

ISLAM, WATER CONSERVATION AND PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

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ABSTRACT

Water conservation is embedded in Islam: it is quite common to find both in the Quran and the Sunnah statements and teachings defining a correct use of water.

Since religion still exerts a very big influence on society and because water plays an extremely pivotal role within Islam, awareness campaigns and water conservation programmes based on religious principles have proved very useful, beneficial and cost effective in different areas of the Muslim world.

Islamic communication channels have often been used to campaign for the conservation of water resources. Imams have been trained to convey messages of water conservation while delivering special sermons during the Friday prayer. Different institutions issued awareness material with words or expressions employing or recalling Islamic or Quranic terminology.

Public awareness campaigns, when enriched with Islamic principles, can be a powerful tool to be employed along with other water conservation policies.

KEYWORDS: Islam, Public Awareness, Quran, Water.

INTRODUCTION

Water is a pivotal issue in Islam, non surprisingly since it is a religion that originated in the Arabian peninsula, a desert area, and it spread mainly to other arid or semi-arid territories. Scarcity has always influenced the perception of water by Muslims and it has, accordingly, shaped their behaviors and customs. In the last decade Islam and Islamic principles have been used to influence and improve people's concern on the subject of water.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the relation between water and Islam and to see to what extent and how religion can influence people's awareness on water issues by giving examples of awareness campaigns carried out in some areas of the Muslim world. This paper is based on first hand material collected during research periods spent in Syria at the end of 2002, in the Palestinian territories in 2003 and during a more recent trip to Jordan. There are frequent references on second hand sources too.

In the first part of the paper there is an analysis of several aspects of Islam that might have influenced the perception of water. The second part deals with public awareness campaigns, describing their purposes, how and where they were carried out and which institutions were responsible for their organization.

The transcription of Arabic words has been simplified to enable non-Arabic speakers to read these terms with ease. The explanation of some Arabic terms, mainly pertaining to religion, has been given directly in the text.

WATER IN ISLAM

There is not a monolithic perception of water in Islam. The vision Muslims have of water has been influenced by different factors and several conditions throughout time and space. In the following paragraphs we tried to analyze the relation between water and Islam by providing some examples.

Water in the Quran

It is evident from numerous verses in the Quran that water is a major theme in Islamic cosmogony and iconography as well as a recurrent topic in liturgy and daily life.

One of the most famous verses pertaining to water is taken from the Sura of the Prophets and it states "*We made from water every living thing*" (21:30). But this is not the only *Ayah* (verse) where the word *Mā'* (water) appears since it occurs more than sixty times in the Quran. Several other words related to the semantics of water and hydrology, such as rivers, sea, fountains, springs, rain, hail, clouds and winds, are also frequent (Abdel Haleem, 1989).

The theme of water in the Quran is dealt both on a symbolic and on a practical level.

Many verses are about creation since by divine intervention everything originated from water (Sura of Salvation 25,54; Sura of Light 24,45). Not only mankind, animals, plants and flowers need water as the basis for life but also to assure its continuation.

Water is thus described as a gift by God so that humanity can benefit from it. This gift is the proof of the existence and uniqueness of Allah as stated in the Sura of the Ant: *“Or, Who has created the heavens and the earth, and Who sends you down water from the sky? Yea, with it We cause to grow well-planted orchards full of beauty of delight: it is not in your power to cause the growth of the trees in them. Can there be another god besides Allah?”* (27, 60).

Water is also a symbol of resurrection since paradise is always described as a place with rivers flowing and florid vegetation (Sura of the Bee 16, 30-31).

Another aspect associated to water in the Quran is its purifying power. Several verses focus on the subject of purification and personal cleanliness like the following: *“It is He who sends down water upon you from the sky with which to purify you”* (Sura of Booty 8,11). Ablutions are a duty to be performed accurately before ritual prayers in order to reach a state of purity. The Quran describes in detail the procedure to be followed when performing them. *“Believers, when you prepare for prayer wash your face and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe your heads and wash your feet up to the ankles”* (Sura of the Table 5,6).

The way to perform ablution is not the only practical teaching related to water in the Quran since we find other verses pertaining to water distribution or condemning wastefulness. References to water in the most sacred book for Muslims are also very material and linked to every day life: water is sent by God so that men can drink it or grow agricultural products. God also created seas and rivers so that they could be used by men for transportation. (Haddad, 2001)

Water in the Sunnah

Other teachings linked to water can be found in the *Sunnah* (Statements or practices undertaken or approved by the Prophet considered as legally binding precedents).

A very famous *hadith* (statement by the Prophet Muhammad) says that: “*Men are co-owners in three things: water, fire and pastures*”. Other hadiths relate on who has the priority over water or whether water can be sold or if it should be considered a public good. Some statements even relate the quantity of water one is allowed to take for drinking or irrigation. Other sayings by the Prophet prohibit excess of use of water sources even when in presence of an abundant flow.

There are also hadiths which prove to be actual measures for preservation of water by prohibiting to defecate or urinate in the proximity of water sources thus to avoid pollution and spreading of diseases. This is probably the origin of the concept of *harim*, that is the buffer zone around a water source where human activities are prohibited in order to avoid corruption of this water body. The concept of *harim* is diffused in the entire Muslim world.

Some hadiths focus on ablutions either by stressing their importance or by reporting how the Prophet himself performed them thus setting an example for his followers (Al-Husseini Al Sheikh, 1996). Other Quranic verses or accounts by the life of the Prophet are still followed nowadays as practical examples pertaining sanitation, water management and distribution.

Water and the Shariah

All around the Dar al-Islam (the territory under Muslim rule), jurisprudence focusing on water had its basis on Shariah (Canonic Law) sources, mainly verses from the Quran or Hadiths. It is interesting to note how the term Shariah itself is bound to water since it could either mean “the watering source” or “the path that leads to a source of water”. In both cases the metaphor associated to Shariah is remarkable since the first interpretation is that of divine law quenching the thirst of knowledge while the second interpretation is that of a path leading to the source of truth, a target for every pious Muslim (Mallat, 1995). There are some basic norms in the Shariah that have to be followed when consuming or managing water. Every

human being, not only Muslim, has a right to drink (shafa) and quench his thirst to assure his survival. Thus mankind has a priority in the access to water while this right is successively accorded to animals. There is also a right of irrigation (shirb) that permits people to water their crops (Lancaster, 1996; De Chatel, 2002), but domestic use has precedence over agricultural or industrial use. Water belongs to the community and no one is allowed to own it unless they have provided labor or they have made an effort to carry it through recipients or to distribute it. This is considered by some scholars to create a right of ownership over water (Mallat, 1995), or better, to create a property on the value added to water by labor, more than on water itself, thus enabling pricing and trade.

These principles have been codified throughout ages and shaped behaviors and traditions. More recently some of these rules were consolidated in the Majallah, the Ottoman civil code, which presents 92 articles on the subject of water management. With the end of the Ottoman Empire, the Majallah was used as the basis for new legal systems and some water laws are still in use today especially in the Arab Levant (Mallat, 1995).

Along with laws and customs Islamic civilization spread water technology too: various instruments and tools were developed like Norias, Shaduf and Saqiyyah, and irrigation techniques were improved to the point that the Qanat, the canals used for irrigation, are still employed nowadays from Sicily to Iran.

Water in Islamic society

Quranic verses and the hadiths shaped cultural values which inevitably had an impact on traditions and habits throughout time and space in the Muslim world.

Water has permeated many aspects of life in Arab-Muslim societies: for example it is quite common to find references to water in Arabic literature be it an account of the characteristics of a water body or a poem set in an oasis.

Water also had an impact on art and architecture in Islamic civilization: its presence shaped the planning of the Islamic city. The city was usually built around a mosque where you could find basins for the ablutions and the streets were scattered with *Subul* (sing.

Sabil), public fountains built for charity decorated with Quranic inscriptions, or beverage basins for animals. A characteristic building of Islamic Cairo during the Mamluk era was the *Sabil Kuttab*, a charitable structure composed of a *Sabil* (drinking fountain) on the ground floor, and a *Kuttab* (Quranic school for boys) on top. The *Sabil Kuttab* was usually donated by wealthy benefactors so that poor people could have easy access to water and children could learn the Quran.

Offering water to the thirsty has always been a duty to be fulfilled and it is perceived as a meritorious act. It is actually one of the primary principles of Sharaitic law. Denying water to someone asking for it is condemned by the Prophet as one of the most ignominious acts to perform (Abdel Haleem, 1989).

Another distinctive building of the Islamic city is the *Hammam*, the Turkish bath. Usually located in the proximity of a mosque it was widely used when bathrooms were not a commodity in most houses. Going to the hammam was also a social experience where people, and especially women, could meet thus making bathing a lay ritual.

Even though the advent of running water in private houses has marked a steep decline of all these customs it is still possible to find in the old part of most Islamic cities such as Cairo or Damascus a traditional *sabil* or a public bath. Sometimes these habits have also gone through a process of modernization as it is quite common to come across plastic water tanks or refrigerated steel containers in the streets or in mosques whereas hammam are mainly used as spas for their beautifying effects than for actual bathing.

The symbol and presence of water even influenced Islamic iconography and imagery. Calligraphic inscriptions with verses from the Quran related to water are often to be found near ablution pools or on *subul*. The presence of water is common in public buildings or private houses: basins, fountains or pools are a characteristic decorative item in mosques, traditional Arab houses or ancient palaces. Buildings were also rich with greenery and gardens, somehow recalling the idea of the Islamic paradise, a place with abundant water and rich vegetation, an image that can be found in the Quran several times.

All these examples show to what extent water and Islam are intertwined, how the role of water in the society is extremely pivotal and the links between it and religion are very strong. There is an Islamic approach to the environment that is reflected on the way water is perceived in Muslim society too. Water like all other natural resources present on earth is a gift by God and men are not allowed to own it. Mankind is just considered as a trustee for the planet: men are entitled to live on the earth and benefit from it but they are not entitled to ruin, corrupt, pollute or destroy the environment. Any behavior that can jeopardize the future of the natural resources, water included, is seen as an act against God and its creation. Preventing the corruption of natural resources or the pollution of water is not simply an ethical and civilized behavior but it is also an act of worship (Abdel Haleem, 1989).

ISLAM AND PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

Not surprisingly, since religion still exerts a primary influence on society, awareness campaigns and water conservation programs based on Islamic teachings have proved very useful, beneficial and cost effective in different areas of the Muslim world.

The main reason why Islam and Islamic principles have been used as a vehicle in several awareness campaigns in predominantly Muslim states since the 1990s is because they can easily reach all strata of society. Furthermore since these principles derive from divine law they might have a stronger appeal on population. Even the less educated ones that might not have a proper ecological education have a knowledge of Quranic and Sharaitic principles because the importance of Islam goes well beyond a mere religious environment and it exerts a very big influence on everyday life in Muslim society.

Preaching conservation in the Mosques

One of the first steps was to use mosques as a platform for the campaign because of their accessible location and conspicuous number in every urban center and because of the aggregative role they play within Muslim society. Even though there is not a proper clergy within Islam, some public figures either because of the active role they play in mosques or because of their moral stature, are generally recognized as guides for the rest of the believers. Imams, then, have

been properly trained on water issues so that during the *Khutbah*, the Friday sermon, they could instruct all the believers on new techniques for water conservation or just draw their attention on water scarcity and the means to alleviate the problem at least in their domestic environment. Imams would focus on Quranic and Sharaitic precepts thus providing a solid basis for their speech and would then shift to more up-to-date problems such as scarcity afflicting the surrounding environment or more modern subjects like wastewater reuse.

Posters, leaflets and other awareness tools

Preaching in the mosques is not the only way to reach people on the subject of water scarcity. Posters, leaflets, booklets and stickers have also been used to promote awareness on water issues, this way people could be reached in the streets or in their households thus not confining the campaigns to a limited environment.

Most of these posters use a religious terminology and imagery stressing the fact that saving water is a religious duty. It is possible to come across different typologies of awareness material. Some leaflets and booklets actually employ verses from the Quran while in others the text begins with the *Basmala*, the formula reciting “in the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate”.

An interesting example that shows how Islam and water issues are greatly interlocked is the fact that the water awareness campaign by WEDO, a Palestinian NGO, has been named “*Zam Zam*” like the water spring in Mecca, where Hagar and Ishmael quenched their thirst after wandering in the desert for days on end. Any Muslim, upon hearing the name *Zam Zam* would associate it with water thus making the main focus of this campaign easily understandable.

Booklets have often been released by official organizations and institutions giving instructions on water conservation. There is a series of pamphlets published by the World Health Organization on Health Education through Religion in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, a prominently Muslim area. The pamphlet on “Water and Sanitation in Islam” makes parallels between correct behaviors in water use and conservation and Hadiths by the Prophet on the same subjects (Al-Husseini Al Sheikh, 1996). The Jordanian Ministry of

Water has also released various pamphlets on water management all of them ending with several Quranic verses pertaining to water.

Another typology of awareness material does not make use of actual Islamic formulas while preferring more neutral phrases that would still recall religion. Examples of this kind could be found in Syria in 2002: a slogan found on a public phone cards said “*Al-Mā’ Amānah*”, which can be translated as “water is faithfulness” or “water is trust”. The root of *Amanah* is strictly connected to faith, thus providing an implicit link with religion. Interestingly enough *Amānah* is the same word used to mean “trust” when referring to natural resources given by God to humanity. A poster by the Syrian national water company stated “*Al-Mā’ hibbat ullah fa-hāfiz ‘alayha* ” (water is a gift of God, save it) thus emphasizing God’s benevolence and recalling Quranic expressions. A picture by the Syrian Ministry of Irrigation presented the following formula: “*Da’wah l-lmuhāfizah ‘ala al-myāh*”. This slogan could be neutrally translated as “appeal, request of saving water” but the word *da’wah* also has the meaning of prayer thus providing another connection with the religious field. *Da’wah* in the sense of prayer is widely employed and even if it does not refer to the five ritual prayers to be performed every day, for which the word *Salah* is used, it means any kind of prayer or plea to God. Other examples of awareness material with religious references could be found in the Palestinian territories in the Summer of 2003. A sticker issued by the Palestinian Hydrology Group rated the correct use of water as a “*wājib dini*”, a religious duty. Interestingly enough *wājib* is a term commonly used in Islamic law.

Other posters or leaflets frequently employed the word “*hayāt*” (life). There might not be an explicit reference to religion when employing this term but the word *life* is so frequently linked to water in Islamic thought that it can be regarded as a non fortuitous choice.

The subjects dealt with in the campaigns

The goal of these campaigns has been to make people more aware on water issues in their region focusing mainly on scarcity and conservation. This was done by teaching the public basic data but also by stressing the importance of a change in behaviors in water use (Atallah, Ali Khan et al., 1999). These campaigns have also been used to introduce new techniques like the reuse of treated wastewater for

agriculture, or dry sanitation applets in households (Faruqui, Biswas et al, 2001)

Where did these campaigns take place?

Water conservation activities and public awareness campaigns are usually carried out in most Arab and Islamic countries due to the scarcity of water resources afflicting the area. Islamic communication channels, though, have not been employed everywhere.

Special training sessions for Imams and Mullahs were organized in Afghanistan, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and also in some Gulf countries (Atallah, Ali Khan et al., 1999; Faruqui, Biswas et al, 2001)

As for newspaper ads, posters and other kinds of awareness material it is very common to come across them in the Jordan River area (Palestine, Jordan and Syria) whereas for other areas we retrieved very little information from the available literature and it is not possible to account on such activities in this paper.

Who is in charge of the campaigns?

Ministries of Water and Irrigation, national water companies and local NGOs, usually sponsored by international cooperation agencies such as USAID or the World Bank, have often promoted training of religious authorities and issued public awareness material. It is interesting to note how religious principles are mainly employed by lay organizations and institutions whereas we have not come across posters actually issued by religious organizations although there is a growing concern within the religious establishment itself.

Can these campaigns be improved?

Although these awareness campaigns based on Islamic principles have always proved useful and beneficial they have mainly centered on limited fields of action, usually focusing on domestic targets while neglecting other environments, such as agriculture, tourism and industry, which would require a bigger intervention in the field of public awareness on behalf of government and other institutions since they are the major consumers of water resources in the region.

Another fault of these campaigns is the little concerted action among institutions. A bigger commitment would be needed on behalf of the

Ministries of Religious Affairs, Agriculture and Education to support the activities of the Ministries of Water and Irrigation in the field of public awareness.

It would also be important, to improve the effectiveness of these campaigns, to involve women to a bigger extent in these activities. Women play an active role in water management within the domestic environments and a change in water attitudes certainly passes through them. It would be wise to focus more awareness campaigns on women thus providing them with the tools to ensure a sound management of water, at least in the households.

CONCLUSIONS

Water conservation is grounded in Islam. Islamic principles and ethics, in fact, have always advocated a good conduct towards the environment and respect for the natural resources.

These principles, employed in the past decade in public campaigns to promote awareness among the population on water issues, have proved effective since Islamic communication channels and expressions are more straightforward and they can easily reach all level of society even the lower and less educated ones. Islamic principles related to environment and water have thus proved to be an added value when included in awareness campaigns.

Preaching in the mosques on water issues proved to be a very productive instrument because through these campaigns people were provided with basic laws of ecology and basic tools for water conservation, and they will likely not forget them since they are indigenous to their culture.

The distribution of awareness material is important too, since the catchy slogans and the simple information provided, because of their links to religion, are easy to remember and understand.

It is essential to make public awareness a prominent tool in water conservation policies so that common people can get involved too in water conservation activities. To make these campaigns a more reliable and more comprehensive instrument it would be necessary to extend their scope beyond the domestic environment and target other

fields such as agriculture, industry and tourism. Furthermore it would be important to focus more on women and their role in water conservation.

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