

**God, His Messenger, and Their Caliphs:  
Dialogical narratives and signs of anger in early Islamic texts**

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# 1.

The word “anger” (*ghadab*) and its derivatives (*ghadaba*, *maghdūb*, etc.) find their way in the Qur’ān at least a dozen times, and even though often in different contexts, they cluster around a central theme: God’s anger, or God’s wrath. A starting point could be the *Fātiḥa* (1:5):

Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for succour.  
 Guide us in the straight path,  
 the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,  
 not of those against whom Thou art wrathful (*ghayri al-maghdūbi ‘alayhim*),  
 nor of those who are astray.<sup>1</sup>

“Those who are blessed” are in this instance diametrically opposed to those who are “the object of God’s anger” (*al-maghdūbi ‘alayhim*). Even though a group of Muslim interpreters have hastened to describe this category of the *maghdūbi ‘alayhim* as the “Jews” (*al-Yahūd*),<sup>2</sup> the likelihood is that “the object of God’s anger” is broader than that, that is, it is not inclusive to an ethnic or religious group, but more of a theme at work. We need to ask, Why is it that the Qur’ān restricts “anger” to God only while the Prophet and his believers are never depicted in states of “anger”? Why is the common lot of men and women subject to “God’s anger” while their *own* “anger” is *absent* from the Qur’anic text? In short, why is “anger” restricted to God only?

In similar vein, “those who are astray” are usually limited by those same interpreters to the “Christians and Jews.”<sup>3</sup> Such interpretations target the two other monotheistic groups that were competing with Islam over a monopoly of cultural and religious symbols. The limitation, if historically correct, to Christians and Jews, has many implications: it ascribes anger to an *attitude* which targets *religious groups* (including polytheists) and makes them the *object* of “God’s anger.” But what if “anger,” in the Qur’anic text, is not simply an attitude but a concept that *relates* God to his Prophet and his “people” (or his *umma*, or mankind in general)?

The Qur’anic text thus constructs a template of differences that distinguishes Islam *as a monotheistic religion* from the other two monotheisms, on one hand, and more generally from polytheists on the other. In this context, “attitudes” such as “God’s anger” are part of a wider mythological framework which accumulates people’s memories, fears, narratives, and visions of the past and future.

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<sup>1</sup> All the Qur’anic translations are from Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> Such common interpretations are to be found, among others, in the popular work of Muḥillī (Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad) and Suyūṭī (Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abdu-l-Raḥmān), *al-Qur’ān al-Karīm wa-Bihāmishihi Tafsīr al-Imāmayn al-Jalīlayn* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Arabiyya, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> William Montgomery Watt, *Companion to the Qur’ān* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1967, 1994), 14, does not indulge in the direction of the Christians–Jews line of interpretation: “*those against whom thou art wrathful...those who are astray*: Jews and Christians according to a traditional interpretation, but this is not possible if the sura is early Meccan, while the phrases would suit the pagan Arabs. Similar phrases in 5.60/5 (‘with whom he is wroth’), 5.77/81 (‘who went astray’), etc. may be a new application to Medinan opponents of terms first applied to Meccan polytheists.”

Those who argue that God’s anger was specifically oriented towards the Jews will undoubtedly have verse 11:61 on their side. In this verse, God’s anger occurs for the second time in the Qur’anic text since the *Fātiḥa* with a specific correlation to the “people of Moses”:

And when Moses sought water for his people,  
 so We said, “Strike with thy staff the rock”;  
 and there gushed forth from it twelve fountains;  
 all the people knew now their drinking-place.  
 (...)
   
 And abasement and poverty were pitched upon them,  
 and they were laden with the burden of God’s anger;  
 that, because they had disbelieved the signs of God  
 and slain the Prophets unrightfully; that,  
 because they disobeyed, and were **transgressors**.<sup>4</sup>

God’s anger is here associated with the Jews in general (the “people of Moses”) on one hand, and with “disobedience” and “transgression” on the other. God came to the Jews with his “signs,” which is not to be limited to the verses of the Qur’ān, but they disbelieved in them: the “signs” are also the *written* Law that was “disobeyed” and “transgressed” by the Jews. We are opting for a *political* reading of this verse (and possibly other similar ones): God acts as a sovereign who manifests his anger because his written Laws have been disobeyed and transgressed by a group of people who also happen to have their own written Laws. The Qur’ān thus posits a necessary relation of obedience between God—the Sovereign—and his people. Faith and belief are the mediators in this relationship and the categories that would otherwise prevent God’s anger. But as in the previous verse from the *Fātiḥa*—and this will be an attitude that will define Islamic polity for generations to come— “anger” is a *sign* of dissatisfaction manifested by God and triggered by a pattern of behavior that emerged from the “flock” beneath. God thus *relates* to the sinners through his anger, but what he *does* with his anger is a different story altogether. In fact, a question comes to mind here: What is God supposed to do with his anger? Punish the sinners later on the day of judgment? Or is there an immediate action to be taken?

God’s anger (or the wrath of God) is a sign that something went wrong in the social, legal, and religious order of things. God’s anger points in the direction of social disorder or rather towards the elements creating such disorder. Those elements, however, are not usually within the Islamic umma but always on the “outside”—not even the

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<sup>4</sup> Here is another similar verse on the “People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitāb*) in III:112, which underscores, one more time, both the disbelief in God’s signs and transgression:

Abasement shall be pitched on them, wherever  
 they are come upon, except they be in a bond  
 of God, and a bond of the people; they will be laden  
 with the burden of God’s anger, and poverty shall be  
 pitched on them; that, because they disbelieved in  
 God’s signs, and slew the Prophets without right;  
 that, for that they acted rebelliously  
 and were transgressors.

margins of society. Those elements, the *maghdūbi ‘alayhim*, could be the “People of Moses,” the “People of the Book,”<sup>5</sup> the Jews, the Christians, the unbelievers, or any other category not integrated yet within the Islamic umma: the threat is the Other who is “outside” the group.

God’s anger ought to be taken more as a strategy of differentiation than, say, as a sign of “losing control over one’s own self.” The important thing to keep in mind here, since we will be discussing the political implications of the sovereign’s anger during the early Umayyād period, that it is God—the Sovereign—who establishes the criteria of differentiation; in other words, such criteria prove to be very arbitrary. Thus the “People of the Book,” and the Jews in particular, have quite often been identified as this Other who was subjected to God’s anger for having “disobeyed” and “transgressed” the rules.

At one point in VII:70, “The Battlements” (*al-A ‘rāf*), there is a “dialogue” between what is described as the “Council of the unbelievers of the people (*qawm*) of the Prophet,” that is, unbelievers from his own pagan Quraysh tribe, and the Prophet himself. The “dialogue,” open and friendly at the beginning, takes an odd turn once God’s anger intervenes to chastise the unbelievers:

They said, “Why, hast thou come to us  
that we may serve God alone,  
and forsake that our fathers served?  
Then bring us that thou promisest us, if  
thou speakest truly.”  
Said he, “Anger and wrath from your Lord  
have fallen upon you. What, do you dispute  
with me regarding names you have named,  
you and your fathers, touching which God  
has sent down never authority (*sulṭān*)?  
Then watch and wait; I shall be with you  
watching and waiting.”

The conflict was regarding the *names (asmā’)* of pagan gods and other deities which were not given the approval of God’s authority (*sulṭān*). The “authority” here was what *gave names to things, that is, it provided linguistic signs for things which either had none or were coupled with other signs*. It was thus the *sulṭān* who established which criteria, that is, which signs ought to be followed and which ones ought to be dropped from sight. God’s anger was therefore another of those signs which was sent as a negation of the older system of pagan’s names of the Prophet’s own people (*qawm*). More broadly then, God’s anger was what gave meaning to things by *imposing* an arbitrary order of signs; God’s anger thus established the hierarchy already established by God’s divine signs:

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<sup>5</sup> By referring to the Christians and Jews as the *ahlu-l-kitāb*, commonly translated in its literal meaning as the “people of the Book,” the Prophet implicitly recognized the “superiority” of the Judeo-Christian tradition because of its focus on a set of *written* codes and values very different in this respect from the honor strategies of *murū’a* and *shahāma*. For this reason, as Henri Lammens has pointed a long time ago, the implication behind the *ahlu-l-kitāb* is that of the “people of writing” (*gens de l’écriture*); thus the focus on *kitāb*, is an explicit emphasis on the original derivative and the act itself, *kataba*, to write, while Qur’ān, from *qara’a*, refers to the acts *reading* and *listening*, closer in this respect to the pre-Islamic poetry in all its forms which was primarily oral.

anger was the sign which made it clear to individuals or groups that the order of divine signs and their meanings were not properly followed; something went wrong at some point, which implies that a “people” (*qawm*) rejected or transgressed the divine signs. Those “people” could be the “People of the Book,” the Jews, the Christians, the Muslims, the polytheists, the Prophet’s own tribal factions, or anyone else: what was common to all of them was that, at some point during the Prophetic mission, they did not follow God’s signs. Signs create a social, cultural, and political “order of things,” and the Qur’anic text is still at the stage of depicting those signs as divinely created by a Sovereign Master: anger was therefore one of those signs which bestowed that the divine “order of things” had been disrupted:

Those who cry lies to Our signs, and the encounter  
in the world to come—their works have failed;  
shall they be recompensed, except according to  
the things they have done?  
And the people of Moses took to them, after him,  
of their ornaments a Calf—a mere body  
that lowed. Did they not see it spoke not  
to them, neither guided them upon any way? (VII:146-7)  
(...)  
“Surely those who took to themselves the Calf—  
anger shall overtake them from their Lord, and  
abasement in this present life; so We recompense  
those who are forgers.  
And those who do evil deeds, then repent  
thereafter and believe, surely thereafter  
thy Lord is All-forgiving, All-compassionate.” (VII:151-2)

The Qur’ān was obviously not concerned about why the Jews adopted a Calf as an ornament, but only by the reaction it provoked in God—anger. Thus individuals and groups have no right to create signs of their own, through their social systems, unless God gives His approval for such social non-divine creations.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.

By the ninth century, the literature known as the *ḥadīth*, which brings together all the sayings and doings of the Prophet, had been canonized thanks to the works of Muslim<sup>7</sup> and Bukhārī.<sup>8</sup> For our theme here, that of anger in the early medieval literature, the

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<sup>6</sup> Other verses from the Qur’ān show a similar pattern, see for example, VII:153, VIII:16, XVI:106, XX:81, XX:86, XXIV:9, XLII:16: all those verses, and many others, only represent a divine anger.

<sup>7</sup> al-Ḥajjāj b. Muslim (817–865), born in Nīsāpūr (capital of Khurāsān), travelled extensively to the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq where he collected close to three hundred thousands *ḥadīths* in his *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 5 vol. (Beirut: Mu’assasat ‘Uzz al-Dīn, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Muḥammad al-Ja‘fī al-Bukhārī (810–870), collected at one point close to six hundred thousand *ḥadīths* and included a carefully edited selection in his *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, 6 vol. (Beirut-Damascus: Dār Ibn

*ḥadīths* turn out to be one of the richest sources. There are in fact close to a hundred references to *ghaḍab* and all its other derivatives in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim alone, and a dozen more (albeit similar ones) in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī, while the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal<sup>9</sup> has even twice as many *ḥadīths* related to “anger” than both Muslim and Bukhārī.<sup>10</sup> But since many of those *ḥadīths* overlap, I will limit myself mainly to the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim because, like Ibn Ḥanbal, he offers the greatest variety of *ghaḍab*-related *ḥadīths*.<sup>11</sup> Amid the austerity we’ve encountered in the Qur’ān, the *ḥadīths* offer a much greater variety of codes of anger: in addition to God’s anger, there is also the anger of the Prophet, his wives, his disciples and friends, and of ordinary men and women as well.

Besides the problem of the relationship between *ḥadīth* and *fiqh* to which the work of Joseph Schacht gave a new direction, there is also this lingering problem of the “authenticity” of the *ḥadīths*: Can we trust the *ḥadīths* and do the narrated facts have any historical value?

The discursive method accounts for individual statements and narratives as in themselves neither false nor true because they are part of a discursive totality which gives them their poetic strength and provides them with an ideological meaning. Discursive practices are a construct of the imagination, as they provide a society with the ideas, ideologies, norms, it needs for its imaginary. This is why it is more important to see *how they are constructed as discourses* rather than limit them by some reality principle. Pre-modern societies in particular (Indo-European, Greek and Roman, Islamic, and medieval Europe) were not known for their obsession at creating modes of thought that conformed to a historical reality.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, Ignaz Goldziher was perfectly right (and ahead of

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Kathīr, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> The Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (800–870), born in Baghdād, and founder of the Ḥanbalī sect of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), author of the *Musnad* in which he collected thirty-thousand *ḥadīths*.

<sup>10</sup> The present section, on the representations of anger in the *ḥadīths*, would not have been possible without the pioneering work of A.J. Wensinck and his collaborators in indexing the nine major *ḥadīth* sources in Islamic literature, see *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane*, 8 vol. (Leiden–New York: E.J. Brill, 1936–1992), 2nd ed., 8 vol. in 4, 1992, on *ghaḍab* and its derivatives, see vol. IV, 520–526.

<sup>11</sup> The big difference in the number of *ḥadīths* and their contents on a theme like anger from the nine major sources (Muslim, Bukhārī, Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/888), Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), Nasā’ī (d. 303/915), Ibn Māja (d. 273/886), Dārimī, Mālik, and Ḥanbal) is a sign that there is no such thing as “one *ḥadīth*” (in the same way that there is only one Qur’ān) but a multiplicity of sets of *ḥadīths* which have been gathered and edited (or “textualized”) according to the particular needs and aspirations of the groups which needed them in a specific socio-historical context. Bukhārī, for example, was primarily concerned with a set of *ḥadīths* that would be useful within a legal framework, while Muslim was more into establishing a tradition of the Prophet that would be a continuum to what the Qur’ān had already established. Ibn Ḥanbal, who established with his disciples what became known as the Ḥanbalī sect of jurisprudence, had, like the *khawārij* and Shī’īs, an anti-state view of things which reflect on his own collected set of *ḥadīths*. Because the *ḥadīths* were a “literary creation” of primary importance, designed in the first place to create a new set of normative rules, customs, habits, and modes of behavior, their “historical truthfulness,” to which historians have devoted so much attention, might not be their most interesting and promising side.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée. L’idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*, vol. I (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 44: “Rechercher, isoler dans la masse un noyau de faits authentiques, garanti par des recoupements dans les autres sections de la littérature, à quoi bon? À supposer que ces faits bruts existent et soient accessibles, ils ne reçoivent d’intérêt que par tout ce qui leur a

his time) when he described the *ḥadīths* as “one of the greatest and most successful literary fictions”—“fiction” is here to be taken in the sense of a “textualist” construction, that is, as a set of practices (originally *said* and *done*) which have been *textualized* and given their politico-religious legitimacy through a chain of transmitters—which served as the backbone for all politico-religious powers to come.<sup>13</sup> Thus, whether the individual *ḥadīths* directly conform to *acts* performed by the Prophet or not does not matter much from our perspective since the issue here is the *process of textualization of performative utterances and their canonization into discursive practices*.

I will therefore consider individual *ḥadīth* statements as part of a much larger discursive totality that needs to be reconstructed. On the theme of “anger” in particular, we should ask whether the *discourse on anger* is purely and simply normative (in the sense of providing norms to follow when confronted with a situation of anger—the anger of one’s own self or of the other) or whether it is a discourse that opens up on the crucial issue of the “care of the self” (*souci de soi*) by creating a “hermeneutics of the subject.” We will reconsider such philosophical issues, derived from Greek philosophy, in their Arab and Islamic contexts.

The *ḥadīths* are mainly about the Prophet and his entourage, and the image of God’s Messenger depicted in this part of the Islamic tradition is that of an “ordinary man,” who at times could get angry like any other. Yes, the Prophet did occasionally get angry and his anger seemed much more man-like than God-like:

Narrated by Anas b. Mālik:<sup>14</sup>

Umm Salīm had an orphan by the name of Umm Anas. God’s Messenger saw the orphan and told her: “That’s you? You’ve grown older. You should not grow older.” The orphan went back to Umm Salīm weeping, so she asked her: “What’s wrong, my child?” The young girl (*jāriya*, maid) replied: “God’s Messenger has wished (*da‘ā*) that I don’t grow older anymore. So from now on I won’t grow older anymore.” [The text uses both *sinn* and *qarn* for age.]

Umm Salīm left in a hurry, covering her face with a scarf, until she saw God’s Messenger who told her: “What’s up, Umm Salīm?” She replied: “O Prophet of God! Did you wish anything on my orphan?” He said: “And what’s that, Umm Salīm?” She said: “She claimed that you wished she wouldn’t grow older anymore.” God’s Messenger laughed and said: “Umm Salīm! Don’t you know that I’ve put only one condition on God (*sharṭī ‘ala rabbī*) and said: ‘I am a human being (*anā bashar*), and I am satisfied like the rest of humans, and I get angry as the rest of humans.’ So whenever I wish (*da‘autu*) on someone from my *umma*, [my action] is not aimed at anyone in particular (*laysa lahā bi-ahl*), and its purpose is to purify and perform a good deed (*qurba*) so as to make it easier [for

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été ajouté de leçons, de sagesse, de beauté.”

<sup>13</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 37–44.

<sup>14</sup> I will be referring only to the “original” narrator who allegedly directly witnessed the act of saying or doing from the Prophet himself. In its reverse order, the above chain of narrators goes as follows: Zuhayr b. Ḥarb and Abū Ma‘an al-Raqāshī, ‘Umar b. Yūnis, ‘Ikrimatu b. ‘Ammār, Ishāqu b. Abī Ṭalḥa, and Anas b. Mālik.

the person in question] during the Day of Judgment (*yawmu al-qiyāma*).” (M 45:95, my italics.)<sup>15</sup>

Even though there are many *ḥadīths* depicting the Prophet in a *state of anger*, this seems to be among the very few in which he expressly states that he is in fact like any other human being (interestingly, such a claim was based almost exclusively on an *attitude towards anger*). That the Prophet picked up “anger”—the anger of all mortals—to show his own commonality with others could be a sign that anger and its negation, the *control of anger*, depicted the essence of a man’s (or woman’s?) qualities. Abū Hurayra reported God’s Messenger as saying—and this is from a *ḥadīth* in both Bukhārī and Muslim: “The strong man (*al-shadīd*) is not the good wrestler (*aṣ-ṣura ‘a*); the strong man is only he who controls himself when he is angry.”<sup>16</sup> One should keep in mind that this was a Bedouin society in a rapid and unusual process of geographic expansion whose values were structured along the honor lines of the *murū’a* and *shahāma*. Such qualities required immediate action, *tha’r*, upon an offense that humiliated the offended party. Controlling one’s anger was therefore much less common than the act of *showing* it. One shows anger as a sign of disapproval for a witnessed action and the like, and this is a first step to deny passivity, fear, and acceptance. The above *ḥadīth* from Bukhārī and Muslim certainly does not seem to encourage the Bedouin trend of retaliation and counter-retaliation, as it has become common in both Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* to deny commonly accepted attitudes towards things and people (for example, the status of women and their rights of inheritance). It is no surprise then to see that, in the hundred or so *ḥadīths* on *ghaḍab*, that anger and the control of anger have become the yardstick for showing a person’s virtues. Anger is neither condemned nor praised; it is seen as a human quality, and, in a Bedouin society, it carries something positive in its womb, but it needs to be controlled.

The orphans, like the Prophet’s relatives, together with the poor and the wayfarers enjoyed a special status in the Qur’ān. A verse (VIII:41) requests dividing one-fifth of the booty of war, the *khums*, among the Prophet and his relatives, the orphans, the poor and wayfarers. So when in the above quoted *ḥadīth* from Muslim, the object of the Prophet’s wish (*du‘ā*) was an orphan, the aim could have been to show someone with a special status and subject to God’s mercy who was offended by what the Prophet had said to her. In other words, the choice seems to have been for a person who could not offend anyone but was offended herself, a way to make her attitude towards the Prophet “authentic.” Comes then the second part of the *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet negates the feelings of a young woman beyond any suspicion in her internal motives. After transforming the Prophet into a unique entity, he is now reduced to an ordinary man who could get angry at times. Such an affirmation, however, was not directly and bluntly stated for had it been so its impact would have been far less. A climax had therefore to be created in order to clear out a common mis-representation of the image of the Prophet as an uncommon man: first, the offended orphan and then the Prophet making his apologies.

The *ḥadīths* abound with descriptions of the Prophet in states of anger:

Narrated by ‘Āysha (one the Prophet’s wives):

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<sup>15</sup> Muslim, book 45, *ḥadīth* 95, henceforth M 45:95, all translations from Muslim and other Arabic sources (except the Qur’ān) are mine.

<sup>16</sup> Bukhārī, 81:5763; Muslim, 45:107.



Two men came to God’s Messenger and talked to him about a matter; I couldn’t figure out what it was. They made him angry and he cursed and insulted them (*la ‘anahumā wa sabbahumā*). When they left, I told him: “O Messenger of God! A person who aims towards goodness would not do such a thing.” He asked: “What’s that?” I replied: “You’ve cursed and insulted them.” He then said: “Don’t you know about the deal I made with God? I said: ‘O God! I am a human being, so that anyone of the Muslims I’ve cursed or insulted, I’ll create for him a *zakāt* and a reward (*ajr*).’” (M 45:88)

This *ḥadīth* fits well with the previous one concerning the human and down-to-earth side of the Prophet; it does, however, add another aspect to the previously quoted *ḥadīth*: the Prophet here not only got very angry but he also cursed and insulted his visitors. Also, in the same way that in the first *ḥadīth*, a woman—an orphan—brought forth the contrast between what the Prophet ought to be (that is, common images of the Prophet as the ideal person) and what he *is* in reality (the sense of being “ordinary” which he himself is forced to bring up in self-defense), the above quoted *ḥadīth* brings forth the familiar figure of ‘Aysha, one of the Prophet’s most influential wives. As in the previous case, a woman beyond any suspicion is the narrator<sup>17</sup> and the one who mediates between the two opposite qualities of the Prophet—the “pure” and the “common.” This is a common technique of narration which is present in the majority of *ḥadīths* and serves the purpose of creating a climax and a tension which would not have existed without a woman’s voice close to the Prophet.

Actually, women—and in particular the wives of the Prophet—do, in turn, get angry and we see a lot of their anger transpiring through the *ḥadīths*: it is indeed an anger turned towards the Prophet himself—they were mad at him for a reason or another; or towards the Prophet’s entourage, the *ṣahāba*, who often disapproved of what the wives did in public;<sup>18</sup> finally, it was an anger turned towards society in general. Anger, however, was obviously not exclusively restricted to the wives of the Prophet and women in general were the source of anger in many *ḥadīths*; their anger brings the narrative to its climax by combining the historical with the private:

Narrated by Abū Mūsa:

While we were in the Yemen, we were told where the Prophet was (*makhraj al-rasūl*), so we decided to migrate towards him (*kharajnā muhājirīn ilayhi*); I was with my two brothers and I was the youngest, and we took the boat with fifty-two others from our own people (*qawm*). The boat took us to an-Najāshī<sup>19</sup> [Negus] in Ethiopia where we met Ja‘far b. Abī Ṭālib<sup>20</sup> with his followers (*aṣḥāb*) who told us that God’s Messenger had sent them to this location and summoned us to stay here, so why don’t you stay with us? We stayed with them and all came together

<sup>17</sup> Though she is not the real narrator, the orphan still assumes this role because she was the only witness to the conversation that took place between her and the Prophet.

<sup>18</sup> The Qur’ān was already critical of a few of the public attitudes of some of the Prophet’s wives.

<sup>19</sup> Official title of the Ethiopian Christian King.

<sup>20</sup> Cousin of the Prophet.

[to meet the Prophet]. God’s Messenger took care of us (*wāfaqnā*) when he conquered (*iftataha*, opened up) Khaybar [in 628]; he allotted a portion to us (*ashama lanā, a ‘ṭānā minhā*) and gave nothing to all those who were absent from the conquest of Khaybar. Only those who were (*shahida*) with him, such as the people of our boat and Ja‘far and his people, were allotted portions (*qasama lahum ma ‘ahum*). There were people (*nās*) telling us—the people of the boat—that we did the *hijra* prior to you.

Asmā’ b. ‘Umays, one of those who came with us, went to visit Ḥafṣa, the Prophet’s wife, who also migrated to an-Najāshī with the others. ‘Umar [b. al-Khaṭṭāb]<sup>21</sup> came to see Ḥafṣa while Asmā’ was there, and said: “Is this the Ethiopian from the sea?” and Asmā’ replied with a yes, thus prompting ‘Umar with the following: “We were before you for the *hijra* and we deserve more from God’s Messenger than you.” She got angry and uttered one word only: “You lied.” “O ‘Umar, No! O God! You were with God’s Messenger who was feeding the hungry among you and preaching your ignorants; and we were in a home (*dār*) or in a land (*arḍ*) in Ethiopia which was far away and hated [...]” When the Prophet came, she [reported to him ‘Umar’s opinions], and he replied: “Your rights are equal to mine. ‘Umar and his friends have one *hijra*, while you, people of the boat, you have two *hijras*.” (M 44:169)

A woman’s anger brings together in a single narrative the historical with the subjective. The historical details have been *grosso modo* narrated by Ṭabarī.<sup>22</sup> In 627, the sixth year A.H., and a year prior to the conquest of Khaybar, the Prophet sends his cousin Ja‘far at the head of a group to an-Najāshī, the African King of Ethiopia, to convert him from Christianity to the newly established Islamic faith. Then, some time later, he sends another Messenger with a letter to find out whether Ja‘far and his group had any impact on the King. The letter openly asks the Najāshī to convert to Islam, stop his aloofness (*al-tajabbur*), and express his feelings to the messengers of the Prophet, to which the Najāshī replied that he did in fact convert to Islam at the hands of Ja‘far, the Prophet’s cousin. Ṭabarī also reports that, in sign of appreciation, the Najāshī had sent his own son with a delegation of sixty people to the Prophet, but their boat drowned on its way there.

A year later, in 628, Khaybar, between Medīna and Damascus, a city with a strong Jewish population, was finally conquered. The Prophet had imposed high taxes on the Jews and confiscated several of their properties. The above *ḥadīth* is mainly concerned with the period immediately following the conquest of Khaybar amid the booty’s allocation among the followers of the Prophet. As it has been pointed out by many jurists, the distribution of the booty, and later the taxes (*‘ushr* and *kharāj*), were not performed on an even basis (the uneven distribution of the booty and taxes became an even more overt policy with ‘Umar, the second Caliph): the “followers” of the Prophet were divided according to their ranks, their closeness to the Prophet, and the degree of their participation in various conquests, starting with Badr.<sup>23</sup> Since the conversion of the

<sup>21</sup> Second Caliph after Abū Bakr, his daughter Ḥafsa was one of the Prophet’s wives, was killed in 644.

<sup>22</sup> Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Umam wal-Mulūk*, Vol. II (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1988), 131–132.

<sup>23</sup> Abū Yūsuf, *Kitāb al-Kharāj* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1985), § 51, 52, 54.

Christian Ethiopians and the opening of Khaybar took place in a short period of time, the purpose of the above *ḥadīth* was to settle the status of the followers of the Prophet who were sent as messengers to Ethiopia and the Ethiopians who converted to Islam: since both “missed” the conquest of Khaybar, what should their share be in the booty? This was a pressing question not simply for the booty at Khaybar but for all conquests to come as well; more importantly, it also had to do with the political status of these groups within the newly established Islamic community.

It was a woman’s anger—that of a Christian Ethiopian who converted to Islam and who was close to one of the Prophet’s wives—which created the necessary and unavoidable climax that brought a final conclusion to the narration. She openly accused ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, father of the Prophet’s wife, and who was to become the second influential Caliph, of lying. As the two women of the previous *ḥadīths*, the orphan and ‘Āysha, she also enjoyed a special status as someone from the Ethiopian King’s entourage who converted with him to Islam, and also as a friend to the Prophet’s wife. She thus intervened at the moment Abū Mūsa finished his own story: in this part, the narration had no climax because the “rights” of the Prophet’s followers in Ethiopia had been established without much problems. In the second part, the woman’s anger pushes for a peak without which the narration would have halted in a dead end. The anger here, coming from a woman with a special status, should be seen as a sign of authenticity: she did not have to contain her anger because she was right. In a *ḥadīth* reported by Muslim (44:80), the Prophet confesses to his wife ‘Āysha (the narration was her own) that he feels confused at times about her attitude towards him: “I can’t tell whether you are satisfied or angry at me.” The Prophet’s confusion on the ambivalence of his wife’s feelings could have stemmed from the fact that, with women in particular, dissatisfaction and anger were not necessarily at odds.

The ambiguity of the women’s attitudes, and in particular some of the Prophet’s wives, and the tensions that this led to within the Prophetic household, has prompted a divine intervention in the form of a Qur’anic verse (LXVI:1) in a chapter entitled “The Forbidding” (*al-Taḥrīm*):

O Prophet, why forbiddest thou what God has  
made lawful to thee, seeking the good pleasure  
of thy wives? And God is All-forgiving,  
All-compassionate.

and a couple of verses later (LXVI:5):

It is possible that, if he divorces you,  
his Lord will give him in exchange wives  
better than you, women who have surrendered,  
believing, obedient, penitent, devout,  
given to fasting, who have been married  
and virgins too.

In a Muslim *ḥadīth* (18:34), the mystery behind these verses is at least partially revealed. The narrator, a certain Ibn ‘Abbās, asked ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb about the two wives of the

Prophet who apparently were the subject of the above verses. ‘Umar, after conceding that one of the wives was his own daughter, Ḥafṣa, and the other ‘Āysha, said: “We, the clan (*ma‘shar*) of Quraysh, are a people who prevailed over their wives (*qawman naghlibu an-nisā‘a*).<sup>24</sup> But when we came to the city, our women began learning from the new milieu. [...] One day I got angry at my wife, so she retreated (*turāji‘unī*) on her own and then I complained to her for having retreated.” She said: “You are complaining that I have retreated? Don’t you know that the wives of God’s Messenger retreated from him and would leave him (*hajara*) all day and night.” And ‘Umar added: “I went to see [my daughter] Ḥafṣa and asked whether she ever retreated from [her husband] God’s Messenger, and she replied positively. I then asked her whether any one of [the Prophet’s wives] left him all day to nightfall, and she replied positively. So I said to her: ‘Those of you who are doing this will be disappointed and will be losers. Would any of you like to provoke God’s anger because of His Messenger’s anger? [...] Don’t retreat from God’s Messenger and don’t ask him anything, but ask me whatever you like. Aren’t you aware that [‘Āysha] is more attractive (*awsam*) than you and more lovable to God’s Messenger?’” The conversation between ‘Umar and his daughter ends at this point and the narration shifts to the Prophet’s own attitude vis-à-vis his wives and the specific problem of “retreat” he was encountering with Ḥafṣa and ‘Āysha in particular. The connection between the two parts of the *ḥadīth*, the one with Ḥafṣa and then the Prophet’s reaction, was preceded by a report from ‘Umar in which he claimed that at one point a friend of his came to him in the evening and told him: “Something important happened. [...] The Prophet divorced his wives,” to which ‘Umar replied: “Ḥafṣa got disappointed and lost.” ‘Umar then sought to meet the Prophet to inquire about his alleged “divorce.” But the Prophet denied that he did divorce any of his wives and after a recapitulation of the conversation that took place between ‘Umar and his daughter, and when summoned by ‘Umar to explain the above Qur’anic verses, the Prophet replied that, because of the anger his two wives had provoked in him, he had committed himself not to socialize with them for a month. The following *ḥadīth* (18:35) was even more specific: the Prophet kept himself at bay from his wives for exactly twenty-nine days.

It has often been noted that the structure of narrative in the Qur’ān presupposes a linear cosmic time axis that stretches from the day of creation of the universe to the Day of Judgment; and within this cosmic time are smaller lapses that combine the individual with the historical and cosmic: the few years of the Prophetic mission occupies the center of historical action and structures the time of individual subjects and that of the cosmos as well. The same applies *grosso modo* to the *ḥadīths* even though their narrative structure, considering their excessive length, is even more complex. There was a technique already used in the Qur’ān where the historical narrative when recounting, say, an episode from the Prophetic mission, deliberately tackles a personal episode from the Prophet’s life so that, at times, the Prophet addresses himself on problems he encountered with his wives and Companions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Ghalaba*, translated as “prevail over,” could also mean to defeat, beat, triumph over, conquer, subdue, overcome, overpower, etc., all of which could fit well to describe gender relationships in the “society” of Quraysh.

<sup>25</sup> See Jacques Berque, *Relire le Coran* (Paris: Sindbad, 1993), 73: “Or, dans les *ḥadīth* aussi, on a affaire à l’interférence, avec la conjoncture, de quelque chose qui n’est plus directement révélation de Dieu, mais conduite inspirée par Lui. On retrouve donc là, quoique indirectement, au second degré pour ainsi

In the *ḥadīths* that narrate the “retreat” of two of the Prophet’s wives, the *triangle of anger* (the previous hadiths were dualistic in their approach) comes through handily expressed between God’s anger, that of His Prophet, and that of the Prophet’s wives. It was the anger of the wives that led to their “retreat,” a step that triggered the anger of the Prophet thus forcing him into a voluntary twenty-nine day “retreat” of his own; finally, God himself, probably out of fear that the Prophetic mission would get distracted by unworthy events, urged Muḥammad to go back to his wives and summoned the latter to “obey” the Prophet with an explicit threat that God’s Messenger still has several marital opportunities open before his eyes. The “triangle of anger” structures many of the representations of anger in the *ḥadīths* and creates a sense of interplay between the persons involved, the facts, and the relations between facts and persons. Usually, within this triangle, the Prophet is always there with some degree of anger; God is often but not always present (one should keep in mind that the *ḥadīths* are primarily about the Prophet); finally, a third party is usually involved: wives of the Prophet or their friends, ordinary man or women, judges and officials, etc. Because of its importance this structure is worth examining in some detail and the above *ḥadīth* is a good starting point for such a task.

As before (with the orphan, ‘Āysha, and the Ethiopian), the women were the ones who got angry first and triggered the whole process of anger; it is not easy, however, to satisfactorily discern the *subjective motives* behind their anger. We have in fact to make a guess from the few nostalgic remarks that ‘Umar communicated to his friend, the narrator of the *ḥadīth*, concerning the status of the women of Quraysh (the Prophet’s clan): a *reversal* occurred, according to ‘Umar, for those of Quraysh who moved to the city. In other words, the reversal in the status of women occurred when Quraysh was gaining in political power. Hence, political power and urban life transformed women and made them more aware of male domination, and their anger and retreat could be seen as signs of dissatisfaction in a period when bargaining for new social and political roles became crucial. In the *ḥadīth*, however, the chapter on the women’s resistance was rapidly closed: first, only their *action*—the retreat—was reported and their “voices” were never heard; second, ‘Umar sets the tone in front of his daughter: for his part, he has nothing to learn from her, disapproves her strategy, and summons her obedience; finally, God’s Messenger sets the final tone and also closes his ears to his wives’ protests, secludes himself, and then comes back to them with an apparent sign of personal victory.

The whole narrative is thus daunted by the *silence of women*, and their voices were muted beneath the signs of anger and dissatisfaction. In a *ḥadīth* reported by ‘Āysha (M 44:75), she claimed that “I never got jealous of the women of the Prophet, except Khadīja, whom I never got to know.” And then she added that, one day, seizing the opportunity from the fact that Khadīja had angered the Prophet, he replied to her, after she reminded him of the source of his anger: “I was given her love (*rūziqtu ḥubbahā*).” Again, what the narrative depicts here is a *situation of anger* where the subjective motivations of women remain hidden and transcended by a male Prophetic view on “love” as something that is “given” by women.

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dire, une communication intercatégorielle, un passage entre l’Éternel et l’éphémère. Nous avons affaire à coup sûr au même problème métaphysique que nous paraissait impliquer la notion même de Révélation, à savoir communication de l’Absolu à l’humain, cette communication entraînant, tant dans son déroulement que dans ses effets historiques, des implications d’une extrême complexité...”

In one of the longest *ḥadīths* in Muslim (49:53), primarily dealing with those who, among the Prophet's followers, took on his side in the conquests and others who participated but "missed" (*takhallaḥa*) subsequent ones, a hierarchy (*tarāṭub*) got established among the *anṣār* (followers) whose criteria were determined by the Prophet himself. This was done on a personal basis, between the Prophet and each one of his *anṣār*, within hierarchically organized networks. In the case of Ka'b b. Mālīk who was also the narrator of the *ḥadīth*, he claimed to have absented himself (*takhallaḥa*) from the conquest (*ghazwa*) of Tabūk even though he never missed, prior to Tabūk, any of the conquests except for Badr. Ka'b also claims that the Prophet did not reproach (*ʿataba*) anyone who absented himself from Badr, and then goes on and finds an excuse for having "accidentally" missed Tabūk: he was preparing himself for the conquest, but the *anṣār* rushed through so suddenly and at such an unexpected moment that he found himself unprepared and superseded by the event.

If, as Ka'b says, the Prophet seems to have been easy on those who missed Badr, this was not the case for Tabūk: the Prophet had in fact inquired about him personally, "Where was Ka'b b. Mālīk?" a question that precipitated feelings of guilt in Ka'b's already troubled conscience. Looking back at his state of mind prior to Tabūk, he clears out his hesitations: "I said to myself that I can do it if I wanted to." But this was not enough to release the tension in him, and he chose to confront the Prophet directly, face-to-face: "As I was told that God's Messenger was on his way [from Tabūk], I felt somewhat relieved since I knew I could not avoid him anymore, so I decided to go and see him."

The Prophet, who was devoting some of his time to receiving and asking God's forgiveness on behalf of those eighty or so men, the *mukhallafūn*, who managed to avoid the latest conquests, noticed Ka'b in the crowd and once he approached him, the Prophet smiled at him "the smile of an angry man (*tabassum al-mughḍīb*)" and asked him: "What is it that forced you to absent yourself?" to which Ka'b replied: "I had no excuse, and O God! I was strong and well enough when I absented myself from you." And the session ended with this brief word from the Prophet: "You told the truth (*ṣadaqa*). Stand up so that God would decide (*yaqḍī*) on you." Because the Prophet had left him in this suspended status without clearing his mind once and for all, the period that followed was for Ka'b even more atrocious than the previous one: he was riddled with anxieties, self-doubts, and uncertainties; he was slightly relieved when he discovered that there were two other men in the same situation as he who were also "left behind"; he used to stay at home most of the time, and when he seldom went out to the marketplace (*sūq*), no one would ever talk to him; and whenever he saw the Prophet, he would say to himself: "Did he move his lips in a gesture of forgiveness?"; he would then sit close to him for praying so that he would be able to glance at him from time to time.

At some point, things became even worse. One day, as he was walking, he saw his cousin, one of the closest people to him, who refused to talk to him, a sign that even his family felt that it needed to take distance from someone who betrayed God's cause; then forty days after the Prophet had left him with the ambiguous message, and while he was still waiting a sign of God's forgiveness, the Prophet summoned him to "leave" his wife—to simply leave her (*i'tizāl*) without divorcing her; the Prophet then, upon a women's request from Banū Umayya (whose husband was in the same difficult position

as Ka‘b), permitted him to take her as a servant with strict orders not to come “close” (*qarraba*) to her.

Fifty dark and troubled nights had already passed before people came to him (and to his other two friends who were in the same perilous situation) and greeted him with the good news that the Prophet had finally forgiven him. He therefore rushed to see the Prophet who greeted him with “a face shining with happiness”; once the Prophet was happy, “his face would shine as if it were part of the moon.” God had sent through his Messenger the following signs (IX:117-118):

God has turned towards the Prophet and the Emigrants  
and the Helpers who followed him in the hour of  
difficulty, after the hearts of a part of them  
wellnigh swerved aside; then He turned towards them;  
surely He is Gentle to them, and All-compassionate.  
And to the three who were left behind, until,  
when the earth became strait for them, for all its  
breadth, and their souls became strait for them, and  
they thought that there was no shelter from God  
except in Him, then He turned towards them, that  
they might also turn; surely God turns, and is  
All-compassionate.

Despite the different contents between Ka‘b’s *ḥadīth* and the one narrating Ḥafṣa’s and ‘Āysha’s story, there is nevertheless a clear similarity in the form. Both show a similar pattern of someone first committing a wrongful act that is immediately followed by an angry disapproval by the Prophet, then, as punishment, a period of physical seclusion and mental torture for those who committed the wrongful action, finally, forgiveness always comes from God in the form of Qur’anic verses alluding in a magic code that only those who have been patiently waiting for could decipher, that their repentance has been cleared.

On the other hand, the differences between the two *ḥadīths* are equally as important as the similarities. Thus, while in the case of Ḥafṣa and ‘Āysha their “internal state of consciousness” was hardly known and were left without their “voices” throughout the *ḥadīth*, Ka‘b b. Mālīk’s “monologue” was an essential part of the narration and enriches considerably the usual triad of sin, repentance, and forgiveness which exists in all religious discourses. Since it was the Prophet’s “smile of anger” that triggered the monologue, we need to study more closely the structure of Ka‘b b. Mālīk’s internal “flux of consciousness”: Is there any similarity with the Greek notion of the “care of the self” (*souci de soi*)?<sup>26</sup>

The “stream of consciousness” starts right from the beginning when Ka‘b b. Mālīk was reviewing in his mind the Prophet’s conquest policy. Three phases structure the narrative, but it is the one in the middle, in which Ka‘b recounts his decisive meeting with the Prophet who received him with a “smile of anger,” which gives shape to the entire narrative; Ka‘b ended with a guilty conscience because of the Prophet’s angry

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<sup>26</sup> On the Greek and Roman notions of the “care of the self,” see Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 2: Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

reception, and the angry smile has triggered a process in him in which his attitude towards the Prophet's conquests was put into question. Ka'b's conscience, however, riddled with guilt and anxiety, never sets itself in a free Socratic process of "know thy self"; instead of transforming the guilt into a self-reflexive process turned internally towards the self, Ka'b keeps an eye on the Prophet all the time to the point that, once he is in a position of physical proximity with God's Messenger, he sets himself at an angle so that he would observe from a distance the Prophet's movement of the lips. The Prophet, in turn, was waiting for God's judgment on the matter of the three men: what got therefore established was a circle of dependence that prevented each one of the actors from freely proceeding towards an internal act of introspection. The Prophet's anger, rather than establishing itself in its purely *human* dimension, becomes anger on behalf of God and it was God's forgiveness that everyone was anxiously waiting for throughout the *ḥadīth*. The Prophet's anger, as anger on behalf of God, was an act that created cultural identities and differences among the Prophet's followers (*anṣār*): it signaled to them a danger, or a weakness in the path they were going through; and in this respect it represents an evolution from the anger of God in the Qur'ān. The *ḥadīths* in fact are less concerned with the other monotheistic religions and concentrate more on the *internal* relationships of the immigrants and followers of the Prophet. In this, they could be placed among the first systematic textual constructs of a detailed set of normative rules to be followed by the *umma*.

In the *ḥadīths*, the Prophet's anger on behalf of God is the *sign* that establishes the borderlines between toleration, misbehavior, and heresy. In a *ḥadīth* in Muslim (47:2), the Prophet reportedly got angry when he personally overheard two men who were quarreling over the interpretation of a verse; he said: "Those who were before you quarreling over [the meaning of] the Book shall perish (*halaka*)."<sup>1</sup> In another *ḥadīth* (43:159), a Jew complained to the Prophet that one of the *anṣār* had hit him on the face because he had loudly proclaimed that "Moses was selected as Prophet over all people (*al-bashar*)," and the Prophet in a visible mood of anger—"he had anger all over the face"—said: "Do not favor (*faḍḍala*) a Prophet of God over another."<sup>2</sup> And still in another *ḥadīth* (4:182), a man came to the Prophet and told him that he would be late for the morning prayer because he was preoccupied with someone in a reading session, which, according to the narrator, "got the Prophet in a mood of anger I have never seen him before," and he said: "O people! Some of you are really repulsive (*munaffirīn*). Those who have to conduct prayers should keep short [their reading sessions]; you might have left behind you the elderly, the weak, and the needy."<sup>3</sup>

There is a common message in all three *ḥadīths* and in other similar ones: only give yourself, and concentrate your thoughts, actions, and passions to the Common Cause, that of God and his Messenger; individualistic actions are not encouraged, and even, quite often prohibited. The battle here is against *individualism* and *subjectivism*: this is what unites together in a single stroke the two persons who were attempting their *own* interpretation of the Qur'ān, and the Jew who was declaring Moses as *his* Prophet (while Muḥammad wanted *all* Prophets at the *same* level), or this other person who seemed more interested in reading (a purely subjective act that involves the mind) than praying (a ritualistic act, which in Islam relies on bodily movements), while the Prophet summoned him to do the reverse. Anger is the sign that re-establishes "the order of things" into an objectively more coherent world, that is, a world in which the Prophetic



mission guides all mankind; and where individuals, groups, and clans are rewarded in degree of their support to the Prophet and his *anṣār*.

Before we close this section on anger in the *ḥadīth* literature, we need to see whether ordinary men and women had also the right to get angry, and if so, how did their anger differ from the anger on behalf of God? Some people, such as the judges, do not have the right to get angry particularly when they are on duty, and in a *ḥadīth* reported by both Bukhārī and Muslim, the Prophet said that “No one should decide on a ruling between two persons when he is angry (*lā yaḥkum aḥadun bayna ithnayn wa huwa ghaḍbān*).”<sup>27</sup> In another *ḥadīth* (M 27:32), a person by the name of Suwayd got angry when he saw someone hitting a maid on the face for having offended him with a word. Suwayd, upset by his anger, told his friends that the Prophet had ordered a group of men to free a maid who was working for them because the youngest among them did hit her on the face. What these two stories show us is that even when ordinary individuals are represented in moods of anger—and such *ḥadīths* are much more limited than those involving God and His Messenger—, their anger does not have an autonomous path of its own but gets usually mediated by a saying and doing from the Prophet.

Our last *ḥadīth* was also quoted by Muslim (44:180) and probably brings together the political implications of anger in this section.

Narrated by Abū Hurayra:

God’s Messenger said in front of a great Muslim audience: “Do you want me to talk to you about the most prestigious homes of the Companions (*anṣār*)?” They said, “Yes, Messenger of God!” God’s Messenger said: “Banū ‘Abd al-Ashhal.” They said: “Then who? God’s Messenger!” He said: “Then Banū an-Najjār.” They said: “Then who? God’s Messenger!” He said: “Then Banū al-Hārith b. al-Khazraj.” They said: “Then who? God’s Messenger!” He said: “Then Banū Sā‘idah” They said: “Then who? God’s Messenger!” He said: “Then in every *anṣār*’s home there is goodness.” Sa‘d b. ‘Ubāda stood with anger and said: “Are we the last of the four?” God’s Messenger had mentioned their home (*dār*) at some point, so he wanted God’s Messenger to speak [again]. Men from his own clan (*qawm*) told him: “Sit down. Aren’t you satisfied that God’s Messenger has mentioned your own home among the top four? He left over much more than the ones he has named.” Sa‘d b. ‘Ubayda left God’s Messenger with what he had said.

The Arab society of the Prophet which gave birth to Islam could not possibly think of itself outside the “tribal” divisions which were at the root of its economic and social infrastructure. “Tribal” should not be taken in the straightforward anthropological sense of kinship relations structured on family and blood ties, but more broadly as a mental superstructure which never lets itself to be determined once and for all by the “real” blood and family ties between generations. One has to think these societies in terms of the more flexible notion of *ahl* which could mean anything from relatives, relations, kin, family, blood ties, household, “home,” followers, adherents, Companions, people of the

<sup>27</sup> Muslim (30:16), Bukhārī (97:6739). In Bukhārī, there is a slight variation in the structure of the sentence: “*lā yaqḍiyanna ḥakamun bayna ithnayni wa huwa ghaḍbān*.”

Book (*ahlu-l-kitāb*), up to the family of the Prophet (*ahlu-l-bayt*).<sup>28</sup> In the above quoted *ḥadīth*, it is remarkable that the Prophet, who was at the time forming the still embryonic Muslim state, was constructing a notion of political power based on a hierarchy of clans and families, within the hierarchies created by the conquests between the Emigrants (*muhājirīn*) and the Companions (*anṣār*). This Arab and Islamic polity, supported by the charisma of the Prophet, and then instituted by the second Caliph ‘Umar, not only affected the distribution of the booty and taxation, but, more importantly, created a type of Islamic state which looked at “society” in terms of its *ahl* alliances. As Ibn Khaldūn noted, the Islamic state is in itself a “group feeling” (*‘aṣabiyya*) that “subverts” (*istatba‘a*) other group feelings in order to survive.

In this social and political context, anger, in the early Islamic literature, was a representation of the implemented *ahl* type of polity. In many of the *ḥadīths* we analyzed and in several others as well, it was difficult to avoid a representation of anger that did not touch upon the *ahl* divisions created by the conquests and the Islamic state in formation. Anger was therefore one of those signs that the social actors used (and abused of) in order to point to a threshold of dissatisfaction over the status of their own “home” and “honor.”

### 3.

Thus far, the anger we have encountered in the early Islamic societies—anger on behalf of God—was an anger turned “outward,” to the other self, to society, to other individuals, and was thus very different from the “Christian anger” which was turned “inward,” in a movement towards the self. In the Judeo-Christian traditions, anger was perceived not simply as a state of the mind to be contained but also as something evil whose *internal motivations* could not possibly lead to a zealous and righteous action: “Anger deprives a sage of his wisdom, a prophet of his vision” (Talmud, Pesahim 66b); and “The anger of man does not work the righteousness of God” (James 1.20). The crucial element in the Judeo-Christian tradition is that anger is subjectivized and falls within the sphere of the *care of the self*; hence, in a way very different from early Islamic societies where anger was a *social and political strategy*, in Christianity anger was what Foucault would have called a “mode of subjectivation.”

It is true, as we have seen, that some *ḥadīths* push forward towards *containing one’s anger*, that is, anger has some limits; the majority of the *ḥadīths*, however, even if they do not explicitly encourage the use of anger, at least show *the benefits of its social and political uses*: the social actors, starting with the Prophet himself, when moderately

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<sup>28</sup> For some time, a debate has been going on within the realm of the field of Middle Eastern social sciences over the use of the concept of “civil society” in its Islamic, Arab, and Middle Eastern context. The notion of “civil society,” in its European and Western roots, presupposes this other ambiguous notion of “body politic” and the autonomy of the “political” from the “social.” “Civil society” became, since the seventeenth century, an important construct of political theory because it paused the problem of how to “protect” “society” from the abuses of political power, that is, the state and its institutions. Since the notion of “civil society,” often translated to Arabic as *mujtama‘ madanī*, has never been efficiently posed in the Arab-Islamic literature because of the preponderance of *ahl* at the infrastructural socio-economic level, it would be more suitable to think more seriously in terms of a *mujtama‘ ahlī* (pl. *mujtama‘āt ahliyya*) and work the evolution of the concept from the Arab-Islamic literature.

and cautiously using their anger, ended up making a point, provoking a status quo, and seldom turning the situation to their own advantage. In the early Islamic societies, there is not much of an art of containing one's anger, but there is plenty to show that these societies were indeed interested in an art of anger as a political and social strategy: it was what Pierre Bourdieu would have described as a social and cultural capital. Obviously, the interest that these societies showed in being able and knowing how to use one's anger, comes from the social values of *murū'a* and *shahāma* inherited from the pre-Islamic (*Jāhiliyya*, "ignorance") era, and they most probably got channeled in early Islam towards higher ideals in conformity with the Prophetic mission.

When the Prophet died in 632, the still embryonic social, legal, and political institutions which he founded, based on a combination of old Bedouin values and the new faith of Islam, were passed to the first four Caliphs who were all from Quraysh and were related to the Prophet as *ahl*. For our topic on anger, the first Caliphal period (632–661) will not bring much novelty: the first four Caliphs still, in terms of literature, kept with the Prophet's *état d'esprit*, at least in the way it emerged from the scriptures. It was only in the reign of the fifth Caliph, Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān (r. 661–680), that things started to move towards the literary genre of *adab al-sultān*, that is, the good manners of the sultan.

Mu'āwiya came to power in a way very different from the first four caliphs. Thus while his predecessors were seen as the "natural" heirs of the Prophet's political power, Mu'āwiya, who was the commander of the Arab armies in Syria, had nothing of the political and social prestige of his predecessors.<sup>29</sup> Worse still, he was from the Banū Umayya family (the Umayyāds) which despite the fact that the third caliph 'Uthmān's membership, was a family that opposed Muḥammad to the last moment, converting to Islam, starting with their leader Abū Sufyān, only because it found it had no other alternative. Hence, the political opportunism for which the Umayyāds were known and the weakness of 'Uthmān's caliphate, were definitely no encouraging signs for a second Umayyād to hold office as caliph.

But what made Mu'āwiya so different, and right from the beginning a suspicious figure, were the various intrigues he had to go through in order to gain political power. Already the dissensions within the Islamic *umma* concerning the nature and essence of political power, and over the question as to who, among the "closest" to the Prophet, should be given priority to rule, had their greatest impact on Islamic societies. Only two dozen years after Muḥammad's death, and following 'Uthman's murder in Medīna by mutineers from Egypt, began a five-year civil war period (*fitna*, "temptation").<sup>30</sup>

The dissensions between 'Alī, who succeeded as fourth Caliph in 656, and Mu'āwiya became more visible in the first *fitna* period (656–661). By the time 'Alī took political power and transferred the state's capital from Medīna to Kūfa, he already had a

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<sup>29</sup> Abū Bakr, the first caliph, had his daughter 'Āysha married to the Prophet; the second caliph, 'Umar, also had his daughter Ḥafṣa married to the Prophet; the third caliph, 'Uthmān, was himself married to two of the Prophet's daughters, Umm Kulthūm and Ruqayyah; finally, the fourth and most prestigious caliph (in terms of family links with the Prophet), 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the founder of the Shī'ī sect, was the cousin of the Prophet and his son his law.

<sup>30</sup> For a brief description of these events, see in particular Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, I (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 212–240; Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 10th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1970[1937]), chapter XVI.

strong group of supporters mostly located in Irāq in the region between Baṣra and Kūfa, and who became known as the Shī'īs (“dissenters”) of Islam. 'Alī, who never took a clear position on 'Uthmān's murder and left the whole issue behind hoping that it would die down, triggered with his attitude the anger of the Umayyāds to whom both 'Uthmān and Mu'āwiya belonged. This led, as early as 657, to a series of military confrontations between the two factions most notably at Ṣiffīn on the Euphrates when Mu'āwiya's men put Qur'āns on the ends of their lances and called for arbitration (*taḥkīm*) according to God's word.

The *taḥkīm* process, however, was badly received among some of 'Alī's followers who ended up, in turn, dissenting from the rest of the Shī'īs. This group of dissenters, close to six thousand,<sup>31</sup> became known as the Khawārij (from *kharaja*, to leave) and were hostile to any form of government: “Only God governs (*lā ḥukmu illā li-llāh*),”<sup>32</sup> was their favorite motto, to which 'Alī responded: “A just word with bad intentions (*kalimat ḥaqq yurādu biḥā bāṭil*), because their sect (*madhhab*) claims that there should be no Prince (*amīr*), but the existence of a Prince is unavoidable whether he is pious or rude.” And it was reported that he later addressed some of the Khawārij with a question whose implication was that government is simply unavoidable and the best of all evils: “Did you ever meet anyone who hates government (*al-ḥukūma*) more than I do?”<sup>33</sup> However, neither 'Alī's *taḥkīm* nor his moderate views on government were enough to convince the Khawārij of a different strategy, and in 661, a year after Mu'āwiya was proclaimed caliph in Jerusalem, 'Alī was murdered by a Khārijī.

With Mu'āwiya already a caliph in 661 many things took the course of change, and some of these changes are worth examining because they are directly related to our subject on anger. First, by transferring the capital to Damascus,<sup>34</sup> Mu'āwiya opted for a city which not only had no classical Islamic heritage like Medīna, but had also a majority of Christians (*Rūm*) among its populations; the strong Christian presence (and to a certain extent the Jewish) and the different Christian ethos in particular in the art of crafting one's self, were among the factors that prompted a change of attitude from Mu'āwiya, from the first caliphal period, in the sphere of *adab sulūk al-sulṭān*, the public behavior of the sultan towards his people. Second, Mu'āwiya transformed the caliphate into dynastic rule, insisting that the Muslims recognize his son Yazīd as successor; having had in mind a long rule for the Umayyāds, Mu'āwiya was anxious to create a “political style” for his family. Third, and this was the most important factor of all, Mu'āwiya knew from day one that he was ruling over a strongly divided *umma* and many blamed him for having weakened 'Alī's caliphate without even having given him the chance to stand out. Mu'āwiya had therefore to rule from Syria while knowing that Irāq was mostly hostile and the Hijāz divided over his caliphate. It was therefore a bad idea for him to “contain”

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<sup>31</sup> Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (Shihāb ad-Dīn Aḥmad), *al-'Iqdu al-Farīdu*, I (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubra, 1935), chapter 64 on the Khawārij, p. 347 on an estimate of their number.

<sup>32</sup> *al-'Iqdu*, *op. cit.*, 347.

<sup>33</sup> *al-'Iqdu*, *op. cit.*, 347.

<sup>34</sup> Damascus was indeed one of the very few alternatives left for Mu'āwiya: considering that he wanted a city outside Arabia because the Umayyād group was looked upon with great suspicion over there ('Uthmān's murder was a sign of this), and also outside the Baṣra-Kūfa axis because of the strong presence of Shī'ism and the followers of 'Alī, Mu'āwiya was left with only two alternatives: Syria and Egypt; but Egypt was conquered only in 658 and would have thus been an awkward choice.

the anger of the Shī'īs who were suffering from the loss of their beloved 'Alī while showing himself in a state of anger (as the Prophet often did, among others). Thus, with Mu'āwiya, a social use of anger as practiced in early Islam could not be that effective anymore: somehow, anger on behalf of God had to be replaced by something else.

Looking back at the Mu'āwiya and 'Alī feud with a distance of several centuries, the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldūn, known for his conceptualization of political power in terms of “group feeling” (*‘aṣabiyya*) and the process of subservience (*istitbā'*) of group feelings to a dominant one, noted that Mu'āwiya's “choice” was guided by a fear of dissolution of the group feeling of his own group, the Umayyāds:

Now, the nature of royal authority (*mulk*) requires that one person claim all the glory for himself and appropriate it to himself. It was not for Mu'āwiya to deny (the natural requirement of royal authority) to himself and his people. (Royal authority) was a natural thing that group feeling (*‘aṣabiyya*), by its very nature, brought in its train. Even the Umayyāds and those of their followers who were not after the truth like Mu'āwiya felt that. They banded together around him and were willing to die for him. Had Mu'āwiya tried to lead them on another course of action, had he opposed them and not claimed all the power for (himself and them), it would have meant the dissolution of the whole thing he had consolidated. It was more important to him to keep it together than to bother about a course of action that could not entail much criticism.<sup>35</sup>

It was not religion that brought the cohesiveness of the Arab tribes, but their “natural” (instinctual) group feeling; what religion gave them was a *purpose* for their political action and conquest policies. Thus, the early Muslim state instituted by the Prophet was structured around the *‘aṣabiyya* of the Qurayshs; this implied, as we have seen in the *ḥadīths*, a system of (political) hierarchies among the Companions and Emigrants and the tribal and clan factions of the Qurayshs. By transferring the capital to Damascus, into Christian held territory, and then transforming the Caliphate into a kingship, Mu'āwiya constructed a political system which was an outcome of a mixture of both elements, the tribal Arab and the politics of group feeling subservience,<sup>36</sup> and the kingship system of the Byzantines.

If Norbert Elias was right on the political and social implications of a “society of manners” created by a court system,<sup>37</sup> then it is fair to say that the new “manners” imposed by Mu'āwiya in his court came primarily from the political changes created by his feud with 'Alī, and more generally with the Shī'īs and Ḥijāzīs. Foremost among these new “manners” was the ambiguous notion of *ḥilm* which became associated with

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<sup>35</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah. An Introduction to History*, translated by Franz Rosenthal, edited and abridged by N.J. Dawood (Bollingen Series: Princeton University Press, 1967), 164.

<sup>36</sup> The rule of the Umayyāds in Damascus meant also that the old system of group feeling subservience centered on the Banū Hāshim clan of the Prophet, has shifted towards another subservience system in which the Umayyāds enjoyed the role of the dominant group which subserves. Ibn Khaldūn's point was that had the Umayyāds not passed to this position of dominance, they would have been subserved to other groups and they would have lost their political autonomy (“subservience,” in the sense of Ibn Khaldūn, does not necessarily imply a *social integration* with the dominant group feeling, but only a political one).

<sup>37</sup> Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

Mu‘āwiya’s character as the caliph of a politically divided *umma*.<sup>38</sup> Let us see first how Mu‘āwiya expresses in his own words, to his niece, the implications of the new policy of the Umayyāds:

My brother’s [‘Uthmān] daughter: people gave us [their] obedience (*tā‘a*) and we gave them security (*amān*), and we showed them forbearance (*ḥilm*) with anger in beneath (*ḥuluman tahtahu ghaḍab*), and they showed us obedience with grudge (*ḥiqd*) beneath, and every human being [keeps] his sword while he checks on the place of his supporters (*ansār*). If we break our commitment (*nakatha*) to them, they will do the same; and we don’t know whether this will be in our favor or not. Being the daughter of the caliph’s (*amīr al-mu‘minīn*) uncle is better (*khayr-un*) than an ordinary woman among common Muslims (*‘urḍu al-Muslimīn*).<sup>39</sup>

This was Mu‘āwiya’s Machiavellian tone. (It was reported by the historian Ṭabarī that Mu‘āwiya’s main political foe, ‘Alī, said of him: “You remember Kisrā and Caesar and their sharpness (*dahā’-ahumā*)? And now you’ve got Mu‘āwiya!”<sup>40</sup>) The difficulty in conceptualizing Mu‘āwiya’s notion of *ḥilm* is in being able to determine how much of the ethos he imposed upon himself was due to political conjunctures and the difficulties he encountered to impose himself, and how much goes back to deeper philosophical and personal convictions; the question is important from at least one aspect: to check whether the practice of *ḥilm* implied a zealous and righteous character or simply a Machiavellian *virtù*, that is, knowledge on how to handle the contradictions of politics and turn them to one’s advantage by creating an external facade—a mask—of good behavior. The nature of our Arabic sources, however, which by virtue of their writing are “expressive” rather than philosophical, does not fit with the type of behavior that we might describe as righteous, or ethical, or moral.

In its most straightforward meaning, *ḥilm* would mean patience, forbearance, longanimity, long-suffering, meekness, tolerance, indulgence; in addition to qualities linked to “reason” and “insight” (*tabaṣṣur*, *ta‘aqqul*) such as discernment and insight, prudence and discernment. But these qualities, all combined or taken separately, do not describe well enough what Mu‘āwiya’s *ḥilm* was. Let us look more closely at the passage quoted above from Ibn Qutayba. Mu‘āwiya acknowledges to his niece that the *ḥilm* of the Umayyāds had anger buried beneath it; this is because the obedience manifested by the majority of their “subjects” was only the surface of things: Mu‘āwiya saw only grudge (*ḥiqd*) beneath this layer of obedience. *Ḥilm* was not, however, a politics of shallowness, hiding something more important beneath, such as the anger and grudge of ordinary people. *Ḥilm* could not be explicated by means of the anger hiding beneath, nor is the truth about *ḥilm* revealed from anger. For Mu‘āwiya, *ḥilm* was simply a *tactics/strategy of survival* through which he contained the anger of his opponents and neutralized it *for a moment; he then had to start all over again*. Thus far, *ḥilm* implies *suspicion* of one’s rivals and even of one’s best friends. Asked whether it was a good idea to reveal to others

<sup>38</sup> On the notion of *ḥilm*, see Henri Lammens, “Le «ḥilm» de Mo‘āwia et des Omayyades,” in *Études sur le règne du calife omayyade Mo‘āwia I<sup>er</sup>* (Beirut: Université Saint-Joseph, 1908), 66–108.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Qutayba (Muḥammad ‘Abdullāh b. Muslim), *Kitāb ‘Uyūn al-Akḥbār*, I (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, a reprint from Dār al-Kutub al-Maṣriyya (Cairo), 1925), 14.

<sup>40</sup> Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, 264–5.

one's deepest secrets, Mu'āwiya replied without hesitation: "Whenever I gave my secret to someone, I felt a deep regret (*nadam*) and a lot of disappointment, but whenever I kept it to myself within my own ribs, I gained glory (*majd*) and good memory, sublimity (*sanā'*) and highness (*rif'a*)." Then asked whether he would not even share his secrets with his most loyal friend, 'Umaru b. al-ʿĀṣ, he replied, "Not even to al-ʿĀṣ," and he added: "What you've hidden from your enemy, you should also hide from your friend."<sup>41</sup> Thus the person who practices the *hilm*, the *hālim*, should be always suspicious of everyone and everything; he is someone connected to the others, whom he rules, by a logarithm of convenient trustworthiness which could be broken at any moment; Mu'āwiya was reported as saying: "I never use my sword whenever my whip (*sawf*) is enough, and never use my whip when my tongue is enough. And if there's only a hair left connecting me to people it wouldn't break. [...] Whenever they extended [the hair] I would keep it, and whenever they kept it I would extend it (*madadtu-hā*)."<sup>42</sup> The suspicious attitude of the *hālim* is one of a delicate equilibrium; one should avoid unnecessary violence, and the point is not to rule by force at any price, but to keep one's eyes—and ears—open at all times so that any opportunity for strengthening one's relationship to the people (the governed) is adequately seized. But the process is long and tedious, and, more importantly, it does not necessarily accumulate from one set of tactics to another.

By breaking the fundamental norm that gave priority to the Banū Hāshim, Mu'āwiya committed, in the eyes of his contemporaries, an unforgivable sin; it is as if Mu'āwiya had broken the divine order of things and replaced it with a socio-historical order. In a set of questions to the Banū Hāshim, Mu'āwiya, in his usual witty style, plays over the fundamental ambiguity of what the fundamental "rule of succession" was all about:

O Banū Hāshim, aren't you going to tell me about your claim for the caliphate [for yourself] while [excluding] Quraysh: How do you get it to yourself? Is it by accepting you (*riḍā*) or by a consensus (*ijtimā'*) around you without taking into consideration kinship factors (*qarāba*)? Or is it kinship without the group (*al-qarāba duna al-jamā'a*), or is it both? If it were only a question of accepting (*riḍā*) a group (*jamā'a*) without [taking] kinship (*qarāba*) [into consideration], I don't see that kinship [on its own] has established any right (*ḥaqq*) nor has it established any [political] authority (*wa-lā assasat mulk-an*). And if it were kinship without the group and its acceptance [that is, consensus over the (ruling) group], what was it that forbade then al-ʿAbbās, the uncle of the Prophet, and his inheritor (*wārith*), and the guardian of the pilgrims and the orphans, from requesting [the caliphate] considering that Abū Sufyān b. ʿAbd Manāf [father of Mu'āwiya] had already given him support? And if the caliphate were a combination of contentment (*riḍā*), together with group [feeling] and kinship, then kinship would only be part (*khaṣla*) of the Imāma [that is, the caliphate] and would not be exclusive to the Imāma as you have been claiming. We say: **The one who deserves it the most from Quraysh is the one towards whom people**

<sup>41</sup> Jāhiz, (Abū ʿUthmān ʿUmar b. Baḥr al-), *al-Maḥāsin wal-Aḍḍād* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Hilāl, 1991), 46.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *op. cit.*, 9.

**have stretched their hands through the *bay'a* system, and came with their feet to him because they desire him [...]**<sup>43</sup>

Mu'āwiya's main concern, the *political legitimacy* of the caliphate, will haunt him all his life and will keep the Umayyāds busy throughout their political career. Taking into consideration the three elements that have traditionally constituted the legitimacy of the caliphate—consensus, group feeling, and kinship—Mu'āwiya was concerned whether there was any hierarchy of priorities between those elements in a way that made sense of past and present history. In case kinship (*qarāba*) was the most important element in determining the right over the caliphate, then why Abū Bakr was chosen over al-'Abbās, the Prophet's uncle? Mu'āwiya was thus playing over what he saw as the “inconsistencies” of the caliphate in order to widen the traditional pool of candidates to Quraysh as a whole, proposing as solution to this unfair dilemma a fair play between potential candidates through the *bay'a* system.

Having broken the kinship norm, Mu'āwiya realized that his political legitimacy could not rest solely on much support from the Hashimites (and the followers of Ali for that matter). Hence the primordial importance of the *hilm* strategy at establishing this missing link with the Arab majority. The *hālim* could not show his anger publicly, as the Prophet did, because he was already confronted with a situation where too many people were angry and refusing his *bay'a*. Mu'āwiya will end up creating a complex give and take process: because *suspicion* is the main *état d'esprit* of the *hālim*, one needs to *test* his opponents and friends on a permanent basis, listen to their ideas, their thoughts, their complaints, dreams, and opinions, before he reveals anything to them. The available literature (which is post-Umayyad) shows many of Mu'āwiya's interlocutors—and the majority were political opponents whom he summoned to his palace in order to listen to—scourging him with insulting remarks and opinions about his past and present (his pagan past until the last moment, when he could not get away with it, and his betrayal of 'Alī). Mu'āwiya would sit down, listen carefully to his interlocutors, show no sign of anger or defeat, and once his visitor was on the verge of leaving, he would ask them whether they need any help. In sum, by playing the ideal host, Mu'āwiya thus instituted a *hermeneutics of suspicion*.

The Arabic literature of the ninth century and later periods, was full of stories of Mu'āwiya playing the host to his visitors with the mood portrayed above. One of these stories, involving 'Alī's messenger (*rasūl*) to Mu'āwiya, Ṣa'ṣa'a b. Ṣūhān, was reported at length by the historian Mas'ūdī and is worth examining here in the context of the narrative logic between anger and *hilm* and the political implications of the process in which the *hālim* finds himself involved.

It was Ṣa'ṣa'a who first suggested to 'Alī to send a messenger to Mu'āwiya, this “spoiled boy” (*al-ghulām al-mutarraf*), so that 'Alī would ask him for his *bay'a*. 'Alī, who likened the idea, summoned Ṣa'ṣa'a to play the role of the messenger, a mission which he reluctantly accepted after some hesitation.<sup>44</sup> Basing himself on directions from 'Alī, Ṣa'ṣa'a drafted a message (*kitāb*) and headed for its delivery. In Damascus, once he introduced himself to Mu'āwiya, the latter replied bluntly: “If in the *Jāhiliyya* and Islam

<sup>43</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *op. cit.*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-Dhahab wa-Ma'ādin al-Jawhar*, III (Beirut: Publications of the Lebanese University, 1970), 229ff.



the messengers were killed, I would have done so with you.” Mu‘āwiya then went on with an informal cross-examination to check whether ‘Alī’s messenger was a genuine or faked one. He thus interrogated him about his *nisba* and his links to Quraysh. When he heard the nice things Ṣa‘ṣa‘a had to say about Quraysh and the good qualities he found in them, Mu‘āwiya, in a rare moment of delight, thought that what the messenger was saying applied to *all* Quraysh, which prompted Ṣa‘ṣa‘a to rectify his speech: “What I said does not apply to you and your people (*qawm*) since you’ve gone away from the pasture and you’ve renounced (*‘adala*) the sweet waters.”<sup>45</sup> When Mu‘āwiya asked him to whom the nice sayings were meant, Ṣa‘ṣa‘a replied without hesitation: to Banū Hāshim, which prompted a request from Mu‘āwiya to his followers to take him immediately out; he was imprisoned with the few men who accompanied him.

Mu‘āwiya would adopt a tactics for which he would become known: a brutal conversational art where the two parties say what they have to say and clear up their problems to one another. Thus, Mu‘āwiya instead of incarcerating or keeping his opponents at a distance in order to force them towards an act of loyalty or *bay‘a*, would keep them close, then summon them to his dialogical sessions:

Mu‘āwiya: “I’ll praise you to God if you tell me rightly the truth: How do you see me as caliph?”

Ibn al-Kawwā’: “Had you not made your request to us, we wouldn’t have said anything because you’re a stubborn minded tyrant (*jabbār ‘anīd*) who doesn’t fear God while killing the best of people (*al-akhyār*). What we can say is that you’re leading a pleasurable life (*wāsi‘ al-dunyā*) but with a narrow afterlife (*al-ākhirā*); you’re rich but with no territory (*mar‘a*),<sup>46</sup> and you transform darkness into light and light into darkness.”

Mu‘āwiya: “God gave this capability to the people of Damascus (*ahl al-Shām*) which protect His creatures and His sacred places, unlike the people of Irāq who desecrate (*intahaka*) God’s holy places, who do what God has forbidden and who forbid us to do what God has permitted.”

Ibn al-Kawwā’: “O ibn Abī Sufyān, for each talk (*kalām*) there’s a reply, but we’re afraid of your tyranny (*jabarūt-ika*); had you set our tongues free, we would have covered the people of Irāq with tongues of mourning that God would have accepted; otherwise, we are patient until God decides [on our destiny] and sets us free.”

Mu‘āwiya: “Oh, no, God, we won’t set your tongue free (*nuṭliq laka al-lisānu*).”

Ṣa‘ṣa‘a: “You’ve talked, ibn Abī Sufyān, and you’ve said what you had to say, but it’s not a question of what you’ve just said; the caliph should not be the person who commands people by arrogance and humiliation, and who comes to power for the wrong reasons while lying and intriguing! And, I swear to God, you never had in Badr neither a pavilion (*midrab*) nor any intention (*marma*); you were someone [who could be described] as useless<sup>47</sup> and you were with your father

<sup>45</sup> Mas‘ūdī, *op. cit.*, 231.

<sup>46</sup> The implication here is that Mu‘āwiya’s power, wealth, and prestige, were not set on solid grounds, that is, the *bay‘a* from Quraysh as a whole.

<sup>47</sup> Ṣa‘ṣa‘a quotes here a proverb “*lā ḥulī walā sūrī*,” with the implication that his opponent was “useless” at Badr and elsewhere.

among the most insignificant (*lā fī al-‘iyari walā fī al-naḥīr*) who tried to receive the attention of God’s Messenger. But you are free person (*ṭalīq*) and the son of a free person; God’s Messenger had set you both free, so does the caliphate fit someone free?”<sup>48</sup>

Mu‘āwiya: “Had I not given priority to the saying of Abī al-Ṭayyib<sup>49</sup> who said:

*You’ve faced their ignorance with your forbearance and forgiveness*

*(Qābaltum jahl-uhum ḥilm-an wa-maghfira)*

*And forgiveness which is the result of strength is an act of generosity*

*(wal-‘afū ‘an qudra-tin ḍarbun mina al-karami),*

I would have killed you.”<sup>50</sup>

The above dialogical turn set between Mu‘āwiya and Alī’s men was confided within a narrative that loosely follows the forbearance technique outlined above. Mas‘ūdī, like Ṭabarī, constructs a history of early Islamic societies based on *isnāds*, which are narrated from the ideological needs of the times, in this instance, Abbasid absolutism. The above dialogue is structured around the territorial divisions of the Ḥijāz, Irāq, and Syria. Thus, while both parties had strong supporters in Irāq and Syria, the Ḥijāz, in its Qurayshī coloring in particular, was the subject of controversy. By reminding Mu‘āwiya that neither he nor his father had witnessed Badr, Ṣa‘ṣa‘a was in fact preparing for his next move, that Mu‘āwiya was a *ṭalīq*, that is, someone with no real “binds” and “obligations” to the Prophet; and by telling him that the Prophet has set you as a *ṭalīq*, this was a further reminder that it was the Prophet who had established the criteria that could not and should not be reversed by ordinary mortals like Mu‘āwiya.

What is of interest to us, however, is that Ṣa‘ṣa‘a and his friends were pushing forward some truths about the Prophet and the caliphate in particular; Mu‘āwiya, at some point (when talking about the sacred places in Irāq that were desecrated), did the same, but because he was never accepted as such by the traditional political and religious establishment, his questions and replies seemed a bit more offhanded. Particularly crucial for our topic was his final reply that “ignorance” (*jahl*) should only be faced with patience and forbearance (*ḥilm*), and that this was the greatest sign of strength and generosity. Hence, in addition to the qualities we have already associated with the notion of *ḥilm*, such as suspicion, the containment of one’s anger (*ḥilm*, in this respect, is like a “mask” that filters anger), and the discursive abilities (and good manners) one *shows* to his opponents, we should add that *ḥilm* was also a technique put forward to stop the destructive potentials of “ignorance.” How was then “ignorance” conceived at the beginning of the Umayyād period (at least as constructed from the lens of early Abbasid absolutism)? In the Islamic view of history, the pre-Islamic era is described, in the scriptures, as *Jāhiliyya*, that is, “ignorance.” The pagans were, like the survivors of Plato’s “allegory of the cave,” ignorant of the *other world* that was open to them, a world of virtues, and where only one God exists that guides them between evil and goodness. Thus, in Islamic discourse, the pagans *did not know*; but could they have known?

<sup>48</sup> The implication here is that the caliph should have been at least among the Companions and Emigrants of the Prophet in additions to all kinship and consensus priorities. Mu‘āwiya and his group were among the last pagans to convert to Islam.

<sup>49</sup> Unknown (poet?).

<sup>50</sup> Mas‘ūdī, *op. cit.*, 232–233.

By opting for the term *jāhil*, Mu‘āwiya was therefore using it in its double meaning. First, in its *Jāhiliyya* meaning, namely that Ṣa‘ṣa‘a and his friends were, like the pagans<sup>51</sup> of the pre-Islamic era, without any real (divine) knowledge of things and that they therefore ought to be forgiven for the stupidities they just uttered. There is, however, a second more “personal” and more intelligent use of *jāhil* (this was part of Mu‘āwiya’s cynicism: keep another meaning beneath the religious connotations of words). In fact, the *jāhil* was, in Mu‘āwiya’s eyes, someone who did not know *him*, who only looked at the surface of things and who kept with the traditional and religious views, that is, those of the Ḥijāz and Irāq. The *ḥālim*, by his capacity of hiding his anger and manifesting a great deal of forbearance—qualities unknown to Bedouin and Islamic ethics—sees himself as a superior creature;<sup>52</sup> no wonder then that the others cannot understand him: they belong to a new *Jāhiliyya* era, since they were among those who still looked at the Umayyāds with their traditional eyes of “ignorants.”

The story with Ṣa‘ṣa‘a is not over yet since the above conversation represents a “transcription” of one session only. In another session, Mu‘āwiya confidently goes on and asks Ṣa‘ṣa‘a about the people who do not particularly like him, questioning him about Baṣra, Kūfa, and the Ḥijāz. At one point Mu‘āwiya asks, “Who are the innocents and the immoral (*fasaqa*) that you’ve mentioned?,” and Ṣa‘ṣa‘a replied: “O Ibn Abī Sufyān, let the delusion (*khidā’*) point to the mask: ‘Alī and his followers are among the innocents and you and yours are the immoral,” a reply that immediately angered Mu‘āwiya and led him to change the subject (another tactics of his to contain a sudden anger). The interesting part comes towards the end when Ṣa‘ṣa‘a, realizing that Mu‘āwiya had avoided the Syrian subject, took his own risk and said: “[The people of Damascus] are the most obedient to a creature and the least obedient to the Creator,” and Mu‘āwiya replied that “the *ḥilm* of Abī Sufyān is the answer to you[r provocations]”; but to Ṣa‘ṣa‘a, it was only God’s order (*amr*) and his will that would put a halt to his cynical criticisms directed towards the Umayyād group.<sup>53</sup>

One has to wait, however, for the third (and final?) episode to watch the full effects of what might be called a *ḥilm*-strategy:

Mu‘āwiya: “The earth belongs to God and I am God’s caliph, so whatever I may take from God’s property (*māl*) is mine, and whatever I leave behind, I also have the right over.”

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<sup>51</sup> Mu‘āwiya himself, having converted to Islam “at the last moment,” was often accused of a hidden paganism beneath the Islam he was claiming he adopted as faith. Thus, in a well known story, Mu‘āwiya had accused Sa‘d b. ‘Ubāda, when he was ‘Alī’s employee in Egypt, of being “a Jew son of a Jew (*yahūdī ibn yahūdī*), and even the one who likes you most among the two parties will lay you off and abuse (*istabadda*) of you, while the one who dislikes you most will kill you,” to which Sa‘d replied: “You are a pagan son of a pagan (*wathanī ibn wathanī*), you came to Islam by force (*kurh-an*) and you left it by conviction (*taw’an*) [...],” reported in Mas‘ūdī, *op. cit.*, 205, and also with a slight variation in Jāhiz, *al-Bayān wal-Tabyīn* (Beirut: Dār Ṣa‘b, n.d.), 256.

<sup>52</sup> Even in terms of everyday manners such as eating, slipping, and sitting with his visitors, Mu‘āwiya wanted to break with Bedouin habits of sitting on the floor with the legs crossed. His longtime companion, ‘Umaru b. al-‘Āṣ, said that “I never saw Mu‘āwiya leaning on his left elbow, or crossing one leg over another, or closing one of his eyes [...],” see Jāhiz, *al-Bayān, op. cit.*, 363.

<sup>53</sup> Mas‘ūdī, *op. cit.*, 233-235.

Ṣa‘ṣa‘a: “Your soul (*nafs*) wishes you to transcend ignorance (*jahl*) so that you don’t sin (*ta’tham*).”

Mu‘āwiya: “Well Ṣa‘ṣa‘a, you’ve learned how to talk.”

Ṣa‘ṣa‘a: “Knowledge (*ilm*) is by learning, and the one who does not learn becomes an ignorant (*yajhal*).”

Mu‘āwiya: “Do you know how much you need so that I let you feel the unhealthiness (*wabāla*) of your condition?”

Ṣa‘ṣa‘a: “There isn’t much you could do about it. This is only in the hand of the One who does not leave a soul when its moment has come.”

Mu‘āwiya: “What is it that keeps us apart?”

Ṣa‘ṣa‘a: “What keeps a person apart from his own heart.”

Mu‘āwiya: “Your stomach has a gross appetite for talking in the same way that the stomach of the camel is ready for its barley.”

Ṣa‘ṣa‘a: “It is the stomach of the one who is still hungry which dilates, cursed by someone who was not convinced.”<sup>54</sup>

Did Ṣa‘ṣa‘a successfully reverse Mu‘āwiya’s *hilm*-strategy and made it seem like null and void? Was he really convinced that there was not much beneath Mu‘āwiya’s mask except a hypocritical and ignorant person? Or was he so taken by the *hilm*-strategy that he decided to make it his own, and by a sudden reversal, apply it on Mu‘āwiya himself? Was such dialogical setting (whose textualization came through only in the first century of Abbasid absolutism, at a time when the followers of Ali received a better acknowledgment) meant to point at Mu‘āwiya’s failure in trying to convince his opponents (and friends) *who he really was*? Was Mu‘āwiya unable to project his own image to others? Was Mu‘āwiya an exceptionally good communicator or was he a failure? There is no doubt that Mu‘āwiya could not convince Ṣa‘ṣa‘a of anything at all, and other dialogues with other political opponents (men and women) show a similar pattern: Mu‘āwiya was never that convincing towards his opponents and one wonders whether he was genuinely interested at getting any message through.<sup>55</sup> If we limit ourselves to the *content* of these “dialogues,” and other similar ones, we might miss the fact that they might not have been intended in the first place to transmit any message: not only there is nothing Socratic in their content and procedure, but they all obsessively dwell with the conflict between ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya, and everyone remains stubbornly rooted in their positions: what we have therefore, from one “dialogue” to the next are the *same* set of ideas that repeat themselves in a *different expressive pattern*. The participants know beforehand that they have nothing to *learn* from one another, but *they do have to perform well, and performance is both physical and linguistic*.

For Mu‘āwiya, performing well meant containing his anger despite all the insulting remarks he would receive from his opponent; to be close to his visitors while maintaining the distance of suspicion; and transmit the disease of suspicion to them so

<sup>54</sup> Mas‘ūdī, *op. cit.*, 235.

<sup>55</sup> Besides the stories and dialogues in Mas‘ūdī, see also Ṭabarī, *op. cit.*, III, 264–269, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqdu*, *op. cit.*, I, 211–220. There are no accounts in this literature on Mu‘āwiya receiving Christians even though it was well-known that he relied on many for his bureaucratic services, which raises the fundamental questions as to why all this literature remained silent on the question of the *Rūm* in general.

that they end up suspecting themselves and their beloved Imām; in short, Mu‘āwiya has to forcefully show all the good qualities of a *ḥālim*. We might be tempted to think that not much of all this has worked with Ṣa‘ṣa‘a and the dialogue was purely and simply a failure. Upon closer examination, however, we notice that the *ḥilm*-strategy worked so well in the first session that Ṣa‘ṣa‘a decided to adopt it himself and reverse the situation; if he was not particularly offended and concerned by Mu‘āwiya’s accusation, why should he have accused Mu‘āwiya later of the same thing—ignorance? Ṣa‘ṣa‘a’s “containment” and reversal of the *ḥilm*-strategy towards Mu‘āwiya himself is a sign of the success of the strategy rather than its failure: Wasn’t Mu‘āwiya’s aim provocation in the first place? By reminding his prisoners on two occasions that, *had he followed the tradition*, he should have killed them, the purpose was to demarcate the Bedouin past from the present in which a new ethics was taking shape, and this is another aspect of this type of posturing: to show what was novel for the Umayyāds and how they differed from the others who preceded them.

When historians like Ṭabarī and Mas‘ūdī narrate such stories (the “dialogues”), they do so on the basis that this was the “good” part (*maḥāsīn*) of the person whose stories they are narrating. The Ṣa‘ṣa‘a story was included by Mas‘ūdī in a chapter on Mu‘āwiya’s “ethics” (*akhlāq*) and was therefore added with the explicit intention that this was a demonstration of Mu‘āwiya’s brave-new-ethics. As readers, we, of course, do not have to accept the historian’s verdict on Mu‘āwiya’s character and we also have the right to be suspicious of stories that most probably were not quoted verbatim and were *constructed* later to fit within the newly established historical context of Abbasid absolutism. We are faced here with the same problem we encountered earlier with the *ḥadīths* as after-the-fact political and legal constructions; the fact that most of those “reports” and “stories” were, however, literary creations of later periods does not diminish from their importance and value; on the contrary, whatever their links to historical truth might be, they tell us—through their narrative constructions—what some of the major standing issues were and how they were perceived, albeit in periods later than the ones portrayed in the narration.

The same applies to other literary genres that are neither devoted to a particular topic nor explain what is it that ties up together the wide range of items that are included. The *al-‘Iqdu al-Farīdu* is one such example among several of a literature that became encyclopedic and diverse; thus, it is no surprise to find that the *‘Iqdu* devotes a short chapter of only few pages to *ḥilm*—one of the twenty-five “jewels” (*jawhara*) that shape the organization of the book into twenty-five chapters—in addition to several others recounting episodes of Mu‘āwiya with his guests. (One should keep in mind, however, that the author, Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih (860–940), was from Cordoba, and that Andalusia remained under Umayyād control amid the ‘Abbāsī revolution in 750.)

According to legend, Aḥnaf b. Qays was the one to have shown the most in terms of *ḥilm* qualities. Asked to define what *ḥilm* was all about, Aḥnaf replied—and this was his first attempt at an answer—that it is about “humiliation” (*al-dhull*) which you need to be “patient” about: “humiliation” (*dhull*) and “patience” (*ṣabr*) are therefore the first two qualities of a *ḥālim*; and Aḥnaf then added: “I am not a *ḥālim* but I practice the *ḥilm* (*lastu ḥālīm-an wa-lakinnī atahālam*).” Could this simply mean that the *ḥilm* is an ideal (like honesty and piety) that no one could match, that is, is beyond what the common of mortals could achieve? Or is it that *ḥilm* could only be actualized by the sultan (caliph)

while ordinary human beings can only practice the *ḥilm* without ever being able to fully actualize the qualities of a *ḥālim*? The next question addressed to Aḥnaf, on who is a better *ḥālim*, himself or Mu‘āwiya?, adds even more of a puzzle. Aḥnaf replied that the difference is so great that he could not be possibly compared to Mu‘āwiya: “Mu‘āwiya is capable and he therefore practices the *ḥilm*, while I practice the *ḥilm* without being capable (*Mu‘āwiya yaqdir fa-yaḥlam, wa-anā aḥlam wa-lā aqdir*).”<sup>56</sup> What is it that Mu‘āwiya is capable of and that Aḥnaf seems incapable of? I am here translating *qadira* with “being capable of,” but it could also mean, to be able, to be in a position to, to have or possess the ability or power, to be or become possible for, feasible for, to afford, to manage; and in the context of the Aḥnaf quote, Mu‘āwiya was “in a position to” practice *ḥilm* full-scale, while Aḥnaf practiced *ḥilm* without being in a position to do so: Does this mean that *ḥilm* needs political power to become fully actualized? We are told, in the same chapter of the *‘Iqdu*, that “there are three qualities which are only known [in conjunction] with three situations: *ḥilm* is only known at the moment of anger, and the courageous person during the war, and you only know your brother when you need him.” The essence of *ḥilm* reveals itself therefore in situations of anger, or at the moment of anger; and in the passage where Mu‘āwiya is discussing his polity with his niece, he tells her that *ḥilm* is like a layer that conceals and acts upon the anger hidden beneath: the sultan (or caliph) is the one who is really confronted with anger in all kind of unworthy situations; and such a confrontation is much harsher for someone of this status than for any ordinary men or women who might be occasionally confronted with situations of anger with no political consequences at all. Aḥnaf might be right therefore in not seeing his practicing of *ḥilm* as that much an extraordinary thing when compared to Mu‘āwiya—a sign also as to how much this kind of ethics denies the “universal” and creates barriers between individuals, groups, and the rulers and ruled.

Not only was *ḥilm* one of those qualities that not any mortal could satisfactorily pursue, but, more importantly, the *ḥilm* was an exercise of social status and power. We have already seen in the dialogue between Mu‘āwiya and ‘Alī’s companions, how much the debate required at the same time full attention and shrewdness in order to find *le mot juste*, and complete distance and control of one’s self as if nothing had happened, as if all the insulting remarks were not even worth replying to. In such debate among men (a woman cannot be a *ḥālim*), the purpose is to intimidate, humiliate, and destroy the self-esteem of your adversary *without showing any signs of anger*, as you need to humiliate your adversary who is angry at you and is insulting you by not showing your anger. It is as if you are telling your opponents that they are so ignorant that nothing matters anymore to the point that it is not even worth lowering yourself to their standards. Another aspect of *ḥilm* is closely connected to kin and clan strategies to the point that it would be reasonable to look at the *ḥilm*-strategy as unthinkable without all the clan factionalisms of that period: it is something that you deploy against the other tribe or clan and never against your own.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> *al-‘Iqdu, op. cit.*, 291.

<sup>57</sup> Henri Lammens, *op. cit.*, 74–75: “Tout dépend de la situation du «ḥālim», de sa position sociale: vertu, s’il se sent fort, indépendant; s’il est roi, à tout le moins, saiyd incontesté; faiblesse, si sa condition lui interdit de se faire craindre, de nuire surtout. Mais principalement le *ḥilm* doit savoir céder aux intérêts, aux caprices même de la parenté et du clan. Ce serait un crime de lèse-tribu de le pratiquer contre l’assentiment des siens.”

If *hilm* at its core implies a desire to “neutralize” your political opponent by humiliation, shrewdness, and intimidation, then *hilm*, even though specific as a notion to the early Umayyād period, was an evolution from the earlier Bedouin honor-strategies of the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras, and in this aspect, was very different from Greek, Roman, Christian, and medieval notions of “righteousness.” What a *ḥālim* was mainly concerned with was this deployment of a (non-violent) strategy against a political opponent than to be “right” in any sense of the term. During the ‘Abbāsī period, *hilm* lost a great deal of its political prestige and became a private virtue, the subject of a literature partially reflected in the texts we have been examining.

Heidegger made the point that the Greeks were not aware of *methodos* but only of *hedos*.<sup>58</sup> The *methodos*—that is, the “discourse on method”—which was inaugurated by Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, has ripped Western thought from its metaphysical and religious foundations and rooted it in the domain of “reason.” Arab–Islamic thought, which was neither *hedos* nor *methodos* oriented, and was obviously rooted within a religious dogma, found in the *ḥadīths* its *mode of expression*: the *ḥadīths* capitalized on a need for narrating individual and collective events within an expressive non-conceptual framework, constructing a set of normative rules of behavior out of what seemingly seems at first sight a broken set of mini-narratives. Even though the Prophet permanently stages himself at the center of a “heroic” action in which he saved himself and his people from paganism and “ignorance,” the aim of the *ḥadīths* is not “heroism” as such (divine intervention, at crucial moments, in the form of Qur’anic verses plays down on heroic actions): there is a lot of playfulness between “being an ordinary man” and “being a Prophet” which establishes the real purpose of the *ḥadīths* as a textual narrative whose primary aim is the focus on normative rules of behavior for all believers. Anger is one of those themes which helps in the mediation between the “ordinary man” and “God’s Messenger” (Muḥammad looks like one of those Greek gods which also shares human appetites while keeping some divine qualities): it is actually the *commonality and banality* of anger which transforms it into one of the thematic elements in the *ḥadīth* narrative of Muslim (much less with Bukhārī and much more with Ibn Ḥanbal). The protagonists, starting with the Prophet himself, make a social and political use of situations of anger in which they themselves, their relatives, and friends were involved. Those actors have to defend their honor and that of their kin, and adapt to the new ethos imposed by the new religion of Islam.

Ironically, Mu‘āwiya, who unlike the Prophet was not God’s Messenger, and who claimed to be *human all too human*, would create a placid strategy of distance with his opponents and people. But neither the *hilm* nor the old Bedouin and Islamic sense of honor have anything self-reflexive or “righteous” in them since the aim is to conquer the (mental) domain of the other by intimidation and humiliation: in this, they are an essential part of the political anthropology of Arab–Islamic cultures.

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<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Moscou aller-retour* (Paris: Éditions de l’Aube, 1995), 148–150.