



THE LIVING QURAYSH

In Arab and Muslim collective memory, Quraysh is in a league of its own. Quraysh is the clan of the Prophet Muhammad (570-632 CE) and many of his close companions — the nucleus of today's Muslim world. But even before Islam, Quraysh can boast a history of leaders and communities of conspicuously noble character.

Throughout its history, Quraysh came to stand for three honorable human impulses: the impulse for **unity**, the impulse for **justice**, and the impulse for **connecting with others** through the exchange of material and cultural products.

In the Quraysh experience, the three elements (unity, justice, communication) constituted a comprehensive worldview. First, the need to exchange material and cultural goods through trade and religious festivals demanded efficient communication and equitable legal conventions. Second, efficient communication and fair laws were the foundation for an interdependent and united world.

EXCHANGING MATERIAL AND CULTURAL GOODS —→ COMMUNICATION
& EQUITABLE CONVENTIONS —→ INTER-DEPENDENCE AND LARGER UNITY

Following is a brief sketch of the Quraysh story, through these three themes.

Unity

One given etymology for the name Quraysh is that it comes from a word that means gathering or getting together (Arabic taqarrush).^{*} It was an ancestor of the Prophet Muhammad, named Qusayy, who brought his kinsmen together after their pursuit of livelihood caused them to spread in different parts of northern Arabia. The name Quraysh is said to describe this gathering (taqarrush). The same man, Qusayy, also founded the House of Deliberation (Dar al-Nadwa) for the people of Mecca to decide the issues that concerned them.

The spirit of taqarrush or getting together could serve as the central theme in the subsequent history of Islam. The peoples who participated in the Islamic civilization, which originated in Arabia, spoke hundreds of different languages and held many different beliefs. After the Prophet Muhammad introduced his call for Islam, Quraysh provided the seeds for one of the most significant multi-cultural units in the human experience. **Diversity within unity** could be the slogan for this multi-cultural and multireligious unit.

^{*} Another etymology is that Quraysh, meaning a little shark, was a nick name for Fihir (see lineage tree at the end).



The Arab/Muslim world has included 1) Arabs who were not Muslim, 2) Muslims who were not Arab, 3) residents in the Muslim community who were neither Arab nor Muslim, and 4) Arab Muslims. Scholars continue to be challenged to refer to this multicultural and multi-religious world in a succinct manner, and terms such as the Islamic or Muslim world remain insufficient. All agree that it all started with a Quraysh man named Muhammad, followed by two Quraysh people, a woman named Khadija, the Prophet's wife, and his cousin 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib. With its continuous legacy of bringing people together through the spirit of taqarrush, Quraysh lives with us today, a creature approaching two millennia of age.

Justice

The impulse for justice runs deep in Quraysh history. We are told of a 6th century bill of rights protecting non-Meccan merchants against abuse by Meccans. This came to be known as the Fudul Alliance (Arabic hilf al-Fudul)—so-named after the names of its main negotiators, who were themselves Meccans. With this, the Quraysh elders established that an alliance for justice is higher than an alliance of blood or ancestry in their eyes.

Numerous other alliances (ahlaf) in Quraysh history offer examples of negotiated conventions which addressed different concerns of justice. These ranged from regulating access to water and other resources, protection of livestock and other properties, and conflicts addressing social and familial disputes.

Trade protections remained a recurrent theme in pre-Islamic Quraysh history. In most cases, the protection was offered to foreign merchants who shared neither Quraysh's pagan religion nor its language, such as the Jews of the Levant and the Christians of Ethiopia. A frequent statement in negotiations that settled these trade conventions was "your rights must be equivalent to your responsibilities."

(لكم مثل ما عليكم)

One must note that some tribesmen allied themselves with their tribe first and foremost while displaying strong reluctance to affiliate with larger social units. This was subjected to rigorous reflection after the Prophet taught his universal message. The Qur'an teaches that humans are originally one family. Sura 2, verse 213, reads: "Humans originated as one people"

(كان الناس أمة واحدة)

But their diversity is inevitable. Sura 123, verse 118, of the Qur'an provides the other side of the story: "God could have forced humans into being one nation"

(ولو شاء ربك لجعل الناس أمة واحدة)

This complex message has opened the door for **diversity within unity** to be the banner of the new world community. Generations of Muslims spread this message across the world, and Quraysh remained the point of departure for those who sought to hear the story.

† Hashim is an adjective meaning 'cutter,' which became 'Amr's nickname because he was known to be a good cook who cut bread into pieces and applied it to different dishes, most notably soup dishes.



Expansive Communication

For many generations, Quraysh tradesmen sold their merchandise only in Arabian markets, mostly in Meccan trade-cum-religion festivals. This situation changed a few generations before the Prophet Muhammad. A Quraysh man known as Hashim† (also as 'Amr) convinced the Byzantine Emperor to open up Byzantine markets for Arab products. Sura 106 in the Qur'an recounts this story:

“For the conventions of secure and open exchange (ilaf) enjoyed by Quraysh
In their Winter and Summer trade journeys
Let them glorify the Lord of this Sacred House in Mecca
Who provided them nourishment to fend off hunger and security to stave off fear.

(لإيلاف قريش ◊ إيلافهم رحلة الشتاء والصيف ◊ فليعبدوا رب هذا البيت ◊ الذي
أطعمهم من جوع وأمنهم من خوف ◊)

This expansion connected Byzantine and Arabian markets, not only in their exchange of material goods, but also in exchanges of culture and ideas. Some Arabs came to learn Greek medicine, and the different religious groups of Arabia, whether Pagan, Jews, Christians, or hunafa' (Abrahamic monotheists not affiliated with Judaism or Christianity) are reported to have gained access to the beliefs and wisdom of others. By the time the Prophet Muhammad arrived on the scene, Arabia was part of a world that included the Byzantine Empire with its Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac speaking communities. After the spread of Islam in Syria and Egypt, the legacy of the ilaf fulfilled itself through the creation of complex networks of religious and secular interactions throughout the region.

A Word on Arabic as a Lingua Franca

The Quraysh variety of Arabic is at the heart of the Qur'an, the starting point for all literati in studying Arabic poetry, prose, and rhetoric. In due time, Arabic became the shared language of diverse peoples around the Mediterranean and subsequently a shared language (lingua franca) for traders. This language was used even by European merchants who entered into trade-exchanges with the peoples of the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. Despite the differences between the Qur'anic register of Arabic and the practical trade language of businessmen, the historical fact remains that Quraysh provided the skeleton for this Arabic lingua franca. Thus, the centuries following the spread of Islam preserved for Quraysh a central place in intercommunal trade, only with a broader universal reach.

Conclusion

Quraysh stands for unity, justice, and the desire to communicate with others. Its legacy is the foundation of the Quraysh Institution, which attempts to play a role in connecting communities, mediating between diverse legal cultures, and bringing together people of different legacies who share the same honorable impulses for unity and justice.



CLAN TREE

Prophet Muhammad's ancestors in blue

