

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

Rüdiger Lohlker

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’”.