account for the complexity of human behaviour and societies and often presents a biased or skewed representation of history. How history is presented in societies is an important factor in establishing identity. It also often leads to the legitimacy of traditions, customs and practises. More so, the representations of "major historical figures is a principal mechanism through which political socialisation occurs"[1] and is often among the first exposure people have with political or historical knowledge.[2] Suddaby asserts the historian's role should not be to fall into the same erroneous pattern, but to understand past events and historical figures as objective accounts of reality.[3]

A group of 15 researchers from across the globe led by Katja Hanke surveyed 6,902 university students from 37 different countries about their views of 40 historical figures. Their

---

[*]   Mostafa El-Gashingi is a postgraduate Islamic studies student at the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation, Charles Sturt University. He is also a Registered Psychologist practising in Sydney.

[1]   Katja Hanke et al., "'Heroes' and 'Villains' of World History Across Cultures," *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 2 (2015): 2, accessed August 10, 2019, doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0115641.

[2]   Ibid.

[3]   Roy Suddaby, William R. Foster and Chris Quinn-Tank, "Rhetorical History as a Source of Competitive Advantage," *Advances in Strategic Management* 27 (2010): 147, accessed September 12, 2019, doi: 10.1108/S0742-3322(2010)0000027009.

results demonstrate the same erroneous reading of history highlighted here, where people from certain backgrounds voted more favourably for the historical figure from a similar background. Overall, the results of the survey placed Prophet Muhammad as 16th out of the 40 historical figures, with Albert Einstein ranked 1st.[4] For an accurate analysis of Prophet Muhammad's leadership an objective reading of his life is required.

This article argues that Prophet Muhammad did not transform a 'savage' society into a 'civilised' one as this falls into the same erroneous dichotomy. Instead, this argument is constructed in three parts. The first focuses on the timelessness and object of Prophet Muhammad's leadership, critiquing concepts implied in the article's question dealing with 'savage' and 'uncivilised' societies. The second contextualises *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic ignorance), discusses Prophet Muhammad's approach to his own community and compares it to his approach to foreign communities. Finally, it analyses Prophet Muhammad's leadership style using social psychology studies to examine specific examples and incidents in his lifetime arguing his leadership style was consistent with the psychological theory of transformational leadership.[5] A thread will be drawn through all three parts of this article arguing that Islam and Prophet Muhammad's approach to societies was never imperialistic, but was about making individuals challenge and question their conformity to norms and beliefs that were devoid of any real thought or reason – merely imitable – because "when they do aught that is shameful, they say: we found our fathers doing so."[6]

HISTORICAL ARABIA AND THE 'OTHER'

It is important to briefly discuss Arabia before the advent of Islam to determine the claim implicit in this article's question that it was a savage society and to understand the object of Prophet Muhammad's leadership. Arabia was by no means a homogenous monolith; it was a peninsula occupied by many tribal clans with their own specific customs and traditions.[7] It would be incorrect to assert that Prophet Muhammad's leadership style only transformed his own society: Makkah, Quraysh or just Medina; rather, it transformed and continues to transform societies to the present day. The reach of Prophet Muhammad's leadership during his lifetime extended to the peoples of Yathrib, who approximately numbered 25 tribes,[8] the Bedouin Arabs scattered through the Arabian Peninsula such as Bani Thaqif from Ta'if, present day Oman, Yemen, Bahrain, Yamamah, the Ghassaind and the Lakhmid tribes.[9] The legacy of

---

4   Hanke et al., "Heroes and Villains," 18.
5   James M. Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 102.
6   Qur'ān 7:28. Yusuf Ali's translation of the Qur'ān has been used for this article.
7   Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1983), 7-13.
8   Ismail Albayrak, "Milestones and Signposts in Interfaith Relations: Constitution of Medina," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 16, no. 1 (2010): 2.
9   Sayyed A. H. A. Nadwi, *Muhammad the Last Prophet: A Model for all Time* (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2006), 124; Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri, *The Sealed Nectar: Biography of the Noble Prophet* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2011), 587.

Prophet Muhammad's leadership continued long after his death and transformed many other societies, some that may have already been considered to be 'civilised' to the present day.

Historical Arabia is a period that is often explored in the first few chapters of most *sirah* (prophetic biography) books adding to the importance of understanding the context in which Prophet Muhammad lived and subsequently began his prophetic mission. Historically, the Arabian Peninsula was shielded from its powerful neighbouring empires because of its mostly barren and arid deserts that make it inaccessible to outsiders.[10] Al-Mubarakpuri, citing classical works of *sirah*, mentions the people who settled in Arabia are generally divided into three categories:

1.   The perished Arabs – ancient Arabs of who little is recorded
2.   The pure Arabs – also known as the Qahtanis who originated from Yemen and comprised many differing tribes
3.   The Arabised Arabs – also known as the Adnanian Arabs who are descendants of Prophet Isma'il and the forefathers of Prophet Muhammad

After the building of the Ka'ba, Prophet Isma'il and his sons settled in what is now known as Makkah with the Qahtani tribe of Jurhum.[11] The Jurhumites assumed rule of Makkah and were responsible for the rites and rituals of visiting the scared house, until a series of injustices saw them ousted by the Khuza'ah tribe, which assumed rule of Makkah and became custodians of the Ka'ba. In what is believed to have been a final act of revenge, Jurhum buried the well of Zamzam and it remained lost until the grandfather of Prophet Muhammad, Abdul-Mutalib, unearthed it following a vision he was granted.[12] Amr ibn Luhay, the first ruler from the tribe of Khuza'ah, is believed to have been the first to introduce idolatry in Makkah after he returned from a trip to Syria seeking a cure for an ailment he had with an idol named Hubal.[13] This saw the religion of the Arabs change from the monotheism left by Prophet Ibrahim and his son Prophet Isma'il to one of polytheism. Centuries passed and a man named Qusayy from the tribe of Quraysh married the daughter of Hulayl, the chief of Khuza'ah. Hulayl is said to have preferred his son-in-law Qusayy to his own sons, resulting in a battle that ended with arbitration and a transfer of rule to Banu Quraysh.[14] Interestingly, as rule and faith shifted in the Arabian Peninsula, the fabric of the society did not – people remained grouped under their respective tribes and were identified by their collective identity. This continued after the advent of Islam, though modified by Prophet Muhammed's warning against blind following: "One who is killed under the banner of a man who is blind (to his just cause), who raises the slogan of family or supports his own tribe, dies the death of one belonging to the days of Jahiliyya."[15] The stern warning here is not about supporting family or tribe, but committing the injustice of presuming the dichotomy that some families or tribes are inherently good or evil. This warning is echoed

---

[10]   Ibid., 32.
[11]   Ibid., 37.
[12]   Lings, *Muhammad*, 4.
[13]   Al-Mubarakpuri, *The Sealed Nectar*, 43.
[14]   Lings, *Muhammad*, 6.
[15]   Muslim, Book 33, Hadith 89, accessed September 19, 2019, https://sunnah.com/muslim/33/89.

and extended in the Qur'ān to not only include families and tribes, but the rich, poor and even one's own self:

> O ye who believe! stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.[16]

Analysing what a 'civilised' society is cannot be divorced from the language of colonialism born out of the period of Enlightenment where the use of dichotomous language, such as 'civilised' and 'uncivilised,' was a main feature of imperial oppression and used to legitimise hostility and colonising peoples.[17] If the suggestion is that civilised societies have a codified common law inhabited by tame, educated people and by contrast uncivilised societies are lawless inhabited by barbaric, untamed and uneducated people, then, apart from this being a racist theorisation of people and societies focusing specifically on the concept of the 'Other,' it is a gross mischaracterisation of the world today and the time of Prophet Muhammad. Interestingly, the city dwelling Arabs, cities and towns, which may be assumed as 'civilised' places, were often seen as places of sloth and a corruption of a person's soul, tongue and body.[18] The nomadic and Bedouin Arabs were often sought by city dwellers in Makkah to raise their children to escape the dangers of cities and towns on a child's development. Additionally, the view city dwellers had of nomadic Arabs was of nobility, purity of language and the peak of eloquence.[19] This phenomenon starkly contrasts the theorisation of the Other, which Al-Saidi comprehensively captures:

> The *Other* by definition lacks identity, propriety, purity, literality. In this sense he can be described as *foreign*: the one who does not belong to a group, does not speak a given language, does not have the same customs; he is the unfamiliar, uncanny, unauthorised, inappropriate, and the improper.[20]

Al-Saidi continues, citing Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, that the concept of 'Otherness' is a dichotomy between the rational, ordered and good 'Self' and the irrational, chaotic and evil 'Other' and is a process of demonisation that is a necessary ingredient to exert control over others.[21] Simpson argues the colonial attitudes towards the Other were born of a need to construct a "civilised, white, European man"[22] and are part of a post-colonial world that has used language to legitimise Western power structures.[23] He also demonstrates how this attitude towards the Other led to the formation of scientific theories of race rooted in the idea of "the

---

[16]   Qur'ān 4:135.
[17]   Afaf A. H. Al-Saidi, "Post-Colonialism Literature the Concept of Self and the Other in Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians: An Analytical Approach," *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 5, no. 1 (2014): 95.
[18]   Lings, *Muhammad*, 23.
[19]   Ibid.
[20]   Al-Saidi, "Post-Colonialism Literature," 95.
[21]   Ibid., 96.
[22]   Murray K. Simpson, "From Savage to Citizen: Education, Colonialism and Idiocy," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 28, no. 5 (2007): 572.
[23]   Al-Saidi, "Post-Colonialism Literature," 95.

Great Chain of Being" – the belief that things exist in a hierarchical structure that is first discussed by Aristotle.[24] This later became appropriated by Christianity and was the basis of missionary activity that spread through non-Christian lands. Though there were competing interests by differing groups within Christian lands such as the Jansenists and Jesuits in France, where the 'savage' was demonic and incapable of true faith because of their base nature according to the former, and one that was uneducated, uncivilised and needed refining and educating in an attempt to make them 'civilised' enough to be integrated into French civilisation, according to the latter,[25] the separation of Other and Self is still evident and forms the basis of their view. This served as the foundation for colonisation and the theories about race that dominated out of the period of Enlightenment in Europe, built on the concept of Other that permeated through various sciences such as biology, genetics, economics, sociology and psychology.[26]

As religion possessed less explanatory power and science became the distinguisher of truth, colonisation was justified by scientific theories of race that cast the Other as inferior and needing control. While these theories are largely considered pseudo-scientific today, they have undoubtedly had an effect that continues to permeate through certain present-day political discourses.[27] In contrast, Prophet Muhammad never employed such language to describe the Quraysh or non-Muslims; his leadership approach and the approach threaded continuously in the Qur'ān is to challenge people's norms and their entrenched beliefs regarding their convictions, practises and customs. This makes his leadership timeless and not limited to one society. Prophet Muhammad was not sent to 'civilise' uncivilised people; his success was in challenging societies, his own and others' still today, to question their entrenched blind faith and practises. This moves us away from dichotomies that assume some societies are inherently 'good' or 'bad' or that history is simply about 'heroes' and 'villains.'

CONTEXTUALISING JAHILIYYAH

At this juncture, a discussion on *jahiliyyah* is pertinent. *Jahiliyyah* is the time that preceded the advent of Islam and is often translated as 'the age of ignorance.' It is also present in various places in the Qur'ān, such as: "After (the excitement) of the distress, He sent down calm on a band of you overcome with slumber, while another band was stirred to anxiety by their own feelings, moved by wrong suspicions of Allah-suspicions due to ignorance."[28] The word *jahiliyyah* is derived from the root word *jahl* and the verbal root *jahala* meaning ignorance, folly, foolishness and dissoluteness.[29] *Jahl* is considered to be two types: simple and compound. Simple ignorance is defined as the "non-existence of knowledge of that which

---

[24]   Simpson, "From Savage to Citizen," 564.
[25]   George R. Healy, "The French Jesuits and the Idea of the Noble Savage," *The William Mary Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1958): 155, accessed October 12, 2020, doi: 10.2307/1919438.
[26]   Simpson, "From Savage to Citizen," 564.
[27]   Angela Saini, *Superior*: *The Return of Race Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 183.
[28]   Qur'ān 3:154.
[29]   Hans Wehr and J. Milton Cowan, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), 170.

should be known"[30] and compound ignorance is defined as "a decisive belief not agreeable with the fact, or reality."[31] Succinctly, simple ignorance is not knowing, while compound ignorance is not knowing while insisting one knows. More specifically, *jahiliyyah* is defined as "the time, or state of ignorance or paganism"[32] and the time of *fatrah* or "the cessation of the mission of the apostles, and the effacement of the signs of their religion."[33]

There are interesting theological discussions regarding the fate, morality and responsibility of the people of *fatrah*. While it is not the scope or focus of this article, it is noteworthy that the period of *jahiliyyah* is not one of immorality and 'savagery' but a pause of revelation from God and disconnection from previous revelations and messengers. Considering this, a more comprehensive view of *jahiliyyah* is required. While the period included acts that Islam considered heinous, it also included customs that Islam embraced. Prophet Muhammed referred to particular practices of *jahiliyyah* as being intolerable such as in the hadith regarding funeral processions: "He who slaps his cheeks, tears his clothes and follows the ways and traditions of the Days of Ignorance is not one of us."[34] He also considered other customs of *jahiliyyah* as praiseworthy and encouraged his community to continue it, such as fasting on the Day of Ashura (10th of Muharram) and the *hilf al-fudul* (Pact of Chivalry) where he stated "if now, in Islam, I was summoned unto it, I would gladly respond."[35] More importantly, the Prophet referred to the period in a manner that is synonymous with the argument being presented in this article – that no community is inherently considered evil – when he said: "People are like gold and silver; those who were best in *Jahiliyyah* (Pre-Islamic Period of Ignorance) are best in Islam."[36]

This bolsters the argument that the Prophetic mission was not to civilise an uncivilised people, but to make them cognisant of God and convey revelation. In defining himself, Prophet Muhammad never erased that he was from the community he was preaching to and challenging. Nor did there appear any shame that he was from the Quraysh or Bani Hashim, nor did he try and hide it despite challenging them so strongly. Even during battle, the Prophet is reported to have been chanting in a rhyming couplet: "Verily I am the Prophet, no lie. I am from the children of Abdul Muttalib!"[37] The significance of him referring to himself as from the children of Abdul Muttalib, even though many of the children of Abdul Muttalib were non-Muslim, is a weighty testament to his regard for the community of which he was a part, and ultimately disavowed from and an example of the lack of Othering. It is noteworthy that Prophet Muhammad before his first revelations was from among the ruling clan in Makkah. His uncle

---

30 Edward William Lane and Stanley Lane-Poole, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1955), 478.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Bukhari, Book 23, Hadith 53, accessed September 10, 2020, https://sunnah.com/bukhari/23/53.
35 Lings, *Muhammad*, 31.
36 Bukhari, Book 65, Hadith 211, accessed September 10, 2020, https://sunnah.com/bukhari/65/211.
37 Bukhari, Book 56, Hadith 80, accessed September 10, 2020, https://sunnah.com/bukhari/56/80.

Abu Talib was the figurehead of the Bani Hashim and Quraysh; had the Prophet sought power or had imperialistic aims, he was in a far better position to do so before revelation.

THE CHARTER OF MEDINA AND THE DELEGATIONS

To truly challenge the claim that Prophet Muhammad did not Other, it is necessary to assess his view of people from tribes and communities other than his own. As the Quraysh intensified its persecution of Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims, a group of representatives from the Aws and Khazraj tribes of Yathrib, who up until that point were locked in a bitter feud, sought the desire of someone to unify them as Qusayy had once unified the people of Makkah. This led to the First Pledge of Aqabah, where 12 men from the tribes of Aws and Khazraj declared their allegiance to Prophet Muhammad and were sent back with Mus'ab ibn Umair, an ambassador appointed by the Prophet to teach the people of Yathrib the faith. So began the sprouting of the first Muslims in the city of Medina. Returning the following year in 622 AD, 74 people of Aws and Khazraj made a second pledge to which Prophet Muhammad responded: "I am of you and you are of me."[38] A significant pact on behalf of Prophet Muhammad considering a tribe other than his own sought to give him their allegiance. More importantly, however, is the significance of his words in the understanding of the Other, as the Other, defined by Frantz Fanon, is 'not me' but separate from the Self,[39] and a feature of imperialism is that the imperialist must see the Other as distinct from the Self to exert control over it. According to al-Saidi, the political and cultural usage of Self and Other are represented as 'Coloniser' and 'Colonised.'[40] Here, the Prophet did not refer to the people of Medina as separate from Self but as a part of Self. What followed, from the words of Prophet Muhammad, was an invitation from the Aws and Khazraj tribes for Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims to migrate to the city of Medina.

If the retort is that Prophet Muhammad did not Other the people of Aws and Khazraj because they accepted Islam, then analysis must be made regarding how he approached non-Muslims. The *hijra* (emigration) to Medina was not the first instance of Muslims emigrating. Prophet Muhammad had sent Muslims to Abyssinia seeking refugee under the protection of the Negus. There, the Muslims lived harmoniously with the Abyssinian people and received no instruction from Prophet Muhammad to colonise or seek power. Muslims continued living in Abyssinia for seven years and remained there even after the Prophet's migration to Medina.[41] Additionally, upon Prophet Muhammad's migration to Medina, the societal make-up was a mixture of: the Jews of Medina, the polytheists and the Muslims from Makkah, referred to as *al-muhajirun* (the emigrants), and the Muslims of Medina, now known as *al-ansar* (the

---

[38] Nadwi, *Muhammad the Last Prophet*, 55.
[39] Fanon, cited in Al-Saidi, "Post-Colonialism Literature," 95.
[40] Al-Saidi, "Post-Colonialism Literature," 95.
[41] Uriya Shavit, "Europe, the New Abyssinia: On the Role of the First Hijra in the Fiqh al-Aqalliyyāt al-Muslima Discourse," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 29, no. 3: (2018): 376, accessed October 10, 2020, doi: 10.1080/09596410.2018.1480120.

helpers). The Muslims were the minority on their arrival to Medina and numbered approximately 1,500, while the non-Muslims numbered 4,000 and the Jews 4,500.[42]

In what was a stunning display of statesmanship and the embedding of harmony in a religious and politically pluralistic society, a constitution was drawn up by Prophet Muhammad between the Muslims, non-Muslims and Jews of Medina known as the Charter of Medina. The document, considered by some as the first documented case of constitutional law, lists 47 articles that unify all the people of Medina as an *umma* (community).[43] Interestingly, Prophet Muhammad asserts in the Charter each tribe's independence, stating: "the emigrants of Quraysh keep to their own tribal organisation and leadership" as well as "the clans of Awf, Sa'ida, the Harith, Jusham, the Najjar, `Amr b. `Awf, the Nabit, and the Aws keep to their own tribal organisation and leadership." This shows Prophet Muhammad did not seek to civilise an uncivilised community nor colonise the existing groups in Medina. Albayrak suggests it would be illogical to presume that pluralism and the Charter were forced on the people of Medina as the Muslims were the minority.[44] Additionally, the Muslim state at that point was in its infancy and possessed none of the imperialistic and material strength that was a feature of colonisation. That Prophet Muhammad entered a treaty with the inhabitants of Medina is a direct confrontation to the concept of Other, which, as discussed earlier, robs people's agency and is a view that casts them as foreign and lacking civility. As Islam spread after Prophet Muhammad's death to lands controlled by the neighbouring superpowers, there is evidence that the inhabitants of these lands welcomed the Muslims as they were highly resentful of the Persian and Roman empires and were "ready to throw in their lot with Islam."[45]

As Islam became firmly established in Medina and the Muslim state became solidified, having survived various battles with the Quraysh, and while the terms agreed on in the treaty of Hudaybiyah appeared to be disadvantageous, it brought Islam centre stage to the world and legitimised its place as a political force. During the years of peace, brought through the implementation of the treaty, Islam expanded dramatically and Prophet Muhammad sent out delegations to the heads of states and empires that neighboured the Arabian Peninsula. The delegations numbered eight in total and were sent to: the Negus of Abyssinia, Muqawqis of Egypt, Heraclius the Caesar of Rome, Chosroes of Persia, Al-Mundhir ibn Sawa the Governor of Bahrain, Haudhah bin Ali the Governor of Yamamah, Jayfar and `Abd the sons of Al-Julandi the Kings of Oman and Al-Harith bin Abi Shamr Al-Gassani the King of the Ghassainds in Damascus.[46] Each of these delegations was headed by companions of the Prophet specifically selected for their experience in diplomatic relations and their knowledge and with carried a letter from Prophet Muhammad that read similar.

---

[42] Albayrak, "Constitution of Medina," 2.
[43] Yetkin Yildirim, "The Medina Charter: A Historical Case of Conflict Resolution," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, no. 4: (2009): 439, accessed October 10, 2020, doi: 10.1080/09596410903194894.
[44] Albayrak, "Constitution of Medina," 3.
[45] Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Prophet for our Time* (New York: Atlas Books/Harper Collins, 2006), 57.
[46] Al-Mubarakpuri, *The Sealed Nectar*, 468.

The purpose of these delegations was to propagate Islam and invite the heads of state and their peoples to accept Islam as their faith while retaining their authority. In each of these letters was a recognition of the authority of the various heads of states as each was addressed with their respective title. The responses to the delegations were mixed, some accepted Islam such as the Kings of Oman, and the Negus, others did not accept Islam but responded favourably such as the Muqawqis, others responded with a mixture of accepting Islam and retaining their own faiths such as Bahrain, and finally some responded negatively such as Chosroes of Persia and the King of Damascus.[47] Interestingly, the kingdoms that did accept Islam like Abyssinia did not transfer power to Prophet Muhammad or Medina; they retained their autonomy and remained a kingdom in their own right. The same was echoed with the people of Bahrain and Oman, both of whom positively responded to the delegations sent to them by Prophet Muhammad and accepted Islam, but retained their sovereignty. Mundhir ibn Sawa, the Governor of Bahrain wrote back to Prophet Muhammad seeking advice on his office and the religiously pluralistic society he was a part of to which the Prophet replied "Continue in your present office and allow the Muslims a chance to preach their religion… of the people who wish to continue in their faith seek from them the *jizya* (tax)."[48]

The significance of this is directly relevant to the argument threaded through this article that Prophet Muhammad did not colonise, 'civilise' or have imperialistic aims with the propagation of Islam. His calling was to God – and this was evident in every letter he sent where he invited people to accept Islam while reassuring them of their own sovereignty. Equally as significant is Prophet Muhammad's response when his letters were rejected, which saw him instead share prophecy regarding the fate of those particular civilisations like the emergence of Musaylima al-Khadhab in Yamamah, or the death of the Chosroes at the hand of his son.[49] Had the Prophet possessed imperialistic aims, the assumption can be made is that hostilities and war would have ensued to secure the capture and occupation of these neighbouring civilisations. While war occurred after the delegations, like the battle of Mu'tah, the precedent for which was one of the Prophet's letter bearers being tied and beheaded, the reasons for this was not to colonise but to demonstrate that Prophet Muhammad can protect those in his community and uphold the universal norm of emissary immunity.

IDENTITY THEORY

The minds of historical figures can be discerned by the study of contemporary minds, which is a field of study called cognitive historiography.[50] Social psychology can offer insight into the minds of historical societies like the Quraysh. To understand the practises of pre-Islamic Arabia, the conceptual theorisation of their customs and behaviours must be studied through

---

[47]   Ibid., 468-483.
[48]   Ibid., 478.
[49]   Ibid., 480.
[50]   Anders Lisdorf, "Towards a Cognitive Historiography: Frequently Posed Objections," in *Chasing Down Religion: In the Sights of History and the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. Panayotis Pachis and Donald Wiebe (Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2009), http://www.researchgate.net/publication/279294059_Towards_a_Cognitive_Historiography.

the lens of social identity and not personal identity. Social theorists divide identity into two broad categories: social and personal.[51] Social identity is:

> The theory that group membership and intergroup relations based on self-categorisation, social comparison and the construction of a shared self-definition in terms of ingroup-defining properties.[52]

Arabia was inhabited by a plethora of different tribes and clans, each with their own customs, traditions and practises as discussed above; as such, group membership was pivotal for survival.[53] Collective identities is a process where group members share self-defining attributes, engage in social action, create an image of what the group stands for and its representation to others.[54] To not engage in the tribe's customs and practises was a concept alien to pre-Islamic Arabs, thus there was an expectation they would be carried out, and if they were not, the tribal leader would have to deal with it to ensure the tribe's survival.[55] Considering this, the individual is expected to show compliance, obedience and conformity, even if there were instances that this went against their own wants or needs. An important pre-requisite to compulsion and conformity is that the "source of social influence is perceived by the target of influence to have power"[56] and in pre-Islamic Arabia, the tribe had power.

Prophet Muhammad's leadership directly confronted and challenged the foundation that these societies were built on, their social/collective identities and their unquestioned blind conformity. When every attempt was made to silence or discredit Prophet Muhammad, the Quraysh and his own familial tribe of Bani Hashim resorted to the one thing that they knew would outrage their society: "he is separating son from father, man from his brother, wife from her husband and man from his clan"[57] showing that he was challenging the compliance and conformity that Makkan society was built on at the risk of his own welfare and his own tribe abandoning him. This also evidences the argument threaded through this article that Prophet Muhammad was never imperialistic or sought to colonise other tribes with his own. In challenging the notion of social identity, Prophet Muhammad introduced and emphasised the importance of personal identity and personal responsibility, saying: "Every one of you is a guardian and every one of you is responsible"[58] and "the pen is lifted from the minor, the insane, and the sleeper."[59]

Islamic law continues this by prefacing the requirement of *taklif* (moral responsibility) for certain acts of worship and the designation of certain acts of worship being *fard ayn* (personally

---

[51]   Graham M. Vaughn and Michael A. Hogg, *Introduction to Social Psychology*, 5th ed. (New South Wales: Pearson, 2008), 125.

[52]   Ibid., 123.

[53]   Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 58.

[54]   Vaughn and Hogg, *Social Psychology*, 123.

[55]   Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 59.

[56]   Vaughn and Hogg, *Social Psychology*, 236.

[57]   Al-Mubarakpuri, *The Sealed Nectar*, 130.

[58]   Bukhari, Book 67, Hadith 1, accessed September 19, 2019, https://sunnah.com/bukhari/67.

[59]   Ibn Majah, Book 10, Hadith 2042, accessed September 19, 2019, https://sunnah.com/urn/1263610.

obligatory).[60] The acts of worship considered to be personally obligatory mean they cannot be deferred to another or blamed on another; each person is independently responsible for its performance, as the Qur'ān asserts "no bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another,"[61] i.e. no soul will bear the sins of another.[62] The Charter of Medina is another example where Prophet Muhammad introduced personal responsibility in a society defined exclusively by their tribal affiliation and just as he organised the new *umma* into a community of tribes and clans, he also included and extended the *umma* to include people who were displaced or unaffiliated to any tribe.[63] The days of *jahiliyyah* saw people unaffiliated to a tribe or those displaced at extreme risk of not surviving or being preyed upon by those who had tribal affiliation.[64] The inclusion of these individuals into the *umma* founded by the Prophet, and the positions some of them were given in the community was a dramatic change from the status quo and an example of how Othering was not a feature of Prophet Muhammad's leadership.

THEORY OF LEADERSHIP AND PROPHETIC LEADERSHIP

In addition to studying societies, social psychologists have devised theories regarding leadership. Finding consensus on a definition of leadership has been a matter of difficulty for social theorists because it intersects with multiple other fields of study such as: conformity, influence, power, personality theory, group membership, social/personal identity and the subjectivity societies have regarding their leaders. Despite this, a workable definition suggested by social theorists is that leadership is "a process of social influence through which an individual enlists and mobilises the aid of others in attainment of a collective goal."[65] True leadership is not about ensuring compliance and obedience or managing group activities, but a transformative process where one group member adopts a vision and pursues that vision on behalf of the group.[66]

While it is not the aim of this article to talk about prophetic leadership through a theological point of view or discuss differences of prophetic leadership as a general phenomenon between various prophets, it is important to discuss the psychological aspects of leadership theory that align and correspond to Prophet Muhammad's leadership to understand the impact it had on human behaviour during his lifetime and the generations that followed to the present day. Leadership has been categorised by many styles and Gulen sums up Prophet Muhammad's leadership as one of delegation to competent persons, consultation, wisdom and deliberate

---

[60]   Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Beltsville: Amana Publications, 1994).

[61]   Qur'ān 6:164.

[62]   Jalal ad-Din al-Mahali and Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti, "Tafsir al-Jalalayn," trans. Feras Hamza (Amman, Jordon: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought), https://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadh No=0&tTafsirNo=74&tSoraNo=53&tAyahNo=38&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=2.

[63]   Said Amir Arjomand, "The Constitution of Medina: A Sociolegal Interpretation of Muhammad's Acts of Foundation of the Umma," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41 (2009): 566, accessed August 20, 2019, doi: 10.1017/S0020743809990067.

[64]   Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 60.

[65]   Vaughn and Hogg, *Social Psychology*, 310.

[66]   Ibid., 343.

action.[67] His appointment of competent persons, wisdom and deliberate action are seen on numerous occasions, the starkest being his rejection of Abu Dharr's request to be appointed to an administrative role saying: "You are not able to manage the affairs of people."[68] The wisdom in his rejection is that he acutely understood Abu Dharr as well as the needs of the community Abu Dharr was requesting to govern and, through deliberate action, told Abu Dharr he would be unfit to manage.

Social theorists refer to this style as transformational leadership as opposed to transactional leadership, the latter being a style focused on the transaction of resources between leader and follower. Transformational leadership has four key components: 1) individualised consideration – attention to the abilities, needs and aspirations of their followers; 2) intellectual stimulation – challenging assumptions, practises and beliefs to develop better ones; 3) charisma/inspiration – the energy, urgency that transforms followers; and 4) idealised influence – good role modelling and high levels of ethics.[69] Each of these four key components is represented throughout Prophet Muhammad's lifetime and are indicative of his leadership style and its effectiveness.

Imam `Aballah Sirajuddin al-Husayni expertly captures the approach of Prophet Muhammad's leadership after citing the Qur'ānic verse: "seek their counsel in conduct of affairs, then when thou hast taken a decision put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust in Him"[70] explaining that the Prophet, despite his superior intelligence, was commanded by Allah to consult and seek the counsel of those around him.[71] This is an example of individualised consideration and idealised influence. The imam continues, describing the wisdom for this as a means to: 1) to lift the spirits of his followers – which is an example of charisma referred to in the theory of transformational leadership; 2) to challenge them to strengthen their opinions – an example of intellectual stimulation; and 3) so it would become the practise of the Muslims after him to seek the counsel of others – an example of knowing the needs of his followers and idealised influence.[72]

In addition to Prophet Muhammad's leadership being transformational, it was also part of his *sunna* (practise/example) – which ensured its preservation until today where people and societies continue to be transformed by his leadership and are commanded to emulate it. While this has not always historically been the case, it does provide Muslims an example to follow. Despite his leadership style being one of confronting and challenging blind faith and harmful practises that were found in the *jahiliyyah* such as: female and child infanticide, blood feuds, tribe raids and poor treatment of women, children and animals, he also praised and incorporated other practises of *jahiliyyah*, making them part of faith such as: the emphasis on language,

---

[67]   M. Fethullah Gulen, *Prophet Muhammad as Commander* (London: Truestar, 1996), 104.
[68]   Muttaqi Al-Hindi, *Kanz al-`Ummal*, cited in Gulen, *Prophet Muhammad as Commander*, 101.
[69]   Vaughn and Hogg, *Social Psychology*, 322; Burns, *Leadership*, 57.
[70]   Qur'ān 3:159.
[71]   Abdallah Sirajuddin al-Husayni, *Our Master Muhammad The Messenger of Allah: His Sublime Character Exalted Attributes*, trans. Khalid Williams (The Netherlands: Sunni Publications, 2009), 61.
[72]   Ibid., 62.

hospitality, *khidma* (service), *muruwah* (courage) and the concept of community.[73] These are all examples of intellectual stimulation that is found in transformational leadership. Prophet Muhammad also appeared to never erase the fact he was from the Quraysh, specifically Bani Hashim. The Qur'ān also makes multiple references to the Prophet being "from amongst them,"[74] he was referred to by Quraysh as *as-Sadiq al-Amin* (the truthful and the trustworthy), he was made the arbiter of their affairs, honoured people's trusts and possessions yet declined offers made by the Quraysh to abandon his preaching for promise of wealth, honour, rule.[75]

Had the Prophet simply sought leadership and rule, he would have accepted the offer, but he did not, proving his leadership was not transactional but transformational. Additionally, had Prophet Muhammad possessed imperialistic aims or sought to colonise, he was in a better position to do this with the material resources the Quraysh had promised him if he abandoned his Prophetic mission.

CONCLUSION

To answer the question whether Prophet Muhammad 'civilised' a 'savage' society, this article deconstructed the loaded terms 'civilised' and 'savage' as language used in post-colonial contexts. Prophet Muhammad did not 'civilise' a 'savage' society; rather, his leadership was transformational, effective, successful and, most importantly, timeless. It transformed his own society, other societies during his lifetime and even more societies after his death to the present day. His leadership style was effective because it did not view non-Muslims or other societies as 'savages' needing 'civility' nor seek to colonise the Other nor was it imperialistic. It was charismatic, intellectually stimulating, confronting and challenging of the status quo, specifically entrenched blind faith and harmful practises, and most importantly introduced the importance and need for a personal identity and responsibility in a society solely built on social identity. His leadership also promoted and encouraged practises that were praiseworthy and, in this way, he challenged the dichotomous notion implicit that societies are inherently 'bad' or 'evil'.

---

[73]   Armstrong, *Muhammad*, 58; Yahya Birt, "Being a Real Man in Islam: Drugs, Criminality and the Problem of Masculinity," Masud.co.uk, last modified December 24, 2014, http://www.masud.co.uk/being-a-real-man-in-islam-drugs-criminality-and-the-problem-of-masculinity/.

[74]   Qur'ān 2:129, 23:22, 62:2.

[75]   Nadwi, *Muhammad the Last Prophet*, 43.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Albayrak, Ismail. "Milestones and Signposts in Interfaith Relations: Constitution of Medina." *Australian eJournal of Theology* 16, no. 1 (2010): 1-9.

al-Husayni, Abdallah Sirajuddin. *Our Master Muhammad The Messenger of Allah: His Sublime Character & Exalted Attributes.* Translated by Khalid Williams. The Netherlands: Sunni Publications, 2009.

al-Mahali, Jalal ad-Din, and Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti. "Tafsir al-Jalalayn." Translated by Feras Hamza. Amman, Jordon: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought. https://www.altafsir.com/index.asp.

al-Misri, Ahmad ibn Naqib. *Reliance of the Traveller.* Translated by Nuh Ha Mim Keller. Beltsville: Amana Publications, 1994.

al-Mubarakpuri, Safi-ur-Rahman. *The Sealed Nectar: Biography of the Noble Prophet.* Riyadh: Darussalam, 2011.

Al-Saidi, Afaf A. H. "Post-Colonialism Literature the Concept of Self and the Other in Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians: An Analytical Approach." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 5, no. 1 (2014): 95-105. Accessed August 21, 2019. doi: 10.4304/jltr.5.1.95-105.

Armstrong, Karen. *Muhammad: A Prophet for our Time.* New York: Atlas Books/Harper Collins, 2006.

Arjomand, Said Amir. "The Constitution of Medina: A Sociolegal Interpretation of Muhammad's Acts of Foundation of the Umma." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41 (2009): 555-575. Accessed August 20, 2019. doi: 10.1017/S0020743809990067.

Birt, Yahya. "Being a Real Man in Islam: Drugs, Criminality and the Problem of Masculinity." Masud.co.uk, last modified December 24, 2014. http://www.masud.co.uk/being-a-real-man-in-islam-drugs-criminality-and-the-problem-of-masculinity/.

Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Translated by M. Muhsin Khan. Accessed September 19, 2019. https://sunnah.com/bukhari.

Burns, James M. *Leadership.* New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

Gulen, M. Fethullah. *Prophet Muhammad as Commander.* London: Truestar, 1996.

Hanke, Katja, James H. Liu, Chris G. Sibley, Dario Paez, Stanley O. Gaines Jr., Gail Moloney, Chan-Hoong Leong, Wolfgang Wagner, Laurent Licata, Olivier Klein, Ilya Garber, Gisela Böhm, Denis J. Hilton, Velichko Valchev, Sammyh S. Khan, Rosa Cabecinhas. (2015) "'Heroes' and 'Villains' of World History across Cultures." *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 2 (2015): 1-21. Accessed August 10, 2019. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0115641.

Healey, George R. "The French Jesuits and the Idea of the Noble Savage." *The William Mary Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1958): 143-167. Accessed October 12, 2020. doi: 10.2307/1919438.

Ibn Majah, *Sunan ibn-Majah*. Accessed September 19, 2019. https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah.

Lane, Edward William, and Stanley Lane-Poole. *Arabic-English Lexicon.* New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1955.

Lings, Martin. *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*. New York: Inner Traditions International, 1983.

Lisdorf. Anders. "Towards a Cognitive Historiography: Frequently Posed Objections." In *Chasing Down Religion: In the Sights of History and the Cognitive Sciences*, edited by Panayotis Pachis and Donald Wiebe, 209–215. Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2009. http://www.researchgate.net/publication/279294059_Towards_a_Cognitive_Historiography.

Muslim. *Sahih Muslim*. Translated by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui. https://sunnah.com/muslim.

Nadwi, Sayyed A. H. A. *Muhammad the Last Prophet: A Model for all Time*. Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2006.

Saini, Angela. *Superior: The Return of Race Science.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2019.

Shavit, Uriya. "Europe, the New Abyssinia: On the Role of the First Hijra in the Fiqh al-Aqalliyyāt al-Muslima Discourse." *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 29, no. 3 (2018): 371-391. Accessed October 10, 2020. doi: 10.1080/09596410.2018.1480120.

Simpson, Murray K. "From Savage to Citizen: Education, Colonialism and Idiocy." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 28, no. 5 (2007): 561-574. Accessed August 21, 2019. doi: 10.1080/01425690701505326.

Suddaby, Roy, William R. Foster and Chris Quinn-Tank. "Rhetorical History as a Source of Competitive Advantage." *Advances in Strategic Management* 27 (2010): 147-173. Accessed September 12, 2019. doi: 10.1108/S0742-3322(2010)0000027009.

Vaughn, Graham M., and Michael A. Hogg. *Introduction to Social Psychology*, 5th ed. New South Wales: Pearson Education, 2008.

Wehr, Hans, and J. Milton Cowan. *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966.

Yildirim, Yetkin. "The Medina Charter: A Historical Case of Conflict Resolution." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, no. 4: (2009): 439-450. Accessed October 10, 2020. doi: 10.1080/09596410903194894.