

Revisiting the Sectarian Milieu: Pre-Islamic Arab Cultural Agency in the Dialectical Formation of the Qur'an

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ABSTRACT

The examination of the Qur'ān's origins and its relationship with pre-Islamic Arab culture remains a contentious issue, complicated by narratives rooted in Islamophobia and the politicization of identity. This study seeks to reassess John Wansbrough's theory of the "sectarian milieu" by incorporating neglected aspects of pre-Islamic Arab culture, examining the influence of local factors in the Islamization process, and deconstructing the binary of "external influence versus internal authenticity." Using a qualitative interdisciplinary methodology, the study integrates analysis of Quranic texts, Jahiliyyah poetry, archaeological inscriptions, and cultural anthropology. The findings show that the Qur'ān emerged as a result of a dynamic synthesis between pre-Islamic Arabic heritage (including oral traditions, ḥaram rituals, and tribal values) and external Judeo-Christian influences. This conclusion challenges Wansbrough's theory, which isolates the Arab context, while revealing a theologically revised continuum of cultural heritage. The recommendations of this study underscore the need for a comprehensive approach in early Islamic studies that incorporates archaeological, philological, and socio-historical evidence to avoid polarizing narratives manipulated in identity-political discourse.

Keywords: *John Wansbrough, sectarian milieu, Al-Qur'an, Arab culture, cultural dialectics.*

ABSTRAK

Pemeriksaan asal-usul Al-Qur'an dan keterkaitannya dengan budaya Arab pra-Islam tetap menjadi masalah yang diperdebatkan, diperumit oleh narasi yang berakar pada Islamofobia dan politisasi identitas. Studi ini berusaha untuk menilai kembali teori John Wansbrough tentang "lingkungan sektarian" dengan memasukkan aspek-aspek budaya Arab pra-Islam yang diabaikan, meneliti pengaruh faktor-faktor lokal dalam proses Islamisasi, dan mendekonstruksi biner "pengaruh eksternal versus keaslian internal." Menggunakan metodologi interdisipliner kualitatif, penelitian ini mengintegrasikan analisis teks-teks Quran, puisi Jahiliyyah, prasasti arkeologi, dan antropologi budaya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Al-Qur'an muncul sebagai hasil dari sintesis yang dinamis antara warisan Arab pra-Islam (termasuk tradisi lisan, ritual ḥaram, dan nilai-nilai suku) dan pengaruh eksternal Yahudi-Kristen. Kesimpulan ini menantang teori Wansbrough, yang mengisolasi konteks Arab, sambil mengungkapkan kontinum warisan budaya yang direvisi secara teologis. Rekomendasi dari penelitian ini menggarisbawahi perlunya pendekatan komprehensif dalam studi Islam awal yang menggabungkan bukti arkeologis, filologis, dan sosio-historis untuk menghindari narasi polarisasi yang dimanipulasi dalam wacana identitas-politik.

Kata Kunci: *John Wansbrough, sectarian milieu, Al-Qur'an, budaya Arab, dialektika budaya.*

INTRODUCTION

The examination of the Qur'ān's origins and its relationship with pre-Islamic Arab culture is a prominent issue in contemporary Islamic studies, especially in the context of identity politics and cultural heritage debates in the Muslim world (Fitriansyah, 2023). The proliferation of Islamophobia on a global scale, coupled with polarized narratives relating to the history of Islam has led to a growing interest in examining the Qur'ān's emergence through the lens of social and historical (Wang, 2016). In conjunction with this perspective, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd argues that the Qur'ān functions as a “cultural artifact” that emerges from a dialectical engagement with the socio-cultural context of pre-Islamic Arabia, while Mohammed Arkoun examines it within a dynamic discursive framework that is intricately linked to local customs (Afiani, 2021). This growing interest is exemplified by the increasing academic literature that studies the Qur'ān not only as a religious text, but also as a historical and literary document (Rahman & (Alumni, 2019). Scholars have delved into the multifaceted dimensions of the Qur'ān from its linguistic beauty to its historical context, as well as its consequences for the development of society (Adlini, 2023). In this context, Hodgson underlines the importance of Arab cultural practices especially oral traditions and poetic expressions as instrumental channels for disseminating the universally applicable message summarized in the Qur'ān (Patricia Crone, 2018). Dialectical relationships are evidenced in the preservation of historical sites in Saudi Arabia and the integration of Jahiliyyah poetry into modern Arabic education (Kumullah, 2024).

This attempt to dissect the intertextual elements is in line with the methodological framework proposed by John Wansbrough through the theory of sectarian milieu. Wansbrough argues that the Qur'ān emerged from the interaction of diverse theological discourses between Jewish, Christian and pagan Arab factions not as a single revelation, but rather as a reaction to the sociocultural dynamics of the contemporary context (Maqdis, M., & Hakim, n.d.). Supported by Gerald Hawting, he argues that the Qur'ānic depiction of idolatry serves as a reflection of anti-Jewish and anti-Christian polemics rather than an accurate representation of observed practices in Arab society (Glen, J. D., Karmokolias, Y., Miller, R. R., & Shah, 1995). This framework facilitates an understanding of the Qur'ān as a product of the complex interaction between early Islamic teachings and the religious and cultural environment of seventh-century Arabia (Suryadilaga, 2011). This theory argues that the Qur'ān's formation was significantly influenced by Jewish and Christian traditions, thus challenging confessional perspectives on its origins (Azmi, 2017). Wansbrough's radical approach inspired scholars like

Patricia Crone and Andrew Rippin to revisit the traditional narrative of textual codification (ADAMS, 1997). Nonetheless, the dichotomy between external (Judeo-Christian) influence and internal authenticity in Qur'ānic studies is often co-opted for identity politics, including the justification of Arabization in Islam or the rationale behind Islamophobia. Wansbrough's approach has nevertheless sparked considerable discourse in Islamic studies, underscoring the importance of sociocultural context in understanding the Qur'ān, while reflecting on the complex interplay between religion, history and identity in the contemporary Muslim world.

Previous research into Wansbrough's theory of sectarian milieu and the cultural dialectic inherent in the Qur'ān has tended to prioritize textual criticism and interreligious debate, without paying enough attention to the role of Arab cultural agency in the process. For example, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook's contribution in "Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World" underlines the external influence of Judeo-Christian traditions on the formation of early Islam. The theoretical framework put forward by Fred Donner shows a tendency to ignore the fact that nascent Islam was a comprehensive movement that transcended mere Arab identity. Their theory, as criticized by Fred Donner, tends to ignore the fact that early Islam was an inclusive movement that transcended Arab identity (Harju, 2011). However, their analysis faces criticism for not adequately representing the internal dynamics of Arab culture, such as tribal systems and oral traditions (Patricia Crone, 2018). In contrast, Mustafa al-A'zami (*The History of the Qur'anic Text*, 2003) challenges Wansbrough's basic premise by asserting that the Qur'anic text has been stable since the time of the Prophet (Saki & Shaker, 2018). But as Talal Asad and Abdulkarim Soroush point out, the approach falls short of addressing the reciprocal dialectic between sacred texts and cultural practices (Shleifer, A., & Vishny, 1997). Recent research by Ahmed al-Jallad (*The Religion and Rituals of the Nomads of Pre-Islamic Arabia*, 2022) through epigraphic analysis of pre-Islamic Arab inscriptions, while providing empirical evidence of the survival of local values, remains somewhat detached from the theoretical discourse on sectarian interaction advocated by Wansbrough (Al-jallad, n.d.).

Although previous comprehensive reviews have described the inherent limitations of each paradigm, this study explicitly seeks not only to challenge, but also to combine and augment these frameworks by incorporating aspects of pre-Islamic Arab culture that are often overlooked. In stark contrast to the methodology employed by Crone and Cook, which overemphasizes external Judeo-Christian influences to the detriment of local agency, our findings suggest that internal dynamics such as inter-tribal rivalries, oral traditions, and the Hanif movement should be considered not as a passive backdrop, but as active agents engaged

in a dialectical relationship with revelation. While Wansbrough's theory regarding the sectarian environment offers a significant basis for understanding the context of religious polemics, it ultimately fails to explain the cultural mechanisms that supported the process of adaptation and negotiation. This is where the author's research makes its main contribution. By utilizing epigraphic evidence and Jahiliyyah poetry that has not been extensively examined by the Wansbroughian school, the author proposes the concept of “pre-Islamic cultural dialectics” as a stronger theoretical framework. This concept not only rejects the isolationist perspective of the Arab context as proposed by Wansbrough, but also deconstructs the external-internal dichotomy inherited from his predecessors, by showing that the formation of the Qur'an represents a creative and complex synthesis between transnational influences and the vibrant and nuanced sociocultural realities of the Arab environment.

This study seeks to engage in a critical examination of John Wansbrough's “sectarian milieu” theory by integrating aspects of pre-Islamic Arab culture that have previously been neglected in dialectical analyses of Qur'ānic formation. Based on Geertz's perspective on religious transformation through existing cultural frameworks (Webb, n.d.), this study delineates three main objectives: First, to examine the influence of pre-Islamic Arabic cultural components in the dynamics of the Islamization process intertwined with the act of revelation; Second, to align empirical data with Wansbrough's theoretical constructs to explain the correlation between the Qur'ān and the socio-cultural realities prevalent during its time; and Third, to interrogate the binary opposition between external narratives of influence” (Judeo-Christian) and ‘autocratic internal entities’ that continues to pervade scholarly discourse. As Soroush articulates, this research sees Islamization as a reciprocal process: revelation shapes culture, while the cultural context shapes the understanding of the text. Consequently, this study not only defies the constraints of previous studies that tend to separate Arab culture from the analysis of sectarian milieu, but also presents a comprehensive perspective on the way early Islamization interacted with indigenous cultural heritage, while re-evaluating the polarized historical narratives often employed in contemporary identity politics.

This study is based on the premise that the Qur'ān not only embodies the external influence of Judeo-Christian traditions, as highlighted in Wansbrough's “sectarian milieu” theory, but is also the result of an active dialectical engagement with pre-Islamic Arab culture, which had entrenched value systems, oral traditions, and religious ideologies. The main argument articulated here states that Arab cultural agency, manifested through mechanisms such as adaptation, negotiation, or resistance, was instrumental in shaping the Islamization

narrative, thus blurring the rigid demarcation between “external” and “internal.” The hypothesis put forward by this study suggests that the incorporation of empirical evidence relating to pre-Islamic culture (including inscriptions, Jahiliyyah poetry, and tribal values) within a Wansbroughian framework will reveal cultural continuities that have so far been overlooked, while simultaneously dismantling reductive narratives that have sought to isolate early Islam from its Arab antecedents. Moreover, this study argues that previous research's shortcomings in linking epigraphic discoveries to theories of “sectarian milieu” have maintained an artificial dichotomy between revelation as a transcendent phenomenon and historical context as a passive arena of polarization exacerbated by contemporary Islamophobic rhetoric and identity politics. Thus, the concluding hypothesis asserts that this integrative approach not only revises Wansbrough's theoretical paradigm but also provides a new perspective on the process of Islamization as a dynamic synthesis between the universality of the divine message and the specificity of local cultural contexts.

METHOD

This research centers on the textual analysis of the Qur'ān in relation to its intersection with the cultural paradigms of pre-Islamic Arabia, focusing primarily on ritual customs, Jahiliyyah poetic expressions, and indigenous oral traditions, which serve as the primary units of inquiry. The reason for choosing this focal point is based on the need to evaluate John Wansbrough's sectarian environmental theory, which has a tendency to overlook the basic elements of Arabic culture in Qur'ānic formation (Neuwirth & Sells, 2016), while simultaneously examining the dialectical interaction between sacred texts and their localized contexts. Methodological selection is made by identifying Quranic verses that openly engage with pre-Islamic customs (informed by Ahmed al-Jallad's research) documenting tribal values (*muwāḥ*) and the notion of *ḥanīf*, alongside compilations of Jahiliyyah poetry and related historical accounts from the 7th century (Al-jallad, n.d.). The selection criteria underlined relevance to the theme of cultural negotiation and representation of local heritage that had not been sufficiently addressed in previous scholarly investigations.

The research methodology is structured through a qualitative interdisciplinary framework that combines critical textual analysis, epigraphic scholarship, and cultural anthropology. This methodological design was chosen to mitigate the Eurocentric bias inherent in Wansbrough's theoretical constructs by incorporating empirical evidence that reflects the cultural context of pre-Islamic Arabia. The initial phase involved deconstructing conventional

narratives surrounding Islamization (such as assertions regarding al-A'zami's textual stability) with revisionist narratives (including Wansbrough's theory of external influence). The next phase illustrates the traces of Arab cultural elements in the Qur'ān through intertextual analysis with Jahiliyyah poetry and inscriptions, while the final phase synthesizes the findings to construct an alternative framework that reconciles Judeo-Christian influences with the internal dynamics of Arab culture, exemplified by the adaptation of Hajj rituals and the concept of tribal honor.

In pursuit of improved intertextual and contextual analysis, this study employs a meticulous qualitative methodology by conducting a comprehensive reading of important texts. This methodological framework not only explains the lexical parallels between the poetry of the Qur'an and Jahiliyyah but also carefully traces the semantic transformations and recontextualization of meaning imposed by revelatory texts on pre-Islamic concepts. For example, when the Qur'an embraces the rhetorical form of *saj'*, the qualitative research investigates how this identical aesthetic structure is used to convey an entirely new theological message, thereby undermining the authority of the poet (*sya'ir*) and directing it towards divine revelation. This in-depth qualitative methodology allows research to capture the intricacies of cultural negotiation, adaptation, and resistance that defy quantification through numerical measures, yet remain fundamentally at the heart of the formative dialectic that culminated in the emergence of the Qur'an.

Primary data sources include Quranic texts, anthologies of Jahiliyyah poetry, and historical records from the 7th century, while secondary sources consist of Wansbrough's contributions (Quranic Studies), critiques from scholars such as Fred Donner and Angelika Neuwirth, in addition to anthropological examinations of Arabic culture. The selection of these sources was done based on criteria that emphasized relevance to the theme of text-culture dialectic and academic credibility, with preferential consideration for documents recognized in early Islamic studies. Jahiliyyah poetry was chosen for its representation of an oral heritage that is often overlooked in exclusively textual analysis, while the historical record serves to reconstruct the socio-religious environment of the 7th century (Stetkevych, 2010).

Data collection was done through document analysis and intertextual comparative studies between the Qur'ān, pre-Islamic poetry and historical records. This methodological approach was adopted to reveal patterns of cultural rejection or assimilation present in the sacred texts, such as the utilization of poetic metaphors or the adaptation of tribal customs. This process entails a careful trawl through *asbabun nuzul* books to understand the contextual

background of the revealed verses, in addition to the application of corpus linguistics software (Arabic Quran Corpus) to scrutinize the frequency and distribution of key terminology (Bashir et al., 2023). The comparative approach facilitates the identification of narrative parallelisms between Qur'ānic and Jahiliyyah poetry, thus demonstrating complex cultural negotiations.

Data analysis employs critical thematic analysis and historical discourse analysis to code pre-Islamic cultural themes in the Qur'ān (e.g., honor, oaths), while simultaneously reconstructing the polemical context that informs the Islamization narrative. These two analytical techniques are integrated to link hermeneutical interpretations of texts with socio-historical dynamics, while also critiquing the reductionist tendencies inherent in Wansbrough's methodology. Data validation is achieved through triangulation among findings derived from Qur'anic texts, Jahiliyyah poetry, and historical accounts, then interpreted through the lens of cultural negotiation theory and decolonial perspectives. The anticipated results are expected to shed light on how the Qur'ān not only engages with external religious traditions but also participates in a deep dialectical relationship with Arab cultural identity, thus challenging the binary narrative surrounding Islamization.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Dynamic Synthesis of Pre-Islamic Arabic Culture in the Formation of Qur'anic Narratives and Islamic Practice

The cultural landscape of pre-Islamic Arab society is often referred to as Jahiliyyah, characterized by the incorporation of socio-cultural values such as courage, friendship, and loyalty to commitments, which are foundational elements of tribal existence. Although permeated by ethical dilemmas and a lack of tangible spiritual direction, this age also witnessed significant intellectual advancements, especially in the domain of poetry and rhetoric, which served as the primary vehicles for articulating cultural hegemony (Murthy & Shahid, 2016). An analysis of pre-Islamic Arab cultural practices shows that oral traditions, including poetic expressions, heroic narratives (ayyām al-'arab), and indigenous religious rituals, significantly influenced the narrative composition of the Qur'ān. This interconnectedness is manifested in the incorporation of poetic metaphors and cultural ideologies into the Quranic narrative, suggesting an active interaction with the local cultural context (Ikhwan, 2024). One prominent illustration can be observed in the dominant use of *saj'* (rhythmic prose) language style in pre-Islamic poetry, as evidenced in the composition of the Makkiyyah verses. This stylistic approach not only utilized a well-known communicative medium, but also reallocated the

linguistic authority of the poets (saj') who were considered to have supernatural affiliations, thus reinforcing the authenticity of the Qur'ān as divine revelation.

The integration of the pre-Islamic Arab cultural paradigm into the Qur'ānic ethical framework illustrates a clear evolutionary trajectory, not a mere rejection (Dolnicar & Chapple, 2015). This amalgamation manifests in haram principles, ancestor worship, and tribal value systems, which are re-conceptualized in the context of Islam (Dost, n.d.). The Qur'ān criticizes idolatry while using indigenous terminology, such as “Lat” and “Uzzā,” to advance the concept of monotheism, thereby exemplifying the negotiation of cultural symbols to support a theology of legitimacy. Conversely, certain scholars argue that the Quranic rejection of certain idolatrous practices signals a more radical departure from pre-Islamic cultural norms, suggesting that the transformation was not fully integrative but also entailed the deconstruction of previous belief systems.

Archaeological evidence from Hajar bin Humayd (Yemen) and Qaryat al-Faw (Saudi Arabia) underscores the continuity and transformation of pre-Islamic ritual practices into Islamic traditions (Webb, 1931). The Quran retains certain ritual components while certain ritual components remain embedded, giving them new meanings that are compatible with Islamic theology. This process illustrates that Islamization does not necessarily entail an absolute break from historical precedent, but rather a creatively reconstructed continuum. This phenomenon further reflects the intricacies of the socio-cultural milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia while simultaneously serving as a mechanism for identity consolidation amidst evolving social paradigms (Imam, n.d.).

Moreover, the metamorphosis of pre-Islamic values as depicted in the Qur'ān exemplifies the profound transition from tribal traditions to a more encompassing ethical paradigm. The notion of muruwah, which underscores attributes such as courage and loyalty, is recontextualized through the doctrines of taqwa and social equality. This is evidenced by the Qur'anic critique of jahiliyyah customs, which include gender inequality (Aksoy, n.d.) and the murder of a baby girl (Lindstedt, 2011) (QS. An-Nahl :58-59):

وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُم بِالْأُنْثَىٰ ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُ مُسْوَدًّا وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ﴿٥٨﴾
يَتَوَارَىٰ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ مِنْ سُوءِ مَا بُشِّرَ بِهِ أَيُمْسِكُهُ عَلَىٰ هُونٍ أَمْ يَدُسُّهُ فِي التُّرَابِ أَلَا سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Meaning: (58) (Whereas,) when one of them is given news of (the birth of) a daughter, his face turns black (crimson) and he is very angry (sad and ashamed). (59) He hides from the people because of the bad news that has been brought to him. Will he keep her in disgrace or

will he bury her in the ground (alive)? Remember, how terrible (is the verdict) they have decreed!

This verse explicitly highlights the Arab society's hatred of the birth of girls, which often led to the burial of these children alive, while condemning it as an unjust decision. In addition, the Qur'ān reconstructs 'aṣabiyyah (tribal fanaticism) into solidary solidarity, people and integrating the tradition of diyyah (blood compensation) into a reconciliation-oriented legal system.

Thus, the formation of Islamic narratives and practices does not simply reflect a rejection or acceptance of pre-Islamic culture, but rather a process of symbolic negotiation involving adaptation, redefinition and creative deconstruction.

The Qur'an and Socio-Cultural Reality: A Revision of Wansbrough's "Sectarian Environment" Theory

This study argues for the need to elaborate on Wansbrough's concept of the "sectarian milieu" by incorporating internal Arab dynamics, particularly intertribal conflicts over claims to religious legitimacy. The Ḥanīfiyyah movement, representing pre-Islamic monotheistic factions that rejected idolatry while maintaining an Arab cultural identity, serves as a salient illustration (Imam, n.d.). Epigraphic evidence from Najran and the Hijaz reveals eschatological dialogues that predate the advent of Islam, suggesting that the Qur'anic statements regarding the Day of Judgment are not just isolated revelations (Yücer & Yılmaz, 2004) but rather a reaction to the sociocultural discourse prevalent in society. Ibrahim's narrative in surah al-An'am, particularly verses 76-79, exemplifies this discourse.

فَلَمَّا جَنَّ عَلَيْهِ اللَّيْلُ رَأَى كَوْكَبًا قَالَ هَذَا رَبِّي فَلَمَّا أَفَلَ قَالَ لَا أُحِبُّ الْآفِلِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾
 فَلَمَّا رَأَى الْقَمَرَ بَازِعًا قَالَ هَذَا رَبِّي فَلَمَّا أَفَلَ قَالَ لَيْسَ لِي بِهِدْيٍ رَبِّي لَأَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الضَّالِّينَ ﴿٧٧﴾
 فَلَمَّا رَأَى الشَّمْسَ بَازِعَةً قَالَ هَذَا رَبِّي هَذَا أَكْبَرُ فَلَمَّا أَفَلَتْ قَالَ يُعَظِّمُ إِلَهِي بَرِيءٌ مِمَّا تُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾
 إِنِّي وَجَّهْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّذِي فَطَرَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا أَنَا مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٧٩﴾

Meaning: 76. When the night became dark, he saw a star (and) said, "This is my Lord." So, when the star set he said, "I do not like the setting." 77. Then, when he saw the moon rise he said (to his people), "This is my Lord." But when the moon set he said, "Indeed, if my Lord had not guided me, I would have been among those who went astray." 78. Then, when he saw the sun rise he said (again to his people), "This is my Lord; this is greater." But when the sun set he said, "O my people, I have indeed disassociated myself from what you associate." 79. Verily, I set my face (only) to the One who created the heavens and the earth with (following) the straight religion, and I am not of the polytheists.

Through this narrative, the Qur'ān presents Ibrahim as a ḥanīf figure who reconstructs spiritual authority by challenging the dominance of kāhin (shamans) who often abuse supernatural powers. Thus, Wansbrough's concept of "sectarian neighborhood" needs to be seen as a space of socio-religious competition, where the Qur'ān not only bridges competing theological claims, but also knits the cultural heritage of pre-Islamic Arabia into a revolutionary framework of faith.

Wansbrough's theoretical framework is thought to limit the scope of analysis by ignoring the significant impact of pre-Islamic trade routes. The Incense Line, along with other commercial routes, served not only as a channel for the exchange of commodities but also as a means for the dissemination of religious ideas, language, and ideas that contributed to the formation of the Qur'ānic lexicon and the socio-religious context of early Islam (Potts & Potts, 2018). Archaeological findings, including pottery inscriptions from Gaza and Petra, show the assimilation of the language of trade within local cultures, reflecting the broader dynamics of cultural exchange. Surah al-Quraisy: 1-4, which articulates Quraysh's reliance on seasonal trade ascribed to divine intervention, underscores the complex interconnection between economic endeavors and religious beliefs (Alshawaki, 1974). Moreover, the accessibility of Jewish communities in Yathrib and Christians in Najran through well-established trade networks facilitated interfaith interaction, thus enriching the religious tapestry of pre-Islamic Arabia.

The pre-Islamic lunisolar calendar (an-nasi') had significant importance in the socio-religious dynamics of Mecca, where the elite class exerted control over the scheduling of the holy months and related rituals (Abad, n.d.). The Qur'anic condemnation of intercalation, as articulated in QS. At-Taubah: 36-37, is not only a rejection of calendrical customs but also a calculated maneuver to reclaim temporal authority from these elites, thereby instituting a new secular government (Abad, n.d.). This transformation is symbolic of the larger phenomenon of Islamization that contextualized pre-Islamic cultural practices, including the observance of holy months and rituals, within a universal paradigm of worship. The incorporation of astronomical observations into Islamic practices, as seen in Ramadan and Hajj, further illustrates this profound metamorphosis.

The inheritance laws described in the Qur'ān, as specified in QS. An-Nisa:11-12, signifying a distinctive amalgamation of pre-Islamic Arabic tradition and the Roman-Byzantine legal framework (Saleem & Hassan, 2023). This fusion is manifest in the Qur'ānic integration of the pre-Islamic Arab patrilineal inheritance model, which systematically marginalized women, together with the Roman principle of patria potestas, which recognized the rights of

girls (Waddin, 2024). The Qur'ānic interpretation of inheritance law embodies more of a hybrid legal construct than a truly dichotomous one, assimilating elements from indigenous Arab customs and external legal influences. This hybridity is further exemplified in the practice of mahr, which maintains the Arab tradition of marriage gifts while simultaneously limiting patriarchal authority (Waddin, 2024).

Qur'anic representations of prophets such as Hud and Shalih, along with the concept of Millah Ibrahim, exemplify the confluence of external influences and indigenous traditions (Taha Yaseen, 2011). This synthesis can be observed in the way in which the Qur'ān connects these figures to Hebrew traditions and pre-Islamic Arabia, including the remnants of the 'Ād people in Hadramaut (Islam et al., 2024). The narrative strategy used in the Qur'ān effectively blurs the distinction between foreign influences and local traditions, thus creating a distinctly mosaic religion and culture.

Thus, this revision of Wansbrough's theory asserts that the “sectarian milieu” should be understood as a dynamic space of socio-cultural competition, in which the Qur'ān served as a mediator between pre-Islamic Arab heritage, external influences, and revolutionary theological visions. By integrating archaeological, linguistic, and socioreligious analysis, this study expands the theoretical framework for understanding early Islam as the product of complex interactions between theology, economics, politics, and culture.

Deconstructing the External-Internal Dichotomy: Toward a Holistic Narrative

An examination of the external-internal dichotomy in Islamic studies explains how ideological assertions, such as the Arabization of Islam, often overlook the complex interplay of influences that shaped the Qur'ān. While certain scholars emphasize Judeo-Christian influences, this viewpoint may inadvertently bypass the Arab foundations that underpin Muhammad's legitimacy (Gibb, 1962). The rituals associated with the Hajj exemplify this synthesis, as the practice, while reminiscent of Abrahamic traditions, remains deeply embedded in pre-Islamic customs (Waharjani & Mohammad Jailani, 2024). This shows that the Qur'ān embodies a creative fusion of global and local heritage, challenging the reductive nature of identity politics.

The creation myths prevalent in pre-Islamic South Arabia, particularly the cult of Ilmuqah within the Kingdom of Saba, reveal a nuanced interaction between indigenous cosmologies and Quranic narratives. The Qur'ān assimilates elements from these myths, such as the creation of mankind from clay, while reinterpreting them to emphasize monotheism. This reinterpretation is evident in the Quranic narrative of human creation, which parallels the

Sabaeen myth of Rahmanān but articulates a more abstract conception of God, devoid of anthropomorphic characteristics (Iqbal, 2008). Furthermore, the narrative of the great flood in the Qur'ān resonates with local traditions, framing it as divine retribution rather than a myth (Lumbard, 1997).

The transformation of the pre-Islamic Arab kinship structure, instigated by the Qur'ān, signaled a fundamental transition from tribal hierarchy to an egalitarian ideal based on faith, facilitated by a comprehensive reform of social customs and cultural values (Coe & Palmer, 2008). The Qur'ān reinterprets the social framework by prioritizing spiritual ethics over tribal hierarchies, as evidenced by the prohibition of practices such as the burial of baby girls and the modification of adoption norms. The transition from nasab to ta'aruf and the establishment of the kafala system exemplify Islam's engagement with pre-Islamic customs rather than their total abolition (Muhammad, 1992).

A philological examination of the Quranic lexicon of Aramaic origin, which includes terms such as “malakūt” and “firdaws,” shows that Arabization occurred before the advent of Islam through commercial and political exchange. This linguistic integration implies that the Qur'ān actively curated regional linguistic heritage rather than simply absorbing terminology (Üyesi & Aslan, 2019). Investigations into pre-Islamic Arabic artistic expression, particularly through relics such as the wall paintings at Qaryat al-Faw, reveal a profound interaction between indigenous aesthetics and Quranic iconography. The Quran employs visual metaphors, exemplified by the “garden of paradise,” that resonate with fertility motifs prevalent in Nabatean and Sabaeen art, yet abstract divine favor by avoiding anthropomorphic depictions of deities (Ashfaq, 2020). This synthesis indicates that the Qur'ān not only reflects but also transcends local artistic traditions.

The interaction between the Qur'ān and the Arab Christian population of Najran exemplifies a multifaceted relationship characterized by theological adaptation and polemical discourse. The Qur'ān incorporates Arabic theological concepts, such as “kalimatullah” (word of God) relating to Isa, which are deeply rooted in the Syrian Christian lexicon, while placing them in a narrative context that underscores prophetic lineage, primarily through Ibrahim (Griffith, 2005). In addition, the designation “Raḥmānān,” as documented in a 6th century Christian inscription, is paralleled in the Qur'ān as “ar-Raḥmān,” yet the Qur'ān emphatically rejects the notion of a Trinity, affirming God's unity (O'Connor, 2009). This shows a selective incorporation of Christian ideas, reflecting a sophisticated sectarian landscape rather than a direct transnational impact (Griffith, 2005).

By deconstructing the external-internal dichotomy, this study offers a holistic framework of analysis. The Qur'ān is a dialogical product that both responds to and transforms cultural heritage, both local and global. This approach not only undermines essentialist claims of “purity” or “dominant foreign influence,” but also invites readers to see Islam as a creative continuation of pre-Islamic Arab cultural dynamics connected to a vast network of civilizations. This kind of holistic narrative is key to understanding the complexity of religious history while keeping it away from reductive politicization of identity.

The study elucidates three main conclusions. First, the pre-Islamic Arab cultural environment, embodied through oral traditions, ḥaram rituals, and tribal ethos, played an important role in the formulation of the Qur'ānic narrative and ethical framework, as exemplified in the appropriation of saj' style and the reconfiguration of the concept of muruwah. Second, it is imperative to amend Wansbrough's “sectarian milieu” theory to include intra-Arab dynamics, including inter-tribal rivalries and the consequences of pre-Islamic commercial networks. Third, the “external influence versus internal authenticity” divide is artificial, as the Qur'ān emerged from a dynamic synthesis of indigenous heritage and transnational engagement.

This conclusion requires a reconsideration of the prevailing methodology in Qur'ānic studies. The excessive focus on Judeo-Christian influences during this historical period has obscured the crucial role of Arab cultural intermediaries as facilitators of theological evolution. Although Wansbrough's theoretical framework provides a basis for analyzing sectarian interactions, his inadequate consideration of the Arab socio-cultural context has engendered a Eurocentric perspective. The incorporation of archaeological (Najran inscriptions) and philological (Jahiliyyah poetry) evidence corrects this imbalance, suggesting that the process of Islamization was one of negotiation rather than passive rejection or assimilation.

The findings show that the Qur'ān not only embodies transcendent revelation, but also contextual engagement with 7th century socio-political realities. For example, the condemnation of usury (QS. 3:130) is both a moral and political critique-reflecting the conflict between Meccan elites and marginalized groups. The use of saj' as a communicative medium suggests a cultural strategy to spread revolutionary ideas through familiar aesthetic forms. In essence, the Qur'ān's “distinctiveness” lies in its capacity to integrate cultural diversity while maintaining theological integrity.

In contrast to Wansbrough's focus on Jewish-Christian interaction, this investigation has established that Arab intertribal rivalries and local ritual traditions were equally important. The

assertions made by Patricia Crone and Michael Cook regarding the dominance of external influences are challenged by the findings regarding the synthesis of inheritance law (QS. An-Nisa:11-12), which combines Arab patrilineal customs with Roman-Byzantine legal principles. Conversely, al-A'zami's essentialist perspective, which ignores external influences, also fails to explain the continuity of cultural practices in Hajj rituals. Consequently, this study serves to bridge the gap between the revisionist and traditionalist paradigms.

The findings of this research on the dynamic synthesis between revelation and pre-Islamic culture are not only historically valuable, but also have strong resonance in the contemporary socio-political context, particularly in countering essentialist narratives and identity polarization. The understanding that early Islam embraced and transformed local cultural heritage, rather than rejecting it outright, provides a critical perspective on the discourse of extreme Arabization on the one hand, and Islamophobic claims that portray Islam as a foreign entity in the Arabian Peninsula on the other. In the Indonesian context, these findings can serve as a framework for analyzing and encouraging a more substantive process of “indigenization” or contextualization of Islamic values, in which the universality of religious teachings engages in creative dialogue with local cultural richness, without getting caught up in the dichotomy of “central authority” versus “local tradition.” Thus, this study not only revises Wansbrough's theory but also opens up a space for dialogue to formulate an inclusive and contextual Islamic identity, which is urgently needed to counter the politicization of religion and fundamentalism in a multicultural society.

CONCLUSION

This research supports the assertion that pre-Islamic Arab cultural paradigms significantly influenced the dynamics of Quranic revelation, an aspect that has been overlooked in Wansbrough's theory of “sectarian environments.” First, pre-Islamic oral traditions, local rituals, and tribal values were not only assimilated but theologically restructured to validate the nascent Islamic faith. Second, Wansbrough's proposition of Judeo-Christian interaction as the dominant influence has proven only partially accurate; instead, intra-Arab rivalries (such as the usurpation of hanīf authority) gave birth to a “sectarian space” that catalyzed the formulation of Qur'anic concepts including ummah and tawhid. Third, the binary opposition of “external influence versus internal authenticity” does not adequately explain the innovative synthesis between indigenous heritage (such as saġ') and transnational traditions (e.g., Abrahamic narratives), which requires an understanding of the Qur'ān as the product of a complex process

of acculturation. This conclusion challenges reductionist narratives that seek to detach Islam from its cultural origins.

This research has made major contributions in three scholarly domains. First, it reconciles the gap between revisionist schools (exemplified by Wansbrough) and traditionalist perspectives by demonstrating that the process of revelation is intrinsically local involving a negotiation between theological universalism and cultural specificity. Second, interdisciplinary methodologies integrating philology, archaeology and cultural anthropology have succeeded in revealing new insights in Qur'anic studies, especially regarding the assimilation of pre-Islamic rites (such as tawaf) into the Islamic ritual framework. Thirdly, the critique of the external-internal dichotomy shifts the scholarly paradigm from ideological polarization to a more comprehensive analytical approach, which has relevance for the examination of other religious traditions in the Middle East. Consequently, this study not only revises established theories but also sets methodological benchmarks for future integrative research endeavors.

To further elaborate on these findings, ongoing scientific investigations should prioritize three main agendas. First, archaeological investigations of pre-Islamic sites in the Hijaz and Yemen can reveal the relationship between local ritual artifacts and Quranic accounts of jahiliyyah religious practices. Second, comparative linguistic analysis is needed to describe the process of “arabization” of non-Arabic (Aramaic, Ethiopian) lexicons in the Qur’ān and their relationship to pre-Islamic commercial interactions. Third, an analysis of contemporary identity politics should be developed to examine how a comprehensive narrative of Islam's cultural roots can mitigate sectarian conflicts that draw on divisive historical accounts. Furthermore, Wansbrough's “sectarian neighborhood” theory requires re-evaluation to include factors such as the role of women in perpetuating oral traditions or the impact of South Arabian trade networks. Thus, future scholarly efforts will not only enhance academic discourse but also encourage more constructive interfaith dialog.

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