Jamā'a vs. Mulk: Community-Centred and Ruler-Centred Visions of the Islamic Community

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The following—preliminary—thoughts are the result of ongoing research into concepts¹ related to ideas we may call—somewhat anachronistically—political, in an Islamic context.²

If we understand community both in its social and affective dimension,³ the concepts of *jamā'a* will further an analytical approach to the concept of community in an Islamic context. *Jamā'a* and other concepts are of greater importance to the analysis of community in Islamicate societies than the *umma*, often referred to as the most central term for community in Islamic contexts.

A caveat: since anything else would mean turning to the most common orientalist fallacy, taking a limited number of sources—see, for example, the article “*djamā'a*” in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*⁴—and claiming to be able to give a general idea of the Islamic term for community, this chapter is restricted to an exploration into the semantics of terms related to community, establishing a starting point for further research.⁵

- 1 In this chapter *concept* is used intentionally in a broad sense instead of other terms, taking account of the present indeterminacy of the semantic field of community in Arabic sources.
- 2 I owe my special interest in the concept(s) of *jamā'a* to the research by Riḍwān al-Sayyid and Ovamir Anjum. Riḍwān al-Sayyid is a renowned specialist in the history of Islamic ideas and has published several monographs and articles on the concept of community in the history of Islamic ideas trying a concept based on Qur'an and Hadith. Ovamir Anjum's studies focus on the epistemology of intellect/reason in classical Islam. His recent study on Ibn Taymiyya has an analysis of the intricate relation of the ideas of community and ruler.
- 3 See the contribution by Christina Lutter in this volume.
- 4 See the entry by Gardet, “*djamā'a*” in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, at the moment the third edition still has no entry on *djamā'a*.
- 5 Islamic scholars have been aware of the difficulties of defining terms. There is a vast corpus of literature on definitions of technical terms in many disciplines. For law see, e.g., Ibn Farhūn, *Kashf al-niqāb*.

Just taking one or two sources for an analysis would not be helpful given the background of a lack of knowledge of the concept to be discussed here. Worse, it would fall in the trap of producing another case of orientalist essentialism. We are leaving aside the crucial question for a thorough understanding of the terms used—at least—in the learned discourses in Islamicate societies: how do we cope with the inherent ambiguity?⁶

Umma as Community

The *umma*, as a community, is mentioned several times in the Quran; but at first we should note the use of *umma* in another document, the “Constitution of Medina”, to avoid a reading of terminology centred on the Quran, an often misleading approach producing a “Quranocentric” view of Islamicate cultures. This document was drawn up by Muhammad when he emigrated from Mecca to Medina to act as a mediator between competing local groups. Here again the *umma* is mentioned. Some scholars regard *umma* as a loose political confederation between several autonomous tribes,⁷ or a community of believers living in Medina (including at least certain groups of Jewish inhabitants in a *ḥilf*⁸ to other Medinese tribes), whose main object was to protect the territory of this city.⁹ Despite the disputes among scholars as to the interpretation of parts of this document and its significance, there is a shared opinion on several points: the covenant aimed at maintaining the previous tribal groupings, agreements and ties. It was a contract for defence against an external enemy, uniting new Muslims, Jews and pagans. While each group continued to preserve its blood ties and its social and religious laws, they were bound to mutual aid and support in the case of war against an external enemy.

In its deployment of the term *umma*, the Constitution of Medina clearly reflects Qur’anic understandings of this term. It should be pointed out that the Qur’an uses the term *umma* not only in reference to the community of Muslims but to the communities of Jews and Christians as well, and specifically to refer to the righteous contingent within distinctive

6 Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*.

7 According to Serjeant, “The Sunna Jāmi’ah”.

8 A form of alliance often cemented by marriage ties (for the context see Ibrahim, “Social and Economic Conditions”).

9 Rubin, “The ‘Constitution of Medina’”.

religious communities. Thus, righteous Muslims constitute an *umma wasaṭan* ("a middle community", Qur'an 2:143) while righteous Jews and Christians constitute an *umma muqtaṣida* ("a balanced community", Qur'an 5:66) and *umma qā'ima* ("an upright community", Qur'an 3:113). The Constitution's emphasis on righteousness and upright behavior as constituting the principal requirements for membership within the Medinan community is thus shaped by the Qur'anic perspective on *umma*.¹⁰

The development in the following decades of early Islamic history may be summarized as the gradual emergence of the idea of a unified community of believers, based on Quranic sayings.

Following Ridwān al-Sayyid¹¹ I would assume that by the time of the rule of the second successor of the prophet Muhammad, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644 CE), the concept of the unitarian *umma* had been perfected based on three principles: the common ownership of land by all Muslims, the common ownership of all booty during the period of expansion of the Islamicate empire, and the necessity to follow the call to jihad.¹²

Misreading Umma

A brief remark about the contemporary or modern understanding of the concept of the *umma* may help to avoid conceptual confusion. The *umma* is reformulated in modern Islam as a counter-institution constituted against global colonialism, then capitalism, then the globalized situation we are living in.¹³ Today we may characterize the *umma* as a globalized nationalism based on religious assumptions although there is no legal concept of this kind of Islamic *umma*¹⁴ and even the transnational practice of Muslims today cannot always be seen as related to this community.¹⁵ The *umma* as a concept of a unified body of believers is belied in the day-to-day practice of Muslims at least until

10 Afsaruddin, *The First Muslims*, 7. The transliteration (and italics) is adapted to the system used in this chapter.

11 Al-Sayyid, *al-Umma*.

12 Technical terms borrowed from Arabic are not transliterated.

13 Following Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus*, 47 and *passim* and id., "Die Politisierung", here 110.

14 Schulze, "Citizens of Islam".

15 E.g., Schmidt, "The Transnational".

the 19th century.¹⁶ As Nile Green in his seminal book on Islam in Bombay (and beyond) in the 19th century stated:

In its cosmopolitan environment, different Muslims protected their customary community boundaries; and in the period with which we are dealing, the idea of an Indian Muslim “nation” or a collective Pan-Islam was still a minority discourse of the privileged and few. [...] In such circumstances, Pan-Islamic visions of a single *umma* under Allah were insubstantial indeed, and visions that, in circumstances of increasing religious production, comprised only one of many Islams on offer.¹⁷

We have to add that the idea expressed by Hamilton A.R. Gibb: “The key word for everything that has to do with Islamic culture is *Umma*, Community”,¹⁸ is a fine example of Orientalist over-simplification trying to grasp one of the many essences ascribed to Muslim cultures so dear to the traditional Orientalist discourse. Moreover, the stress on the concept of *umma* as the main concept of community in an Islamic context has to be regarded as another example of backreading contemporary concepts of intra-Muslim discussions. For a better understanding of community another approach is needed:

The early Islamic political vision [...] has the following characteristics: (1) It places the *umma*, the community of all the believers, as the recipient of the Prophet’s mission to humankind; one Qur’anic term to refer to this mission is *al-ʿahd*, keeping of God’s covenant. (2) It requires rendering qualified obedience to authorities from among themselves. (3) It requires *shūrā*, the practice of participation and consultation in collective affairs, and (4) by corollary, considers the Community’s collective affairs in need of rational human management. Finally another corollary of the Community’s inheritance of the mission and God’s covenant is that (5) this vision considers the caliph answerable to those he rules, the Community. I will name this the Community-centered vision of Islam, that is, a vision of ordering authority and responsibility of Islam’s mission [...] in such a way that the entirety of the Community, rather than a ruler, particular institution, or lineage stands atop the hierarchy of legitimation.

16 Further research on the modern history of concepts related to community is needed.

17 Green, *Bombay Islam*, 6.

18 Gibb, “The Community”.

This community, of course, is ruled by a successor of the Prophet but one who does not inherit the infallible authority of the Prophet.¹⁹

Anjum²⁰ thus outlines the framework for our understanding of community in the early, classical, and middle²¹ period of Islamicate societies, especially the dialectics of community-centred and ruler-centred visions of Islam.

Community as Jamā'a

This community is called *jamā'a*.²² The Arab lexicographic tradition defines *jamā'a* as a collectivity of humans—and even of non-humans.²³ The term was applied, we are told, for example to tribal groups (*jamā'āt*) in early Islamic time,²⁴ but it is not Quranic, although may be reconstructed in the Quran.²⁵ We will have to look into the history of this concept and the related concept of *mulk* to understand the historical process that was the context of *jamā'a*.

Jamā'a the Organized Umma

As Ridwān al-Sayyid puts it, the ideal of Islamic unity prevalent in early decades of Islamic history—making it possible, for example to take moral excellence into account as a criterion for the decision on who will be the successor of the prophet—turned into the ideal of a unity of emperorship (of both Byzantine

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- 19 Anjum, *Politics*, 61–62; for another analysis of hierarchy and egalitarianism in Islamic thought cf. Marlow, *Hierarchy*.
 - 20 Ovamir Anjum's studies focus on the epistemology of intellect/reason in classical Islam. His recent study on Ibn Taymiyya has an analysis of the intricate relation between the ideas of community and ruler.
 - 21 The periodization of the history of Islamicate societies follows a modified versions the periods proposed by Marshall G.S. Hodgson in his seminal work *The Venture of Islam*: the early period (until 692), the classical period (until 945), and the middle periods (until 1503), a periodization much more in consonance with the logic of the development of Islamicate societies (Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* 1 and id., *The Venture of Islam* 2).
 - 22 For the traditional Islamic studies view see the article in the Encyclopedia of Islam by Gardet, "ḏjamā'a".
 - 23 Al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-'arūs*, 451 and Abū 'Ubayd, *al-Gharīb*, 908.
 - 24 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, 1:680.
 - 25 Al-Sayyid, *al-Umma*, 21–24.

and Persian origin).²⁶ This meant the community-centred view of the early caliphate (*khilāfa*) turned into kingship (*mulk*); this implies a turn away from community (*jamāʿa*) to obedience (*ṭāʿa*) to the ruler.²⁷

The role of the *jamāʿa* at this moment of transformation of the structure of early Islam is central. During the internal strife about the succession of the prophet under the reign of ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān (d. 656) and ʿAlī b. a. Tālib (d. 661) this internal dissent was seen as a danger to the existence of the Islamic community. This internal strife was called divide, Arab. *furqa*.²⁸ The concept regarded as being able to close this divide was called *jamāʿa*, community or unity.²⁹ This idea was based, among other things, on traditions from the prophet saying: “*Jamāʿa* is a mercy [of god] and internal strife is a punishment”.³⁰

The first dynasty after the four successors of the Prophet, the Umayyads (r. 661–750), reconstructed this idea during the early and beginning classical period. They, and especially the poets singing their praise, used *jamāʿa* to identify the people who were obedient to the Umayyad rulers,³¹ taking up the concept Ridwān al-Sayyid mentioned: *ṭāʿa*, obedience. The Umayyad instrumentalization of *jamāʿa* led to an appropriation of the concept by opposition movements, especially in Iraq and the eastern parts of the Islamic empire. They projected the concept back into the time before the Umayyad takeover and assigned it to a group of companions of the prophet speaking out for unity of the Islamic community.³² This identity was projected back into the time of the Prophet. We read in reports about his farewell sermon in the last period of his life that he had said: “Know that your bosoms will not be filled with rancour [if your acting is based on] three habits: acting sincerely towards God, giving

26 Referring to companions of the prophet like Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar, or ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. a. Bakr when asked to swear the oath of allegiance to the successor of the first Umayyad caliph (al-Sayyid, *al-Umma*, 151).

27 Ibid., 151.

28 Playing with the similarity to *firqa*, group, since, in Arabic script; the two are indistinguishable when not vocalized. The concept of *firqa* is related to the idea that at the end of time there will be a “saved group” (*firqa nājiyya*) (van Ess, *Der Eine*, 22). Another semantic subfield of the root *f-r-q*—emerging during the first Islamic centuries—is *farqa* or *farīq* denoting politico-military factions.

29 Van Ess, *Der Eine*, 22.

30 http://library.islamweb.net/hadith/display_hbook.php?hflag=1&bk_no=1849&pid=908991 (accessed March 2, 2014).

31 Van Ess, *Der Eine*, 24–25.

32 Ibid., 26–28.

honest counsel to those in command, and keeping to the community of the Muslims (*luzūm jamāʿat al-muslimīn*).³³

Until the end of the first century of the Islamic era and the beginning of the second century, the period of transition between the early and the classical period, there are several concepts denoting religious and other groupings among Muslims or forms of community:

- group of beings and objects (*jamāʿa*)
- tribal group (*jamāʿa*)
- obedient *jamāʿa*
- oppositional *jamāʿa*,

and the *umma*³⁴—but which was not as important as we may think. There are other concepts like group/community (*milla*), variants/groups/communities (*ṣinf*; pl. *aṣnāf*), group/tribal group (*tāʾifa*), or group/faction (*firqa*). This is not the place to discuss every concept in detail, a task to be accomplished in future research, but we have bear in mind that these concepts were taken up by authors until the end of the middle periods and were the common point of reference for the learned discourses.³⁵ To give an overview over at least one concept of community, the *jamāʿa*, we have to describe it in the context of the relation of the community-centred to the ruler-centred vision (Anjum) to understand the role of the community.

Ruler-Centred Political Vision

Let us return to the rulers, more precisely the ruler-centred political vision in the last part of the early period. The community-centred vision, “when brought to bear on political life, comprised two parts”.³⁶ One was the task of elaborating on the divine message, making it accessible to the community and, if necessary, criticizing the way the members of the community may try to live up to

33 Al-Wāqidi, *al-Maghāzī*, Part 1, 592.

34 See the remarks by Heiss/Hovden in this volume.

35 All the authors mentioned lived in the Mashriq and Egypt. A case study claiming to exemplify a known idea of community in Islamicate societies would be worthless, since there is no shared notion based on a thorough knowledge of sources. So this would be a single, isolated case without any power to explain differences of meaning in different historical situations.

36 Anjum, *Politics*, 63.

it. This may prove that there are—maybe many—people who are more pious than the ruler. The other task is the mission to spread the message to the rest of humankind. In Umayyad times—at least in some regions—this meant military jihad at the frontiers.³⁷ This necessitated the unity of the community and an authority, the authority of the ruler. We may sense a tension between the two tasks and will look into the results of this tension, to quote Anjum again:

Inasmuch as this vision remained dependent on the piety and integrity of those in authority rather than enshrined in robust institutions, its inherent tension could readily yield another vision in which a ruler became the center and the Community's rights were left to the mercy of the ruler's pious scruple.

... During Mu'āwīya's reign (661–80) [this process led] to a readjustment of the *modus operandi* and vision of the caliph's office. The transfer of the caliphate to Damascus is described in idealist sources as the transformation of caliphate to kingship. [...] This change was registered by early Muslims as the loss of *shūrā*, which remained the most important weapon in the armor of the critics of the Umayyads. Some even saw it as the end of the caliphate itself and as the advent of worldly kingship (*mulk*) in Islam. [...] The Umayyads could lay claim to many redeeming qualities, the most important of which was their ability to hold together an increasingly volatile empire.³⁸

During Umayyad times the representatives of community-centred vision focused on the reinstatement of the mechanisms of consultation, Arab. *shūrā*.³⁹ However, the predominant attitude of the speakers of the community—or later on communities—was political quietism and neutralism. The classical period of the rule of the Abbasids (750–1258) furnished further reasons for this attitude. The ruler-centred vision of the Abbasids is different from the vision of the Umayyads, so a reconfiguration of this vision took place, as in the case of the community-centred vision. “As the community could no longer be maintained as a united political body, the theoretical part of its job was transferred to the sacred Sunna, and the living part to a minority of every generation who embodied the Sunna”.⁴⁰

37 Bonner, *Jihad*.

38 Anjum, *Politics*, 63–64.

39 A thorough discussion of the concepts of *shūrā* is still a desideratum.

40 Anjum, *Politics*, 83–84.

This minority of the community made compromises with the Abbasid ruler, saying that God has appointed the rulers to be caliphs.⁴¹ The ruler-centred vision clearly expresses the prerogatives of the rulers. In the years to come the Abbasid rulers had to accept a tenuous status quo and accept the status of the Muslim *jamā'a* and its representatives, i.e., the Muslim scholars (and other leaders), as an embodiment of normativity. This story, however, tells only half of the truth, the theoretical much more than the practical one. The *jamā'a* in this view remains on the theoretical level, not able to be expressed in politics and political institutions. "The consequences of giving up the Community's claims amounted to a loss of normative agency in the political realm".⁴² What remains is to discuss the role of *jamā'a* at other levels of Islamicate societies.

The Histories of Jamā'a

Did the concept of *jamā'a* work at a practical level? At this stage we have to look at the various histories of the concept of community in the first centuries of the history of the Muslim communities. We have defined *jamā'a* as the organized form of the *umma*.

To trace this idea we will look into two genres of early Islamic sources: the *Maghāzī* of al-Wāqidi on the battles of Muhammad and works on the biography of Muhammad (the *Sīra* of Ibn Hishām and *Zād al-ma'ād* of Ibn Qayyim), both written in the classical period. Scholars in the middle periods and later on constantly refer to both works.

In the *Maghāzī* of al-Wāqidi, a book describing the battles fought by Muhammad, *jamā'a* is mentioned several times. 'Utba b. Rabī'a, a leading member of the Quraysh in Mecca, is called their chief (*sayyiduhā*) and the chief of the community (*sayyid al-jamā'a*), i.e., the confederation of the Quraysh.⁴³ In another story in al-Wāqidi the Quraysh were warned against a person who is creating strife (*mufarriq*⁴⁴) in the community (*jamā'a*) of the Quraysh.⁴⁵ The antagonism of *furqa* (aroused by the *mufarriq*) and *jamā'a*, a united community, mentioned by Ridwān al-Sayyid thus had pre-Islamic precursors.⁴⁶

41 Abū Yūsuf, *K. Al-Kharāj*, following Anjum, *Politics*, 84.

42 Anjum, *Politics*, 92.

43 Al-Wāqidi, *al-Maghāzī*, Part 1, 30–31.

44 Thus creating the *furqa*, division, mentioned above.

45 Al-Wāqidi, *al-Maghāzī*, Part 1, 42.

46 The article by Gardet, "djamā'a", does not mention any pre-Islamic occurrence of the term. Even arguing for a backreading of the term will not eliminate the fact of the

A more general concept is *jamāʿa* as a sub-group. In *Zād al-maʿād* by Ibn Qayyim, a collection of biographical traditions on Muhammad, we read: “there was a group of Jews (*jamāʿa min al-yahūd*) with a group of Arabs (*jamāʿa min al-ʿarab*) attached to them”,⁴⁷ “Nawfal b. Muʿāwīya al-Daylī⁴⁸ moved out with a group (*jamāʿa*) of the Banī Bakr”,⁴⁹ or “with them moved out a group of the hypocrites (*jamāʿa min al-munāfiqīn*)”.⁵⁰ In the *Sīra* of Ibn Hishām Muhammad entered a Jewish “assembly house with a group of Jews (*jamāʿa min yahūd*) [in it] and called upon them to follow Islam. Al-Nuʿmān b. ʿAmr and al-Hārith b. Zayd asked: Oh, Muhammad, what is your religion (*dīn*)?”⁵¹ It is the ‘creed of Ibrahim’ (*millat Ibrāhīm*)⁵² and his religion”.⁵³

Coming back to the united community. The companions of the prophet are collectively seen as *jamāʿa*. Derived from this idea, the Sunni Muslim community was called *ahl al-sunna waʿl-jamāʿa*, the people of prophetic custom and communal solidarity.

Its full appellation—*ahl al-sunna waʿl-jamāʿa* (“the people of prophetic custom” [Sc. those who follow the practices of Muhammad] “and of communal solidarity”)—underscores their basic accommodationist outlook which strove to contain dissension as much as possible in order to preserve the unity of the Muslim community.

It appears that by the mid 9th century, a less hard-line ʿUthmani position that was willing to include ʿAlī as one of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, and a considerably watered-down ʿAlid position that was willing to settle for third place for ʿAlī were fast finding niches for themselves within the broad platform of the Sunnis-in-the-making. Membership within the *ahl al-sunna* began to

existence of the term in the first decades of the existence of the Islamic community and the fact that it was understood.

47 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Zād*, 354.

48 Owing to the limited scope of this article, it is not possible to give full details of all those mentioned.

49 Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Zād*, 395.

50 Ibid., 230.

51 I.e., cultic practice.

52 Here *millat* means a group united by a common creed. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, 205, writes: “The Qurʾān therefore instructs Muhammad and the believers to regard themselves as neither Jews nor Christians, but a community distinct from both, followers of the ‘creed of Abraham’ (*millat Ibrāhīm*); and Abraham is described as a *hanīf*, a *muslim* (that is, one surrendered to God), not one of the idolaters. The religion of Abraham is simply the pure religion of God, since all the prophets have received in essentials the same revolution”.

53 Ibn Hishām, *Sīrat*, 307.

broaden at this juncture in history to include all those who accepted the caliphate of the four Rāshidūn caliphs, with Abū Bakr and ‘Umar inevitably ranked as first and second in order of excellence while some compromise was allowed (and even expected) in the ranking of ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī relative to one another. The 11th-century scholar ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 1037) indicates as much when he describes the Sunnis as those who showed preference for Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and those who came after him, even though they differed with regard to the respective merits of ‘Alī and ‘Uthmān.

A clear and more detailed hierarchy of merit for the Companions of the Prophet had emerged by the late 10th to early 11th century. This is apparent in the following statement by al-Baghdādī:

The *ahl al-sunna* are universally agreed that the most excellent of men after the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, are Abu Bakr, then ‘Umar, then ‘Uthmān, then ‘Alī, then the rest of the ten [Sc. the ten Companions assured of heaven by the Prophet], then the rest of the people of Badr, then the rest of the people of Uhud, then the rest of the people of allegiance (*ahl al-bay’a*), then the rest of the Companions.⁵⁴

Other forms of community emerge in Islamic history, often related to specific religious or professional orientations. These forms of community often have a specific name,⁵⁵ but refer implicitly or explicitly to the concept of *jamā’a*.

We may notice the emergence and stabilization of a phenomenon called traditionally the schools of law,⁵⁶ Arab. *madhāhib* (*madhhab*), or, in my opinion⁵⁷ more apt: guilds of law, i.e., at the end of the classical period and the beginning of the middle period, the organization of teaching and training scholars and to integrate them into the “scholastic community” to find ways of earning their living. These guilds of law fit our concept very well, since their internal modes of discussion, the fight over symbolic capital are—to a certain extent—independent of political control. Since the consensus of the scholarly communities (*ijmā’*) is at the core of the methodological apparatus of these guilds, we may consider them as another case of *jamā’a*.⁵⁸ The guilds are

54 Afsaruddin, *First Muslims*, 57–59.

55 I leave aside terms like *banū*, “sons of”, e.g., the *banū Sāsān*, for the subcultures of thieves, beggars, etc.

56 Bearman, *The Islamic school of law*.

57 Referring to George Makdisi’s term *guilds of law* (see below).

58 Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges* and id., “Guilds”.

constructed—or “done”—by regular interactions and exchanges of the members thus creating a communal identity.⁵⁹

This argument may be strengthened by the fact that the concept of *madhhab* has been transferred to other non-juridical phenomena of community building. The most important may be the “school of passionate love” (*madhhab-i ʿishq*) dominant in Persian poetry for a long time since the beginning of the middle period, denoting a group of poets emerging over time who shared a common tradition, world view and way of living.⁶⁰

However, “lines were not always drawn according to *madhhab* identity”⁶¹ and debates “often tended to go beyond the boundaries of the *madhhab*”.⁶² Debates often occurred within the boundaries of the *madhhab*, not only as inter-*madhhab* polemics.⁶³ And then the *jamāʿa* emerges again as the appropriate term to identify the intra-*madhhab* subgroups. A pertinent case is the *jamāʿa* of the scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), today more influential than during his lifetime and the centuries after his death. As Bori puts it,⁶⁴

Ibn Taymiyya, like other scholars, had his own “circle” (*jamāʿa*) of faithful associates who honoured him, obeyed him and who at times were subject to public humiliation on his behalf. Contemporary sources use the term *jamāʿa* [...] to indicate the group of people who most closely affiliated with Ibn Taymiyya. This collective term refers both to intellectual association with Ibn Taymiyya (i.e., disciples who studied with him, shared his doctrines and were involved in the transmission of his works), and to those individuals who accompanied the Shaykh in public and shared his penchant for activism, especially on his excursions against popular religion.

The term *jamāʿa* is also used by Ibn Taymiyya and his brothers when writing letters to each other or to his disciples.⁶⁵

We see here that *jamāʿa* is used for a “circle” of disciples transcending *madhhab* boundaries since among the “faithful associates” were members of several

59 See the chapter by Christina Lutter in this volume.

60 For the case of Hafiz see the contributions in Lewisohn, *Hafiz*.

61 Bori, “Ibn Taymiyya”, 24.

62 Ibid.

63 Leaving aside the fact that the boundaries were not as fixed as is often assumed (see Lohler, *Islamisches*).

64 For recent research on Ibn Taymiyya's role in the history of Islamic thought cf. Rapoport/Ahmad, eds., *Ibn Taymiyya*.

65 Bori, “Ibn Taymiyya”, 25; there are similarities of this understanding of *jamāʿa* to that of the Sufi *tariqa* mentioned below.

madhhabs. This understanding of *jamā'a* as a group of like-minded people following the same set of ideas and a master they are affiliated to can be enlarged to describe non-specific groups throughout Islamic history. To give just one later example, the leading Syrian scholar 'Abd al-Ghaniyy al-Nabulūsī (d. 1731)⁶⁶ writes in his treatise on the Mevlevi Sufi order: "The gathering of the Mevlevis comprise a group of Muslims (*jamā'a min al-muslimīn*) and a group (*tā'ifa*) of various people with various intents and different aims".⁶⁷

This may lead us to another concept of community available in Islamic contexts, the Sufi order, or *ṭarīqa* (pl. *ṭuruq*), particular "initiatory ways" associated with the teachings of an eponymous Sufi master reflexively "passed down" by his spiritual, and in no small number of cases blood, heirs to their own confraternity of disciples,⁶⁸ emerging over the course of the sixth/twelfth and early seventh/thirteenth centuries. The discussion of this concept lies outside the scope of this paper.

Turning back to the *jamā'a*, we may regard the congregation of the Friday prayer, the *jum'a* prayer, also called *ṣalāt al-jamā'a*, community prayer, to be one of the most common references when talking about *jamā'a*.⁶⁹ As such we may see the *jamā'a* as an embodiment of the *umma*, an organized form, visible every Friday (see below).

A Case Study

One way to establish the identity of a guild of law as a community is to write a history of the members of this guild, a way to "do" community. This history of the generations of scholars is called in Arabic *ṭabaqāt*, classes. We will take one of this *ṭabaqāt* works as a case study to understand how the concept of *jamā'a* is understood in the context of a specific *madhhab*, the Hanbalite guild of law. We will take as the source for this case study the *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥanābila* of the famous Hanbali author Qādī Abū Ya'la b. Al-Farrā' (d. 1065) flourishing at the beginning of the middle periods when the guilds of law started to reach their fully institutionalized form.⁷⁰

66 Akkach, *'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi*.

67 Al-Nābulūsī, *al-'Uqūd al-lu'lu'yya*, 65.

68 Ohlander, *Sufism*, 1.

69 E.g., al-Bājī, *Muntaqā*, 207: "the time at which the leading scholars recommend performing the community prayer."

70 "Abū Ya'la was one of the most capable teachers and prolific authors of the Hanbalite school, attracting to his study circles a great number of students early in his career and until he died at 78 years of age". (Makdisi, "Autograph Diary", 11)

We find the following meanings of *jamāʿa* (leaving aside the general idea of “a group”):

- a group united by belief: “He was an innovator (*mubtadiʿ*), leaving the community (*jamāʿa*)”.⁷¹ “He is an innovator, contradicting and separating himself from the community (*jamāʿa*)”.⁷² “He contradicted the *sunna* and separated himself from the community (*jamāʿa*)”.⁷³
- the believing⁷⁴ Sunni Muslims (*ahl al-sunna waʿl-jamāʿa*).

In the biographical entry on the Hanbali scholar al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī al-Barbahārī (d. 941), called a manifest demagogue by Michael Cook,⁷⁵ the concept of *jamāʿa* is frequently mentioned. This may be due to his identitarian worldview.

We find the following meanings of *jamāʿa*:

- an indication of belonging: “There was no Friday prayer (*jumʿa*), no community (*jamāʿa*), no two feasts”.⁷⁶
- a corpus of knowledge: “He studied the knowledge on the prophetic customs and the community (*jamāʿa*) [of the companions of the prophet];”⁷⁷ “without proof from the prophetic custom and [the custom] of the community (*jamāʿa*) [of the companions of the Prophet];”⁷⁸ “the consensus (*jamāʿa*), on what the companions of the Prophet [...] agreed upon in the caliphate of Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān”.⁷⁹
- community of companions: “Anyone who rejects the *sunna*, contradicts the truth (*ḥaqq*), and the custom [of the companions of the prophet] (*jamāʿa*) and who declares the whims of humans to be licit is more dangerous for this community (*umma*) than the devil”.⁸⁰ Anyone who rejects these ideas is “a

71 Abū Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 14.

72 Ibid., 16.

73 Ibid., 21.

74 E.g., ibid., 19 and 238.

75 Cook, *Forbidding Wrong*, 103.

76 The feast of sacrifice at the end of Ramadan and the feast of breaking the fast, communal events indicating the belonging to the community of the believers. Abū Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 333.

77 Ibid., 333.

78 Ibid., 334.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 335.

follower of the *sunna* and the community (*jamā'a*) [of the companions of the prophet]".⁸¹

We see the concept of *umma* placed at a higher, ideal,⁸² non-practical level of this discourse reminding us that *jamā'a* was more important than *umma* at a practical level. Taking *umma* as the central term risks theologizing the practical logic symbolized by *jamā'a*.

- community of praying believers: "anyone who leaves the Friday prayer (*ṣalāt al-jum'a*) and the community (*jamā'a*) [of the people praying]".⁸³
- being together: "If you see a man being engaged in fulfilling his religious duties together with (*fī jamā'a*) the ruler and others, you may know he is a follower of the *sunna*, God willing. If you see a man who is lax in fulfilling the religious duties in a group (*fī jamā'a*) even with the ruler being part of it, you may know, he is a follower of his whims".⁸⁴
- community and communal solidarity: "a follower of the *sunna* and the perfect community (*jamā'a*) in which communal solidarity (*jamā'a*) was perfected".⁸⁵
- the eschatological group: "It is the saved group (*firqa nājiyya*), the just community (*jamā'a ādila*), and the victorious group (*tā'ifa manṣūra*) until the day of resurrection".⁸⁶

Here we can see the complex structure of the semantic field of *jamā'a*. Whatever the community is called and what is meant by *jamā'a*, throughout the first centuries of the history of Islamicate societies we notice a reconfiguration of its role in relation to the rulers, the sphere of *mulk*.

Political Elites and Communities

We have once again to return to the dichotomy between political elite and religious scholars as an epitome for the non-elite elements of society:⁸⁷

81 Ibid.

82 See the remarks by Heiss/Hovden in this volume.

83 Abū Ya'lā, *Tabaqāt*, 337.

84 Ibid., 338.

85 Ibid., 341.

86 Ibid., 470.

87 For a detailed classification of societal groups in the perspective of the support of successors of the throne see Ibn al-Khatīb (in Hoenerbach, "Was verspricht sich").

Although the loss of political community and sensibility is ubiquitous in the legal culture of the classical period, perhaps few anecdotes bring out its implications as dramatically as the following one. It concerns the chief judge of Cairo, the great Shāfiʿī jurist, an emblem of piety and speaking truth to power, ʿIzz al-Dīn b. ʿAbd al-Salām al-Sulamī (ca. 577/1181–660/1262) [...] When al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb b. Kāmil Najm al-Dīn (d. 647), the grandson of Saladin who had ruled over Syria as a governor, acceded amidst internecine warfare to the throne of the Ayyubid dynasty, he brought along to Cairo the slave army he had built during his governorship and distributed governmental offices among them. The biographer Subkī tells us that the pious, daring, and learned chief justice, ʿIzz al-Dīn, in keeping with the rules of the Shāfiʿī school of law, refused to accept the rule of these slaves as governmental officials, which included the commander of the army, and to ratify the contracts they made, which caused great angst and annoyance. When the Sultan interfered, ʿIzz al-Dīn abandoned his post and prepared to leave town. The Sultan, moved, summoned him and apologized, and finally the *qāḍī*'s verdict was carried out: The military slaves were publicly auctioned and freed before resuming their posts.⁸⁸

This story has a certain historical plausibility, but what is interesting for me is the fact that the hero in his uprightness is falling back on unrelenting legal formalism.

To the gradual takeover of the government by imported slaves who were completely detached from the Community and whose instrument of governance was primarily violence, the most heroic scholarly objection was that this violated a minor legal rule that could be fixed by a theatrical act!⁸⁹

Or let us say: a political tragedy turned into a legal trifle. Anjum described this process as the “‘ulamā’s deliberate flight from politics”.⁹⁰ As a result there was a very tenuous separation of spheres between religious authority and political elite—and the life of the majority.

What are the theological and religious implications of this separation of community and ruling elite? Discursive traditions of religious thought in the classical period (10th–13th century) of the time stressed “that the appointment

88 Anjum, *Politics*, 135.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

of a caliph is an obligation and that this obligation is [established] by revelation, not reason. [...] reason has no rule in obligating or prohibiting, nor in judging things to be good or bad—for it does so merely as a result of custom”.⁹¹

One of the elements we may refer to is the inherent elitism of the theologians preventing them from intervening in political strife and reserving rationality to the intellectual elite; the other may be the need to uphold the order of the Sunni world against other communities, be they Shi'i-Isma'ili or other kinds of “heretic” groups; the third may be cynicism, denying the possibility of a rational understanding of the role of the community and the ruler any longer. In the classical period the role of the caliph became more and more reduced to a ritual role, acknowledging the access of a local ruler to the throne, for example, and so forth. This was aptly expressed in the classical theory of the caliphate:

The foundation of the classical caliphate theory, namely a ritualistic understanding of the caliphate and depoliticization of the Community, were underpinned by theological cynicism toward reason in postrevelational life on the one hand and elitism on the other, both of which deepened as the Sunni *kalām* doctrine matured in the classical period. Both elitism and cynicism toward reason militated against the other option, that of resurrecting and re-imaging a Community-centered vision of Islam. A politically vibrant society requires grounding political practice and theory in the normative apparatus of society, which the socio-political trends of the classical period made difficult to attain and the intellectual commitments of the age had rendered impossible to imagine.⁹²

The re-emergence of a community-centred vision of Islam took place in the second half of the middle period, beyond the immediate scope of this paper. But, beyond the theoretical level of ruler-community relations, the various types of *jamā'a* flourished among the majority and made up the fabric of Islamicate societies. A reconstruction of the developments of the concepts used—*jamā'a* and others—and their relations to other concepts remains to be done.

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91 Al-Nawawī following Anjum, *Politics*, 138–39.

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