

# In the Shadow of Arabic The Centrality of Language to Arabic Culture

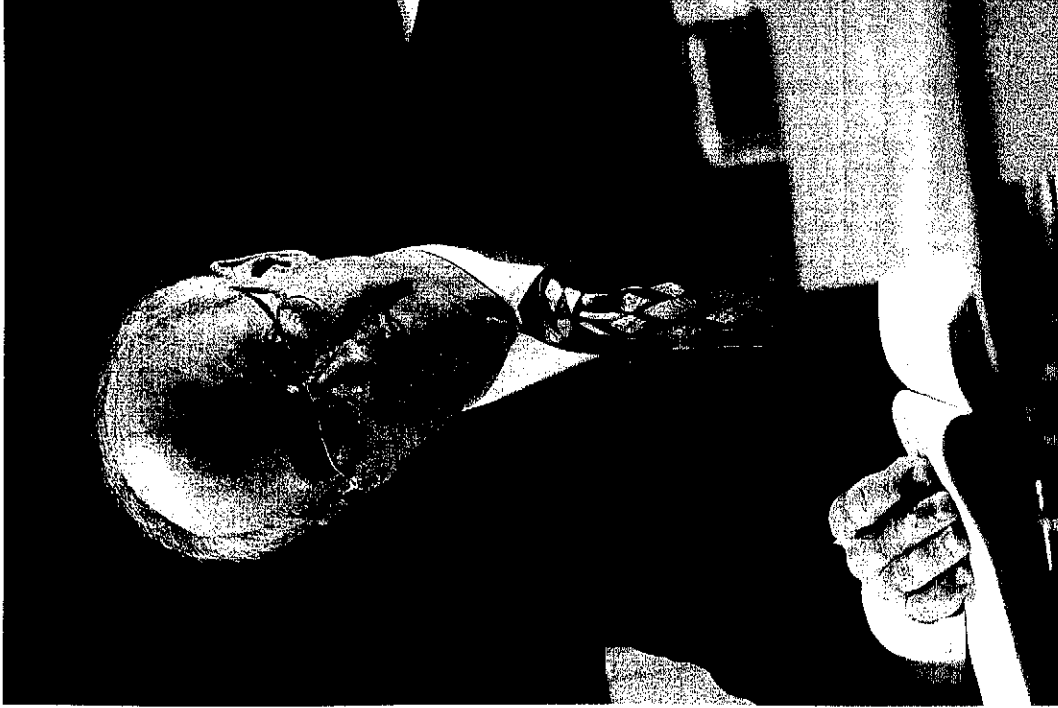
Studies Presented to Ramzi Baalbaki on the  
Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday

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## LINGUISTIC OBSERVATIONS ON THE THEONYM ALLĀH

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The purpose of this essay is to look into the character and possible provenance of the divine name Allāh, which became ultimately the supreme theonym in the Qur'ān. The discussion to follow is concerned primarily with matters of direct pertinence to the divine name Allāh as a linguistic phenomenon; other aspects of this theonym, such as the contexts of its use among pagan Arabs, of the use and semantic status of theonyms in general, and its use in the Qur'ān, have been treated elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Further, the following paragraphs shall confine their treatment to the pre-Qur'ānic Allāh almost exclusively as a proper name: as an iconic sign having no determinate semantic content or standard pragmatic interpretation, and virtually irrespective of any interpretative code which might establish its intension and extension, as a member of the "linguistically poor universe" of proper names.<sup>2</sup>

Morphologically, it is clear that Allāh is related to the Semitic *'lh*, of which it is an amplified form.<sup>3</sup> Whether a morphological treatment based upon the standard stem and pattern model common in Semitic philology overall be an appropriate guide to semantical pragmatics and historical linguistics is a view that I hold to be doubtful, not least as this model appears to be a tool of grammatical and lexicographic rationalisation rather than a description of actual word formation, with the stem being an artifact rather than a linguistic reality.<sup>4</sup> Be that as it may, following an opinion common among Arab grammarians, and attributed to al-Khaṭīb b. Aḥmad, Allāh has generally been taken to be a syncope of *al-'llāh* by a haplology, with the suppression of the *hamza* according to a regular pattern in Arabic nominal terms (*'lh* < *ilāh* < *al-ilāh* < Allāh),<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This essay is an amended version of a section in ch. 5 of my forthcoming *A History of Allāh: Islam in Late Antiquity*. General points made throughout this essay are sustained by a detailed discussion there.

<sup>2</sup> Eco (1977: 87 and § 2.9.2); Ullmann (1971: 122).

<sup>3</sup> Thus, not from *'ll* and the morphologically related \**ll*\*, \**llahay*, \**llat* and others, as suggested by Moubarac (1955: 98f.).

<sup>4</sup> See in particular, Larcher (1995: *passim*); idem (2007: 94 ff.); Pothtomovsky (2007: 46).

<sup>5</sup> Sibawayhi, *al-Kiṭāb* 2, 195ff. drawing an analogy with *umās* < *al-umās* < *al-nās*. See Fleisch (1961: § 30b); Testen (1998: 215ff.).

through the degree of regularity of this rule has been disputed.<sup>6</sup> There does seem to be a certain contrivance in the labour of classical Arab linguists who devoted some considerable attention to this matter. Some preferred to see Allāh generated from *ʾlāh*, others from *lāh*; often, in the manner usual for the time and still common in Islamic Studies today, a marked preference was given to considerations of etymology.<sup>7</sup> This said, it must also be stated that this view is morphologically and semantically satisfactory and presents no serious phonetic difficulties.

The trouble with such morphological genealogies is that they privilege etymologies and pseudo-etymologies of supposedly ultimate origin and initial condition (what Arabic grammarians and lexicographers termed *wadʿ*) over a more historical pursuit of realised semantic fields and of pragmatics,<sup>8</sup> and, indeed, over the history of language. They draw semantic conclusions from morphological connections incautiously, appearing far too bookish and unhistorical, in this case postulating implicitly for the authors of Sufaitic inscriptions, and for Muhammad, an improbable application to morphology as various derived forms of the stem *ʾlh* were deployed. In this sense, the evasion of historical, semantic and a sociolinguistic approach to the matter would amount to a somewhat incurious *lectio facitior*.

In contrast, paralinguistic and non-philological considerations would, however, indicate a number of more pertinent matters. *ʾlh* had been vocalised as Allāh when used as the theophoric element in a variety of personal names, spread widely, and this is shown by late antique Greek epigraphic and literary transliterations in northern Arabia and its extensions further north (as *-allas* or *-allos*).<sup>9</sup> One might note, anticipating a point which will be made below, that Allāt, or rather *ʾlt*, to which the Arabic definite article is almost invariably imputed, is a name not attested epigraphically in the form Allāt. She was an ubiquitous deity, worshipped far beyond territories

<sup>6</sup> Winnett (1938: 247).

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 1:1, al-Rāzī, *al-Taǧ̃ir al-kabīr* 1, 87ff.; Gimaret (1988: 121ff.). For Allāt: Krone (1992, 43ff.). For a review of the morphology of Allāh and other divine names in the Qurʾān according to Arabic grammarians, see al-Zajjāji, *Ishāʾiq asmāʾ Allāh*. For reasons that remain unclear, Ibn Durayd, *al-Ishāʾiqāq*, 11, 482, declared, uncommonly, that he was disinclined to pursue this matter.

<sup>8</sup> On the root fallacy of Biblical vocabulary and associated themes, see Barr (1961, 107 ff.); in briefer compass but with succinct focus, Sawyer (1999: 16), and the works there cited.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, J.-B. Chabot and G. Ryckmans (1907–1950: #8 2049, 2066, 2096) (the last an uncertain reading), and *passim*, derivatives from *-ʾlhy*, with the *y* serving as a *mater lectionis*: Haussig (1965: 422); Wuthnow (1930: *passim*)—the evidence here stems from Egypt; Bin Saray and al-Shāmīsī (2000: 33); Sourdel (10, 52, 88).

where the definite article *al-* was in use, and long before there is any evidence for the use of this phoneme as a definite article.

Moreover, on the common assumption of the presence of a definite article attached to these theonyms, the Dadanitic *hlh* and Tharrudic *hʾlh* should in fact have been *ha-Lah*, or *han-ʾlāh*,<sup>10</sup> not *ha-* or *han-Allāh*, and clearly not Allāh. In the context of compounds from *ʾlh* in Arabic, one might also consider Arabic forms of jurative invocation, not very frequent but common enough, that use *lah* as their nominative element, but without the velarised or emphatic *l*, of Allāh, such as *ta-l-Lāh*, *li-l-Lāh* and (more commonly) *bi-l-Lāh*. Like *li* and *bi*, the element *ta* functions grammatically as a preposition, and all these expressions are formulaic ellipses excluding *wasimū* ('I swear') and similar formulae.<sup>11</sup> In all these cases, Arabic grammar detected a contracted Allāh component, although these jurative invocations actually have the form of *ta-ʾlāh* and *bi-ʾlāh*, with *hamzat al-wasl* omitted. One possible conclusion that might be drawn from the foregoing is that the *hā* element in Ancient North Arabian may well have been a prefixed vocative particle rather than a definite article, a phenomenon which is attested.<sup>12</sup> Transposing this into the suggestion that the *al-* in Allāh may be a vocative particle is attractive, but it would seem to be unique to Allāh, as there is no incidence elsewhere in Arabic of its use as a vocative particle.

Whatever conclusion may or may not be drawn from this, it is likely that, in terms of its history, the form *Allāh* was not so much a morphological derivation from *ʾlāh* or *lāh*, as integrally primary, it was a name adopted, in an obscure way that is probably no longer recoverable, in its absolute form irrespective of its morphology. This is a matter also highlighted in Arabic grammar, where the *al-* element was seen in this case to be integral to the word's structure, and not used as a mark of definitiveness, not least on the devotional argument that the supreme name of God cannot be indefinite,<sup>13</sup> a perceptive intuition nevertheless. The implausibility of the morphological hypothesis discussed is further sustained by the fact that the addition of the definite article *al-* to *Lāh* or *lāh* would

<sup>10</sup> The definite article in Dadanitic changes from *h-* to *hn-* only before glottals and pharyngals: Macdonald (2004: 57f.).

<sup>11</sup> cf. Fleisch (1961: § 153), and see al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʾulūm al-Qurʾān* 1, 572.

<sup>12</sup> Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, 4:1; Macdonald (2004: 519).

<sup>13</sup> Sibawayhi, *al-Kiṭāb* 2, 195f.; Khan, *Die exegetischen Teile des Kitāb al-ʾAyn*, 12; al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmiʿ ʿilā Ahkām al-Qurʾān* 1, 103; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʾulūm al-Qurʾān* 1, 543). See the discussion of the related questions of definitiveness in proper and common names in Ibn al-Anbārī, *al-ḥaṣṣī fī masāʾil al-kullūf*, # 101, and of *al-* in Ibn Hishām, *Mughnī al-labīb*, 50f.

yield different but allophonic values for the medial vowel *a* (/œ/ and /a/ respectively, according to the International Phonetic Alphabet, for *Lah/Ilah* and *Allah*). This is at least the case with their enunciation according to standard Qur'anic modes of cantillation.

This brings us to the related matter of *tafkīḥim*, emphasis by velarisation of the phoneme /l/ in *Allāh* which, like definitiveness, was regarded in classical Arabic grammar and much modern scholarship alike as arising from moral enhancement and tonal emphasis, without adequate attention to its grounding in Arabic phonetics and historical linguistics.<sup>14</sup> The velarised /l/ in *Allāh* appears irregular and *suū generis*;<sup>15</sup> the only rule that might be formulated would be that the phoneme /l/ has the allophone [l̤] in the sequence /-lāh/ when it is not preceded by /i/ and when it means God.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of whether the velarised /l/ should be regarded as an allophone or an independent phoneme, this is an unusual phenomenon in which a phoneme of such rare occurrence in the total lexicon of the Arabic language yet appears in one particular morpheme which occurs very frequently. This phenomenon is not altogether unknown in other languages.<sup>17</sup>

The peculiar phonetic character of *Allāh* invites consideration of its provenance, in so far as this might be ascertainable. It has been proposed that *Allāh* came from the Aramaic in the absolute state *Allāhā*, as a proper name, duly arabised by dropping the determinative affix *ā*.<sup>18</sup> But there is no trace of *Allāhā* in Syriac, only of *Alāhā*, and there is no doubling of consonants in this language.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the point was made that the Syriac form might have been derived from the Arabic,<sup>20</sup> a point which might gain sustenance from the occurrence of \**Ilaha* in Thaumudic,<sup>21</sup> with a tendency

<sup>14</sup> al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, *fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* 1: 543, and the comments of Ambros (1981: 24).

<sup>15</sup> Ambros (1981: 23, 27).

<sup>16</sup> Ferguson (1956: § 2). This and other features would distinguish velarisation of the divine name from the other instances of the velarised /l/ in the neighbourhood of certain consonants, and in unpredictable items such as loan words—see *ibid.*, § 1 and cf. Ambros (1981: 25, 28 n. 26).

<sup>17</sup> Ferguson (1956: § 2), where the author cites a similar phenomenon respecting the phonetic value *ð* in English (as the *th* in *this*) which occurs, of course, in many more morphemes.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffery (1938: 66f.); Winnett (1946: 122); Trimmingham (1979: 251 n. 14); Nau (1933: 26 n. 2), who concludes unnecessarily from this that the origin of Muhammad's *Allāh* is Christian.

<sup>19</sup> Blau (1972: 175f.).

<sup>20</sup> Littmann (1934: x), and see Blau (1972: 176).

<sup>21</sup> The best studied instance is a famous Greek/Nabatean inscription dated A.D. 166–9 at al-Rawwāfā, 75 km southwest of Tabūk, with an invocation to ʾl̤l̤h; read as \**Ilaha*. Text in Müllk, (1971: 58), commentary in Bowersock (1975) and Beaucamp (1979).

in late sixth- and early seventh-century Syriac towards the emphatic articulation of the /a/, giving it a tonal colour comparable to the Arabic *ā* in contact position with velarised consonants.<sup>22</sup> In all, the matter of the relationship between Arabic and Syriac in this regard needs to be adjudged inconclusive, but must also bear consideration in terms of the possibility that this divine name with *tafkīḥim* might have been yielded by the contact area of Syriac and Arabic in northern Hijāz (and in al-Hīra as well), taking into account also the possibility of a velarisation in Hijāzī dialect, many of whose features remain, of course, largely hypothetical.

One might regard emphasis to have a prosodic feature connected with Muhammad's preaching, or indeed, if one accepted that *Allāh* was used by the Arabs, the possibility that emphatic articulation was introduced by Muhammad, as a mark of acoustic differentiation from previous uses of this divine name.<sup>23</sup> Finally, it has been suggested that the loss, by syncope discussed above, of the stem-initial syllable *i* of *ilāh* in conjunction with the definite article,<sup>24</sup> might indicate a specifically Hijāzī feature added to another, that of velarisation. If this be accepted, it would yield *al-Lāh* as the original form. This would then bring the theonym into the regional ambit of the central Arabian usage of this particular form, on evidence of a unique occurrence in an Arabic inscription written in south Arabian *musnad* script, some centuries prior to Islam, at Qaryat al-Fāw, mentioning, among others, a divinity called *'lh*, vocalised as \**Lāh*.<sup>25</sup> However, this identification of the original form would carry conviction only if one were to eliminate the definite article as an element of explanation, and settle for the absolute form *Allāh* without velarisation.

This last statement is made from an argument of plausibility. The foregoing discussion lends sustenance to the major point being made here, that *Allāh* was a divine name available in its absolute form, in which perspective morphological considerations would, when and if convincing, serve at best a purely antiquarian interest at best, without historical explanatory value. Moreover, if, in contrast, one persisted in making the unsafe assumption that *Allāh* was derived from *Lāh* morphologically,

<sup>22</sup> Ambros (1981: 30).

<sup>23</sup> Ambros (1981: 27f., 31 n. 37, 32); Ferguson (1956: § 5, and cf. the reservations of Blau (1972: 176f., 176 n. 8), regarding emphasis in Syriac, who also proposes that *Allāh* and *Alāhā* emerged independently.

<sup>24</sup> This is relevant to three words occurring in the Qur'ān: *Allāh*, *nās*, and *alī*. Testen (1998: 214, 214ff.).

<sup>25</sup> Testen (1998: 27ff.); The inscription: al-Anṣārī (1982, 21)—the inscription is reproduced photographically at 146).

one might point out that it does occur in Arabic that the *al-* functions as a demonstrative pronoun (*ism isharāʾ*) in adverbial form in addition to functioning as an article indicating definitiveness, a feature shared with the Hebrew *ha-*.<sup>36</sup> This would take us again to the possibility of considering this proper name in the vocative mode.

The integral adoption of *Allāh* in the absolute form, prior to suffixation or any other grammatical operation performed upon this word, was a point noted in classical Arab grammar, where, in addition to the view attributed to al-Khalil and mentioned above, it is maintained that *Allāh* as a proper name fell into the nominal class of *ism murtajal*. What is being suggested about the lack of an etymological relationship of *Allāh* to the definite article *al-* has also been safely established with respect to the *al-* component in the name of *ʾĪl*, Allāt.<sup>37</sup> The *murtajal* is that class of proper names that exist only as integral proper names, with the name specific to an individual or improvised for an individual, in contrast to the other class of derived proper names termed *manqūl*, a substantive or verbal construct characterised as tropical or as transferred, from another use, such as generic use (an example would be the proper name *Asad*, lion), metaphorical transference of meaning or attribute (*Asad* for a brave man), onomatopoeia or some other operation.<sup>38</sup> That divine names are halloed in themselves, and that their punctilious enunciation is necessary for unlocking the numenal energies they conjure, is a fact that would in itself lend a certain credibility to this hunch of Arabic linguists. This sets the name *Allāh* apart from names such as *Rabb* or *Baʿl*, into which is transferred a general meaning of superordination among humans, or indeed from *ʾĪl*. His autonomy from the world involving *āliha* is a point that I have argued in detail elsewhere.

What is being suggested, that the divine name *Allāh* as it entered the Arabic language, irrespective of its origin or etymology, is an independent personal name of the *murtajal* class,<sup>39</sup> designating a particular individual being, is sustained by a number of further considerations. It is a specific

<sup>36</sup> Baʿalbakī (1999: 249f.); thus the Arabic *al-yawm* and the Hebrew *happoyom* for 'today'. It is established that the demonstrative *-ha* is related to the alternation between the initial *ʾ* and the initial *h*; Zaborski (2006: 1, 188).

<sup>37</sup> Hämeen-Anttila and Röllinger (2002: 87f.). In a similar vein, I have shown elsewhere that kalbiya invocations containing *Allāhumma*, often cited in confirmation of the cultic worship of *Allāh*, are irrelevant, *Allāhumma* being a generic epicletic version of which stretch as far as Ugaritic texts.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab*, 1:1-h; Caetani and Gabrieli (1905: 1, § 8); Wright (1907: § 191(6)); Ali (1968-73: 6, 23).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Testen (1998: 222).

and indeed a unique proper name indicating a particular deity who, in the early period of the Qurʾān, nevertheless retained both a generic and a specific local meaning, being an intransitive name but with properties shared by others. To the Qurʾānic polemical question in a Meccan sūra (Q, 19:65) as to whether the hearers of the Qurʾānic Recitation knew of anyone who shared the name of Muḥammad's Rabb, so far generic but also with a specific habitation, the implied answer was clearly in the negative.

Ultimately, whatever the historical or the remote morphological connections of the proper name *Allāh*, it appears that the phenomenon under consideration is best regarded from the perspective of pragmatics, historical linguistics, and socio-linguistics. At Zabad, some 60 km southeast of Aleppo, an important trilingual Arabic/Aramaic/Greek inscription on the lintel of a church, dated A.D. 52 and one of the earliest Arabic inscriptions written in an alphabet that is recognisably Arabic, invokes the succour of *ʾĪl*, "the God," a common epithet for named divinities, here uniquely with the Arabic definite article *al-*.<sup>40</sup> But the authors of this inscription used *\*al-llāh*, and clearly had no cause to form a syncope, which is possible for Arabic morphology, but not inherently necessary to the Arabic language. Morphology may account theoretically for the form of the word, but not for its history, for its connotations, or for a cult.

The emergence to primacy, and then to exclusivity, of Muḥammad's deity *Allāh* is therefore indeed "not self-evident."<sup>41</sup> We are not in a position to account for the spread of the name *Allāh*, a name afloat in jurative formulae and theophoric compounds that exist in poetry and inscriptions, possibly also in documentary form. We still lack a map of the geographical distribution of this name and of its users, and we have as yet no way of telling if its geography indicated any spatial or social hierarchy that governed its incidence and frequency, or if we need to assume a model of random dispersal. But some suggestions regarding the attractiveness of *Allāh*, leading to His ultimate adoption by Muḥammad, are not inconceivable.

It may or may not have been the case that the Arabs of the Hijāz, and reputedly elsewhere, would appeal on occasion to a certain *Allāh* in

<sup>40</sup> Étienne Combe, Jean Sauvaget and Gaston Wiet (eds.) (1931-1935: § 2). An excellent photograph of this inscription, capitially important for the study of the rise of Arabic and Arabic script (a point first noted by Sachau (1882: 189)), is given in Grohmann (1971: 16 and Tafel II.1.2). The most up-to-date revised and amended reading of this much-discussed inscription is by Robin (2006: 331f., 337).

<sup>41</sup> Simon (1993: 133).

situations of special distress.<sup>32</sup> One would interpret this, if true, in line with the aggregative nature of pagan divinities implied in syncretism, as an appeal to multiple deities in case of need, and to a remoter, vaguer being for good measure and added value. Whatever the truth of the matter, the opaque, distant presence of an Allāh among a multiplicity of other, more frequently invoked and culturally more concrete local deities, would certainly have been an advantage for this floating signifier. This was the advantage of a certain distinctiveness, no matter how vague,<sup>33</sup> and in circumstances such as this, vagueness of designation could add force to an enunciation,<sup>34</sup> in this case a vocative enunciation. The appeal to locally rootless exotic deities in such circumstances is not unusual in the history of religions,<sup>35</sup> and mystifying obscurity does play a role in binding acolytes to masters, however defined.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, Allāh bears certain historical affinities to the Israelite Yhwh. The latter was also a remote, exotic, non-Israelite and non-Palestinian divinity, the meaning of whose name is hard to establish,<sup>37</sup> His very remoteness conveying a sense of abeyance and regularity.<sup>38</sup>

Poetic evidence, and old Arabic poetry is only most minimally religious,<sup>39</sup> points to some sparing use of Allāh in a formulaic and generic sense (and as the deity of a Christian monk, which might be a later interpolation or a rendition of the Aramaic Alāhā). This formulaic sense, used almost as a topos, might strengthen His appeal in oaths. There is a report concerning a document written by the hand of 'Abd al-Muttaḥib, Muhammad's paternal grandfather, relating to a loan he made to a person in Ṣan'ā', to which is added the statement that Allāh is a witness to the agreement. A document of alliance between the same person and Khuzā'a concludes with a

<sup>32</sup> Muslim traditions, in which this idea occurs, have contradictory views of this very common claim. Ibn Ishāq, *Sirat Ibn Isḥāq*, §§ 15, 127.

<sup>33</sup> It has been noted that having no idol was in itself a mark of distinctiveness for Allāh: Healey (200: 84). A comparison with the vague distinctiveness of Sol and of the solar cult attributed to the Syrians and Syrian Arabs during an earlier period might yield interesting results: see Seyrig (1971).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Eco (1977: § 2.7.3).

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Hierapolitan (west Anatolian) appeals to the distant Ionian Apollo of Claros, rather than the local Apollo, during the outbreak plague in the mid-second century: Potter (1994: 4).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Gellner, (1957: 34).

<sup>37</sup> Toom (1999: 93), where (at gmf.) his provenance is identified as having been Midian.

<sup>38</sup> Weber (1993: 17f., 34).

<sup>39</sup> See Hirschberg (1939: 28ff.), for an attempt to disengage the religious contents in the poetry of one group of urbanised and courtly pre-Islamic Arab poets, and Brockelmann (1922: 100f., 105ff.).

similar statement—if the documents quoted be genuine, for the mention of Allāh may well have been a later gloss, as is the monetary denomination quoted to this document, although the rest of the document has the due form and the linguistic character expected of a text of such vintage.<sup>40</sup>

Thus also, in a situation remote from solemnity, a repartee between two lovers shows the mistrustful woman insisting tartly that her lover should swear by Allāh's right hand rather than by his own.<sup>41</sup> One could say that this jurative use of Allāh might be compared in some respects to the exclamation of an old-world Englishman invoking Jove.<sup>42</sup> Closer to home, there is a demotic linguistic expression that seems to underline the obscurity of byways taken by divine names, some characterised by extraordinary longevity and disengagement from "original" senses and contexts of use which are difficult to account for. In the dialect of Damascus and other regions of Syria, one still occasionally appeals to a Yāhū in situations of vexation, frustration and distress. This expression, not unknown in other, ancient contexts, has been interpreted as a secondary form of Yhwh, but may very well have been entirely independent in origin.<sup>43</sup> In all cases, the use of a divine name in jurative exclamations falls within the category of speech-acts, actions performed by an enunciative act (perlocution) or in an act of enunciation (illocution). What we have in these and in similar instances altogether is an enhancement of illocutionary energy corresponding to a diminution in propositional or otherwise semantic content.<sup>44</sup>

If Allāh was indeed, as often claimed, considered to be the "High God" by the pre-Islamic Arabs,<sup>45</sup> His elevation must be interpreted as denoting

<sup>40</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, 8; Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-Munammāq*, 91; Ibn Qutayba, *Faḍl al-'Arab*, 88–9.

<sup>41</sup> Poems by al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī (7718) and Imrī' al-Qaysī (200.4–5) in Arzi and Masalha (1999); "Allāh" in *ibid.*, "Concordance," s.v. God's right hand is also mentioned by Mālik b. al-Rayb, in al-Qaysī, *Shu'arā' Umarayyūn*, 212.

<sup>42</sup> Similarly, musing the name of God as "gosh" and "golly" might well have involved initially a hedging, by nominal transference, against insincerity and profanation, before the divine association and the fear of profanation were lost, with the jurative or vocative function of this speech-act remaining.

<sup>43</sup> It is proposed in "Yāhweh," *Dictionary of Divinities and Demons*, 900, that there were abbreviated secondary forms for the Yhwh theonym: Yā, Yāhū, Yāhō. The Damascene expression receives an implausible common explanation in terms of Arabic as "Oh Hei", usually as part of the more general exclamation "yā 'ilāh, yā hū."

<sup>44</sup> These notions were first developed by Austin (1975: 98ff., 101ff., 144ff.), and have produced a vast body of work in semantics and philosophy. For a technical discussion of these and associated notions, see Fodor (1980: 2uff.). It is noteworthy that the notion of illocutionary force used above is unclear in Austin.

<sup>45</sup> Contra this view, Brockelmann (1922: 104f., 104 n. 1).

less a celestial location and individuation with an associated cosmology and myth, than a supernumerary remoteness, that of a *deus otiosus*, of a "potential" deity,<sup>46</sup> semantically a floating signifier. To this might be added that this *deus otiosus* was not one who had withdrawn from managing the affairs of the world, devolving his rule to lesser deities, according to some pantheonic mythological scheme, but that he never played such a role or formed part of such a system. It has long been realised, but without drawing concrete conclusions, that the pre-Muhammadan Allāh lay outside the ambit of Arab cultic divinities,<sup>47</sup> and that, for all His attributes, meagre as they are, recoverable from Arabic poetry, such a deity bereft of cult cannot be considered to have been a generic deity in the form of a "collective singular," abstracted from local deities and appropriating their functions, as a High God might.<sup>48</sup> If such a god be invoked in moments of distress, such invocation would need to be interpreted as an act of doubling the force of the vocative illocution involved, rather than an appeal to a specific divine being whose name has specific connections with particular functions and capacities. This invocation would have been an appeal to supernatural agency in general, over and above a particular deity or group of deities in particular, much as indistinct spirits might be invoked.

Such invocation without acts of worship can have little consequence for religious history, as it is not culturally and socially rooted, for the deity thus invoked appears to have been understood as a god of all in general and of no one in particular which, in the context of Arab paganism, is incongruous. Vague distinctiveness along with an indistinct presence, an interstitial condition within and without boundaries, everywhere dispersed, a presence however vague and diffuse: such a condition can also give rise to claims of self-evidence, of truth obscured by facts of prevailing religion, claims systematised in classical Arabic historiography and in Islamic literature, and accepted, in large measure uncritically, by modern scholarship. How this vague distinctiveness was achieved might only be determined once an historical geography of the distribution and use of the name Allāh becomes available.

<sup>46</sup> Chelhod (1964: 97).

<sup>47</sup> Wellhausen (1927: 223f.).

<sup>48</sup> Brockelmann (1922: 104, 105ff.) who adopts, by way of interpretation, a theory no longer tenable, that there did exist among a variety of people in Australia, America, Africa, as among ancient Aryans and as with the El Elyon and El Olam of the Israelites, a general belief in an ultimate Creator (*Urheber*), but is nevertheless keen to differentiate this from the notion of an *Urmonotheismus* (100 f.).

That He has no namesake, though His names be several, al-Rabb, al-Rahmān, or Allāh, and that He be invoked by His qualifiers and predicates, his Beatific Names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), by his epithets and epicleses; that He be unique yet polyonymous, multiple in name; that He could admonish his worshippers and deniers by asserting that He is but One (Q. 41.6 and *passim*) without the necessity for qualification: such are serious claims, and make severely counter-intuitive and very inhabitual demands on votaries and worshippers. For what is claimed here, as a theonym becomes a specific deity and what is demanded, is submission to a tautology, the tautology of a deity making self-referential claims to self-definition and self-naming, a self-identical deity who speaks in the manner of a previous one who stated: "See now that I, I am He" (Deut. 32.39). Inhabitual, and perhaps counter-intuitive as well, demands mark the point from which is exercised a claim for the indivisibility of legitimacy by which order is established and a habitus, new or continuing, is inculcated.<sup>49</sup> In the case of the Muhammadan Allāh, the very arbitrariness, indeed, in the eyes of Muhammad's adversaries, the very absurdity of the claims he made for his deity, will in themselves have been the sharp edge of self-demarkation from Arab polytheism, in which what appears arbitrary and absurd to the foe comes to confirm the position of the protagonist.<sup>50</sup>

This "self-predication of God,"<sup>51</sup> has a venerable history,<sup>52</sup> not least in the self-definition of the Israelite Yhwh whose very name is cast in a verbal form that has been interpreted as *yhwh*, "I am,"<sup>53</sup> making it altogether possible to dispense with the theonym altogether and to consider it superfluous.<sup>54</sup> Self-predication appears as an important marker of the move to monotheism and monotheism, and dramatises the transition from divine names to the names of God,<sup>54</sup> when the generic appellative becomes a proper name, when the theonym loses memory of origin, and when its object acquires personality capable of taking on attributes.<sup>55</sup> This is the

<sup>49</sup> The notion of "symbolic violence" might usefully be employed as an overarching category here—cf. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977: Bk. I).

<sup>50</sup> See the comments on the uses of arbitrariness and absurdity in Bourdieu (1971: 310) and "Absurdität," *Erezyklopädie des Märchens*. Bell (1968: 51, 97), considers that Muhammad liked to introduce unfamiliar words, a certain obscurity being appropriate to divine revelation, by design.

<sup>51</sup> Westermann (1967: 125).

<sup>52</sup> See Toorn (1999: 93f.) for this and other possible interpretations.

<sup>53</sup> Gladigow (1950-78: II, 1214f.).

<sup>54</sup> This is emblematised by Usener (1896: 337 and *passim*) in the change from *perī lōn theōn ton onomāton* to *perī theōn onomāton*.

<sup>55</sup> Usener (1896: 326f.).

ultimate form for the expression of authority, premised on a charter of limitless arbitrariness and at the zero degree of signification. As noted by an early Qur'anic exegete, the meaning of a divine name is essentially Rabb-hood, boundless sovereignty and superordination overall (*rubbūbiyya*).<sup>56</sup> This is the abstract and boundless lordship of a deity who, however named, is yet individual and a person, combining His individual identification mark with a generic concept which was ultimately to indicate Him alone, moving from precise denotation and specific location to connotation and a very considerable extension of semantic range.<sup>57</sup>

This arbitrariness marks the development discussed ultimately as a political process and as a command economy of the divine, rather than as a natural emergence from a process internal to the morphological transformations of *'lā*.

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<sup>56</sup> Muqāṭil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqāṭil* b. Sulaymān 4, 285.

<sup>57</sup> cf. Ullmann (1972: 71 ff.).

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