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Dancing in Duality: Exploring the Comparative Relationship of Swahili Culture with Islamic and Liberal Paradigms

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Abstract: This paper examines the crucial role of Islam on the Swahili coast, using it as a case study to explore the intriguing transformations Islam underwent during its spread in the region. It aims to shed light on the cosmopolitan nature of the Swahili space before colonialism, focusing on the reciprocal processes of Islamization and the Swahilization of Islam. By doing so, it aims to enhance our understanding of the significant role of Islam in fostering globalization. Moreover, it explores the expansion of Islam beyond the Arabian Peninsula, particularly through trade conducted by Muslim merchants. This exchange resulted in a dynamic interaction as local leaders embraced the faith, facilitated trade, and supported the growth of Islamic intellectual, artistic, and cultural endeavours. Building upon this case study, the paper conducts a comparative analysis of the legal systems of Islam and liberalism and explores the potential for envisioning a world transcending colonial national racial logics. Embracing Islam as a major signifier, this essay draws on a diverse array of critical scholarship, contending that Islam, unlike liberalism, inherently embraces diverse cultural knowledge, making it a faith that is inherently receptive to different cultures and their unique contributions.

Keywords: Swahili, Cosmopolitan, Culture, Islamization, Swahilization, Liberalism.

Introduction: Islam's early formation witnessed its spread as a political force, followed by a subsequent phase driven primarily by trade. Consequently, the pivotal role played by Muslim merchants in facilitating the adoption of Islam by non-Muslims cannot be overstated. Wherever these merchants ventured, they were accompanied by Sufis and scholars, leading to the emergence of new followers who embraced Islam while simultaneously infusing it with their own cultural expressions. By the 12th century, Islam had permeated societies across a significant portion of the region, as evidenced by the increasing number of individuals identifying as Muslims. This identification, in turn, prompted the incorporation of their distinct perspectives and practices into the fabric of the religion. Thus, as the Indian Ocean world witnessed a surge in Islamization, the religion itself underwent a process of Africanization and Asianization, transforming its content, character, and composition to reflect the diverse cultural contexts in which it thrived. The aforementioned statement should not be interpreted through the lens of the *"many Islams" or "little Islams*" arguments often advocated by the anti-orientalist perspective. Instead, we will strive to approach Islam as a *major signifier*, as aptly articulated by *Salman Sayyid*, thereby transcending both the pitfalls of orientalist essentialism and anti-orientalist

structuralism. Central to this approach is the examination of Islam's functioning within the framework of totality, encompassing a universal dimension that shapes the unity, identity, and interconnectedness of the whole and its parts.[1]

This essay draws inspiration from the scholarly contributions of Talal Asad, Ovamir Anjum, and Wael B. Hallaq. Of particular significance is Talal Asad's conceptualization of Islam as a "*discursive tradition,*" which warrants special attention. At its core, this perspective emphasizes the importance of treating Muslims as thinking subjects and being attuned to what models of the past should inform our present vision. By doing so, we can transcend the limitations imposed by the dominant categories prevalent in the present global context.[2]

We reside in a culture marked by widespread disbelief, where the dominant entity is the distinct sovereign, secular liberal nation-state. This nation-state possesses unprecedented governance technologies that exert an extensive influence over the interior dimensions, subjectivities, epistemologies, and ontologies of individuals. Underlying the metaphysical foundations of these hegemonic structures is a fundamental *"episteme of is."*[3] This episteme is characterized by the separation of law, society, and morality, which has resulted in the disintegration of organic social units such as the family, the emergence of oppressive economic systems, and the degradation of the environment. These consequences have been made possible by the disassociation and detachment of morality from the state.

The essay undertakes a comparative analysis between liberalism and Islam, as liberalism not only serves as a fundamental philosophy that underpins the metaphysical framework of Westphalian nation-states but is also intricately intertwined with structures of violence and a thought system shaped by modes of sovereign domination. In this context, liberalism is understood in a broader sense, encompassing secularism, secular humanism, and various other elements that have emerged within the trajectory of modernity. Through this analysis, the essay aims to expose the fallacious claims of liberalism to neutrality. Moreover, the essay contributes to the discourse presented by Ovamir Anjum on envisioning an alternative world that challenges the conventional and explores the legitimacy derived from a "different political philosophy" rather than one rooted in Westphalia, nationalism, and secularism. By engaging with these ideas, the essay endeavours to contribute to the exploration of a plausible alternative world, departing from the realms of the conventional and embracing new possibilities for legitimacy.[4]

At the onset, it is imperative to establish that this essay, pertaining to the explored theme, is by no means an exhaustive discourse. The focus of the piece gravitates prominently towards Islam, while the treatment of liberalism remains concise, primarily centred on its underlying metaphysical aspects. Historians' critical examination often evades these metaphysical facets; hence, their inclusion is crucial, accompanied by ample citations, affording the reader valuable resources for further exploration should they desire to delve deeper into the subject matter.

The Cosmopolitan Frame and the Two-Way Processes: Despite its origins outside of Africa, Islam has maintained a close relationship with the continent due to the significant presence of individuals like *Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ* (*ra*) (d. 640 CE), an Ethiopian descendant who

served as Islam's first muezzin.[5] The earliest evidence of Islam's development along the coastal regions of East Africa can be traced back to the eighth century, with the emergence of mosques appearing in the latter half of that century.[6] However, when examining early Muslim accounts such as "The Wonders of India"[7] or writings by *Al-Bīrunī (d. 1048 CE)*, it becomes evident that even until the early 11th century, East Africa was predominantly described as an unIslamic region.[8] Only from the late eleventh century onwards, when the local population began to convert, can we identify the formation of a "Swahili civilization."[9]

Muslim traders, employing traditional seafaring methods in *ḍhows*, played a significant role in the trade networks spanning from the Horn of Africa to the Swahili coast. Their endeavours focused on acquiring commodities such as ivory, gold, metals, leather goods, and slaves.[10] With the increasing flow of Muslim traders into the region, Islam gradually gained influence, leading to noticeable changes in language, material culture, architecture, funeral customs, writing systems, political institutions, and gender relations among the Bantu- and Cushitic-speaking communities.[11] Collaborating with Arabs and other foreigners, they contributed to the vibrant cosmopolitan culture that characterized the Swahili coast.[12] Pouwels explores this process of Islamization as part of the broader evolution of a complex, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan culture among coastal Africans.[13] As emphasized by Ross Dunn in his work "The Adventures of *Ibn Bāttutā,"* being a Muslim in 14th-century East Africa denoted possessing a cosmopolitan sensibility, reflecting the region's dynamic cultural landscape.

Figure 1: The Indian Ocean World, ca. 1450

The Swahili people practiced a combination of Islam and ancient customs, incorporating elements of their pre-Islamic expressions. These processes contributed to the Africanization of Islam and the Islamization of Africa.[14] The Swahili space exhibited a diverse nature, and the spread of Islam entailed more than mere transformation; it involved a continuous process of assimilation and integration into local structures. Their way of life demonstrated syncretism and bore traces of Persian-Arabic influences. In his work "Horn and Crescent," Pouwels explored the *Shirazi* traditions within the Swahili region and revealed how the emergence of Swahili culture was shaped by unique natural

conditions.[15] Throughout history, the East African coast served as a destination for refugees and offered opportunities for diverse Muslim and non-Muslim groups, including *Shī'as, Ibādīs, Khārījites, and Māḥdālis.* The Swahili space was characterized by dynamic interaction and continuous blending between the local population and Muslim and non-Muslim groups of various socio-religious backgrounds. This ongoing interaction ultimately led to the development of a distinct linguistic structure. The Bantu language integrated numerous Arabic and Persian loanwords, resulting in the formation of a beautiful language known as *Kīswāhili.*

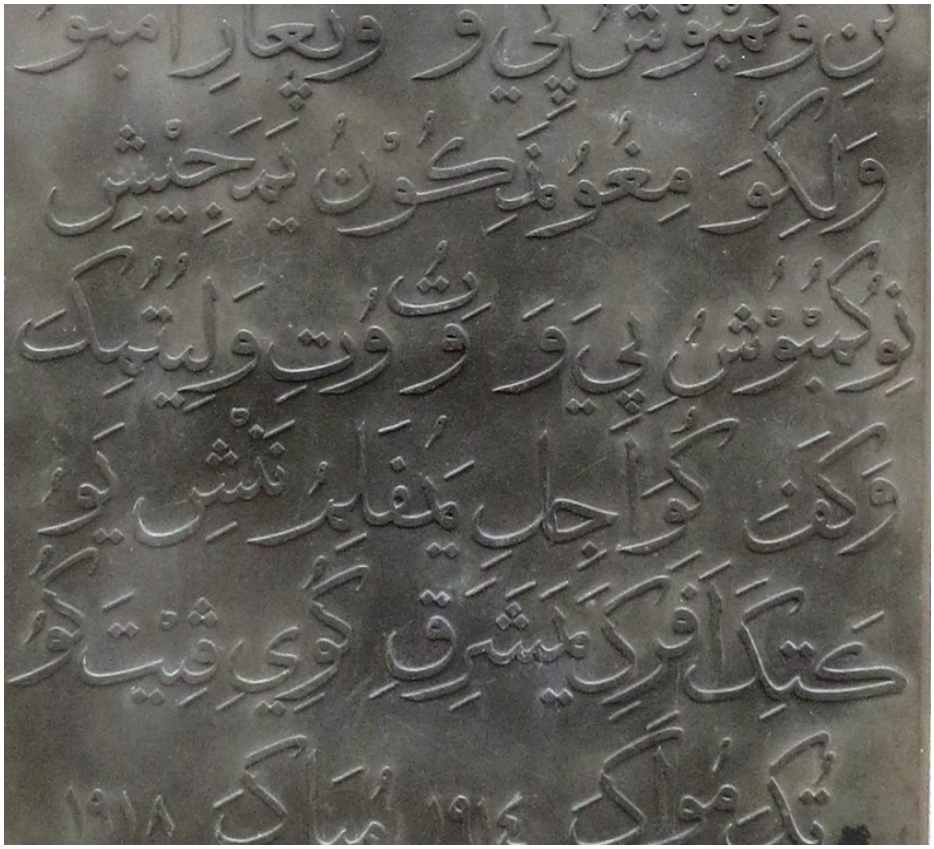

Figure 2: Swahili is written in Arabic script and has been heavily influenced by Arabic. It is officially recognized as the lingua franca of the East African Community. The language is now written in the Roman alphabet.

This language formed the foundation of their culture, centred around coastal towns.[16] The Swahili city-states experienced their most prosperous eras during the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries. These periods witnessed the establishment of sophisticated Islamic commercial laws, particularly the utilization of *Shāfi' ī jurisprudence*[17] along the East African coast. However, alongside Islamic laws, pre-Islamic local business laws continued to operate concurrently.[18] The 13th and 14th centuries marked the pinnacle of trade, with the East African coastline hosting numerous trading towns that evolved into city-states governed by sultans. These city-states boasted elegant mosques and palace complexes, adorned with magnificent decorations.[19] Carpets from Isfahan and Gujarat, ceramic ware from China, and intricately designed platters from Persia embellished these architectural marvels. The

markets of *Hadrāmaut,* the Persian Gulf, and western India were regularly supplied with sought-after African commodities such as gold, mangrove poles, resins, ivory, and slaves.[20] During his visit to the East African coast in the early 14th century, Ibn Bāttuta (d. 1369) observed that the people adhered to the *Shāfi' ī* school of Islamic law and displayed devoutness, chastity, and virtuousness. Swahili city-states experienced their peak prosperity during this time, and one of the most affluent among them was Kilwā, described by the Moroccan traveller as "one of the most beautiful and well-constructed towns in the world".[21]

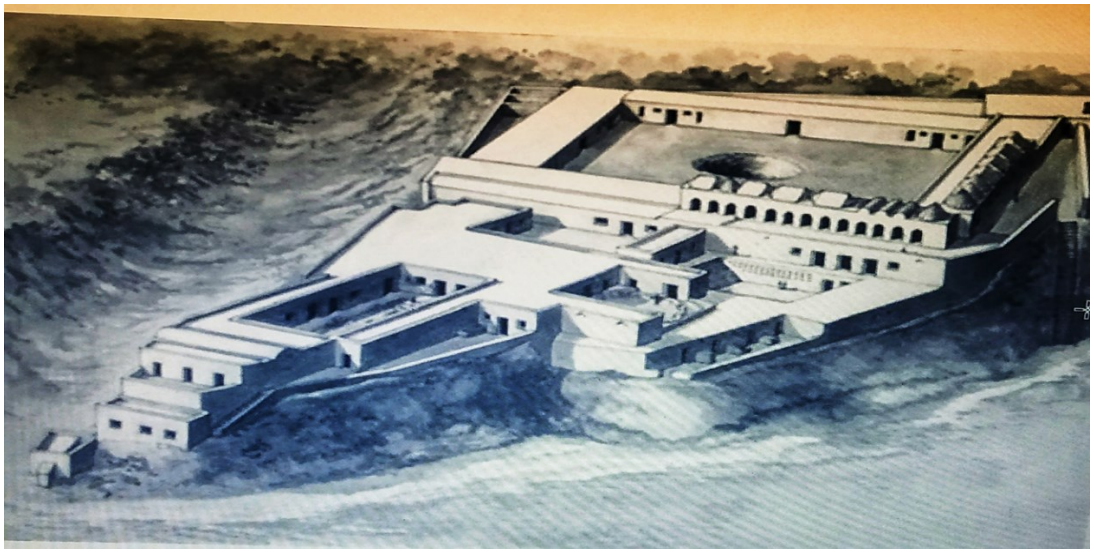

Figure 3: Kilwa, the most prominent of the Swahili cities in the early period.

Islam spread through Swahili regions primarily through oral teachings, with merchants playing a significant role as agents of Islamization. The process of adopting Islamic principles varied gradually among the Swahili city-states, and in certain African areas, Muslim clerks categorized specific non-believing groups as Magians, integrating them into the theological realm of Islam.[22] African Muslim communities demonstrated unique forms of appropriation and expression of the faith, such as the use of amulets and the construction of mosques following distinct architectural styles—Egyptian in East Africa and indigenous in West Africa.[23] Another method of embracing Islam involved the utilization of genealogy, often manifesting as a spiritual competition.[24] While Islam emphasizes unity, it does not necessitate uniformity, acting instead as a purifying filter that preserves cultural diversity. By promoting collective divine sovereignty, horizontal relationships among creation, and vertical connections between creation and the Creator, Islam fosters solidarity across different cultures.

In parallel to these occurrences, analogous processes unfolded along the Asian coastlines, characterized by the amalgamation of cultural and artistic expressions, the emergence of novel linguistic forms like Arabic-Tamil (see the picture below) and dialects, and the integration of Islamic practices within the existing Hindu caste system in South Asia. These phenomena exemplify the Asianization of Islam's trajectory in the region.

Figure 4: Arbu Tamil script on a tombstone at Kilakarai, the Old Jumma Masjid in Tamil Nadu.

During the period spanning from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, a multitude of Muslims from diverse backgrounds embarked on journeys across the Indian Ocean, fostering extensive interactions among individuals, commodities, and ideas. The presence of these travelling Muslims had a profound impact on the cultures and societies they encountered, leading to a continued diversification of the ummah and a transformation in the understanding of Muslim identity. Consequently, Islam assumed the characteristics, rituals, and customs of the local populations residing across the Indian Ocean region.[25]

Islamic vs Liberal System of Law: The preceding case study prompts us to explore the nature of the Islamic legal system in pre-colonial periods and its relationship with non-Muslim cultures. It compels us to consider the possibility of envisioning an alternative world beyond the confines of secular liberal logic, where the future of humanity can be contemplated within the framework of this legal system. In order to do so, a critical analysis of Islam and liberalism becomes necessary, as Islam stands as a counterforce to the prevailing hegemonic idea. To begin, it is crucial to recognize that Allah created human beings to exist as diverse nations with distinct societies. This concept is emphasized in *Surah al-ḥujurāt* of the Holy Quran.

> "O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may ˹get to˺ know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware. (13)"

Allah's divine message affirms that He has created humanity in diverse forms and tribes with the purpose of fostering mutual recognition. The term لِتَعَارَفُوٓا used in this context encompasses not only recognition but also includes the concept of "ruff," denoting social norms. This implies that when Muslims interacted with different cultures, such as their encounters in China and Indonesia, they gained insights into various ways of life and customs. Essentially, they acquired knowledge about different cultural practices. The term شُعُوبًا وَقَبَآئِلَ, translated as people, nations, and tribes, holds an interesting origin in Arabic. Originally, the word شُعُوبًا referred to imperfections in a wall, such as cracks. By using this term to describe people or nations, Allah intends to convey the message that imperfection is inherent in individuals and nations alike. Just as humans possess strengths and weaknesses, some excel in organizing but struggle with verbal communication, while others are skilled writers but face challenges in mathematics. Allah has bestowed unique strengths upon each individual and, likewise, has endowed cultures with diverse strengths and weaknesses. Allah deliberately made us شُعُوبًا, representing diverse cultures, with the purpose of fostering mutual learning and the adoption of beneficial practices from other cultures. One of the underlying objectives is to recognize that Allah does not favour one group over another. In fact, within the same verse, Allah emphasizes that the most honourable among people are those who possess the highest degree of *taqwá* (God-consciousness) within themselves.

Allah says he made us into different kinds of people and different tribes so that we could learn to recognize each other. The word لِتَعَارَفُوٓا not only means recognize but also includes the word "ruff," which means social norms. In other words, for instance, Muslims went to China and learned something about how they do things. Then they went to Indonesia and learned some different things about those people, all of which basically meant learning different things about different cultures. The word شُعُوبًا وَقَبَآئِلَ is translated as people, nations, and tribes, but the word شُعُوبًا in Arabic originally meant some sort of imperfection in the wall. When someone builds a wall and gets a little crack or some imperfection, that is called شُعُوبًا, and one of the reasons Allah uses that word for people or nations is to make us realize that we or our nation are not perfect.

Some nations have cracks somewhere else, and other nations have a crack somewhere else. Just like humans are not perfect, some people are very good at organizing but can't speak very well. Some people are very good writers but aren't good at math. Allah gave us some strengths, and he gave all of us some weaknesses. The same is true for cultures. Some cultures have many strengths and at the same time some weaknesses and other cultures have many weaknesses and at the same time some different strengths. And this is one of the reasons Allah made us شُعُوبًا; he made us into diverse cultures so that we could learn from each other and adopt practices from other cultures. One of the goals of doing so is to recognize that Allah does not want us to think we are more valuable than others and that Allah stated in the same ayah that the noblest among you are those who have the most *taqwá*[26] inside.

In this context, the Muslims, guided by the wisdom of *Tāwhid*[27], embraced a nuanced approach to expressing and practising Islam, honouring the local language and culture while preserving diverse ways of perceiving the world. In the absence of Islam's moral framework, a common occurrence entails one group assuming its superiority and looking down upon other cultures as inferior. This mindset resonates with the mentality of colonizers who sought to civilize as they colonized. Such a superior sensibility finds its roots in the *jāhiliyyah* period,[28] where certain groups, like *Banū Hāshim*, believed in their innate superiority and failed to recognize their own flaws. This attitude impedes the ability to learn from other cultures and fosters antagonism towards them. Allah explicitly states in the Quran the diversity He has created among people, urging recognition of our weaknesses and the potential for learning from one another's best practices. Allah's grand plan encompasses the creation of diverse cultures, cuisines, attires, languages, heritages, and architectural styles.[29]

The aforementioned discourse raises pertinent questions regarding the term "*sharīʿah*" and its common misperceptions. It is ironic that *sharīʿah* law is often associated with notions of harshness, barbarism, backwardness, and inflexibility. In reality, the prevailing legal system we have today exhibits greater degrees of brutality, severity, and punitiveness. *Sharīʿah* encompasses more than the laws inscribed in legal codes and extends beyond punishments, which tends to be the primary focus of public perception. The essence of *sharīʿah* lies in its procedural aspects, emphasizing the preference for arbitration over litigation. Various mechanisms are in place within *sharīʿah* to encourage individuals to resolve their disputes through peaceful means before resorting to formal legal proceedings. Islamic law promotes the notion of resolving conflicts without involving the legal system unnecessarily, thereby avoiding an indiscriminate recourse to litigation. Islam does not seek to extract every possible claim or restitution from individuals. Instead, it emphasizes redemption, facilitating individuals to reform and redirect their lives. Islam aims to rehabilitate rather than perpetually punish. This aspect often eludes those who fixate solely on the corporal punishments associated with Islamic law. For example, a person may receive a hundred lashes for an offense, but afterward, they return home to their family, having completed their sentence. In contrast, a liberal system may entail locking an individual away for years, with their family bearing the consequences. Upon release, they face societal stigmatization, loss of employment opportunities, voting rights, travel restrictions, and limitations on their personal freedom. The question arises: which system can be characterized as barbaric? Which system displays harshness? Which system recognizes the potential for personal growth and reform? And which system closes the door on individuals without providing avenues for redemption? In the liberal system, the individual bears a lifelong stigma, whereas *sharīʿah* demonstrates mercy, flexibility, and a humanistic approach unparalleled in any legal framework. Unlike modern secular-liberal law, which predominantly emanates from the state, *sharīʿah* did not originate from a centralized Islamic government. While *sharīʿah* serves as a guiding principle, it does not coercively impose itself upon societal morality. Rather, societies and their communities produced their own legal experts, individuals proficient in a range of roles that collectively formed the Islamic legal system.[30]

Sharīʿah in the precolonial era embodied multifaceted processes encompassing judicial and cultural dimensions, as well as ethical codes and a moral view of the world. It thrived

within a morally grounded community, assuming the inherent morality of its audience and adherents. Wael B. Hallaq provides insightful nuances regarding the premodern *sharīʿah* system, illustrating its comprehensive nature. According to Hallaq, 'the *sharīʿah* extended beyond being solely a judicial system and a legal doctrine tasked with regulating social interactions and resolving disputes. It constituted an all-encompassing and systemic practice that intricately intertwined with the surrounding world. This integration occurred through various dimensions: vertical and horizontal linkages, structural and linear connections, economic and social aspects, moral and ethical considerations, intellectual and spiritual dimensions, epistemic and cultural elements, and textual and poetic expressions, among others. Thus, the *sharīʿah* represented not only a set of beliefs and intellectual pursuits but also a way of life and a distinctive lens through which the world was perceived.'[31]

In another significant work, Wael b. Hallaq presents a nuanced analysis of the Muslim project, contrasting it with the orientalist project associated with colonialism and structural genocide.

Hallaq contends,

> "The Muslim project may be said to have largely been geared toward self-construction—the psychological, moral, mildly mystical, and "legal" being paramount and overriding in importance and scope the materialist (a category emerging as paradigmatic4 only with modernity). These aspects were exemplified in the emergence and maintenance of particular theoretical and practical technologies of the self/subject, narratives of collective moral engagement, discursive codes of juridical and mystical conduct, and a socioeconomic system that ranged in its interests from social organization to economic activity and civil society, to a limited conception and practice of politics, and to much else. The project was chiefly one carried out by the civic order on behalf of and for the sake of that order.6 In this project, "Islam," as a collectivity of cultural, intellectual, spiritual, individualistic, communal, and material ways of living, was the subject, the predicate, and the object, all at once. It is also in this project, as I have been arguing, that education, learning, and cultivation of the ethical self—all standing in mutually enhancing dialectic and integral to a habitus—were products of "civic" societies, articulated by ordinary individuals, governed by communal "self-rule," and largely without the dictates of "totalization and individuation" by an all dominating biopolitical power."[32]

With the coming of the colonial age characterized by a distinctive secular-liberal paradigm, the establishment of an expansive state and a global market necessitated the cultivation of conditions conducive to the emergence of autonomous, free, and equal individuals. This objective aimed to emancipate individuals from arbitrary and involuntary modes of existence, particularly those shaped by cultural identities. Consequently, the liberal colonial state sought to supplant culture with an all-encompassing anti-culture—a state of normlessness that stands in stark contrast to culture in every aspect. This anti-culture is devoid of place, existing in a temporal vacuum detached from both the past and the future.

It lacks a connection to the natural rhythms of life in the world and represents a contrived rendition of a civilized form of the state of nature. In the pursuit of a global market, the commodification of liberal equality occurs through pre-packaged and consumer-tested means. The proliferation of this anticultural environment serves as the foundational prerequisite for the emergence of liberated individuals, where previously constraining factors such as origins, parents, family, culture, tradition, and religion become less influential, allowing for ongoing self-fashioning. J. S. Mill encapsulates this concept by advocating for a reordering not only of the political sphere but also of the social realm. He perceives the freedom to experiment, referred to as "experiments in living," as the driving force behind both material and moral progress.[33]

The colonial policies pursued by European powers in East Africa's coastal regions, despite their diverse ideological foundations, were fundamentally shaped by Enlightenment values pertaining to human nature, the market, governance, religion, and tradition. These ideologies converged in their aim to supplant traditional moral frameworks with a universal modern rational morality, leading to a profound re-evaluation of nature's meaning, vision, and perception. Primarily characterized by a secular liberal framework, British colonialism played a pivotal role in reshaping the socio-legal and economic order of East Africa. This was achieved through the imposition of standardized laws that deeply impacted the intertwined dynamics of self and society in the region. Consequently, subjects were not left with their own subjectivities; instead, their lived experiences were systematically influenced by a modern system that harnessed capitalism, technology, industrialism, and a legal framework grounded in an ostensibly rational knowledge system. However, this rationality lacked sufficient moral and ethical constraints, which, as highlighted by Hallaq, resulted in a proclivity for destructive tendencies. The comprehensive transformation witnessed in coastal life encompassed a range of aspects, including the conquest of nature, the replacement of informal norms with standardized European laws, the establishment of a universal market, the substitution of customs with depersonalized abstract laws, and the reconfiguration of socio-economic foundations. These radical changes engendered a void, systematically dismantled cultural rights, eroded cultural status, and fostered feelings of helplessness, cultural ineffectuality, and a pervasive sense of malaise.[34]

In his analysis of the Orientalist project, Hallaq says,

> The Orientalist project, on the other hand, though similar in some ways, was yet profoundly different in others. The subject matter of Orientalism, always the object, was by definition not European, although the enterprise itself was conducted by Europeans for Europeans, and mostly for the exercise of their sovereign domination over the Orient. An instrumental building block of colonialism, the enterprise was an essential part of constructing modernity that initially—but undoubtedly— reconstituted the life values and worldview of Europeans. They came to inhabit that modernity, the only world they recognized as having full and autonomous ontological, epistemological, and cultural status, and thus legitimacy. The essential difference between the two projects thus pertained not to the processes of constructing the cultural or psychological self (however different these

were in each case), but rather to the teleology of humanity and of the subject, and their place in the world.'[35]

Colonel F. B. Pearce, a representative of the changing order in East Africa, provided a perceptive assessment of the cultural impacts during the initial 25 years of colonial rule. He highlighted the tendency of the English to impose their own ideas and institutions on others without considering whether they are suitable for the local conditions. Pearce expressed concern that this well-intentioned imposition of complete personal liberty may lead to unintended consequences, causing the very people they sought to benefit to resent this gift. The English legal framework, with its emphasis on personal freedom, allows young men, once they reach adulthood, to engage in extravagant and wasteful behaviour, leading to the squandering of their resources on frivolous pursuits. In contrast, Pearce recognizes the wisdom of Islamic law in this regard. The Arab governance system, described as a Royal Patriarchal Magistracy, combines elements of autocracy with strict adherence to custom and Koranic principles. The Arab population still values this system, as they perceive the absence of a controlling discipline in their lives as a source of various difficulties and abuses that ultimately harm and ruin many young men. Pearce's observations shed light on the potential drawbacks of a lack of restraint and discipline in personal conduct and highlight the enduring appeal of the Arab system of governance among its adherents [36]

The Possibility of an Alternative World? The secular-liberal modernity project represents an unrealized hegemonic idea that seeks to impose violence on those who resist its agenda. This project has given rise to an episteme that separates what is from what ought to be. It prioritizes the pursuit of what is physically possible, such as the development of nuclear weapons, while disregarding moral considerations and ethical obligations. In contrast, the Islamic episteme aims to cultivate a moral subject through the implementation of sharīʿah, someone who is incapable of envisioning such highly destructive endeavours for humanity.[37] As students of knowledge, we must exercise caution in our utilization of categories and concepts, recognizing how they evolve and shift over time. For instance, the concept of Islamic law in a modern secular context is imbued with its own political imperatives, shaping our perspectives and sensibilities regarding Islam. One such imperative rooted in the modernity project is the notion of inevitable progress in history. However, it is crucial to question why we assume that progress is a given. The modern state finds itself confronted with a profound moral crisis, characterized by the disintegration of essential social units like the family, religion, culture, and tradition, as well as the emergence of oppressive economic forces and environmental degradation. These various crises should not be viewed as evidence of the incomplete nature of the liberal project. Instead, they result from the detachment of morality from the state, leading to fundamental moral disarray. The interconnectedness of these catastrophes underscores the pressing need to re-establish the moral foundation within the modern state.[38]

To sum it up, Islam in the Indian Ocean world reflects the beliefs, practices, and traditions of the local population. As individuals embraced Islam and became Muslims, they drew guidance from the Quran and hadith, while also incorporating pre-Islamic traditions, customary laws, and social practices into their new faith. This mutual process teaches us a

valuable lesson: culture and Islam are not in conflict, and sharīʿah recognizes diversity. The expansion of Islam in East Africa was a dynamic and fluid phenomenon, characterized by reciprocal reactions and responses from the local communities. Islam underwent periodic reorganization in unique ways, and individuals from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds embraced and adapted Islam according to their own experiences.

Unlike liberalism, Islam does not seek to displace alternative ways of experiencing the world. However, we must acknowledge that we inhabit a world dominated by neoliberal hegemony, where democracy, if it exists, has become a mere spectator sport. The ability to envision alternative possibilities is increasingly constrained within this paradigm. Nevertheless, Islam offers a glimpse of a different world, albeit contingent and imperfect. It presents an opportunity for human emancipation by transcending the confines of colonial, national, and racial logics. While it is not without flaws and ambiguities, Islam provides one of the few avenues for imagining a future that encompasses the well-being of all humanity. It is vital to seize and cultivate these possibilities, utilizing them to foster a broader understanding of what lies ahead.[39]

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[14] See David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Omar H. Ali*, Islam in the Indian Ocean World: A Brief History with Documents,* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

[15] See Lyndon Harries, "The Arabs and Swahili Culture", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol 34, No 3, (1964), pp 224-229. Randall L. Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800-1900,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
[16] For more, see Basil Davidson, *Africa in History: Themes and Outlines*, (New York: Collier, 1974); David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Beverly E. Coleman, "A History of Swahili", *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 2, No. 6, (1971), pp. 13–25.
[17] The Shāfiʿī school, considered one of the principal Sunni schools of jurisprudence, traces its doctrinal origins to the teachings of Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī (767-820 CE).
[18] For a detailed discussion on the principles of jurisprudence and Islamic laws (see Marghinani's 12th-century work The Hidaya).
[19] An illustrative instance can be observed in the grand palace of the 14th century, known as *Husuni Kubwa,* commissioned by Sultan al-Hasan ibn Sulaiman. This remarkable edifice holds the notable distinction of being the most expansive singular structure across the entire sub-Saharan African region.
[20] This raises the significant question of why Islam did not abolish slavery. The phrasing of this question itself highlights the problem with its framing. In Islam, there is no equivalent concept of "slavery." Instead, there is the concept of *riq*, which differs in both terminology and underlying principles. It is essential to recognize that translation between languages cannot assume identical meanings. Therefore, when we use the term "slavery" in English, it evokes specific imagery. Particularly for those from the West, this conjures images of the horrific, unjust, racist system of servitude and bondage that characterized the North American experience and is widely regarded as one of the worst forms of subjugation in human history.
[21] G. S. P. Freeman Grenville, *The East African Coast: Select Documents from the First to the Earlier Nineteenth Century*, (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
[22] Cited in David Robinson's *Muslim Societies in African History*.
[23] See David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History*; Martin Frishman and Hasan Uddin Khan, *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development and Regional Diversity*, (eds.) (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).
[24] David Robinson, *The Holy War of Umar Tal: The Western Sudan in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
[25] See Burjor Avari, *Islamic Civilization in South Asia*, (Routledge: London, 2013). G.F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1979). S.D. Goitein, Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through the Ages, (New York: Schocken Books 1955)
[26] A state of consciousness and mindfulness, often translated as "piety" or "God-consciousness.
[27] Central principle of Islamic monotheism, emphasizing the absolute oneness and unity of God
[28] The term "*jāhiliyyah*" in Islam refers to the historical era preceding the revelation of the Quran to the Prophet ﷺ. It represents a significant period in Islamic history characterized by ignorance, moral and social decadence, and the absence of divine guidance.
[29] For more, see N.A. Khan, and S. Randhawa, *Divine Speech: Exploring the Quran as Literature,* (Dallas: Bayyinah Institute, 2016).
[30] Few scholars match the nuanced understanding that Wael B. Hallaq offers regarding the lived system of Sharia during the pre-colonial era. His scholarship surpasses any others in this area. For an in-depth exploration of the subject, I recommend Hallaq's book, *"Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations"* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
[31] Wael B. Hallaq, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 163-164.
[32] Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 164.
[33] See Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018). Aria Nakissa, "Reconceptualizing the Global Transformation of Islam in the Colonial Period: Early Islamic Reform in British-Ruled India and Egypt", *Brill, Arabica* 69 (2022), p. 146-230.
[34] R. Coupland, *The Exploitation of East Africa, 1856-1890*, (London: Faber and Faber, Limited, 1939).
[35] Wael B. Hallaq's *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*, p. 164 – 165.
[36] F. B. Pearce, *Zanzibar, The Island Metropolis of East Africa* (London, 1920), 220.
[37] See, Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
[38] See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
[39] For more see Mohammad Asad, *The Road to Makkah* (Noida: Islamic Book Service, 2000). Salman Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London and New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1997). Salman Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonisation and World Order* (London: Hurst, 2014).