



Trade and the Religious Dimension in Pre-Islamic Arab Society: A Historical Review in the Light of Selected Models

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Abstract

This article seeks to provide a critical historical review of studies that have addressed the nature of the relationship between trade and the religious dimension in pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula society. The article adopts an analytical review approach by categorising previous studies into three main themes: Studies that focused on commercial activity, caravan routes and markets, studies that dealt with the religious structure and its doctrinal and ritual manifestations, and studies that explored the dialectic of interaction between trade and religion. Through this article, the researcher reached the conclusion that most of the classical sources and modern studies that dealt with research in this field agreed unequivocally that Mecca was a pivotal center where trade and religious rituals overlapped. The article also concludes that understanding the interaction between trade and religion requires the use of multiple approaches (economic history, sociology of religion, and anthropology), which opens up new horizons for researchers.

Keywords: Pre-Islamic Arabs, Meccan trade, religion and rituals, seasonal markets.

1. Introduction

The study of pre-Islamic Arab society is one of the areas of research that has received great from historians and orientalists, as well as Arab researchers, because this era represents an essential background for understanding the religious, social, and economic transformations that contributed to the emergence of Islam [1]. One of the core issues within this context is the relationship between trade and the religious dimension, as trade was not a purely economic activity, but was closely linked to religious belief patterns and rituals, and had direct impact on the formation of the political and social structure in pre-Islamic Arabia. Many studies have approached this topic from a variety of angles. Some have focused on Mecca as a commercial and religious centre, while others have examined the role of caravans and seasonal markets in promoting cultural and religious exchange. In the same vein, a number of recent studies have emerged that address the complex relationship between the sanctity of the Sacred House and the economic activity associated with the Hajj. However, most of these studies turned out be scattered and not integrated, highlighting the need for a comprehensive review article that reviews and critically evaluates the most important research trends [2]. This article aims to provide a critical historical review of the nature of the relationship between commerce and the religious dimension in pre-Islamic society, with a focus on the diversity of approaches

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used, and thus seeks to guide researchers towards new horizons to study this topic within a wider historical and cultural context [3].

2. Research Method

This study aims to explore the relationship between trade and religion in pre-Islamic Arab society by reviewing historical evidence through selected models of socio-economic and religious frameworks. To achieve this objective, a qualitative research design is employed, which integrates historical analysis, literature review, and theoretical modeling. The core methodology involves historical analysis of primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the socio-economic and religious landscape of pre-Islamic Arab society. Historical sources, including ancient texts, archaeological findings, and religious scriptures, will be systematically examined. Key texts such as *The Detailed History of the Arabs before Islam* by Jawad Ali and *Geography* by Strabo, alongside Islamic and pre-Islamic sources, will be scrutinized for insights on how trade routes, economic practices, and religious beliefs interplayed in the Arabian Peninsula. A comprehensive literature review will be conducted to summarize the existing research on the economic practices and religious customs in pre-Islamic Arabia. This review will cover works on the role of Meccan trade, religious influences on trade practices, and early Islamic perspectives on pre-Islamic trade networks. Literature from historians, anthropologists, and religious scholars will provide a broader context for the socio-religious fabric of the period. Emphasis will be placed on examining how historical narratives shape contemporary understanding of pre-Islamic Arab trade and religion.

3. Result

The importance of this topic also lies in the fact that it represents a comparative model with other civilizations.[4] The relationship between economic activity and religious rituals was not exclusive to the Arabian Peninsula, but is evident in urban centres such as Babylon, where temples were associated with economic functions, and in Greece, where religious festivals coincided with public markets [5]. Hence, addressing the relationship between commerce and religion in pre-Islamic Arab society is a gateway to understanding broader patterns of interaction between the economy and the sacred in human history:

This review consists of two axes: The first axis, entitled: Previous Studies on Trade and the Religious Dimension, is a conceptual; axis that includes a review of some of the literature on the topic, and the second axis: Critical Analysis of Historical Approaches and Studies, a methodological approach that relies on a critical analytical review by collecting and categorising studies related to trade and religion in pre-Islamic Arab society. It analyses the approaches used in these studies (like the descriptive approach, historical, anthropological, anthropological, and Orientalist) [6]. In this review, I relied on a range of sources and references, the main focus of which was the primary sources dealing with the news of pre-Islamic era found in the Holy Qur'an and some classical Greek and Latin texts, such as the writings of Strabo. Not to mention modern studies: peer-reviewed articles in historical and religious journals. Orientalist research on trade and religion [7].

The first axis: Previous studies on Trade and the religious dimension in pre-Islamic Arab Society.

This theme is concerned with presenting previous studies that dealt with trade and the religious dimension in pre-Islamic Arabia, focusing on the most prominent economic and religious center such as Mecca and seasonal markets. It also highlights the main trade routes

for caravans, and reviews the overlap between commercial activity and religious rituals [8]. For convenience, I have also divided this theme into subsections including.

First: Studies on trade.

Second: Studies on religion.

Third: Studies on the intersection between religion and trade.

First: Studies on Trade

Studies that have investigated the topic of trade in pre-Islamic Arabia as more than just an economic activity, but was linked to social, political, and religious structures [9]. Due to the large number of studies that dealt with the topic, I have chosen to select some of them in the forefront:

1. Jawad Ali(1986) Jawad Ali,s book “ The detailed History of the Arabs before Islam” is one of the most profound studies that dealt with pre-Islamic Arab society from its multiple aspects(economic, religious, Social, Political). He provided very rich material on the topic of trade and the religious dimension of the Arabian Peninsula being an international trade center, due to its location between the trade routes coming from India, Yemen, the Levant and Iraq. He referred to the role of Quraysh in organizing trade caravans(winter and summer journeys) and the importance of markets such as Souk as an economic and cultural center. He showed that trade was not just an economic activity, but was linked to the status of tribes and their political prestige [10].
2. He outlined major trade routes such as the southern route between Yemen, the Red Sea and the Levant, and the northern route between the Gulf and the Levant, noting that trade contributed to the emergence of urban centers of religious importance, such as Mecca .
3. Some Greek and Roman historians and geographers, such as Strabo, mentioned the trade routes extending from the south of the Island to the ports on the Red Sea and the Levant, explaining the importance of the trade in incense, spices and perfumes and its impact on major cities, such as Mecca and southern Yemen, and they also noted that economic activity was linked to some local rituals and ceremonies that ensured the protection of caravans (Starbo,1930c16, chapter4). Some recent studies also indicate that southern Arabia, especially the kingdoms of Sheba, Himyar and Qurban, Played a pivotal role in the incense and frankincense trade, which was closely linked to religious rituals inside and outside the Island, as these goods were used in temples and rituals in Babylon, ancient Egypt, and Christian churches in the Levant [11]. This opens the door to a broader understanding of the nature of the overlap between the religious economy and cross-regional trade,
4. Montgomery Watt(1953) focused on the Quraysh,s control of trade routes, emphasizing that the volume of trade was sufficient to support Mecca,s economic and religious status, although not huge(Watt,1953,pp.21-27)
5. Patricia Cronh(1987) questioned the magnitude of Meccan trade, arguing that Mecca was a local centre of limited impotence) Cronh,1987,pp.134-138).

Second: Studies on Religion Studies have discussed religious rituals and sanctuaries and their relationship to the organization of society:

1. Jawad Ali (1968) devoted volume to the study of ancient religions such as paganism, Judaism, Christianity and Hanifism, analyzing inscriptions associated with sacred sites . He pointed to the religious dimension associated with trade [12]. as the Pre-Islamic era pilgrimage was not just a religious ritual, but was directly linked to trade, as the pilgrimage seasons were people gathered to sell and buy alongside the religious rituals. He even drew attention to the fact that the Kaaba was not only a religious center, but also an economic center, as it sanctity contributed to making Mecca a safe city that attracted caravans. This, in turn, showed the reciprocal relationship between trade, which supported the status of pre-Islamic era religion, and religion, which legitimised and protected trade [13]. From the above, we can see that Jwad ali did not stop at describing, but tried to explain the dialectical relationship between trade and

religion, arguing the religion legitimised the economy, while trade helped spread religious beliefs and customs through cultural exchange.

2. Irfan Shahid(1989) highlighted the influence of christiany in the Jazira frontier on religious and social culture.

Third: Studies on the interaction between trade and religion studies have focused on the interactive relationship between business activity and the religious dimension: [14]

1. Jawad Ali(1968) noted the seasons of trade often coincided with the seasons of pilgrimage, and that the great markets were associated with religious rituals. He enen explains that Quraysh benefited from the sanctity of Mecca, becoming the protector of the trade routes, which gave them economic and political power .
2. Montgomery Watt (1953) noted that the sanctity of Mecca contributed to the protection of caravans and markets.
3. Patricia Cronah (1987) argued that later Islamic narratives exaggerated this interaction (Cronah, Meccan Trade and the Emergence of Islam, pp.155-156).

The second axis: Critically analyzing historical approaches and studies:

There are many research approaches used to study the relationship between trade and the religious dimension in Pre-Islamic Arab society, each with its own analytical tools and abilities to explain historical phenomena. This theme allows, us to critically analyse previous studies, focusing on descriptive and historical approaches, anthropological and sociological approaches, as well as Orientalist and critical approaches, so that we can benefit from these studies, point out the strengths and shortcomings of previous studies, and assess their contribution to building an integrated vision of the interaction between religion and commerce in Pre-Islamic Arabia.

When reviewing some of the writings on trade and its relationship with religion in the sources mentioned in the previous section, we find that their authors relied on various historical approaches in dealing with the topic. Some of them resorted to the descriptive and historical approach, which relies on collecting historical data from primary and secondary sources and presenting it within a clear temporal and geographical framework. Al-Tabari, Al-Balathari(1938) and Jawad Ali (1968) used this approach to document trade routes, markets and religious centres in pre-Islamic Arabia. This approach is characterized by an accurate account of the historical event and the direct relationship between commerce and the religious dimension . However, it focused on describing events without in-depth analysis of the social and cultural dimension [15]. However, excessive reliance on historical narratives has led some studies to fall into the trap of reproducing traditional narratives without subjecting them to critical accountability . Hence the need to incorporate more modern approaches, such as economic anthropology, which sheds light on the concept of sacred economy, where trade becomes marked by religious legitimacy and subject to patterns of social organization associated with the sacred. This helps explain the dual role of markets as a space for economic exchange and a place to renew religious legitimacy, while the pioneers of the anthropological approach focused on studying the impact of rituals and social practices on economic activity. This is what Irfan shahid adopted when addressing the role of seasonal markets and pilgrimage seasons in promoting the interaction between religion and commerce. This shows the strength of the prevailing relationship between religious rituals and economic and social organization, as well as the effects of the cultural value system on the movement of markets and trade caravans. These studies have integrated trade and religion in pre-Islamic Arab society and the impact of this on the economic and political system in general. From the above, we note that the most appropriate approach to address such studies is the mixed approach by combining descriptive anthropological and social history, as it is characterized by comprehensiveness and historical accuracy, which in turn provides the opportunity to accurately trace economic and religious events across time and space, such as trade routes, markets and pilgrimage centers, based on Arabic primary sources, as well as understanding the social and cultural dimension, which allows understanding the impact

of religious rituals and practices on commercial activity, and how social values and cultural framework shaped the organization of markets and pilgrimage seasons.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

- a. Trade in pre-Islamic Arabia was not just an economic activity. It was linked to social, political and religious structures and contributed to the emergence of urban centres with religious significance.
- b. Religious rituals, such as the Hajj and Holy Months, protected markets and gave commercial activity social legitimacy.
- c. Recent studies have added critical analyses to classical sources, but there are still research gaps that need a deeper examination of the interaction between trade and religion across different regions of Arabia. Studying the relationship between trade and religion in pre-Islamic Arab society not only reveals the past but also contributes to understanding how social and economic structures were formed in religious societies throughout history, making it a promising area for further comparative and in-depth studies

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