

# Water in the Qur'an: Symbolism and foundations of a water culture<sup>1</sup>

*"Before designing His creation, God dwelt in a cloud in the midst of the air. His Throne and placed it above the water".*

**Hadith** (authentic saying of the Prophet)

The Qur'an is the Book par excellence, Al Kitab, the word of God handed down to the Prophet Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel. It contains 114 sura or chapters of differing lengths. Each sura is made up of verses (ayat, or signs from God).

In the Qur'an, water is the key element in Creation and is referred to so frequently -63 times- that some even speak of the Holy Book's "obsession" or "bewitchment" with water.

In Arab culture, there is nothing surprising in the immense interest in water revealed in the sacred writings. In his famous essay on "Water in Islamic thinking and Arab literature", Professor Muhammad bin Abdulaziz writes: *"It will suffice to say that Arabs are so passionate about water and place so much hope in its coming that they have rightly come to be called "sons of the water of heaven". Among Arab Muslims, the best you can wish for someone from whom you are seeking a favour is "God give you water". Thinking of days when all is harmony and peace, when the soul finds serenity, they will describe such days as masqa Allah, "watered by God".*

Even those who, in the early days of Islam, dismissed Muhammad as an impostor challenged him to perform miracles that related to water.

*"We will never believe in you unless you cause a spring to gush forth from the earth for us, or have a garden full of date palms and grapevines and make rivers gush forth plentifully through the midst of them<sup>2</sup>"* (Sura 17, The Children of Israel, ayat 92-95). This is clearly reminiscent of the Bible, when the Almighty says to Moses: *"Go on before the people and take with thee the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thine hand and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel."* (Exodus, 17:5-6). The Bible also makes frequent reference to water (Leviticus, Genesis I and II) in both its literal and metaphorical sense: water is *"God's creation"* and a *"divine benefit"*

---

<sup>1</sup> This is part of the text of Mohamed Larbi Bouguerra on: *"Water: symbolism and culture"*, Institut Veolia Environnement, 2008

<sup>2</sup> We have used for the translation of the Qur'an into English that of T.B. Irving (Al-Hâjj Ta'lim'Ali) Suhrawardi Research & Publication Center.

but its absence prevents the faithful from fulfilling their obligations and also brings in its wake drought and desolation.

## Water in the Qur'an

The Qur'an also makes reference to the Flood. In sura 69 The Reality, ayat 11, it says: "When the water overflowed, we loaded you on the vessel" and adds in sura 7 The Heights (ayat 64): *"So we saved him (Noe) and those who were along with him in the Ark. We let those who rejected Our signs drown" and, finally, in sura 11 Hud (ayat 44): "and it was said: "Earth, swallow your water, and: sky, clear up! So the water receded, the Command was accomplished, and she settled down on (Mt.) Judi."*

The Holy Book asserts that water is, by the will of God, the sole basis for the emergence of life: *"We have made every living thing out of water."* (Sura 21 The Prophets, ayat 30).

The Qur'anic account of the forming of the Cosmos places great emphasis on water, as demonstrated in other ayat in the preceding sura which on the one hand lists heaven, earth, the moon, the sun, night, day etc. as natural factors in the creation of the universe and, on the other, speaks of a single element that infuses life into the universe: water. The Qur'an immediately asserts, however, that water fills the entire inanimate universe with life: *"He is the One Who created Heaven and Earth in six days. His Throne rises over the water"*. For certain commentators<sup>3</sup>, this means in effect that water was the origin for both heaven and earth and that Allah drew from it the natural elements as well as all living creatures. Water is even present in the rocks and stones. Sura 2 The Cow (ayat 73-74) says: *"...for there are some stones which rivers gush out of and there are others which water comes forth from when they split open, and there are still others which collapse out of awe for God"*. The Qur'an also teaches that *"God has created every animal out of water; some of them walk on their belly, while others walk on two legs and still others walk on four. God creates anything He wishes; God is Able (to do) everything."* (Sura 24 The Light, ayat 45). Thus every life on earth owes its existence to the element of water: *"Among His signs He sends water down from the sky so He may revive the earth with it following its death."* (Sura 30 The Romans, ayat 24). *The vivifying property of water is repeated in many ayat: "He sends the winds to bring news so He may let you taste some of His*

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Radhouane Essaièd, Bada'el (Beirut), no.2, Autumn 2004, p.28-29.

mercy (sura 30, ayat 46)... And any water God sends down from the sky with which to revive the earth following its death and to scatter every kind of animal throughout it. We give it in due measure as a sign to those who are wise<sup>4</sup>" or again "We have sent down blessed water from the sky and We grow gardens with it as well as grain to be harvested and soaring palms which have compact clusters as sustenance for worshippers. We have revived a dead countryside with it; thus will (your) reappearance be".

The Qur'anic account of the Creation is naturally crowned by the creation of man, as confirmed by ayat 54 of sura 25 The Criterion: "He is the One Who created humanity out of water; and He has graced them blood ties as well as in-laws".

According to Dante Caponera, for the Qur'an: "After humanity, water is the most precious of God's creations<sup>5</sup>" and water, in the Holy Book, is in fact at the service of mankind: "God is the One Who has created Heaven and Earth, and sends down water from the sky. He brings forth produce by means of it as sustenance for you. He has subjected ships to you so they may sail at sea by His command; and subjected rivers to you".

Thanks to water, God gives man plants: "... (since he is the One) Who has laid out the earth as a carpet for you and has traced highways on it for you, and sent down water from the sky. We have brought forth every sort of plant with it, of various types." (Sura 20 Taha, ayat 53) or again "and produced its water and its pasturage from it". (Sura 79 Soul-snatchers, ayat 31).

Jacques Berque shows that sura 86 The Nightcomer -in which ayat 6 calls on man to show humility<sup>6</sup>: "He was created from a fluid ejected"- with its reference to the rain, in fact expresses the cyclical pattern of nature and resurrection, and he describes this as an "admirable evocation completed by that of the annual return of the vegetation" in ayat 12. This vegetation is, of course, vital to the survival of the Bedouin Arab's flocks and most especially of his camels.

Given its pre-eminent place in the Qur'an, water is therefore blessed, endowed with purifying powers by its role in the flourishing of all forms of life, and made sacred: "... (II) Thus He caused drowsiness to overcome you as an assurance from Him, and sent down water from the sky on you

---

<sup>4</sup> For Hamidullah, "the wind is the harbinger of rain which, in a dry or arid land, is one of the most obvious manifestations of divine mercy." Again, in sura 27 The Ant (ayat 63), there is a reference to wind: "Celui qui envoie les vents comme une bonne annonce." But since the wicked do not give thanks for divine bounty such as rain, Allah punishes them: "Et si Nous envoyons un vent puis qu'ils voient tout jaunir, après cela, ils demeurent bien ingrats." (Sura 30 The Romans, ayat 51)

<sup>5</sup> "Water management in Islam", edited by Naser Faruqui, Asit K. Biswas and Murad Bino, United Nations University Press, Tokyo, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> A further reminder of this type is found in sura 77 The Emissaries, ayat 20 and in sura 22 The Pilgrimage, ayat 5.

*to cleanse or with and to remove Satan's Blight from you, and to bind up your hearts and brace your feet with it*<sup>7</sup>" (Sura 8 The Booty, ayat 11) or as repeated in sura 50 Qaf, ayat 9: *"We have sent down blessed water from the sky and We grow gardens with it as well as grain to be harvested, And soaring palms which have compact clusters, As sustenance for worshippers. We have revived a dead countryside with it"*.

Thus, for the Qur'an, water is the symbol of life. Its absence or scarcity is generally a death sentence. The Holy Book of Islam makes many references to such themes: *"God sends water down from the sky and revives the earth with it following its death"* (Sura 16 The Bee, ayat 65) or: *"You see the barren earth when We send water down upon it, stirring, sprouting and producing every sort of lovely species."* (Sura 22 The Pilgrimage, ayat 5).

Between life and death, water may not only bring prosperity, wealth and opulence, but may also bring misfortune should it be misused or mismanaged or should we fail to give thanks to God for his bounty, as sura 18 The Cave (ayat 40-41) warns: "perhaps my Lord will still give me something better than your garden... or its water will sink down some morning and you will never manage to find it again", while sura 67 The Sovereignty (ayat 30) is still more explicit: "Say: Have you considered who, if your water should sink into the ground, will bring you any water from a spring?".

The metaphor stems from the contrast between the water of a well disappearing into some crevasse and water springing forth from the very earth, a contrast often dramatically experienced by certain civilisations<sup>8</sup>. For Jacques Berque, this verse contains a possible allusion to the drought that fell upon Mecca immediately after the Hijra (16 July 622 AD) when the prophet was obliged to flee with the first of the faithful to Medina, in order to escape persecution and assassination.

In the text of the Qur'an, life is inconceivable without water because in addition to its vital functions, essential to plants, animals and human beings, God has surrounded us with natural beauty in the form of rivers, snow-capped mountains, the ocean and its shores and, as sura 13 The Thunder (ayat 3 and 17) explains: *"He is the One Who has spread the earth out and placed two*

---

<sup>7</sup> For Hamidullah, the Qur'an is alluding here to the famous battle of Badr (in the year 2 AH, 623 AD), a decisive victory for the new faith, during which it rained. The Muslim army was drawn up on sand, which the rain hardened into a firm footing (and prevented dust from rising in the course of the battle), while the Quraishi enemy took its stand on clay soil that turned to heavy mud, hampering both infantry and cavalry.

<sup>8</sup> The term ma'inused in this verse and meaning "spring forth from the earth" reappears in the Berque translation of the Qur'an (Sura 23 The Believers, ayat 50). It is important to note here the unparalleled richness of Arabic in vocabulary relating to water, wells, clouds, etc. Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwich has listed no fewer than 110 terms for "water" in Arabic (Mahmoud Darwich, "Mémoire.... pour l'oubli", Organisation arabe pour les études et l'édition, Beirut, 1990, p. 46 - 47). The Hebrew word for water, ma'im, takes the feminine plural.

*pairs for every kind of fruit on it... He sends down water from the sky so that river valleys flow according to how much there is. The torrent carries along swelling foam".*

Radhouane Essaièd, professor of Islamic philosophy at the Université Libanaise points out that descriptions in the Qur'an of seas, rivers and stretches of water suggest no fear of desertification, water shortages or of life in an arid climate. Water is one of God's gifts. As a result, its scarcity can only be a sign of divine wrath, a consequence of man's mismanagement of the precious gift or of his ill-conceived projects, since God created all things in due measure, without excess but also without parsimony: *"We send down water from the sky in due measure, and let it trickle into the Earth. We are even Able to make it disappear. We have produced date groves and vineyards on it for you; from which you have much fruit to eat..."* (Sura 23 The Believers, ayat 18). Even today in Islamic countries - and among the Jews - prayers are said in the event of persistent drought and sometimes, as in the case of Tunisia or Algeria in recent years, it is the authorities themselves that take the initiative<sup>9</sup>. In pre-Islamic Arabia, during periods of drought, sacrifices were made in Mecca to the rain goddess Manât.

The Qur'an, says Essaièd, calls for proper governance of water and the equitable sharing of this vital resources when it says: *"Announce to them how water must be shared among them; each will have his own special time to drink"<sup>10</sup>* (sura 54 The Moon, ayat 28).

For the Qur'an, the supreme mark of divine favour in this earthly world is made manifest in the rain and river water. But God punishes the wicked *"their wells have been abandoned"* (sura 22, The Pilgrimage, ayat 45). The punishment is severe because water sources in the desert are few and far between and a shortage of water in this arid environment can often prove fatal.

## Water and Eternal Life

For the Qur'an there is, of course, life on earth, but there is also the life beyond. Here, too, water is God's supreme reward to the believers and to those who have done good works during the brief passage on this earth that is life for any follower of the Prophet. Time and time again the Qur'an

---

<sup>9</sup> In Istanbul - which suffered from an unprecedented drought in 1994 - a lively debate arose, however, between partisans of "religious rain" and those of "scientific rain", the latter being triggered by seeding clouds with silver nitrate crystals. (Musa Akdemir, "Thirsty Istanbul implores the heavens", Libération, 11 July 1994, p.15)

<sup>10</sup> Hamidullah's translation differs slightly from Berque's: *"Et informe-les que l'eau est à partager entre eux, oui, chacun son tour de boire."* The latter adds: *"In the Islamic tradition, each of the Twelve Tribes has its passage, as it has its own spring of water in the desert."*

repeats expressions such as *"paradises with rivers flowing below"* or *"living running waters"* promised to good Muslims under *"in the shade long-extended of the trees of paradise"*; sura 2 The Cow (ayat 25) reveals this instruction to the Prophet: *"Proclaim to those who believe and perform honourable deeds that they will have gardens through which rivers flow."* Almost exactly the same words are to be found in verse 85 of sura 5 The Table Spread: *"God will compensate them with gardens through which rivers flow to live in for ever because for what they have said."*

For Hamidullah, a translator of the Qur'an, these graphic expressions seem designed to remind the Bedouin in the Arabian desert of the hillsides of Syria with their lush green orchards from which springs of water rose to form trickling streams: an idyllic setting, in essence, for those who lived in the arid wastes of Arabia. And, the translator adds, St. Luke's Gospel (Luke 20: 30) and the writings of St. Ephraim the Syrian (circa 365) also depict the indescribable pleasures of Paradise in earthly terms.

In Paradise, the fortunate drink *"a cup of spring water"* and *"shall never want for (fresh water)."* The Qur'anic text uses the Arabic term ma'in (see note 7) for *"water running on the surface"*, a true delight, Hamidullah adds, for those who have known only the bitter water from deep wells in the desert, water that is often brackish or over-rich in iron or mineral salts. Furthermore, sura 37 Those Who Set the Ranks, (ayat 45 to 47) tells the fortunate that God will relieve them of *"long journeys"* to fetch this water from a distant waterhole under the burning desert sun. In Paradise, indeed, one spring goes by the name of *Salsabil*, a composite word made up of *salas* (easy walking) and *sabil*<sup>11</sup> (path), i.e. flowing pleasant water, and another by the name of *Tasnim*, which means spring of abundant water; one of the streams in Paradise is called *Khawthar* (nectar, in Arabic). In sura 20 Taha, ayat 119, God warns Adam against the wiles of Satan and assures him that in Paradise: *"you will neither thirst there nor feel sunstruck"*.

---

<sup>11</sup> While performing the Hajj in 808, Zubaida, wife of the Abassid Caliph Haroun Al-Rachid, was touched by the plight of pilgrims who had trouble finding water. She ordered the building, at her own expense, of a canal to bring the water of Aïn Hanin to Mecca. It is interesting to note that in certain Muslim countries (Kuwait, Morocco, etc.), *sabil* also means a source of water provided by a pious benefactor for the benefit of passers-by. In Kuwait, these water sources are even chilled and feature the name of the donor (often a woman, in fact). In Morocco, they are richly decorated with azulejos. Offering water to the passer-by is a gesture highly valued throughout the Islamic world.

It is to be noted that Paradise is watered by rivers and streams<sup>12</sup> and not by seas, because rivers are a symbol of life while the sea and the desert, according to Egyptian novelist Gamal Ghitany, *"are infinite expanses and through this infinity take on a common significance and symbolism, in which land and sea are, for once, joined"*.

It is also to be noted that the Qur'an devotes sura 34 Saba to south-western Yemen. This region - Arabia Eudaimon or *"Arabia the blessed"*, cited by Euripides' Dionysus as one of the many distant lands he has visited- greatly impressed the Bedouin with its lush green vegetation and its opulence, since irrigation was practised here long before the Christian era and not only were dykes built but also the famous Mareb "dam", which features in pre-Islamic Arabic literature. The flooding of the "dam" is mentioned in verse 16 of this sura: *"They spurned (it), so We sent a torrent from the dam upon them, and We changed both their gardens for them into two gardens yielding bitter food, tamarisk and a very few hawthorns"*. The first destruction of the "dam" would seem to have taken place around 750 BC and a second destruction occurred just prior to the appearance of Islam. The dam remained in service for some 1,500 years and provided irrigation for close on ten thousand hectares, enough to feed 50,000 people -a considerable number for the period<sup>13</sup> - which would explain the interest shown by the Qur'an in this water project, unique of its kind, in the Arabian peninsula.

Nothing is more pleasing to God than to offer water to one's fellow man, even if he be an enemy, and the sharia -a term which originally (and how instructive the etymology!) meant *"water law"*- instituted *"haq al shafa (shirb)"* or *"the right to quench one's thirst"* for man and beast. The great merit attributed to the giving of water to any living creature is reflected in this hadith<sup>14</sup> transmitted by Al Bukhari<sup>15</sup>: *"A prostitute was forgiven by Allah because, passing by a panting*

---

<sup>12</sup> Water is often associated with the representation of paradise. The land of Eden, the Garden of Delights -where Adam and Eve dwelt- is the source of four rivers: Pishon and Gihon (long considered to be the Ganges and the Nile), the Tigris and the Euphrates. Amer, the Japanese paradise, lies above the earth and is watered by the peaceful river of the Milky Way. For the ancient Egyptians, paradise was the Field of Reeds, an idealised vision of the familiar landscapes of the banks of the Nile.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Gentelle wrote on this heading: "Since ancient times, Mareb has been the object of unanimous admiration, by virtue of the dyke built across the wadi and which is therefore sometimes called a dam... The remains, still visible today, represent such an ingenious solution for capturing the water that would otherwise run off uselessly into the desert, that they have never ceased to fascinate those who know of them. It is no accident that such a work is mentioned in the Qur'an, even though the Qur'an dates from after the final destruction of the dam." (in "Traces d'eau. Un géographe chez les archéologues", Belin, Paris, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Information handed down by many chains of transmitters of the deeds and words of the Prophet. For Muslims, the authority of the hadith is second only to that of the Qur'an.

<sup>15</sup> Muhammad al-Bukhari (810-870), considered the greatest of the hadith scholars and venerated as a saint.

*dog near a well and seeing that the dog was about to die of thirst, she took off her shoe, and tying it with her head-cover she drew out some water for it. So Allah forgave her because of that".*

The Qur'an also emphasises the ambivalence of water, which can also destroy - by means of torrential rains, hail or floods, for example- and thus serve to punish the wicked. Sura 6 The Cattle, ayat 70 announces to the Prophet: *"Stay away from those who take their religion as a sport and amusement. Those who let themselves act recklessly concerning what they have earned must drink boiling water and suffer painful torment because of how they have disbelieved"*. Pagan Arabs of the time used boiling water as a form of torture. Similarly, sura 26 The Poets, ayat 173, recounts that God punished the wicked with catastrophic rains: *"We sent a rain down upon them. How evil was such a rain or those who had been warned!"* Muhammad's biographers relate that in 605 the Prophet, then aged 35, witnessed the destruction of the Kaaba by fire followed by torrential rain.

## A religion unable to dispense with water

Water plays an essential role in religious observance. One could go so far as to say that without water, the daily practice of Islam would be virtually impossible.

After sexual relations, a Muslim man or woman is required to wash from head to foot (*ghus'l*), generally at the hammam or public bath, a place of great conviviality where the Muslim community comes together around the purifying element of water; here, Qur'anic values and representations of water go hand in hand with various local practices from the Maghreb, the Middle East and, indeed, from all over the Islamic world. Women in particular are required to perform *ghus'l* after menstruation and also after giving birth. This head-to-toe washing is also required of both sexes before daily prayers, and in order to observe the mandatory fast over the month of Ramadan, and the rites of the minor pilgrimage (*omra*) and the great pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca<sup>16</sup>. Man may not address God if his body is unclean and water is the purifying element above all others: purification by water -even metaphorical- is essential to communing with Allah. Before entering a mosque or performing the required five daily prayers, the Muslim must perform

---

<sup>16</sup> The ritual of the pilgrimage includes two stations, the hills of Safa and Marwa, a re-enactment of the search for water by Hagar, wife of the prophet Abraham, after she was driven into the desert by Sarah. The most important day of the Hajj is *wuquf* which ends after sunset with the "Débordement des flots" and the "Déluge", *Ifada* and *Tawaf*. The pre-Islamic rite of the *Ifada*, at the autumn equinox, was performed facing the direction of the sanctuary of the god Quzah, god of water, thunderstorms, rain showers, etc. (See Patricia Hidroglou, "L'eau divine et sa symbolique", Albin Michel, Paris, 1994). During the pilgrimage, as during the Ramadan fast, sexual relations are prohibited.

the ritual ablutions (*wudu*) laid down in sura 5 The Table Spread, ayat 6: *"You who believe, whenever you intend to pray, wash your faces and your hands up to the elbows, and wipe off your heads and (wash) your feet up to the ankles. If you are (ritually) soiled, then take a full bath. If you are ill or on a journey, or one of you has just come from the toilet or had contact with a women, and you do not find any water, then resort to wholesome soil and wipe your faces and hands off with some of it God does not want to place any inconvenience on you, but He does want to purify you and to complete His favour towards you, in order that you (all) may act grateful."*

Water is necessary for the purity of both body and spirit; in extreme cases, however, the believer must aspire at least to purity of spirit by showing humility and using clean dust or sand to perform *wudu*. Purity of soul and purity of body go hand in hand in Islam and mutually complement one another to ensure that the Muslim is in a state of psychological wellbeing and inner harmony favourable to communication with God. The moral function of ritual ablution is clearly expressed in the sacramental words spoken to God that complete the ritual of purification: *"Appoint me amongst those who repent well, and among those who purify themselves well. I seek Your forgiveness and I turn to You in repentance."*

Scholars of the law and the Islamic Tradition have codified in minute detail all the points of these Qur'anic injunctions, based on how the Prophet lived his life. They have also described, in great detail, not only the manner of performing these ablutions but also the quality of the water to be used and virtually even the very quantities to be used.

Al-Qayrawani<sup>17</sup>, the great 10<sup>th</sup> century Andalusian lawyer, recommends that the believer wash his hands three times before immersing his hands in the bowl containing the ablution water. He also recommends rinsing out the mouth three times, taking in water and expelling it through the nostrils three times, and rubbing water over the inner and outer parts of the ears.

*What is the reason for this detailed attention to ablution in Islam?*

Firstly, because the Prophet himself placed great importance on ablution, saying *"purification is half of faith"* and also that *"to be a Muslim is to be clean"* (according to Ibn Maja<sup>18</sup>). Next, because Al-Qayrawani in his famous *Risala* writes: *"The Prophète said (hâdith): "whoever*

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani, "La Risala ou Epître sur les éléments du dogme et de la loi de l'Islam selon le rite malékite", text in Arabic followed by a translation by Léon Bercher, Bibliothèque arabe-française, Algiers, 1951. Abdelhamid Slama "Water issues in the ancient arab world from the origins to the end of the XIth C. AH/XVIIth C. AD. Editor: Dar El Gharb Al-Islami, Beyrouth, 2004", (arabic language)

<sup>18</sup> "Water and sanitation in Islam", World Health Organization (WHO), Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, Alexandria (Egypt), 1996

*performs ablution and performs it well, then lifts his eyes towards Heaven and professes the Muslim faith, shall see open before him the eight gates of Paradise and he shall enter by whichever gate he pleases" and the law scholar goes on: "He who prays confides the secrets of his heart to God. He must therefore prepare for this act by ablution or by bathing where this is required... The ablution must be performed solely with Allah the Most High in mind and in order to obey His commandments, in the hope of gaining His approval and reward and, by this practice, to be purified of all faults committed. The believer must be sincere in his intention that this is a preparation and an act of cleanliness designed to fit him to speak with God and humble himself before Him through bowing and prostration. He shall therefore perform this action in mindfulness of these things and with the greatest of care (to perform it scrupulously), for the perfection of any act is subordinate to the purity of the intention behind it".*

Water to be used for purification or for the ablutions must be pure and *"no mixed with anything the law defines as impure"*. Its colour and odour were subjects of discussion by the law scholars<sup>19</sup>, as well as the size of the vessel in which it was held.

Nor did the question of how much water should be used in ablution and washing escape their vigilance.

Elsewhere, the Andalusian legal expert continues: *"It is recommended that water be used sparingly, while scrupulously performing the practices of purification by ablution. Using water prodigally is an excess and a practice contrary to the Sunnah. The Envoy of Allah... performed ablution using a mudd [half a litre of water]... and he performed the purification by ablution in a vessel of four mudds [two litres]"*. Not wasting water is in fact no more than the strict commandment of the Qur'anic text that says: *"Children of Adam, eat and drink, yet do not overdo things; He does not love the extravagant"* (Sura 7 The Heights, ayat 31). It could be argued that it is normal, given the water conditions prevailing in Arabia, for the new religion to call on its followers to be sparing with water since the archaeology shows, as at Petra, that even when the

---

<sup>19</sup> They even codified a correct way of drinking. In 1878 Eugène Fromentin, who travelled widely in the Algerian Sahara, described a "diffa" (formal dinner or reception) to which he was invited and from which he returned with the precept: *"The drinker must not breathe into the cup containing the drink, but must withdraw his lips to take breath; then he should resume drinking."* (in "Un été au Sahara", Plon, Paris, 1879). This is very similar to words written by Ibn Maja, one of the greatest hadith scholars, according to a version given by legal scholar Al - Qayrawani (Ref. 16): *"When drinking, do not breathe into the vessel from which you drink, but remove it from your lips and resume drinking afterwards if you wish. Do not swallow the water in long draughts, but in small sips, savouring its taste.... It is forbidden to breathe over food or drink... and it is forbidden to drink from vessels of gold or silver."*

nomads became sedentary, *"they did not lose their sense of water economy"*<sup>20</sup>. Here, in fact, it is more of a matter of principle. The Prophet forbids wasting this precious resource even when it is available in abundance, since a hadith instructs Muslims: *"Do not waste water, even if you perform your ablution on the banks of an abundantly-flowing river."* In another hadith, transmitted by Abu Daoud, the Prophet says: *"Guard against these three accursed things: relieving yourself near a spring, at the roadside or in the shade"*<sup>21</sup>. It is on the strength of these recommendations that Islamic lawyers and decision-makers have consistently condemned and fined those responsible for wastage, pollution, damage or poor maintenance of water facilities. In many Muslim countries, modern legislation aimed at water pollution finds its roots and its justification in these injunctions<sup>22</sup>. The purifying role of water in Islam, for both body and soul, is also underlined by its recommendation that Muslims should perform ritual ablution in many different circumstances: when angry, before going to bed, before eating, when coming into contact with or transporting a corpse, when observing a lunar eclipse, when soaked with perspiration, after losing consciousness or fainting, when slaughtering an animal for food, when reciting the Qur'an or hadiths, when taking a course in religious science, when visiting a mosque or a cemetery. According to Ibn Muslim<sup>23</sup>, the Prophet also recommends bathing once a week even if there is no religious requirement to do so (in the absence of sexual relations or menstruation, for example).

When death occurs, washing the body of the deceased -a religious obligation- is always considered the greatest honour that can be paid to the soul of the departed; in many Muslim countries, pitchers of water are set out along the route of the funeral procession so that mourners as they drink from them may invoke blessings and mercy on the soul of the departed.

It is noteworthy that, in common with Islam, there are many Jewish rites designed to wash away impurity (such as the purifying immersion of tevila) and the Book of Leviticus in the Bible is given over to a detailed enumeration of the rules of purity and of sexual taboos. Water also plays an important symbolic role in Judaism, especially at the most solemn moment of the Jewish calendar, the ten days of repentance between the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah (the head of the year), and Yom Kippur: all faults, sins, errors and doubts are cast away into water. This is the

---

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Gentelle, "Traces d'eau.Un géographe chez les archéologues", Belin, Paris,2003.

<sup>21</sup> People seek the shade for rest and coolness.

<sup>22</sup> See in Ref.4 the contribution by Naser Faruqui, "Islam and water management: Overview and principles"

<sup>23</sup> Ref.4

annual ceremony of Tashlikh (casting away) which is the basis for the rites of purity: standing on the bank of a river or the brink of a well, Jews turn out their pockets or shake their handkerchiefs to rid themselves of their sins.

## The culture of water and practical issues

Naturally, as we have seen, these precepts are echoed in everyday Muslim life and were the foundation for the Muslim culture of water. Power and religion, civilisation and water have forged strong links for many peoples over the course of history. Islam is no exception to these links. One hadith says: "*Muslims have common share in three things: pasture, water and firewood*<sup>24</sup>" and certain commentators suggest that in order to provide water for the followers of the new religion and avoid one person or one tribe having control over the precious resource, Muhammad encouraged Uthman<sup>25</sup> to buy the well of Ruma and establish it as waqf (or habous, which means for collective enjoyment or ownership for religious use and for the public benefit) for the perpetual use of the community and successive generations. Later, the two main branches of Islam - Sunni and Shia-adapted these general principles to local conditions and to the settlement of complex situations regarding the right to quench one's thirst, irrigation and the sale and transfer of water.

This document cannot claim to cover these questions in full, given the enormous body of theological and administrative references, and the accumulated case law of centuries regarding them. It will confine itself to indicating certain outlines for the non-Arab speaking reader.

Al-Qayrawani says: "*Surplus water [from a spring] must not be withheld to prevent people from coming to the pasture. Those who have dug wells for their flocks may take precedence in their use. They will thus use them first; after which, all others shall also be allowed to use them. [But] he who has a well or spring on his own property may forbid the use of it to another, unless his neighbour's well becomes unusable and that neighbour has crops which might then perish. In*

---

<sup>24</sup> Ref.4. Note that the Syrian Minister for Water and Irrigation quoted this hadith against Turkey (without actually naming his target) in a statement reported in Cairo newspaper El Ahrām (06 May 1997) regarding the difficult negotiations over allocation of water from the Euphrates. This was somewhat surprising since the government in power in Damascus claims allegiance to the Ba'ath party, a secular party founded by a Christian, Michel Aflak, and while the majority of citizens of the Turkish Republic are Muslims, the country has been profoundly secular since its founding in 1923 by Mustapha Kemal Atatürk.

<sup>25</sup> Third caliph, 644 to 656

*which case, he cannot refuse his neighbour the surplus water. But is the neighbour required to pay the price of the water? The question is disputed".*

We are therefore faced with a particularly controversial issue since the sharia distinguishes between 3 types of water: running water (rivers, streams, etc.), water from a well made by the hand of man, and water from natural springs (sometimes improved by man). The nature of the water and its use have given rise, throughout history, to highly complex forms of legislation in which Qur'anic law and local custom and practice are often more or less closely associated.

The foggara water management system in Tunisia, for example, is similar to that of the Iranian qanat. The foggara makes it possible to create an oasis. The foggara is made by digging a deep tunnel in the earth of the foothills - i.e. at the foot of a fairly steep mountain range such as the Jebel Orbata. Water from the scarce rainfall in this virtually Saharan zone filters its way down into the foothills and the gallery acts as a drain. The foggara collector may be up to one or two kilometers in length. Families maintain the foggara and own the land it irrigates over a width of ten metres (reserved area) and of unlimited length as long as the gradient allows gravity to deliver water to the plot, as is shown by the work of Jean-Olivier Job and Jean Albergel on Tunisian oases.

In the case of the Muslim societies of black Africa, it is not easy to separate Islamic law and traditional law in the matter of water; in most cases, where traditional law does not openly conflict with the rules of Sharia, it is incorporated by scholars into canon law. In Niger, for example, whoever controls the use of the water supply controls the neighbouring pastures, which is where the real wealth lies. In essence, water controls access to grazing land. In pastoral societies, access to vital water is never denied to passing men or herds, even if a limitation on transit time may be imposed. This reflects a clear application of an Islamic principle: the right to quench one's thirst (shirb), here extended to the herds that are practically the sole means of subsistence for whole communities. It is common practice among the Arabs, however, to prevent stray camels with no known owner from drinking from the community's water supply, according to many authorities including a very famous speech by the governor of Iraq, El Hajjaj Ibn Youssef (661-714).

These practices appear to conform to the Tradition that relates how the Amalik of Yemen, suffering from drought, went in search of water and fertile lands. On reaching a certain valley, they saw a bird which seemed to hang motionless in the sky and concluded that the creature was

looking for water. Yet the place was known not to contain any water. A scout was sent out and discovered water - the well of Hagar and Ishmael. The Amalik asked permission to halt at the well. Hagar agreed, but not without stipulating: "*Yes, but you have no rights over the water*"<sup>26</sup>". The Amalik agreed to this condition.

Even in the pre-Islamic period, it was common practice for the caravans of goods crossing Arabia to pay for water as they paid for fodder, notes Maxime Rodinson.<sup>27</sup>

In the Muslim tradition, however, the interests of the community take precedence over those of individuals or of small groups, as is generally the case in much Western legislation<sup>28</sup>. The community here is the *Umma*. As used in the Qur'an and in the writings of law scholars, this term refers to the Muslim community but modern usage tends to use the term "nation" imported from the West.

Speaking of current practices, Dante Caponera says: "*For Islam, water resources lie in the public domain... While it is impossible in theory to tax water as such, since it is God's gift, it is perfectly legitimate to levy a tax on water services or to tax the supply of water for various purposes, with authorisation.... Islam places no restriction on trading in water. As a public good, water cannot be transferred, but the transfer of its use is permissible. So if a user, large or small, holds a concession or license, he may exchange water with or sell water to another user, large or small, if the government, which is the curator of public water, agrees... The religious precepts of Islam are in no way an obstacle to the appropriate management of every aspect of water as a resource*"<sup>29</sup>.

Addressing the question of water markets and water pricing in Iran - hence from the standpoint of Shia Islam - Kazem Sadr, of the faculty of Economics and Political Science of the Shahid Beheshti University in Teheran, states that Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and the consensus of the ulema, or legal scholars, teach that surface water as well as water from the aquifer are either public property or the property of the Imam, "*the just and legitimate governor of the country*" and that such water may therefore be exploited directly by the authorities or licensed to private operators. Sadr asserts that in the earliest days of the Muslim state, the construction of wells, dykes and other waterworks was paid for from the public coffers, *Baitulmal*. However,

---

<sup>26</sup> Mahmoud Hussein, "Al-Sira. Le prophète de l'Islam raconté par ses compagnons", Grasset, Paris, 2005, p.91.

<sup>27</sup> Maxime Rodinson, "Islam et Capitalisme", Le Seuil, Paris, 1966

<sup>28</sup> In a dispute over water rights, the Supreme Court of Hawaii found in favour of the community, and against the owner, in a decision handed down in August 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Ref.4

should someone invest in gaining access to water from a spring or river, that person acquires priority of access when it comes to making use of the water, but can in no way claim to possess the river or spring providing the water, which remains communal property. The rights of other users must be protected in all circumstances. In the ingenious system of qanats in Iran, for example, these underground canals that rely on gravity are the property of their builders, but the wells or springs supplying the water are not.

Shia Islam apparently adheres to Garrett Hardin's theory that to allow free access to common property leads remorselessly to its destruction<sup>30</sup>.

This view is confirmed by Pierre Gentelle. Examining the issue of water in Iran's Lut desert, he writes: *"According to the Prophet, the ownership of a spring, canal, well or qanat involves the ownership of a neighbouring extent of land, known as harem, an area in which no one else is allowed to dig" and concludes: "The Persians did not fail to observe, from the outset, that the Arabs had been nomads before following the teachings of Muhammad and that their customs still contained traces that were not of divine origin. In the case of water rights in particular, conquered agricultural societies had had their own complex rules of water management centuries before the Prophet appeared. One thing common to Muslim and non-believer alike: when water is shared, upstream "drinks" before downstream, according to fiqh, and the upstream water in a canal may not be higher than ankle-height"*. Proof that, in this highly sensitive area, no one can wipe clean the slate of the past and of history, and that a culture, a civilisation, is made up of multiple contributions and successive accretions which join and merge to form a new entity through which to express the ingenuity of the human spirit and its continual adaptation.

Sadr, however, points out that the transfer and distribution of water may be carried out by the private sector and adds: *"If Islamic rules and values prevail in a market, we may expect the price set to be effective. This price will then serve as a reference for water supplied and sold by the public sector and it should cover all operating costs. In practice, no discrimination should be made when establishing the price. This proposition is in accordance with the rules of the Islamic legal system, and the management and distribution of water in Iran<sup>31</sup>".*

Now to the Sunni version. Algeria is a Muslim country which suffers enormous problems of water supply. Minister for Water Abdelmalek Sellal admitted in an interview with newspaper El

---

<sup>30</sup> Garrett Hardin, "The tragedy of the commons", Science, no.162, 13 December 1968, p.1243-1248

<sup>31</sup> Ref.4

Watan (23 November 2004) that in the capital, "...only the east of the city receives a 24-hour water supply; the central and western areas do not receive a regular supply. At present, they do receive water every day, but only for a very limited number of hours... We have already begun work on renovating the network in Algiers. Most of the work has been completed, but the situation is not improving".

This situation has existed for decades and, sadly, is not confined to the city of Algiers, or to this Arab Muslim country alone. Looking more specifically at the Arab world, Jean-Paul Bord writes: *"Medium term United Nations forecasts show that "countries likely to suffer water deficits or shortages in 2025 include a large proportion of states in the Arab world (with the exception of Mauritania, Sudan and Iraq). Globally, this part of the world suffers most from water problems. And even if the pattern of change will differ from one country to another, by 2025 almost all the countries in the Arab world will be affected by water shortages"*<sup>32</sup>.

What can be done? The Algerian minister, after pointing out that *"water is a common good"* announced the launch of an array of legal weapons such as: *"Water will no longer be an abstract product which has no value. Under the new water code, it will have a value to society and a market value."*

Like the Bible, the Qur'an places unrivalled importance on water. In Paradise, water is the reward given to good Muslims and exists there in profusion; in the Garden of Eden, springs and rivers abound. Water, vital to the observance of religious rites, is the gift of God and a divine blessing. Water is the primal element and opens the way to the sacred and to transcendence. Its scarcity or lack is due either to the wickedness of man or to his failure to manage the resource adequately, since God gave everything in due measure. The Qur'an therefore requires Muslims to use water with moderation and condemns wastage. Moreover, it encourages proper governance of this vital resource, more particularly because the Arab world is, for example, *"an area dominated by desert and the search for water, except on its margins."*

The various religious schools agree on many points regarding the management and exploitation of water for the benefit of the community while respecting the rights of whoever invests his labour, for example by tapping and channelling water and making it available.

---

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Paul Bord, "Le monde arabe: des espaces géographiques aux représentations cartographiques", doctoral thesis in geography, Université François Rabelais, Tours, December 1998