



## Short Thought Report

# Is there a link between Dhaouadi's theory of cultural symbols and that of Michael Carrithers' book? (Why humans have culture?)

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**Abstract** - This article investigates the potential link between Tunisian sociologist Mahmoud Dhaouadi's<sup>1</sup> theory of cultural/human symbols, as presented in his book *Cultural Symbols*, and the *Human Long Lifespan: An Islamic Cultural Perspective*, and Michael Carrithers's<sup>2</sup> arguments in 'Why Humans Have Culture?'. Through a close reading of both works, the article explores potential thematic similarities, particularly concerning the role of symbols and meaning making in human life. While acknowledging the apparent closeness in the book titles, the analysis delves into the distinct theoretical frameworks and focuses of each author. Ultimately, the article argues that despite some conceptual overlap regarding the importance of shared understanding, Dhaouadi's work, rooted in an Islamic cultural perspective and focusing on the impact of human symbols on the human lifespan, represents an original contribution to sociology and human sciences, distinct from Carrithers' anthropological inquiry into the foundations of cultural diversity. The possibility of plagiarism of the central idea is thus ruled out, highlighting Dhaouadi's unique theoretical endeavor.

**Keywords:** Mahmoud Dhaouadi, Michael Carrithers, cultural symbols, human culture, Islamic Perspective.

<sup>1</sup>Mahmoud Dhaouadi was born in a rural region called Zreeba near Kalaat al-Andalus and Aousdja in the northeast of Tunisia, where no formal school existed. His father established the Kutab (a place for learning the Quran and writing and reading Arabic) to teach his children. Mahmoud studied his secondary education in the Zeituna school, where Arabic is the single teaching language of all subjects, unlike most of the other Tunisian schools. His higher education was in the USA and Canada, where he received a BA in psychology and an MA and Ph.D. in sociology. He taught at worldwide universities. Professor Dhaouadi has published over 20 interdisciplinary books, over 200 essays, long and short articles, and book reviews, in Arabic, English, and French (Austin Macauley Publisher Website, Mahmoud Dhaouadi, <https://austinmacauleyusa.com/author/mahmoud-dhaouadi>).

<sup>2</sup>Michael Barnes Carrithers (1945-) was awarded a doctorate by the University of Oxford in 1978 for his thesis entitled "The forest-dwelling monks of Sri Lanka: an historical and anthropological study." After lecturing at the London School of Economics and Oxford, he joined the staff at Durham University in 1982 as a lecturer in anthropology; he was promoted to senior lecturer in 1987, reader in 1989, and professor of anthropology in 1992. (Michael B. Carrithers, "Is anthropology art or science?", *Current Anthropology*, vol. 31, no. 3 (1990), p. 263. *Durham University Gazette*, new series, vol. xxvii (Epiphany term 1983), p. 4. *Durham University Calendar 1999–2000*, vol. 1, p. 324. *The forest-dwelling monks of Sri Lanka: an historical and anthropological study*, SOLO: Bodleian Library Catalogue. See Carrithers M. 1983)

The Tunisian sociologist Mahmoud Dhaouadi is known for his study of what he calls *Cultural Symbols/CS*, as manifested in his theory of the role of CS in the length of the human lifespan (Dhaouadi 2012).

Professor Dhaouadi has continued his in-depth research in this field and has consequently promoted the study of CS. His reviewed book here is the outcome of his pursued intellectual efforts. There is no doubt that this book reflects the experience and maturation achieved in his work. In this regard, Dr Dhaouadi published a book in Arabic titled (Introduction to Cultural Sociology with Arabic and Islamic Views, Dhaouadi 2010). His present book adds new ideas related to the Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring and the discussion of Huntington's thesis of the clash of civilizations.

While the author of the book titled (Cultural Sociology within Innovative Treatise: Islamic Insights on Human Symbols, Dhaouadi 2013) was writing its last part in the Spring of 2012, some Arab countries – including Tunisia his own country to which he devoted some case studies- were witnessing revolts and revolutions led mainly by youth. These events have shaken the Arab region not only on the political scene but also on the social and cultural dimensions. Professor Dhaouadi has dedicated his book to the revolutionaries of *the Arab Spring*. Yet he was not in a position to predict the dramatic following transformations against the revolutions in the Arab societies where the collapse of security and the raging civil wars have also undermined the general economic stales in

the Arab countries stifled the collective and individual rights and violated the human rights due particularly to the rise of extreme religious movements in some Arab countries.

### **Dhaouadi's theory of cultural symbols**

Tunisian sociologist Mohamed Dhaouadi emphasizes the centrality of cultural symbols in shaping social life and identity. His theory builds symbolic interactionism and structuralist traditions, highlighting how symbols act as vehicles of meaning deeply embedded in cultural systems. For Dhaouadi, cultural symbols not only reflect social reality but also constitute it—they help structure and reproduce that reality. His focus is especially on how symbols are rooted in the collective memory and value systems of societies, often tied to Arab-Muslim identity.

This book outlines a shift in Dhaouadi's use of his intellectual thesis, which he has adopted for many years. This is expressed in this move to use Human Symbols/HS instead of cultural symbols/CS. Likewise, the HS includes the same elements as the CS: language, thought, religion, knowledge, science, laws, myths, cultural values and norms. The author explains that the reason behind this is to dismiss the confusion which bears the use of CS since recent studies attribute culture/CS to animals and other species.

### **What does Dhaouadi present?**

The book has an introduction, and three main parts divided into nine chapters, which are also divided into a number of themes. The first part is titled: New conceptual exploration into cultural sociology. It includes the first four chapters of the book, where the author gives the first chapter, this title: The Search for Cultural Sociology. Dhaouadi dealt with the causes of the late coming of cultural sociology on the sociological scene as well as with the double use of (sociology of culture) and (cultural sociology). Cultural sociology focuses on the making of meaning (6, P.3). Dhaouadi thinks there is a compelling need for cultural sociology. He concludes that the sociology of culture is not enough. He calls rather for more interest in cultural sociology.

Sociologists' road map for sound cultural sociology can be realized if they follow the following two steps:

- 1-** They should consider culture as an independent variable and a central dimension of human identity.

2- They should deepen their understanding of the components of culture and not rely only on the apparent features of the human symbols. They should also have a good knowledge of the cognitive dimensions of human symbols.

Social sciences' illiteracy of the Other Underdevelopment/OU in post-colonial societies constitutes the second chapter of the third part of the book. In this chapter, the author discusses the concept of the OU in developing countries, which Dhaouadi had already explored since he published in Arabic his first article in 1983, where he studied the problems of the marginality of the Arabic language in the North African countries (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco). The wide use of French in Tunisian Society is the outcome of French colonization (1881-1956). The chapter also deals with the Tunisian women's use of the Franco-Arabe, which uncovers its psycho-social symptoms. Finally, Dhaouadi offers some insights on two phenomena- the so-called (Aada) cursing practiced by women, especially against others toward whom they are angry or because of existing conflicts with them. The chapter shows the relationship hierarchy among the three social actors (the French colonizers, the Tunisian men, and the Tunisian women).

The third chapter's title is: Social Sciences' need for HS paradigm. The author argues in favour of the HS paradigm for social sciences. He also discusses the meanings of HS and the three transcendental dimensions of HS, and applies them to human language, which helped uncover new implications for the nature of language. Dhaouadi considers the values of freedom, justice and democracy as cultural forces that motivate individuals, groups, and societies. He used three phenomena as case studies which show the real impact of HS on these phenomena:

- 1- The Arab World as the resulting outcome of the HS/CS.
- 2- Canadian bilingualism and the phenomenon of the Two Solitudes in the province of Quebec, where French and English-speaking Canadians live in general isolation from each other.
- 3- The danger of cultural colonization/imperialism. In the last part of this chapter, the author emphasizes the importance of cultural sociology.

Chapter IV's title is: theory of HS and the rules of collective behaviour patterns of influence on people's behaviours, it includes the culture as a means of understanding and explanation, the concept of social determinism in sociology in society, the hypothesis of culture as a dynamic force of influence on behaviours in theorizing on the individual and society. The chapter presents an analysis of the rational choice theory, covering its

principles and its credibility. Finally, the chapter discusses the cultural roots of collective behaviours.

The second part of the book, titled “Human Symbols in the Islamic Perspective” is made of chapters five and six. Chapter five is titled “Culture Profile from a Different Islamic View”. It includes the following themes. The vague definitions of culture in the social sciences, the concept of culture from the Islamic cognitive viewpoint, the cognitive Koranic foundational view of culture, features of some of the transcendental aspects in HS, language and its metaphysical traits, HS that imbue human beings with great energy, towards a sociology of the metaphysics of HS, the harmonization of the author’s perspective with the reflexive sociology.

Chapter six, its title is “The Aql-Naq’ Theory of Human Symbols (the ANTHS) and the Making of Cultural Sociology”. It contains many subjects: the theory and its purpose, the ANTHS, cultural sociology, the inner nature of culture, and what a theory is. basic observations and the making of the ANTHS, potential explanation of my theory, cultural sociology as a core discipline, the Koran’s cultural strong program and conclusion.

The third part of the book presents three case studies within the HS perspective in three chapters. The title of chapter seven is “HS Behind Human Longer Lifespan”. This includes the following themes: introduction, HS and their use in soft and hard sciences, the human species' longer lifespan, the biogenetic perspective on the human lifespan, the need for a complex thinking approach, the pace of growth and maturity of HS, years difference between the child’s muscular and linguistic development, cultural determinism and the human lifespan, biology, genetics and HS, modern social sciences and the missing transcendence, social sciences unfit for HS study, the Islamic perspective as an alternative, human nature in the Quran, the image of Man in the Quran, dualistic human identity and longer lifespan.

The author titles chapter seven “Social Science Illiteracy of the Other Underdevelopment/OU in post-colonial Societies” which includes the following themes: the wide illiteracy among contemporary social scientists on the OU and the bipolar nature of the cultural-linguistic underdevelopment.

- 1- Languishing underdevelopment.
- 2- Third World’s underdevelopment in modern sciences and knowledge.

**3-** Third World's underdevelopment in the cultural values system. The psychological underdevelopment in the Third World, the OU as a psycho-cultural system, and the roots of Western modern social sciences' silence on the OU.

Dhaouadi concludes his book with chapter nine titled: The Arab Muslim World Set to Dialogue with the West: A Cultural Perspective. This chapter outlines the following themes: the chapter thesis, the HS theory, HS and cultural dialogue, Western science's appeal to Arabs and Muslims opens a dialogue with the West, Huntington's theory in question, the Islamic East and the Christian West could dialogue and the politics of conflicts and tensions between the West and Islam.

Mohamed Dhaouadi's core arguments are that cultural symbols are central to understanding human societies, particularly in the Arab-Islamic context. These symbols are deeply tied to collective identity, values, and memory, and help maintain social cohesion. However, he argues that modernization and Western cultural influences often disrupt traditional symbolic orders, leading to cultural disorientation. Furthermore, Dhaouadi emphasizes the importance of reviving indigenous symbolic systems to rebuild social and moral order.

### **Dhaouadi's methodology**

Dhaouadi's methodology is sociological and structuralist, drawing on symbolic interactionism and structural functionalism (Durkheim, Parsons), while incorporating Islamic epistemology. Dhaouadi uses interpretive analysis of cultural artefacts, practices, and institutions. Often adopts a diagnostic approach, examining the symbolic "health" or "disruption" within a given cultural system (especially in the Arab world). However, Dhaouadi's perspective is based on the fact that societies thrive when their symbolic systems are intact and resonate with their historical identity. However, Arab-Muslim societies need to reinvest in authentic cultural symbols to resist alienation and dependency on Western models. Finally, he sees that cultural reconstruction is necessary for genuine modernization, not mere imitation of the West.

### **Carrithers' argument in 'Why humans have culture?'**

Michael B. Carrithers is a professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Durham, and a member of its Behaviour, Ecology, and Evolution Research Centre. Carrithers explores how culture arises from the human capacity for communication, improvisation, and shared understanding. He sees culture not as a static set of rules or

symbols but as a dynamic, evolving process of meaning-making. Carrithers emphasizes narrative, interaction, and the human ability to shape and reshape their cultural worlds.

For someone who has seen the titles, the similarity might be noticed. As such, it was important to refer to Carrithers' book to answer potential questions. Among its objectives is the study of human cultural diversity, as an invitation to anthropological and related research (3, P. 17). In his words, Carrithers also says: "I set off my research with the following question: why are people's cultures and life patterns different? My question focuses on the true foundations of cultural diversity (3, P.17)".

The main idea of Carrithers' book is that culture and its elements are a mechanism invented by humans and society to confront life (3, P. 12). The book also focuses on the unity of human culture (3, P. 13). Michael Carrithers presents a compelling argument for understanding human beings not simply as biological entities, but as deeply cultural creatures whose lives are shaped by meanings, practices, and shared understandings. Through a careful examination of anthropological theory and ethnographic evidence, Carrithers illustrates how culture is not a static inheritance but a dynamic, evolving process—an essential mechanism through which humans adapt to, interpret, and transform their worlds.

Culture is the outcome of social interaction. He believes that no other species has a complex and rich common shared life. It seems like humans, throughout our collective long history, needed to always change society equally as we needed to make our common dispositions more interrelated, richer, and diverse. Carrithers cites Ruth Benedict's idea of the Great Art, saying: 'We have indeed invented what Benedict called the Great Art to cover different means of work, speaking, management of our local life, our domination on each other, the orientation of our shared life and .... on non-visible facts' (3, P. 20). Moreover, the book underscores that culture is both a product of social interaction and a framework that enables creativity, cooperation, and the construction of identity. Rather than reducing human behavior to biology or economics, Carrithers invites us to see the richness of human variability and the capacity for change, debate, and moral reflection within every society. Ultimately, *Why Humans Have Cultures* leaves us with a deeper appreciation for the centrality of storytelling, symbol-making, and collective meaning-making in the human experience. It challenges readers to recognize the value of cultural diversity while also understanding the shared human propensity to create culture as a way of life.

Michael Carrithers's core argument is that human beings are inherently cultural; our capacity for culture is rooted in our evolutionary history as social and communicative creatures. However, culture is not fixed but constantly improvised, emerging from interactions, storytelling, and shared meanings. In addition, he rejects deterministic or static views of culture (e.g., structuralist or essentialist models), and he emphasizes the narrative and dialogic nature of human beings: culture is performed and negotiated, not just inherited.

### **Carrithers's Methodology**

Michael Carrithers's core arguments are that human beings are inherently cultural; our capacity for culture is rooted in our evolutionary history as social and communicative creatures. Culture is not fixed but constantly improvised, emerging from interactions, storytelling, and shared meanings. He also rejects deterministic or static views of culture (e.g., structuralist or essentialist models) and emphasizes the narrative and dialogic nature of human beings: culture is performed and negotiated, not just inherited.

Carrithers sees culture as a creative, adaptive process, not a fixed structure; human distinctiveness lies in our ability to generate shared meaning through symbolic interaction, especially via narrative, and anthropological analysis should focus not on static systems but on flows, interactions, and improvisations.

### **Key Conceptual Link: The Symbol as a Mediator of Meaning and Identity**

Both scholars are concerned with how humans construct meaning and maintain social coherence through shared understandings.

Symbols, in Dhaouadi's framework, are core elements that mediate identity and cohesion. Carrithers don't focus on symbols per se but on cultural practices like storytelling and communication, which implicitly rely on symbolic processes.

For both, cultural transmission depends on symbolic systems—whether through structured religious or national symbols (Dhaouadi) or flexible social interactions and narratives (Carrithers).



## Conclusion

There is a conceptual link between Dhaouadi's theory of cultural symbols and Michael Carrithers' ideas in *Why Humans Have Culture?*, though they approach the subject from different disciplinary angles and emphases. Even though, we could conclude that Dhaouadi's book represents a kind of theoretical effort in sociology and human sciences, on the one hand, and a sound trial that proposes a sort of paradigm of an Arabic Islamic orientation based and supported by the Koran insights, on the other. His work is considered original, and thus we rule out the possibility that he plagiarized from Carrithers even the main idea, despite the similarity in titles, but the difference in details. Furthermore, the book is considered a good contribution to the international library, especially to cultural sociology. The book is also an important window into the Arab Muslim Culture through a potentially credible sociological comparison. The author tried to put together what he has worked on since the late 1970s. Finally, Dhaouadi succeeded well in introducing his intellectual venture in this book after he had presented some of his ideas on previous occasions in English and French at a number of international and Arab research and scientific congresses.

Mahmoud Dhaouadi's sociological work, grounded in an Islamic cultural framework, offers a distinctive theoretical perspective that sets it apart from Richard Carrithers' anthropological exploration of cultural diversity. Dhaouadi introduces the concept of "Human Symbols" (HS) encompassing elements such as language, thought, religion, science, and cultural values, as central to human identity and societal development. He posits that these symbols are transcendental and spiritual, lacking physical weight or volume, and are pivotal in explaining unique human traits, including the extended human lifespan compared to other species. This approach not only diverges from Carrithers' focus but also underscores the originality of Dhaouadi's contribution to sociology and human sciences, effectively ruling out concerns of idea plagiarism.

*Conflicts of interest:* The author declares no conflict of interest

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