ERSILIA FRANCESCA

From the Individualism to the Community's Power:
The Economic Implications of the *walāya/barā'ā* Dynamic among the Ibāḍīs

As is known, the relationship between religion and entrepreneurial activity has been a subject of sociological interest since Max Weber first identified the association between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism in Western Europe (Weber 1958). Since then, there have been several attempts to apply Weber’s idea to other situations, and find other religious groups in other parts of the world for which the theory is valid.

The Ibāḍīs from Mzab (Algeria) and Jerba (Tunisia), who are a religious minority with outstanding entrepreneurial success, conform to the pattern of behaviour discussed by Weber (Stone 1974: 260-73; Chabert 1961: 330-51). According to Gellner (1963: 71-86), the Ibāḍīs show such strong ‘Protestant’ features that they may be described as 'the Calvinists of Islam', who, thanks to trade, manage to wrest a living from the desert oases of Mzab and of Jerba island.

Indeed, the Ibāḍī ethical principles reveal a rigorous conception of life and faith. Sinful actions entail the loss of the state of purity and render the sinner unfit to participate in religious rites. This moral austerity leads the Ibāḍīs to refute any kind of innovation, laxity or modern ideas, to interpret the ancient precepts in the most rigorous fashion and to forbid anything that smacks of frivolity or luxury, such as the use of tobacco, the ornamentation of mosques, etc.

Salvation can only be won through prayer, pious living and hard work. Understood as a form of asceticism and as a discipline, work becomes a religious act and a duty, while idleness is considered as one of the most serious vices. Worldly success can be based only on hard work, piety and respect for the precepts of the Koran; it is therefore regarded as a sign of election, especially when the accumulated wealth is devoted to praiseworthy ends (legal almsgiving, charity; cf. Schwartz 1986: 61-69; al-Jayṭāli 1976: II, 245-51; Rubinacci 1969: 309; Cuperly 1984: 155).

* A shorter version of this essay was presented at the 19th Congress of the Union européenne des arabisants et islamisants on ‘Change and Transition/Parameter des Wandels’ organised by University of Halle, 30 August-3 September 1998.
These principles support the Weberian thesis positing a relationship between religious ethic and entrepreneurial success among the Ibāḍīs, although, as well-known, the Ibāḍī ethics did not succeed in spreading across the Islamic world, as the Calvinist ethics did in northern Europe. A further variable must be examined in analysing the economic fortune of both the Jberans and the Mozabite. They show a strong cohesion as a group apart, which has a dogmatic basis in the concepts of walāyā and barā’a (association and dissociation), that is to say the obligation of friendliness towards individuals who carry out the precepts of religion in a satisfactory manner, and conversely, the obligation of hostility against those who do not deserve to be called believers.

The earliest propositions of Ibāḍism in late seventh century Basra attempted to place the believer in a direct relationship to God. Ibāḍism attached great importance to religious principles which stressed the responsibility of individual man, such as the obligation of ‘promoting good and preventing evil’ and the conception of the relationship between works and faith (Schwartz 1986: 59-61, 86; al-Jannawuni 1886: 49; Rubinacci 1964: 561, 582). For the Ibāḍīs, anyone who committed capital sins (kabā’ir), failed to obey divine law or introduced innovations was a kāfir, or infidel and was combated so long as he remained dissident (muhālif). Moreover, he would be condemned to eternal punishment in hell, if he did not repent (Schwartz 1986: 94; Rubinacci 1964: 585). While according to these principles the Ibāḍī doctrine seemed to focus on the individual and his own belief, still Ibāḍism in its development was never divorced from the overwhelming role of the community. The community’s power was expressed in religious terms through the walāyā/barā’a dynamic. This doctrine has counterparts in orthodox belief only in so far as regards the general obligation of solidarity with the faithful and hostility toward infidels. In conformity with the barā’a principle, the sinners could be banished and admitted again after their public repentance. On the other hand the walāyā principle imposed the distribution of almsgiving (zakāt) only among poor Ibāḍīs who were considered true believers (Abū ‘Ubayda 1982: 19-22; Francesca 1987: 33-34). Moreover, some scholars held that the poor godless Ibāḍī is entitled to zakāt before the upright learned non-Ibāḍī Muslim.

On the question of ‘adāla, only an ‘associate’ is ‘adl and his testimony is admissible in all cases (Ennami 1972-73: 193-220).

In the Ibāḍī written tradition, we find the first statements on walāyā and barā’a in an Ibāḍī manuscript called Futūḥ al-Rabi’ b. Ḥabīb1 (d. about 806) relating the opinion of ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz and Abū ‘I-Mu’arrīj ‘Amr al-Sadūsī, two Ibāḍī authorities from the late eighth century, concerning the status of the believer who wipes over his shoes instead of washing the feet as part of the wudū (al-Rabi’: 40). The doctrine of the walāyā and barā’a is fully

---

1 I borrowed the copy of the manuscript from Dr Werner Schwartz (Göttingen University Library), to whom I am deeply indebted.
discussed in the Kitāb al-jāmiʿ of Ibn Jaʿfar (1981: I, 147-253), an Omani ʿālīm from the ninth century, and virtually all major Ibāḍī fiqh works from this century onwards contain a book or lengthy chapter devoted to this subject (Cuperly 1984: index).

According to the Ibāḍī sources, the walāya was obligatory towards 1) the faithful in general; 2) those who are praised in the Koran; 3) a righteous imām; 4) individuals who carry out the precepts of religion in a satisfactory manner. Conversely the barāʿa was obligatory against 1) infidels in general; 2) those blamed by the Koran; 3) an unjust imām.

The barāʿa takes place in the following circumstances: 1) when a person has committed a major sin or persisted in committing a minor sin; 2) when a believer sees a person committing a major sin or persisting in committing a minor sin; 3) when two persons of equity testify that a certain individual merits barāʿa.2

The true believers must dissociate themselves from such defaulters until they repent. The doctrine of association and dissociation was developed within the Ibāḍī community as a religious obligation; nevertheless, it was practised as a political attitude. It attacked the very basis of caliphal authority as represented by Umayyad orthodoxy. It defined the membership of the community on the basis of the faith alone; theoretically, there was no limit to those who could belong to the community, and neither race nor colour could obstruct the way (Savage 1990: 6). This could only undermine the privileged position occupied by the Arabs, and the position of the Umayyads who relied on Arab support. Leadership stemmed from personal excellence, and the confidence, which the community places in its imām constitutes his authority. The Ibāḍīs supported the principle that any Muslim could be elevated to the supreme dignity of imamate, even if he was ‘an Abyssinian slave whose nose has been cut off’, always provided that he was of irreproachable character. When an imām commits a major sin his followers should not immediately dissociate themselves from him (barāʿa ḍanhu) but call him to formal repentance (tawba). If he does so, and does not continue in his errors then he is still in his imamate and has the walāya; if he does not, then it is the duty of his followers to dissociate themselves from him and, if necessary, fight against him.

Such an egalitarian doctrine had enormous appeal for the underdogs. As Wilkinson pointed out, it is not surprising to find that the ‘ulamāʾ, who were the first to formulate it, were from the humblest Basran background: Jaʿfar b. al-Sammāk, son of a fisherman (variant Sammān, butter merchant), Abū Nūḥ Ṣāliḥ al-Dahhān, the painter/greaser, Abū ‘Ubayda Muslim, a basket weaver (qaffāf ) who was a mawlā of the Banū Tamīm (Wilkinson 1982: 137). From

2 Reservation (wuqūf) is a duty connected with walāya and barāʿa. If a person’s case is not clear and he does not deserve walāya or barāʿa, his state must be of reservation (Ennami 1972-73: 206-7).
the very beginning, the Ibāḍī movement became associated with the members of Basran merchant community, few of whom had reason to love the Umayyads because of the disdain with which the Umayyad ruling class treated artisans and labourers (Shatzmiller 1994: 371, 376).

The merchants were the main sources of income needed for the organization of the Ibāḍī da'wa. They contributed to the cause through their trade network which permitted a relative freedom of communication when movement outside the period of hajj might have been regarded with suspicion. From the earliest days, the Ibāḍī community in Basra had recourse to the generosity of its wealthy merchant members (Lewicki 1935: 173-186; 1971: 64-73; Wilkinson 1982: 139). In his Kitāb al-Siyar, al-Šammāḥ (d. 1522) reports that by the middle of eighth century the bayt al-māl of the Ibāḍī secret state had more than 100,000 dirham collected from the Ibāḍī merchants to finance the da’wa. Moreover, excerpts from Kitāb al-Siyar recount a description of one pious Ibāḍī, Abū Salīm, whose wealth enabled him to supply camels to his fellows-Ibāḍis to make the pilgrimage. Another wealthy Ibāḍī merchant, Abū al-Hurr, arrived in Mecca from Basra with a gold ingot, of which he gave half to the poor and kept a quarter for his needs, with a quarter given to Arabs in China (al-Šammāḥ 1883: 93, 106, 114-15; al-Dārjīnī 1974: II, 248-53, 262).

Towards the end of the eighth century Basra declined as the spiritual centre of Ibāḍism and the community emigrated to Oman. Here, towards the middle of the ninth century, Suwar prospered as a trade centre between the Islamic countries and the monsoonal regions (Wilkinson 1979: II, 894-98).

The Ibāḍī vocation for trade – and in particular long-distance trade – was even more evident among the Ibāḍī community in North Africa. Ibāḍis succeeded in founding, in 776, a stable state with its centre at Tāhert under the leadership of the Persian ‘Abd al-Rahmān Ibn Rustam. By the first part of the ninth century, Tāhert had reached its zenith, extending hegemonic claims from Tlemcen in the west (Algeria) to Tripolitania in the east (Libya), and as far south as Gafsa (south Tunisia), and the oases of Wāḍī Righ and Wargla in Algeria.3 In 908, the kingdom of Tāhert fell at the hands of Fatimids, and the Ibāḍī survivors, not wishing to renounce their faith or submit to the conquerors, moved farther south. The invasion by Banū Bilāl Bedouin tribes in 1050 drove them still further into the interior of the Sahara.

From their refuge in Saharan oases, the Ibāḍis moved south, engaging in commercial and missionary work.4 According to Cuq, Ibāḍis could have been

---


4 As well known, the long distance market economy was mainly based on luxuries: the salt-gold exchanges in the western Sahara and Sudan, and the slave-horses exchanges in the central Sahara and Sudan. The Ibāḍis not only contributed to the expansion of this long-distance luxury trade; more generally, they contributed to the process of change and to the spread of Islam in black Africa (Schacht 1954: 11-27; Cuq 1984: 10, 15-18, 22-24, 45-49, 57, 101). Ibāḍis in-
among those who visited the upper Senegal and Falémé confluence in search of gold (Cuoq 1975: 135).\footnote{The possibility that Ibāḍī merchants approached the auriferous regions known to the Arabs as \textit{Waqāra}, is also considered by Perinbam (1989: 70-90).}

With respect to Ibāḍī long-distance commerce, the concept of a trade diaspora, introduced by Cohen (1971: 266-84), seems to be valid. The commercial diaspora came into existence in the pre-industrial era when people from the same ‘ethnic groups controlled all or most of the stages of the trade in specific commodities’. In effect a diaspora meant economic integration and social separation. That the Ibāḍī merchants and missionaries lived in diaspora in Saharan and western Sudanese oases is beyond reasonable doubt. Evidences from Arabic sources, spanning 600 years, especially accounts of al-Ya‘qūbī (d. 891), Ibn Ḥawqal (d. 988), al-Bakrī (d. 1068) and Leo Africanus (Hasan b. Muhammad al-Wazzānī al-Za‘iyyāt al-Fāsī, d. 1515), testify to the Ibāḍī commercial and missionary communities’ diaspora at the southern boundaries of the major trans-Saharan routes. In the mid-fourteenth century, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1365) found a ‘white quarter’ in the capital of Mali, as well as separate mosques (a Sunni and an Ibāḍī) in Gao (Perinbam 1987: 67-68; 1989: 72-74). Keeping their social distance, Ibāḍīs in diaspora nonetheless were integrated in the economic life of the towns in which they resided.

The social phenomenon of diaspora can still be noticed among the Ibāḍī merchants from Mzab and from Jerba who leave their native countries. They maintain their social and cultural separation and provide for protection against rival groups. The Ibāḍī from Jerba migrated throughout Tunisia primarily to operate grocery stores. They seldom integrate socially in the communities in which they work. Rather, they retain close ties to their native island, return there periodically during their working lives, and almost always resume residence there when they retire.

In comparing the Jebans with other migrant occupational groups from southern Tunisia as regards their economic activities, the only difference that emerges is the religious element. The Ibāḍī religious ethic is the crucial variable in terms of which the Jebans differ from other immigrant groups. In terms of entrepreneurial success the difference between Jebans and other southern groups is striking. The Jebans managed to capture a virtual monopoly of the retail grocery trade. They were the richest and most successful of the various emigrant merchant groups (Stone 1974: 260-73).

The survival of the cities of Mzab (where life is possible thanks to a complicated system of irrigation and water supply) depends on temporary emigration and commercial undertakings (one third of the male population live outside Mzab). This allows the Mozabites to acquire the capital needed to assure

\footnote{Increased commercialisation and manufacture of textiles and metallurgy, and probably introduced the Maghrabi food crops into western Sudan (Perinbam 1987: 66-77).}
the upkeep of the oases and the expensive cultivation of the palm groves. The disintegrating influences of emigration (the attraction of the easier way of life in the cities of North Algeria, the charm of acquired wealth and the business success) are opposed by the extremely vigorous pressure that the group exercises over all its members through the intermediary of its religious doctrine. Every device is used to impress upon the emigrants the feeling that the aim of emigration is the conservation of the group, particularly of those habits, which require them to make a periodic return to Mzab, both to keep the identity of the group and bring once again the emigrants into contact with the religious environment. The sentiment of belonging to a unique religious community and the extremely strong cohesion of the family prevent the dispersion of the Mozabite society (Vigourous 1945: 96-97; Bourdieu 1962: 46).

In Mzab, where the Ibadis are a marginal element untouched by modern development, the walaya/bara’a system has remained almost intact. The religious authority is exercised by the halqa of ‘azzaba (sing. ‘azzabi), a twelve member assembly of the Ibadhi ‘clergy’. The ‘azzaba control the religious life of the community, giving guidance, exhorting the faithful to do good and shun evil, and repressing all actions which are contrary to the shari’a. They oppose social change, instruct the laity in both religious and worldly matters, and supervise the markets, preventing fraud and suppressing monopolies. The supreme power is vested in the shaykh of ‘azzaba, one of whose duties is to make public announcement of excommunication in the mosque, which excludes the guilty persons from the religious and social community and entails the loss of all their rights. The aim of this measure is not only to safeguard the doctrine, but also to raise the moral tone of the masses. In the hands of ‘azzaba, it is definitely an instrument of power and is generally feared, to such extent that the mere threat of its application is often sufficient to restore order.

The ‘laity’, or ‘awamm, have an organization of their own, a jamaa’a, or assembly consisting of elected heads of tribes, which discusses the budget, collects the taxes and looks after local interests in general. Its qā'id, nowadays chosen by the government, is responsible for the maintenance of public order and the observance of the law.

What one might call legislative functions are under the joint control of the halqa of the ‘azzaba and the jamaa’a of ‘awamm. They govern political life as well as private morals and provide archaic but very formidable punishment: bastinado, fines, banishment and excommunication. Generally speaking, no important decision, no civil regulation, no new prohibition, nor sanction against a serious crime, is taken without the intervention of the halqa (Faath 1985: 60-129; Merghoub 1972: 33-45; ‘Abd al-Rahmān 1997:

---

6 During the eighteenth century, Mizāb emigrants have already risen to pre-eminence in urban commerce in Algiers (Venture de Paradis 1895: 278; Holsinger 1980: 61-74; Lespès 1925: 197-218).
401-27; Rubinacci 1960: 37-78).
Among the Mozabite, \textit{walāya} and \textit{barā’a} represent a religious transformation of tribal politics. The notables’ authority could not exist without a social structure founded on the clan. Each clan designates its representatives in the \textit{jamā’a} and its notables, who direct the group’s business, form a restricted assembly which meets in the presence of one of the members of the \textit{halqa} (Bourdieu 1962: 41-42). This connection between religious solidarity and agnostic groups’ power assures that community ties remain very strong even among emigrants. Particularism or individualism are banished and each Ibāḍī has a strong feeling of belonging to ‘the chosen people’, distinguished by their rigor and intransigence.

In terms of the organization of entrepreneurial activity, the solidarity existing among the Mozabites is converted into commercial cooperation. The business establishments of the Tell are generally the property of the family group, and in most cases the employees are members of the owner’s family or else come from the same clan or city. This family organization of the business enterprise, thanks to the very limited costs, allows the Mozabite merchants to sell at competitive prices. Moreover, mutual aid is practised in every possible occasion (Bourdieu 1962: 48; Chabert 1961: 348). In this way, fidelity to the traditional social structure, far from being an obstacle to their competitiveness in the capitalist system, rather favours it and makes it easier.

REFERENCES


