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What is

“ISLAMIC”

CULTURE?

An introduction to the relationship between Islam and Cultural Diversity

Da'wah Institute of Nigeria
Islamic Education Trust
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FOREWORD TO THE SERIES

Islam is considered by many observers to be the fastest growing religion in the world, yet it is the most misunderstood of the world's major faiths. Some misconceptions about Islam stem from calculated propaganda against Islam, but a good amount of it is attributable to the ignorance of many Muslims whose limited knowledge and practice of Islam perpetuates these misconceptions.

Due to the deficiencies of the common, restricted way of teaching Islam to children, many Muslims grow up believing that Islam requires only blind faith and invites no intellectual challenges. Often such Muslims manage with minimal knowledge of their faith until they interact with larger circles of people, in higher institutions or the work place, where they are confronted with many misconceptions about Islam, and face questions they cannot answer.

It is in response to the need for empowering Muslims to know their religion, and to share its beautiful message with the rest of humanity, that this work was begun.
This effort is part of a wider project of intellectual empowerment of the global Muslim world. Among the programs designed by the Islamic Education Trust over the past decade and a half is the Train the Trainers Course (TTC) in Islam and Dialogue. As its name indicates, the course is designed to train da'wah volunteers in clarifying misconceptions about Islam, handling differences of opinion among Muslim scholars, and extending personal leadership training to others. The contents of this series of books evolved from teaching manuals from the TTC. It is hoped that this publication will serve as intellectual resource material for Muslims of different backgrounds.

Justice Sheikh Ahmed Lemu
National President
Islamic Education Trust (I.E.T)
January 2009
Muharram, 1430 A.H.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All praise and gratitude is due to Allah Who has made this work possible. And may the peace and blessings of Allah be in His last messenger, Prophet Muhammad.

The Prophet said: “Whoever does not show gratitude to people does not show gratitude to Allah”. It is therefore with great pleasure that the Da'wah Institute of Nigeria (DIN) takes this opportunity to express its sincere gratitude to all the brothers and sisters from all over the world, who have in various ways contributed to the development of the Train the Trainers Course in Islam and Dialogue (TTC) and its study material of which this book is a part.

The material has evolved into its present form over a long period before and after the TTC became an organized course in 1994.

The contributions to the course and its material have come in many ways, through numerous channels, both formally and informally, and from all over the world. They have come from contributors of various backgrounds, age-groups, organizations, and specializations.
It has unfortunately become practically impossible to cite all who deserve mention - but Allah has counted them all, and we continue to pray Allah to bless them with the best in this life and the next. We will however mention at least the countries where the major contributors have come from, and may Allah forgive us for any omissions.

Contributions to the development of the course have come from Australia, Bahrain, Burundi, Cameroun, Egypt, the Gambia, Ghana, Jordan, Kenya, Liberia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Niger, the Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, U.K., U.S.A., and most importantly, Nigeria.

In Nigeria, we would like to acknowledge the following organizations for their key support in the development of the TTC material. They include the Da'wah Coordination Council of Nigeria (DCCN), the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), the Movement for Islamic Culture and Awareness (MICA), the Muslim Students Society of Nigeria (MSSN), the Muslim Corpers Association of Nigeria (MCAN), and the Nasirul Fatih Society of Nigeria (NASFAT). Others include numerous University departments, Colleges of Education, Colleges of Arts and Islamic Legal Studies, etc.
We wish to acknowledge those who, to the best of our knowledge, had the greatest input to the TTC 101 Series. The chief editor of the material was Asiya Rodrigo, who also located most of the references in this work. Others who greatly assisted in important capacities such as structure, contents, style and preparation of the materials for printing include Justice Sheikh Ahmed Lemu, B. Aisha Lemu, Abdullahi Orire, Isa Friday Okonkwo, Muhammad Dukuly, Bashir Mundi, Nuruddeen Lemu and Aliyu Badeggi.

Finally, and on behalf of the research team and all the staff of the Da'wah Institute of Nigeria (DIN), I would like to pray for the Trustees and minds behind the Islamic Education Trust (IET), and the DIN in particular, Justice Shiekh Ahmed Lemu and B. Aisha Lemu, whose wisdom, support, encouragement and leadership have helped bring the DIN to where it is today alhamdulillah and jazākum Allahu khair.

As only the Qur'an is perfect, this material will by Allah's leave continue to evolve through revisions and improvements with better contributions from people like you, the reader, inshā Allah.

May the reward of whatever benefit comes from this material go to those who have in any
way contributed to it. The Da'wah Institute of Nigeria (DIN) takes full responsibility for any imperfection in this work, and we pray that such will be forgiven by Allah and you the reader.

Alhaji Ibrahim Yahya
Director
Da’wah Institute of Nigeria
January 2009
Muharram 1430 A.H.
NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY AND TRANSLITERATION

◊ **Use of ""**

It is a time-honored and cherished tradition among Muslims that whenever the name of any of the numerous Prophets of God is mentioned, peace and blessings of God are invoked upon him. In line with this tradition and the injunction in Qur'an 33:56, wherever the title “the Prophet,” “Messenger of Allah,” “Apostle of Allah,” or the Prophet's name, “Muhammad,” appears in this text, the blessing in Arabic (ﷺ) appears next to it. It means “may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him.” Contemporary writings on Islam by Muslims use many variations and abbreviations of this benediction in Arabic or English or other languages such as “S.A.W.”, “s.a.s.”, “s”, “p”, “pbuh” and others. In deciding which customary symbol to use, it is worth mentioning that in manuscripts belonging to the first two centuries of Islam's intellectual heritage the writers did not rigidly adhere to the custom of writing a benediction after the Prophet's name, and hence, there is no 'best' way of representing it.
References to *ahadith* and commentaries drawn from computer software

Efforts have been made to ensure that all *ahadith* (narrations or reported actions of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ) in this material are drawn from reliable and well-respected collections. Reservations expressed by respected authorities about the authenticity of any *hadith* have been indicated in footnotes, even as its presence in this text indicates that it is considered authentic by other scholars of repute. An abundance of Islamic classical texts and some of their translations now exist on CD-ROMs. The present material has made use of some of these CD-ROMs for obtaining *ahadith* and their commentaries (*tafasir*). The most commonly utilized CD-ROM database of hadith in English has been the *Alim Version 6.0* software. Hence, references to *hadith* collections that end with the phrase “in *Alim 6.0*” throughout this material refer to those obtained from the Alim Version 6.0 database (ISL Software Corporation, 1986-2000). References to collections of *hadith* commentaries which have been drawn from other CD-ROMs have been noted in footnotes throughout the text.

Transliteration of Arabic words
Modern Islamic literature in English utilizes a number of transliteration systems for Arabic words. With a few exceptions, this material has followed the system used by the majority, the details of which may be found in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. However, for our ease and simplicity, we have omitted the diacritical dots and dashes which facilitate exact pronunciations. It is expected that this should not render the words unreadable.
PREFACE

Islam is considered by many observers to be the world’s fastest growing religion, yet it is the most misunderstood of the world's major faiths. Some misconceptions about Islam stem from calculated propaganda, but a good amount of it is attributable to the ignorance of many Muslims whose limited knowledge and practice of Islam perpetuates these misconceptions. Many Muslims grow up believing that Islam requires only blind faith and invites no intellectual challenges. Often when such people in due course interact more broadly at school or in the work place, they find themselves unable to explain or rectify misconceptions about Islam.

In response to the need for empowering Muslims to preserve their religion, and share its beautiful message with the rest of humanity, this work was begun.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines culture as “the customs, arts, social institutions, etc. of a particular group or nation”. Culture is therefore one way of identifying distinctive groups or nations. Some Non-Muslims and even Muslims have unfortunately assumed that whatever is Arab is Islamic, and whatever is Islamic is Arab. This has led to the wrong conclusion that to become
Muslim necessitates abandoning all aspects of a person's cultural heritage for that of Arabs, Indo-Pakistanis, Hausas, or any other Muslim-majority culture. The first part of this book addresses this misconception.

The second part of the book looks into the use of the term “Islamic” in describing various aspects of culture, especially names and dresses of Arab or non-Arab origin. It critically examines the criteria for considering any cultural practice as Islamic or not.

This effort is part of a greater project of intellectual empowerment for the global Muslim community. Among the tools designed by the Islamic Education Trust over the past decade and a half is the Train the Trainers Course (TTC) in Islam and Dialogue. As its name suggests, the TTC is designed to train da'wah volunteers in answering misconceptions about Islam, handling differences of opinions among Muslim scholars, and personal leadership and development courses. The write ups that constitute this series evolved from teaching manuals from the TTC. It is hoped that this publication will serve as intellectual resource material for Muslims of different backgrounds.
What is “ISLAMIC” Culture?

PART I: ISLAM AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

1. Introduction

Islam acknowledges the diversity in people's customs, race, languages, dress, food, and other cultural expressions, as not only legitimate but a sign of Allah's bounties. Islam, however, also disapproves of and even condemns those aspects of a culture that contradict its teachings and principles. No culture, Arab or otherwise, may therefore be regarded as completely Islamic or completely un-Islamic.

Allah says “And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colors: for in this, behold, there are messages for all who are possessed of (innate) knowledge!” (Qur'an 30:22)

In another verse, Allah says, “O mankind! We created you from male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God are the most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is All-Knowing, All-Aware” (Qur'an 49:13).

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It is therefore Allah's will that there be diversity in the various nations, communities and tribes of humankind. It is also decreed that there is no inherent superiority of one nation, tribe, or race over another since “the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him”.

Arab culture is not the basis for Islam, nor is it the practice of the majority of Muslims. In fact, most of the followers of Islam live in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Arabs only make up 15-20% of the followers of Islam.² Hence, although the majority of Arabs are Muslim, an Arab is not necessarily a Muslim, and a Muslim is even less likely to be an Arab. There is, indeed, at least an 80% chance that a Muslim is not an Arab.

2. Cultural partisanship and tribalism are unacceptable in Islam

The Prophet (ﷺ) is reported to have said, “Behold, God has removed from you the arrogance of pagan ignorance (jahiliyyah) with its boasts of ancestral glories. Man is but a God-conscious believer or an unfortunate sinner. All people are children of Adam, and Adam was created out of dust.”³ In another authenticated saying of the Prophet (ﷺ), “He is not of us who proclaims the cause of tribal partisanship ('asabiyyah); and he is not of us who fights in the cause of tribal partisanship; and he is

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³ *Abu Dawood*, no.2425; *Tirmidhi*, no.1268 in Alim 6.0.
not of us who dies in the cause of tribal partisanship.”

When he was asked to explain the meaning of “tribal partisanship”, the Prophet (ﷺ) answered, “It means helping your own people in an unjust cause”5, and this applies to Arab partisanships as much as it does to any other relationship.

Though Islam respects the diversity within mankind, it also recognizes that some aspects of nearly every culture or community are in contradiction with the guidance that Islam provides for a just and God-conscious community. Islam, therefore, has criteria for assessing the permissibility or otherwise of any aspect of society, whether Middle-Eastern, Western, Asian, African, or others.

3. Criteria for assessing cultural practices

When evaluating any culture, tradition or custom from an Islamic perspective, a Muslim must first clearly understand that in matters which have to do with social norms and affairs (mu'amalat), the general principle is that “whatever is not prohibited is in fact permissible”6 or “everything is permissible except what is prohibited by a

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4 Sahih Muslim, No.855 in Alim 6.0; Abu Dawood.
5 Abu Dawood.
6 Tariq Ramadan, To Be a European Muslim (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1999), p.64, n.18.
clear and decisive (qat'i) text of the Qur'an or Sunnah”. In other words, clear textual evidence is required before a particular act or custom may be prohibited. In those aspects of a culture which have to do with social affairs, therefore, no textual evidence is required from the Qur'an or Sunnah before such an aspect is considered permissible. Evidence is, in fact, required before a cultural practice relating to mu'amalat is prohibited.

In other matters of belief or creed ('aqidah) and formal worship ('ibadah), the general principle (with a few exceptions8) according to some scholars is that everything is prohibited, except what is permissible from the Qur'an or Sunnah. In other words, unambiguous and categorical textual evidence is required for a particular type of worship9 ('ibadah) or religious belief ('aqidah) to be accepted as permissible. Related to this are religious symbols10 or anything that is unique to and identified with a religious group, such as their beliefs, worship, dressing11, grooming, customs, festivities, etc. These would be either

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7 This is a well-known principle of Usul al-Fiqh in Arabic is called “Al-'asl fil ashya'i al-ibahah” (“the legal premise of everything is permissibility”). See Yusuf al-Qaradawi’s brief discussion of this principle in The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam (London: Al-Birr Foundation, 2003), pp.3-7.

8 See Nuh Ha Mim Keller, The Concept of Bid'a in the Islamic Shari'ah (Cambridge: Muslim Academic Trust, 1995).

9 i.e. any type of worship other than those already performed by the Prophet and his Companions, such as salat, du'a, dhikr, Hajj, Umrah, reciting Qur'an, etc.

10 Such as the cross and the star of David.

11 Religious dress should be noted, here, as meaning dress that identifies a religious belief such as a pastor's collar, bishops' gowns, the saffron or orange robes of Buddhist monks, ceremonial headgear worn by some animist diviners and pagan priests, and certain jewelry worn for non-Islamic religious purposes.
discouraged or prohibited, unless Islam clearly permitted them. It is with reference to such issues that the Prophet is reported to have said, “He is not one of us who imitates a people other than us. Do not imitate the Jews and Christians.” (Tirmidhi, No.1207\textsuperscript{12}). According to another version, “Whoever imitates a people is one of them.” (Ahmad).\textsuperscript{13}

It is along these lines that the distinguished medieval scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah states:

\textsuperscript{12} This well-known 	extit{hadith} is recorded in 	extit{Tirmidhi} as having a weak isnad (chain of narration). This is also the opinion of Hafiz al-Iraqi, al-Mundhir, and Haythami. Al-Sakhawi and al-Munawi state that there is a weakness in the chain but it is strengthened by other witnesses. However, others, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Imam Ahmad and Ibn Hajr consider the hadith as sound and without defect. (See Ibn al-Qayyim, 	extit{'Awn al-Ma'bud: Commentary of Sunan Abu Dawood, in Hadith Encyclopedia, Version 2}, (Egypt: Harf Information Technology, 2000).\textsuperscript{13} Some Muslims have understood this hadith to mean that it is prohibited to do anything a Non-Muslim does, even if it has no religious significance to the Non-Muslim, except what specific actions were also done by the Prophet and his Companions. The views of early hadith commentators, however, generally do not support this interpretation. Munawi and al-Qamee', for instance, say the hadith condemns those Muslims who follow the path of other faiths both in the wearing of their uniforms and some of their actions. Al-Qari said the hadith bears two meanings: whoever imitates those who deny Truth in their dressing or in their disobedience and vices, he is among them in sin; and whoever imitates people who engage in spiritual purification and righteousness, he is among them in goodness. Al-Qamee' also infers that whoever imitates some of the signs of the honorable, he will be dignified even if he does not deserve such honor. Ibn Taymiyyah continues that the condemnation of imitation could be general, but it could also mean that if a Muslim imitates disobedience to Allah, the same judgment for non-Muslim wrongdoers is also upon the Muslim who imitates them. (Ibid.)
People's sayings and actions are of two kinds: acts of worship by which their religion is established, and customary practices which are required for day-to-day living. From the principles of the Shari'ah, we know that acts of worship are those acts which have been prescribed by Allah or approved by Him; nothing is to be affirmed here except through the Shari'ah. However, as far as the worldly activities of people are concerned, they are necessary for everyday life. Here the principle is freedom of action; nothing may be restricted in this regard except what Allah has restricted... to do otherwise is to be included in the meaning of His saying: 'Say: Do you see what Allah has sent down to you for sustenance? Yet you have made some part of it halal and some part haram?' (Q.10:59)... Since this is the stance of the Shari'ah, people are free to buy, sell, and lease as they wish, just as they are free to eat and to drink what they like as long as it is not haram [prohibited]. Although some of these things may be disapproved, they are free in this regard, since the Shari'ah does not go to the extent of prohibiting them, and thus the original principle [of permissibility] remains.14

4. The legal position of local customs ('urf)

Consequently, 'urf (local custom) or 'adah (tradition or practice) is permissible, and even admissible, as part of Islamic law, so long as it does not conflict with the principles or teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah.15


15 See any credible reference on Usul al-Fiqh for more details, such as Taha Jabir Al-Alwani's Source Methodology in Islamic Jurisprudence (Usul al-Fiqh al-Islami), 3rd edition (Herndon, USA: IIIT, 1993);
In fact:
…according to Ibn ‘Abidin, in most legal decisions the mujtahid (jurist), simply bases his decision on the prevailing customs ('urf) in his society to an extent that if he were to operate in a different social set-up or in a different period of time, he would be obliged to reach a different conclusion. That is the reason why a mujtahid must acquire a thorough knowledge of all the customs and social norms prevalent in his society.¹⁶

Thus, from an Islamic legal perspective, various aspects of a particular culture could therefore be classified as either compulsory/obligatory (fard or wajib), encouraged (mustahab), merely permissible (mubah), discouraged (makruh), or prohibited (haram).¹⁷ Islam is, in this sense, a universal 'supra-culture' which permeates and validates the acceptable and desirable aspects of all cultures.

It is important to bear in mind that it is the Shari’ah that is the criterion for judging a cultural practice (or 'urf). It is not the 'urf that is the criterion over Shari’ah. There is A mujtahid must acquire a thorough knowledge of all the customs and social norms prevalent in his or her society.

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¹⁷ Tariq Ramadan, To be a European Muslim (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1999), pp.69-72. See also Imran Khan Nyazee, Theories of Islamic Law (IIIT Islamabad, 1994), p.66.
the need for a clear understanding of the distinction between a cultural or personal requirement, and a religious (deeni) or Shari'ah requirement. A cultural preference is not necessarily a religious one, and a culture-to-culture conflict is not necessarily a clash between culture and religion. So long as a local custom or tradition (urf) does not contradict the Shari'ah, it is considered permissible (halal).

For example, a traditional Middle-Eastern or Arab name, food, drink, dress or way of doing things, is not necessarily better, from an Islamic point of view, than a traditional African, Western or East Asian alternative, so long as they meet the criteria of permissibility in Islam.

However, in the interest of social order and general public interest, the spirit and purpose of the Shari'ah would also discourage an otherwise Islamically acceptable custom, if it is clear that this will create unnecessary civil unrest (or fitna). Depending on the probability and seriousness (among others,) of the harm and/or benefit expected, a permissible act may be discouraged or even prohibited if it will create or lead to a situation that does more harm than good, or whose disadvantages are greater than its advantages.18

18 For more on this and other principles see the discussions on “choosing the lesser of two evils”, “blocking the means to a prohibition” (Sadd al-dhara’i), public interest (maslaha), etc. in any credible reference on the Objectives of Shari'ah and Usul al-Figh, such as Hashim Kamali's Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, 2nd edition (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Ilmiah Publishers, 1999); Ahmad Al-Raysuni’s Imam Al-Shatibi's Theory of the Higher Objectives and Intents of Islamic Law, (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: IIIT & IBT, 2006), etc.
Likewise, it should be mentioned that some puritanical scholars have a tendency to exaggerate this concern about *fitnah* in order to frustrate freedom of speech and cultural appreciation.
5. Examples of acceptable cultural practices:

The hospitality of the pagan Arabs during their pre-Islamic days, for example, is acceptable and even recommended, because to honor the guest is enjoined by Islam. Islam is also positive towards a culture that enjoins its youth to respect elders. The hospitality and courtesy observed in the traditional English home is, thus, encouraged in Islam even though it is found in the West. Therefore, not all aspects of Eastern, Western, African or other traditional cultures are viewed negatively by Islam.

Some cultural practices are considered acceptable simply because they do not contradict any Islamic principle. An example of this is a cultural way of preparing various types of non-prohibited food and drinks. The fact that people have a variety of taste preferences is acknowledged in Islam, and the Shari'ah contains provisions for it accordingly. Other acceptable cultural practices are traditional verbal greetings, wedding customs, farming methods, forms of leisure and entertainment, and different cultural architecture. With closer examination, therefore, one may readily observe that many aspects of most cultures are acceptable in Islam.

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19 E.g, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol.8, no.156; *Al-Muwatta*, vol.49, no.22 in *Alim 6.0*. 
6. **Examples of unacceptable cultural practices:**

   On the other hand, social activities that revolve around the consumption of alcohol are Islamically unacceptable. Other unacceptable cultural practices include the cutting and drinking of blood from live animals (traditionally practiced among the Masai of Kenya, for example), greetings involving hugging and kissing between a male and a female who are not married or immediate relatives (i.e. non-**mahram** to each other, festivities that involve participants displaying nudity or vulgarity, the compulsory giving of dowry by a woman's family to her husband (done in some parts of the Indian subcontinent), 'coming-of-age' initiation rites that involve bodily mutilation or sexual lewdness; and superstitious acts such as patronizing a local soothsayer or astrologer whenever a major decision needs to be taken.

7. **In conclusion**, no culture is completely un-Islamic. Some aspects of every culture or group of traditions are good. Other aspects are merely permissible, while others are Islamically unacceptable. Cultural diversity is recognized in Islam based on the passage in the Qur'an 49:13 where Allah states that He has made us into different tribes and nations to know each other (not to despise one another), and that superiority is based on whoever is “**most deeply conscious of Him**.”
PART II: ON “ISLAMIC” NAMES AND DRESS

1. Introduction

Some Muslims, particularly converts (reverts),\textsuperscript{20} raise concern when other Muslims insist that their names and dressing should be changed to conform to what is recognized as more “Islamic”. Very often, it is believed that the more “Islamic” names and dress styles are those that are held by the dominant Muslim cultural group(s) in a particular society. Even books on “Muslim names” contain largely Arab and Indo/Pakistani alternatives, thereby reinforcing the stereotype. Hence, the new Muslim is placed in the difficulty of not just changing religions but also abandoning one culture and heritage for another.

The convert's family is, moreover, often deeply offended by the rejection of their bestowed name and customs. The impact of this has been, in many cases, alienation and the loss of important da'wah opportunities between new Muslims and the community they no longer identify with. The expectation of suffering so drastic an outcome is also a major obstacle to some new Muslims, thereby making a difficult choice even harder.

In recent times, critics of Islam have exploited the stereotype of “Islamic names” to further their agendas, either through publishing books under Arab pen-names or through the frequent mention of names containing “ibn”\textsuperscript{20} Some contemporary English speaking Muslims prefer to use the term “reverts”, since someone that converts to Islam is only reverting back to their fitrah (innate primordial belief).
or “bin” (meaning “son of”) when screening reports on terrorism or extremism. For all these reasons, it is incumbent on Muslims to clarify whether a Muslim is obliged to identify suitable “Islamic” names or not, and to dress in the manner of certain cultures rather than others. The question below represents the concern of many present and potential Muslims.

2. “Are 'Islamic Names' and 'Islamic Dress,' etc. not culturally biased and exclusive, and therefore ethnocentric or even racist? Otherwise, why do non-Arab converts (or reverts) to Islam have to take new 'Islamic' names and dress?”

The notion that some cultural names or styles of dress are “Islamic” simply because they are Islamically acceptable is a prominent misconception held by both Muslims and non-Muslims. Arabic versions of various names and traditional Arab styles of dressing are particularly regarded by some as Islamic, while others names and dresses are viewed as non-Islamic. Indeed, the adjective “Islamic” is a very common term used by many Muslims to qualify many things. There are “Islamic names”, “Islamic clothes”, “Islamic schools”, “Islamic subjects”, “Islamic lectures”, “Islamic art”, “Islamic architecture”, “Islamic banking”, “Islamic political system”, “Islamic countries”, and so on. However, it is not precisely clear what definition the qualifier “Islamic” bears in all these labels.

3. What is “Islamic”?

The truth is that anything, be it a name, dress, food, etc., that does not violate what is permitted by Islamic textual evidence (from the Qur'an and Sunnah) may be
called Islamic. For instance, some of the Prophet's closest companions, such as Bilal (from Abyssinia\textsuperscript{21}), Salman al-Farisi (from Persia), Umar (from Arabia), and indeed the overwhelming majority of his other companions (sahaba), held the same names even before they became Muslims. The Prophet (ﷺ) never asked them to change their names upon conversion.\textsuperscript{22}

Other Islamically acceptable names include Asad (meaning lion), Ghazali (Gazelle), Badawi (Bedouin), Khadir (Green), Zahrah (Flower), Maher (Skilled One or Expert), and Abu Hurairah (Father of a Kitten, or “kitten man”). Some popular names such as Khan, Adam, Maryam, Suleiman, Musa, Asiya, Isma'il, Ishaq, Idris and Ibrahim have non-Arab origins. The Qur'an lists many good and great names that are in fact Hebrew in origin. Well-known Muslim scholars also took their names from the lands they came from, such al-Bukhari from the Uzbek city of Bokhara, and al-Qurtubi from the Spanish city of Cordoba.

4. What names are un-Islamic?

The Prophet (ﷺ) did, however, substitute some names for more positive ones.\textsuperscript{23} For example, Abu Dawood narrated that, “The Prophet (ﷺ) changed the names al-'As,

\textsuperscript{21} Abyssinia is the historical name of the East African region that now comprises Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti.

\textsuperscript{22} As will be discussed further below, the Prophet (ﷺ) only asked converts to modify their names when they were considered obnoxious by Islamic principles, such as the name “Abdul 'Uzza,” meaning “Servant of (the idol) 'Uzza”, etc. This was the Sunnah of the Prophet on the question of changing names for new Muslims.

\textsuperscript{23} Tirmidhi, no.1232 in Alim 6.0.
At the time of the Prophet (ﷺ), a name was not an automatic indication of religion, and as a rule, the Companions of the Prophet (ﷺ) did not change their names upon conversion to Islam.

Therefore, some categories of names are to be avoided by Muslims, and would not be considered “Islamic”. These include derogatory names, names with pessimistic meanings, names unique to Allah, names that indicate

\[\text{Aziz, Atalah, Shaytan, al-Hakam, Ghurab, Hubab, and that of Shihab, and calling him Hisham.} \]

He changed the name Harb (War) to Silm (Peace). He changed the name of a land, Afra (Barren), and called it Khadra' (Green). He changed the name Shi'b ad-Dalala (the mountain path of straying), and called it Shi'b al-Huda (mountain path of guidance). He changed the name Banu al-Zina (children of fornication) and called them Banu al-Rushda (children of those who are on the right path), and changed the name Banu Mughwiyah (children of a woman who allures and goes astray), and called them Banu Rushda (children of a woman who is on the right path)."^{24} Abu Hurairah reported that, “Zainab's original name was 'Barrah,' (Righteous) but it was said, 'By that she is giving herself the prestige of piety,' so the Prophet changed her name to 'Zainab.'^{25} Abu Dawood narrates that, “Bashir's name in pre-Islamic days was Zahm ibn Ma'bad. When he migrated to the Apostle of Allah, the latter asked, 'What is your name?' He replied, 'Zahm' (Foul Odor). The Prophet said, 'No, you are Bashir' (Glad tidings)…”^{26}

\[\text{At the time of the} \]

\[\text{Prophet (ﷺ), a name was not an automatic indication of religion, and as a rule, the Companions of the Prophet (ﷺ) did not change their names upon conversion to Islam.} \]

24 Abu Dawood, no.2330 in Alim 6.0.
26 Abu Dawood, no.1428 in Alim 6.0.
submission to gods other than Allah, names that are deemed spiritually self-righteous, and names that are known to be specific to the opposite gender.27

5. What to consider in an “Islamic name”:

When selecting names, the Prophet (ﷺ) is reported to have said, “On the Day of Resurrection, you will be called by your names and by your fathers' names, so give yourselves good names.”28 It is thus the right of every Muslim to have a good name such as the name of a righteous individual of history or a name that has a positive meaning. Nonetheless, it may be observed that even though certain names are discouraged, there are instances where the Prophet (ﷺ) still tolerated those who insisted on not changing their names (e.g. “Hazn”),29 provided these names did not contradict the fundamentals

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28 Abu Dawood, no.4930.
29 Al-Musayyab narrated that his father (Hazn ibn Wahb) went to the Prophet and the Prophet (ﷺ) asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Hazn.” The Prophet said, “You are Sahl.” Hazn said, “I will not change the name with which my father has named me.” Ibn al-Musayyab added, “We have had roughness (in character) ever since” (Sahih al-Bukhari, vol.8, no.209; also no.213 in Alim 6.0).
of Islam such as the belief in the existence of only One Deity worthy of worship.

New Muslims may consider the socio-cultural realities of their locales in deciding whether to change their names or not. They should, however, bear in mind the far-reaching positive or negative implications their name-change may have on their condition, the perceptions of their loved ones, and the position of the Muslim community. Given the burden of these considerations, a new Muslim should, therefore, be left (without pressure) to make a personal choice on whether to retain his or her original name, or adopt a new one.

Converts are, however, advised not to change those names that are associated with their lineage (such as surnames or their father's names), due to the stern warnings of the Prophet (ﷺ) against those who are aware of their birthright names but still proceed to name themselves after people to whom they are not related.\(^{30}\) This applies even if the surnames are anti-Islamic in meaning, such as retained by the Companion, Abu al As ibn Rabi'a ibn Abd al Shams, who was the husband of the Prophet's daughter, Zainab, and the father of the Prophet's granddaughter, Ummahah.\(^{31}\)

When handling converts, a Muslim should be careful of the potentially subtle innovation (bid'a) that lies in making it a religious requirement to use a name for religious identification, when this purpose of naming was not the precedent of the Prophet (ﷺ) as illustrated above in the names of the Companions. Once a name does not fall

\(^{30}\) See *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol.4, no.711, 712; and vol.5, no.616 in *Alim 6.0*.

\(^{31}\) See *al-Muwatta*, vol.9, no.84; *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol.1, no.495 in *Alim 6.0*.
under the category of prohibited names, all other names, whether their meanings are known or unknown, are left to individual preference, even if it is a cultural variation of an Arab name. For such cultural variants as are commonly found in Muslim countries, there is no religious basis for their condemnation. This follows the same principle that is applied to choice of food, clothing, and other areas of social affairs (mu'amalat).

6. **What is an “Islamic dress”?**

Any dress style that meets Islamic dress requirements is acceptable, and hence “Islamic”. A new Muslim does not have to adopt a foreign style of dress, but may find a way to adapt his/her customary dress in any way that pleases him/her and covers his/her body in conformity with Islamic standards of modesty as mentioned in the Qur'an and *Ahadith*.

7. **Conclusion: Use of the term “Islamic”**

What is important for Muslims to know is that Islam is a way of life and that any other activity that does not fall within what Islam prohibits is “Islamically” permissible. The same logic applies to many other words or phrases to which the adjective “Islamic” is attached, when what is really meant is “Islamically acceptable”, or simply “*halal*” (permissible). Thus, “Islamic knowledge”, “Islamic political system”, “Islamic culture”, “Islamic banking”, “Islamic movement”, etc, are all broad terms which may encompass many acceptable (*halal*) permutations. Similarly, the term “Islamization” simply means a process of “making a thing *halal*” or “more just”, and “in line with what Islam permits, enjoins, or encourages”.
If da'wah (or propagating Islam) alone is referred to as “Islamic work”, then nursing, teaching, administration, or environmental activism (which are all part of the Muslims' collective duties, or fard kifaya) may be denied the “Islamic” description they equally deserve, and those who practice such professions may undervalue the spiritual value of their work.

Since the spectrum of permissibility (halal) in Islam ranges from what is compulsory/obligatory (fard/wajib), to what is encouraged (mustahab/mandub), to merely permissible (mubah), and to some of what is discouraged but tolerated (makruh), the use of qualifiers such as “Islamic” seems to over-simplify and negate the diversity acceptable in Islam.

A simplistic description of a thing as either “Islamic” or “non-Islamic” may result in the misunderstanding that what is conventionally termed an “Islamic” thing or practice is the only option acceptable, and that anything else is “unIslamic” and unacceptable, or even prohibited (haram). If such a premise were valid, then the study of anything other than what is conventionally called “Islamic Studies”, such as Engineering, Medicine, Education, or Management, would be considered unIslamic. If da'wah (or propagating Islam) alone is referred to as “Islamic work”, then nursing, teaching, administration, or environmental activism (which are all part of the Muslim Ummah's collective responsibilities or fard kifaya) may be denied the “Islamic” description they equally deserve, and those who practice such professions may undervalue the religious value of their work.
The term “Islamic” as attached to various features of present-day Muslim populations may also give the impression that an “Islamic” alternative or society is completely at odds with the features of modern non-Muslim or Western societies, which is not necessarily so.

It may therefore be argued that the term “Islamic” could in some cases create more misconceptions than it tries to clarify! Allah knows best.
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32 These online resources have very useful information and products on Islam. This list is, however, far from being exhaustive, as new websites debut on the internet daily. Other Islamic websites may be even more informative than the above listed, and whereas these websites are recommended, not all the views and opinions expressed in them necessarily reflect those of DIN or the IET.