GOD EXISTS IN YEMEN, part 1: On the meaning of livelihood

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If you can rely on *God* with due reliance, *He will provide you* with *sustenance* in such a manner as *He provides birds* and beasts. (A saying of the Prophet)

The notion of *rizq* can be broadly—and provisionally—translated as 'sustenance' or 'bread', keeping in mind that English glosses always need to be used with caution. Sustenance, or *rizq*, is a central feature of how social actors in Yemen

construct their everyday existence and give meaning to their economic practices. It is a 'common sense' concept in C. Geertz's definition, one endowed with the characteristics of naturalness, practicality and thinness (1983: 85).

Since the topic of sustenance has been of central interest for Islamic theologians and for Arab intellectuals, not the least Ibn Khaldun, I shall start my analysis by presenting some classical Islamic understandings of *rizq*. As we shall see, three main themes overlap in the discursive construction of *rizq*: *a*) the theme of predestination, which is connected with Arab emic conceptions of what we would call 'agency'; *b*) the related theme of human freedom and endeavour, often defined as 'labour'; c) the theme of livelihood and sustenance itself. Hence I will show how *rizq* emerges as a contested notion within local and historical discursive practices. Finally, I will argue that the notion of *rizq* provides the semantic background for a whole range of economic practices of reciprocity.

1. On sustenance and Islam

1.1. Rizq and Predestination

M. Watt is one of the few authors to have proposed a thorough interpretation of the notion of *rizq*. The general framework of his analysis is presented in *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (1948) and can be briefly summarised as follows. Broadly speaking, M. Watt recognises that a 'predestinarian view' is to be found both in the Qurʿān and in the Traditions (or Sunna, the inspired sayings of the Prophet of Islam). Yet these two sources represent two opposing trends as to the interpretation of *liberum arbitrium*, divine sovereignty and human responsibility. M. Watt labels these two trends 'the theistic view of destiny' and the 'atheistic conception of Time (*dahr*)' (ivi: 20).

In the Qurʿān, regarded as a unitary whole, we can individuate a 'theistic view of destiny'. This position strongly emphasises what M. Watt calls the 'majesty and omnipotence of God' in overt opposition to the notion of the 'predetermined

character of man's life' which is drawn from the Sunna in continuity with pre-Islamic thought (ivi: 20). Hence, in the Qurʿān "[…] the conception of the righteous God demanding righteousness from His creatures leads by an irresistible logic to the doctrine of human responsibility with its corollary the doctrine of Qadar, namely that man has the power to perform the duties imposed on him by God." (ivi: 38) Human beings are intended to live and work in the direction expressed by God's guidance. Since dependence on God implies duties (ivi: 24), they can handle their freedom in accordance with God's morality to improve their achievements in the after-life, as well as in this life, or they can choose to ignore Good and pursue Evil.

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This attitude is directly opposed to an 'atheistic conception of Time (*dahr*)' (ivi: 20), drawn from the Sunna, that leads to inactivity, to resignation and to idleness, and is overtly fatalistic, stating that human life is controlled and fixed by mysterious and impersonal forces often leading to a "let us eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" attitude (ivi: 23). Generally speaking, it opposes the

idea of the Judgement and of future life itself. These "impersonal and rather atheistic conceptions belong to the system of ideas that were current among the Arabs and the surrounding peoples before the coming of Islam […]," (ivi: 20) and they have been thoroughly criticised in the Qurʿān.

> *It is interesting to note that a pivotal node of the debate resides in the attribution of good and evil to God's knowledge (ʿilm) and command (ʾamr). In what we have so far labelled as a 'theistic' conception of predestination, Evil deeds cannot be attributed to God's command. On the contrary, in the 'atheistic' conception of predestination, everything descends from God.*

Now that we have set the general terms of the debate about predestination and free will, we can try to understand how the notion of *rizq* has been constructed at the intersection of different discursive regimes and how these conceptions have been affected by specific notions of predestination. As M. Watt has noted (1948: 16), the notion of *rizq* has been discussed in connection with predestination on the basis of the following Qurʿānic verses: "There is not a beast in the earth but God is responsible for its sustenance; He knows its lair and its resting-place; everyone is in a clear book." This conception of *rizq* is—by acknowledgement of M. Watt himself—very close to an 'atheistic' conception of predestination and hence to those notions which have been held to be characteristic of the Tradition.

Rub al-Khali desert in Saudi Arabia,

2007. Photo by Javierblas, CC BY-SA 3.0

These verses describe *rizq* as something settled by Fate. This peculiar notion of sustenance has been interpreted as an "[…] obvious consequence of the harsh desert environment of Arabia, which could be not be altered much by individual human effort," (Bosworth, 1986) and hence in continuity with pre-Islamic conceptions of sustenance. Whether this interpretation regarding the 'origins' of the relationship between notions of sustenance and a harsh desert environment is verifiable or not, is not our concern here. What is central is that the ambiguity of the Qurʿānic verses has led the notion of *rizq* to a prolific discursive career, both theological and political.

The problem at stake can be briefly summarised as follows: if sustenance descends from God, how are we to interpret unlawful sustenance? The debate, again, centres around the problem of avoiding fixing evil on God. Thus, given the ambiguity of the verses about *rizq*, how has this theological dilemma been solved? First consider the positions of the Muʿtazila: it generally holds that God creates only lawful sustenance. So what a man obtains unlawfully, stolen goods for example,ias not appointed to be his sustenance by God (Watt, 1948: 67). This interpretation clearly stretches the meaning of the Qurʿānic verses, with the goal of supporting the anti-fatalistic perspective of the Muʾtazilite school.

Other authors have attested to overtly fatalistic positions. In this perspective, the Qurʿānic verses about sustenance lead to a completely opposite interpretation. An-Najjār, and more generally the theological currents that M. Watt defines as 'orthodoxy', argued that God provides both lawful and unlawful sustenance (ivi: 146).

1.2. Predestination and the Zaydī

school

During my fieldwork, most of my interlocutors defined themselves ‘Zaydīs’, followers of the Imām Zaīd Ibn ʿAlī, the grandson of Ḥussaīn Ibn ʿAlī Ibn Abū Ṭālib. The Zaydīyyah is a moderate Shiite school, sometimes described as the “fifth school” of the four Sunnite schools of Islam. In the period between 2011 and 2013, the traditional ‘Zaydī identity’ of many of my interlocutors was being questioned. Due to the complex historic-political scenario set in motion by the Arab Spring and the controversial conflict between the Yemeni Government and the Huthys in the north of the country, ‘being a Zaydī Muslim’ suddenly became a politically marked option.

As a result, many theological aspects of the Zaydī school became symbolical flags in a complex process of selfing / othering that opposed the Huthys and Iṣlāḥ (the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood). The theme of predestination was one of these symbolical flags, since many Zaydīs maintain that Muʿāwiya, a historical character accused of rebelling against the lawful Imām (ʿAlī Ibn Abū Tālib), was an unbeliever because of his many sins, which included the belief in predestination (*jabr*) (Kohlberg, 1976).

Hereafter I will propose a brief analysis of Zaydī theological conceptions of predestination since, I believe, they are a good starting point to analyse local notions of agency. How do Zaydīs conceive of predestination and free will? As W. Madelung (1986a, 1986b) has argued, we can distinguish two phases in the development of the Zaydīyyah, related to two different conceptions of *liberum arbitrium* and predestination. The early phase can be traced back to the period of Zayd’s activity in Kufa, in the late 30s of the 8th century. The so-called ‘Kufan phase’ was characterised by a strong opposition to the Qadariyyah and to the Muʿtazila. Hence, Zayd Ibn ‘Ali was a determinist. In *Majmuʿ al-Fiqh*, Zayd appears as an “anti-Qadari supporter of predestination” (1986a: 474). This work, first published by E. Griffini as *Corpus Iuris di Zayd B. ‘Ali* (Zaid ibn ‘Ali and Griffini, 1919), presents many passages that, in a general sense, explicitly condemn the Qadariyyah and the Murji’ah.

Furthermore, there is one *hadith* that, I believe, can give us a hint of the focal points of the discussion. The *hadith* relates a dialogue between a Qadary supporter of 'free will' and 'Ali Ibn Abu Talib. (1) From the dialogue it emerges clearly that Qadary positions are considered apostasy. But what does it mean to be a 'Qadary'? A focal point of the *hadith* seems to be the *attribution of evil to God*. While the Qadary refuses to consider evil actions as stemming from God's will, 'Aly represents the opposite position.

Queen Arwa Mosque. Jibla, Yemen. Picture by Bernard Gagnon, CC BY-SA 3.0

Thus, as we have seen, the position of Zayd Ibn 'Aly was clearly an anti-Qadarite one. Various dates are mentioned for Zayd's death though the most likely is March 740. The Zaydī Imamate in Yemen was founded some 150 years after Zayd's death, in 897. The Yemeni Zaydīyyah reached ideological positions close to the Baghdad school of the Mu'tazila, overturning Zayd's position in less than a

century and a half. In fact, referring to the doctrine of destiny, the Imam al-Hādī Yaḥya ilā al-Ḥaqq, founder of the Zaydī Imamate in Yemen, adhered completely to the Qadary principles (Madelung, 1986b).

The mainstream of later Zaydī thought steadily remained in this position. Consider, for example, the exegesis put forward by a famous Zaydī scholar on a popular Zaydī website. A Zaydī follower asks: "If an individual kills his wife, can we say that [his action] resides in God's knowledge [*'ilm*] but that God didn't order it?" (2)

The Zaydī scholar's answer emphasises many crucial points, one of which is of paramount importance: is it possible that something resides in God's knowledge but is not foreordained by Him? The answer is clear: from God descends freedom, the possibility of choosing what is good and avoiding what is evil. God knows his servants, but he does not compel them to act in any way. Thus while the early Zaydī positions on this matter pointed clearly to a determinist ideology — both good and evil descend from God — the Yemeni Zaydī school seems to take the opposite position: the individual is free and God holds no responsibility for the individual's actions, despite the fact that God's knowledge knows no limits and hence he can foresee an individual's choice.

Similar positions are widespread at the common sense level. Consider the position of Zeynab (3), a young teacher from the Old City of Ṣanʿā':

> *"Yes, the person is free in everything he does. It's true that everything about us is written by God, with his science and his knowledge of us, but still the person is free to choose [mukhayyar]. In everything, he can choose what is good or what is evil, he's not at all obliged to do anything; for example when the teacher knows that one of his students will be successful in an exam and another one will flunk, he didn't coerce them. But he knew it through his science and his previous knowledge of them. Because God knows us all".*

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Generally speaking, most of my Zaydī interlocutors were ready to admit that the individual is "free and not compelled in his choice (*al-insān mukhayyar w laīsa musayyar*)" and that "God did not write anything but what is good (*mā katabsh Allāh illā al-kheīr*)." A corollary of this anti-fatalistic ideology was an emic theory of agency whose focal points are well summarised by the words of Taghrid, another young teacher from the Old City of Ṣanʿāʾ:

"If God had taken us out from our mothers' bellies, letting us bring our page in our hands… then human beings would stop working, making efforts, being diligent. And God's will regarding the examination of his servant would be disrupted. [If we knew our destiny] the diligent believer who knows that, eventually, success will be his ally, would be lazy. And in the same way, the loser would hesitate, knowing that, whichever his efforts, failure is always his, and a destiny of being miserable!! If the person knew what is waiting for him—the fears of life and the tribulations of death for the decision of his age—he would hide himself, terrified and scared, and his life would be disrupted, earth would become desolated and so everything that moves in its constructions and buildings!!"

The duty of the believer, Taghrīd concludes, is just one:

> *"[…] what is asked from the individual is to think and to ask the guidance (ihdā') and the adequacy of all his choices. And the person doesn't need to bear the burden of thinking what his Creator has planned for him as aqdār. The duty is to believe that he's free…"*

In sum, the believer is free to act. His duty consists in following God's guidance, although he is not coerced to do so and may act *as if* he is free. In fact, in an inversion of the Weberian argument (Weber, 1958), if he knew what is written "he would hide himself terrified and scared, and his life would be disrupted." Do these principles about human freedom and human agency apply to the notion of *rizq*? We will answer this question ethnographically after taking into account the matters of endeavour and work.

1.3. Sustenance in the work of Ibn Khaldun

We have so far considered how the notion of *rizq* has been constructed and interpreted within classical Islamic theology. We have considered the pre-Islamic genealogy of the term, its connection with a fatalistic view of life, and the subsequent development of the notion within two classical trends of Islamic theology, the Zaydī theological school and the common sense discourses of Zaydī followers.

Now I would like to deepen our understanding of the notion of *rizq* by presenting the analysis of the famous Moroccan sociologist Ibn Khaldun. His perspective is interesting because it weaves together a theory of value and Islamic conceptions of sustenance and predestination. We can summarise Ibn Khaldun's interpretation of sustenance starting from his definition of the notion of 'profit'. What is profit? *Profit*, argues Ibn Khaldun, *is value realized from human labour* (1967: 479). On the basis of this general definition, he distinguishes between natural and

unnatural ways to obtain profit. Agriculture, hunting and fishing, the crafts, and commerce are a natural way of making a living. They are natural because they are based on human labour.

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On the contrary, it is not natural, for example, to make a living from exercising political power or searching for buried treasure. This last task is considered a devious way of making a living since it is an attempt to gain profit without effort and trouble (ivi: 486). But why is the exercise of political power not a natural way of making a living? The argument, here, is more subtle: people with a high rank are served by the labour of others who want to please them; the value that they realize from such labour becomes part of their profit because there is a wide gap between the value produced by the labour of their servants and the prices they pay for the services. Thus the exercise of political power is not a 'natural' way of

making a living, because it entails the exploitation of someone else's labour to gain surplus.

Now that we have clarified Ibn Khaldun's definition of profit, we can address the matter of sustenance. *Sustenance,* Ibn Khaldun argues, *is the part of profit that is utilized*. He reaches this conclusion drawing on the Koranic text and on the Sunna of the Prophet, quoting, for example, the following *ḥadīth*: "The Prophet said: 'The only thing you (really) possess of your property is what you eat, and have thus destroyed; or what you wear, and have thus worn out; or what you give as charity, and have thus spent.'"

> *Sustenance is the income that a person obtains through his own effort and strength and that is spent upon his interests and needs. Thus the definition of profit encompasses that of sustenance, sustenance being the 'utilized' part of the profit.*

While reflecting on the notion of sustenance, Ibn Khaldun addresses two themes that are of fundamental importance for our work. The first theme can be summarized as follows: is 'unlawful sustenance' provided by God? As we have already seen, this was a focal point of debate in the discussion about sustenance and predestination. The Muʿtazila, that first raised this point, clearly answered that unlawful sustenance was not provided by God, although this solution presented some contradictions on the theological level. Zaydīs followed the Muʿtazila. Ibn Khaldun upholds the opposite position: "[…] God sustains him who acquires property wrongfully, and also the evildoer, the believer as well as the unbeliever" (ivi: 480).

The second theme refers to the relationship between human effort and sustenance. Ibn Khaldun develops this point by addressing the contradictory assumptions regarding God's omnipotence and human freedom. On the one hand, Ibn Khaldun reminds us that that 'everything comes from God'. A famous Koranic verse states: "Thus, ask God for sustenance" (4) and this implies that the effort to acquire sustenance depends on God's determination and inspiration. On the other

hand, he observes that sustenance requires effort and work, and human labour is necessary for profit and capital accumulation. From this perspective, the remembrance of God is a necessary but insufficient condition to obtain sustenance. We will further analyze this theme on the common sense level.

In sum, classical sources have discursively constructed the notion of *rizq* around the following questions: *a*) Does *rizq* descend from God? *b*) Is it (or is it not) related to human labour and endeavour (and hence to human agency)? *c*) Is it (or is it not) related to the quality of human action (to its moral value)? *d*) Is it what subjects need to 'live'?

1.4. On the role of 'deafness' and theoretical metonymies

In a general sense, *rizq* and the nominal and verbal forms related to it refer to God's provision and sustenance. The word *rizq* itself occurs in the Koranic text 55 times. Its related verbal forms occur 68 times (McAuliffe, 1986). I have no statistical insights as to the frequency of the usage of this word in everyday language, but during my fieldwork I had the feeling that *rizq* was something worth knowing, at least because it was a central concern for my interlocutors. This should not be surprising; in a hand-to-mouth economy, sustenance is quite a central topic.

> *Yet, to my knowledge, anthropologists have not written a single word on this topic. Unlike other celebrated notions, sharaf being the most controversial, the concept of rizq has remained segregated at the periphery of our discursive constructions.*

J. Elyachar has recently observed that economic anthropology, in the Middle East, "is a sub field waiting to exist." (Elyachar, 2005) Her consideration echoes a famous article by L. Abu-Lughod (1989) that describes Yemen as a Middle Eastern "zone of theory". A zone of theory is a discursive construction that entangles

places, ideas and images. It constructs the 'natives'—in our case Yemeni natives—through anthropological tropes, that: *a*) sum up the cultural complexity; *b*) transcend intra-regional specificities; *c*) organise the anthropological debate; *d*) provide a link between (native) internal realities and (anthropological) external preoccupations (Appadurai, 1988).

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A theoretical metonymy is a conceptual tool that sums up an entire society, working as a gate-keeping concept: a "concept that seems to limit anthropological theorising about the place in question, and that defines the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region" (Appadurai, 1986: 357). Abu-Lughod lists three themes that have worked as theoretical metonymies in the anthropology of the Middle East: segmentation, the harem and Islam (1989: 280). I would add, as a fourth, the complex of honour and shame.

> *Is the power of our discursive constructions so pervasive? Do we construct representations of the 'other' in such a referential way? Apparently we do. Anthropological theory sheds light on peculiar, legitimised themes, preventing us from seeing what lies in the shadows. The segmentary lineage theory has worked, in Yemen, as a theoretical metonymy, flattening the construction of the anthropological subjects to that of one-dimensional tribesmen.*

Anthropologists have widely used the metaphor of 'deafness', and this metaphor can probably teach us something about our ability to learn. Consider, for example, the reflections of A. Weiner on the notion of *mapula*. Describing the process of her understanding of the concept, she observed: "The problem with *mapula* was that, *a priori*, I accepted its original Malinowski definition, and I then proceeded to take its meaning for granted. […] In retrospect, *mapula* was so much a part of my own exchange vocabulary that I remained deaf to what my informants were really saying to me." (1980: 77)

Consider another example. S. Gudeman has put forward similar reflections on the role of 'listening' in the practice of anthropology: "The anthropologist produces a text, as we do here, but only as one part of several larger conversations; and the anthropologist must certainly have a 'good ear' as well as a facile pen." (1990: 4) S. Gudeman undertook his fieldwork in Colombia with another scholar, A. Riveira and both recorded their discussions with local people: "More often than we would like to admit, each of us had missed something the other had heard, or heard the 'same thing' differently" (ivi: 6).

When I undertook my first fieldwork in Yemen, in 2009, I had been very influenced by the magnificent works of P. Dresch and R. B. Serjeant. I thought of *sharaf* as a central notion in Yemeni culture and society. Consequently, I started discussing this topic with my Yemeni interlocutors. Their reaction, a mixture of blush and indignation, surprised me—as probably my question surprised them. Soon I discovered that *sharaf* stands for what we might gloss as 'sexual honour', and it is not a comfortable topic of conversation. Yet, for a long time, I was not

able to reconcile what I heard from my Yemeni friends and what was so strongly rooted in my theoretical biases.

Something similar happened to me with the notion of *rizq*. Although *rizq* is a widespread common sense notion, I did not 'hear' the word for a significant span of time. Here I need to specify what the verb 'hear' stands for; the metaphor of deafness operates at two levels. First, it stands for a 'cognitive' inability: some words and some notions are silent to the anthropologist, until they come into focus. We can hear them hundreds of times a day, yet we do not perceive them. Second, it is a theoretical inability of the kind described above: the extreme difficulty of recognising a theme, or a notion, as an anthropologically sensitive one.

Endnotes

(1) The *hadith* can be found in *Majmu' al-Fiqh: 938.*

(2) The full text in Arabic. Last accessed: 12/06/2014.

(3) I have analysed this theme in a paper titled *"It Wasn't destiny": Love and Work in the Old City of Ṣanʿā'*, presented at the annual BRISMES Conference in Brighton, 16-18 July 2014. Zeynab was interviewed in the ambit of a research on love and marriage strategies.

(4) Koran, surat al-Ankabut, ayah 17.

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