Bert G. Fragner, Bamberg:

The Civilization of Islamic Iran:
Cultural Hegemony along the Silk Road

In the year 1985, there was a marvelous exhibition to be visited at the David and Alfred Smart Museum, Chicago: its title was "Blue and White", and it dealt with the impact of Chinese porcelain on the Western World. But, the most astonishing aspect of the material having been gathered at the occasion of this event was the visualization of the tight mutual relations between the Chinese coastal areas and the highlands of Iran, throughout medieval history. It was from Iran, that cobalt was brought to China – among other locations via our hosting city Quanzhou – and thus the Chinese craftsmen were enabled to produce all that famous blue and white chinaware having found so much adherents and buyers throughout the world – in the Indian Ocean, the Middle East and in Europe, ultimately even in the New World, as it is proved by manufacturing blue and white earthenware to the Chinese model even in Mexico! Persian cobalt had been imported as early as until the eighth century A.D. to China, and it had found its ample use in producing the famous so called *sancai* Tang lead-glazed earthenware stained with green, ocher/brown and cobalt blue. It was during the late Yuan Dynasty when Persian cobalt from areas near Kashan was again imported to China, then having been used for the famous blue and white porcelain ware mentioned above. As we learn from John Carswell's careful introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition, those having managed the distribution of cobalt as a raw material, and the organization of oversea, and also overland, large-scale export of these blue and white final products where mainly Muslim – most of them Persian – merchants permanently residing along the Chinese Pacific coast, some of them even in special settlements of their own. Blue and white chinaware having been produced predom1nantly for maritime and also for overland transport to Iran and beyond (this is to say. to the Ottoman and the Mamluk Empires, and ultimately to Europe) was regarded as

one of the most valuable and profiting import goods to Iran until the beginning of the seventeenth century. From 1600 onwards the caravans and caravels started ceasing the supply to Iranian courts and upper class households with these highly demanded commod1t1es. For a while, they were imitated in Iran, and consequently manufactories in Ottoman Turkey and, later on, also all over Europe and even in transatlantic Mexico, started producing blue-white earthenware, and ultimately authentic porcelain, too.

The relationship between exporters and importers of cobalt, the managers of transforming cobalt into some kind of specific raw material within the process of production of a very special kind of chinaware, the manipulators and intermitting factors of the distribution of this sort of chinaware all along the far away from China back to the Persian Gulf – albeit by using maritime or continental routes – may easily be embedded discursively in the network linking East Asian China closely to the so-called *Muslim World*. If we try to follow the main routes of communication between this Muslim World and China we immediately result in the identification of two main ways of getting into permanent mutual touch and exchange: firstly, the continental communication and contact system usually called the "Silk Road", connecting as its furthest points the Eastern Mediterranean coasts with those of the Yellow Sea and, even some Southern Japanese ports as for instance: Naha and, secondly, its maritime pendant, the "Maritime Silk Route" being a tightly woven network of traffic and communication between roughly spoken the same outposts. At its Western fringes, one of its central positions was the Persian Gulf. Both systems, the continental and the maritime Silk Route as well, had existed for a long time prior to the rise of Islam. Their facilities and institutions were rather immediately taken over and well used by the Islamic civilization. Within the first millennium of Islam, the degree of intensity of utilizing these facilities and institutions surpassed by far conditions having already prevailed in pre-Islamic periods, in terms of quantity, density of exchange and quality of the goods being exchanged, and in terms of quantity and density of traffic and human exchange as well.

Since Neolithic periods and particularly during late antiquity under the political conditions of the Roman Empire and subsequently the Byzantines, the Mediterranean Sea itself constituted the base for another system of traffic, communication, exchange and contact, and it was obviously this system, the political and cultural success of the ancient Romans was guaranteed by, throughout centuries. It was the traditional borderline between the Roman Empire and the Parthians and in later centuries between Sasanian Iran and the Byzantines

where the Mediterranean system was linked to the two Silk Route systems. Especially during the period of Sasanian rule in Iran (3rd to 7th century A.D.) the degree of permeability of this border was immediately determined by the quality of the political relations between the Sasanians and the Byzantines, and there is less doubt about the fact, that Sasanian politics plausibly can be interpreted as a chain of attempts to control and monopolize the contacts between these systems of communication as much and intensely as possible – the Mediterranean on the one side, and the maritime and continental Silk Route networks on the other. As long as the Sasanian Empire held sway over the Persian Gulf, the peninsula of Oman and, for a while, even Yemen – the entrance of the Red Sea –it became clear that its ruling layers were in a situation of acting as cross-bars in what we may call the communicative interaction between ancient Asia and the Mediterranean system of communication, since the Sasanians controlled both the maritime and the continental networks of Asia.

Until now, we notified three pseudo-organic systems in ancient history, being linked together and, therefore, potentially interacting: firstly, the Mediterranean coast connected by elaborated sea fare within what the Romans called their *mare nostrum* including the *terrae firmae* of the coasts, these *hinterlands* reaching, in the case of its Eastern coastlines, through Syria as far as Mesopotamia: secondly, the continental Silk Road connecting China with the highlands of Iran and the Persian Gulf, thus touching the Mediterranean System at the Syrian Mesopotamian fringe: and, thirdly, the Maritime Silk Route to be potentially characterized by a tripartite area: the first two parts – going from Wes to East – belong to the Indian Ocean: the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Bengal: the third part – the South China Sea – must be regarded as belonging to the Pacific.

In my paper, I try to develop some sketches of what may become a metahistorian's theory of the dynamics and the potentials of Islamic civilization within a spatial frame encompassing these three systems, in pre-modern times or, to put it into the wording of Professor K. N. Chaudhury "Asia before Europe". He is one of those theoreticians I'll explicitly follow in what I have to tell you. Others are Maurice Lombard, Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein. Implicitly, I shall try to combine their concepts with that of "cultural hegemony" by Antonio Gramsci. My crucial point will be questioning for systems of communication and contacts, and how political and socioeconomic activities might have been interrelated with these systems, throughout history.

What was the special position of Islam during its first centuries and beyond within this frame of systems of communication? As for presenting a negative definition, let me offer you two examples: there were two empires in antique and medieval history having established more or less total congruency of their territory of political rulership with the spatial dimensions of one of these systems of communication: one was the Roman Empire being *grosso modo* and by far congruent with the Mediterranean system, the other was the Chinggizid Mongol Empire encompassing perfectly the spatial dimensions of the Continental Silk Road system. As successors to the ancient Romans, the Byzantines hegemonized the Mediterranean only partially and for a limited while, until the early Muslim Caliphate succeeded in taking over effectively the greater part of Byzantine positons in the Mediterranean. But, contrary to what we may have observed in the case of the Romans, early Muslim rule conquered only a part of the Mediterranean system – its Eastern and Southern coastlines – including the Iberian peninsula for the first seven centuries of Islam, and, in times much later, adding the Aegean Sea, parts of the Adriatic Sea and even the Black Sea, when the Ottomans succeeded in taking over the main part of Byzantine heritage.

It was by no means by mere random of history that after the first century of Islam the political center of the Caliphate was shifted from Mediterranean Damascus to Baghdad, the latter being clearly situated on the interface between the three systems, mentioned above. This shift of the Caliphs' capital makes clear that Islam from the eighth or ninth century A.D. onward had created a new type of system in the sense of political economy, i.e., a connective meta-system being centered at the overlapping areas of all three traditional systems of communication. The Abbasid Caliphate had, at that time, taken over a number of potential *Longue durée* functions having formerly been maintained by the Sasanian Empire. But, under the changed conditions of Islamic hegemony the areas where the three systems of communications met each other – this is to say, the Persian Gulf, Mesopotamia and the neighbouring highlands of Iran – were not anymore characterized by political dichotomy as this had been the fact before Islam but, former confrontation had soon become transformed to tight connection and mutual exchange. This is precisely what I am going to talk about as "the connective meta-system of Islam in its classic period, having integrated important parts of the three systems of communication mentioned above.

Towards the Northern – the Christian – parts of the Mediterranian system of communication, the sphere of Islamic hegemony never could expand unlimitedly. Although relations between the Islamic Mediterranian South-East and the Christian-European-Northern shores were much more differentiated than but hostile, cooperation and communication remained substantially restricted. The situation was totally different in the case of Islam's participation in the two other systems of communication – as seen from a Baghdad perspective, the two Eastern systems. Throughout a period of about eight centuries, until the beginning of the seventeenth century A.D., at least, the lands of Islam did not only participate fully in the activities of the Continental and the Maritime Silk Routes but, contributed heavily to the development of both, especially of the latter, directly or indirectly, as something like a catalyst.

Let me remind you that, in pre-Islamic times, the Sasanians had an obvious tendency to monopolize and, ultimately, to prohibit open exchange between the two Eastern systems and the Western-Mediterranean-system of communication. Contemporary with their rule we may witness that maritime activities centered in the Persian Gulf and along the shores of Eastern Arabia had been, therefore, mainly limited to the areas of the Arabian Sea down to the islands between Africa and India. Muslim hegemony transformed the formerly hostile borderlands between the Mediterranean and the Eastern Systems into a region of dense contact and mutual exchange, followed by an immense increase in commercial and market activities parallel to and contemporary with the establishment of Caliph Rule in this area. As for the maritime sector, this led almost immediately to a vast extension of commercial navigation throughout the whole area of the Indian Ocean, passing the Sunda straits until the ports of China. This is not the place to discuss the question whether there had been Chinese navigation up to the Persian Gulf, prior to Islam. Moreover, the point is that there is an incredible increase of maritime commercial activities between the Chinese coast and the Persian Gulf area more or less immediately after the establishment of Muslim hegemony in the mainlands of Islam.

There is some sound reason for this increase. Muslim civilization inherited knowledge and routine in navigation and maritime techniques from Sasanian Iran. The disappearance of political limitations between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean coasts supported mutual open exchange of both systems of communication but, since the Mediterranean one turned out to be defect since the beginning of Muslim rule, much more in the direction from East to West

than *vice versa.* This phenomenon may have effected primarily the continental trade activities, what is corroborated by the increasing importance (if the Khorasan region, of Kharezm and Transoxiana (Samarkand and, especially Bukhara under Samanid rule in the tenth century), and cities like Nishapur, Marv, and Balkh, along the continental Silk Road, within the scope of the Islamic lands. The increasing demand for goods from Inner Asia – as for instance, slaves – but equally from China – among others: silk, paper and luxury goods, may also have stimulated rivaling maritime activities thus offering Muslim demands for Far Eastern goods by sea as well as by land.

This means that, from the point of commerce but, more than this, from communication and exchange of cultural goods too, the Iranian Plateau with its coastal area along the Persian Gulf – just remind the topographical position of the famous port of Siraf – and the regions of Transoxiana and Kharezm assumed the crucial function of acting as the central dispatching areas for all new and/or demanded commodities from the Far East, from North-Eastern Europe and, from the Indian subcontinent too. In clear contrast to what some representatives of contemporary Iranian nationalist historicism had claimed for decades throughout this century, during the first centuries of Islam, Iranian civilization did not at all witness a decline , but, on the contrary, a dramatic increase of cultural cohesiveness and importance. In this period, for the first time since the Akhaemenians and Alexander, the lands beyond the Oxus and the formerly Sasanian regions became again politically permeable. If we take into account that Baghdad and her *hinterlands* were regarded as coercively supported metropolitan and residential places of wealth and luxury it must be assumed that Transoxiana and Khorasan were the real centers of economically based affluence not being surpassed by any other region in the Muslim World during the ninth and the tenth centuries A.D. This was the socio-economic background for the rise of the New Persian language. Based on a Western vernacular it was obviously developed as a written language in the South-East and the East (Sistan and Khorasan) but, found its transformation to a *trans-regional lingua franca* with a clearly Islamic notion in the North East of the Iranian lands and in Central Asia where it obviously surpassed Soghdian, the traditional common language of commerce along the Continental Silk Road!

The linguistic transition from Soghdian to New Persian in Central and Inner Asia must have been an indicator for the process of gradual acceptance of Islam since, in a semiotic sense, it was clear that New Persian - the first non-Arabic language in Arabic script within the

realm of Islam – signalized Islamic culture and Islamic cultural hegemony in those areas "here, until that time, Soghdian had been in use as the traditional *lingua franca* along the Silk Road. This means that the rise of New Persian was not at all the result of something like linguistic protest of a "national Iranian stratum" against Arabic or, against Islam but, on the contrary, a direct result of the process of Islamization! By means of New Persian in Arabic script it became possible to link together vast territories having earlier been dominated by various Middle Iranian languages under the Sasanids, and Soghadian in Transoxiana and beyond, and various regional vernaculars of Iranian, Turkic, Altaic, or Indoarian linguistic affiliations. Without any regard to ethnic affiliations, the spread of New Persian as a new linguistic instrument of interregional communication – clearly bearing all significant aspects of what, in a semiotic sense, could have been an "Islamic language" at that time – led to easily possible communication within an area re-1c h rll g from Anatolia and the Caucasus until Transoxiana and Xinjiang in the North- East and the subcontinent in the South-East. If we accept from a socio-linguistic perspective the possibility of a language undergoing a special process of "linguistic Islamization", this would mean that New Persian was the first consciously "Islamized" language in history, thus having shaped a fertile model for further processes of "Islamization" of any languages, which means transforming a given language to a literary language being enough to transport any aspects and meanings common to Islamic civilization and, on the other hand, offering a distinct individuality and possibilities of cultural self-identification to its users. Thus, it was New Persian which modelled the later conditions of shaping Khorezmian and, later on, Chaghatay Turkish in the East, Ottoman Turkish in the West, Dakhni and subsequently Urdu – and Sind hi as well – in the subcontinent into a language belonging to a common Islamic *sprachbund,* may be, much more intensely than Arabic itself! Consequently, the development of New Persian as a medium of highly refined literature, both poetry and prose, and, later on, also of administration resulted in the fact that – at least, at certain times – those contributing to and receiving this literary production were not necessarily primary speakers of Persian. In fact, more than fifty percent of those having participated in Persian literary production did not regard Persian as being their first or mother tongue, throughout centuries.

In the course of history, there are two stages of development to be defined, with regard to this unique phenomenon of temporary cultural hegemony of these "Lands of the Eastern Caliphate", as Guy LE STRANGE had put it into wording, within the so-called "World of Islam". These two stages must be separated from each another not only by terms of "history of

events" and by chronology but also structurally. The first stage encompasses the period from the later ninth until the twelfth centuries A. D. and might be called "the Samanid-Seljuqid stage". Under ethnic aspects, political leadership in this stage is increasingly concentrated in the hands of more or less tribal entities of mostly Turkic origins.

Within this stage, we understand that Islam continued to link together the three abovementioned systems of communication (the Mediterranian Sea, the Continental and Maritime Silkroutes), ultimately these three meeting in the connective area of Baghdad. the highlands of Iran and the Persian Gulf. The dominating factor of this "Samanid-Seljuqid hegemonial subsystem" as I should like to call it, was its character as a set of transmitting means functioning mainly from East to West. This "subsystem" could also be described as a hegemonial network. Until the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D. this network had incorporated the Seljuqids' empires in Anatolia, Western Iran including the Caucasus, the Atabeks' rules on Iranian soil, Khorazmshahs and even Qarakhitais m Central Asia and later Ghaznavids, Ghurids and even the earliest Delhi Sultans!

A decisive cut in the development of Islamic history was, without any doubt, the thirteenth century to be characterized mainly by the Mongol invasion into the Muslim World, or, to put it into other wording, the incorporation of this former "Samanid-Seljuq subsystem" into the Chinggizid World Empire covering more or less totally the whole area of the Continental Silk Route system under a single political shelter, although temporarily limited. It was obviously by the virtue of our above-described Samanid-Seljuq subsystem that without regard to a clear tendency of, at least, official abrogation of Islam as the religion of the Mongols' ruling layers for a period of some fifty years, that its main aspects survived Mongol domination, by far. After the breakdown of direct Mongol (Chinggizid) rule as soon as throughout the fourteenth century A.D. (with the exception of the rule of the Golden Horde which managed to survive longer) it quickly turned out that the potential of the "Perso-Islamic subsystem" was still strong enough to gain historical presence but under entirely different framing conditions.

Due to the incorporation of the Perso-Islamic subsystem and some adjacent areas including Iraq, Syria and parts of Anatolia into the Mongol World Empire (thirteenth century A.D.) suddenly our region changed its spatial position. Within the Islamic frame, our subsystem had clearly held a central and connective position but, the Mongol Empire's center

was located much more eastward. The establishment of regional or local, partial Mongol Khanates like those of the Golden Horde (including Kharezm), Chaghatay (Transoxiana) together with greater parts of Xinjiang) and the It-Khanate (officially called Iran, after this historical denomination had fallen into oblivion since seven hundred years) created preconditions of a rather balanced development of each region within the setting of the Continental Silk road system. From the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries A.D. we even may witness an impressive revitalization of our former Perso-Islamic subsystem but, without regaining its previous transmitting function, at least not to that extent. But nevertheless, even after the breakdown of Mongol rule from China until Persia, the subsystem continued to exist and to function. The main difference in comparison to pre-Mongol times was obviously the gradual alienation between the Mediterranean and the Silk Route systems being well illustrated by the upcoming of the Ottoman and the Mamluk empires and, from the sixteenth century onward, the clear domination of Ottoman rule in the Islamic parts of the Mediterranean system of communication. To the same extent that European-Western hegemony gradually dominated the Mediterranean Sea, the Ottoman territories - themselves being Mediterranian – were incorporated into WALLERSTEIN'S famous Modern (Capitalist) World System. The Ottoman-Iranian border, at the same time, should turn out to become again more and more the political borderline between the Mediterranean and the Continental Silk Road systems, thus somewhat reestablishing conditions having prevailed before Islam! Subsequently, after Timur's and Timurid rule in Central Asia, the Safavids and the Uzbek rulers of Transoxiana did still maintain a vital structure resembling by far our Perso-Islamic subsystem, at least down to the beginning of the eighteenth century! By cultural terms and by terms of mere communication Moghul India had much in common with these – otherwise politically hostile – members of that common system – the Safavids and the Uzbeks. But, the problem was that during Mongol domination throughout Eurasia the Maritime Silk Route was obviously less estimated by the Il-Khans of Iran, mainly due to Timur's conquest and the rule of his successors and the otherwise "post- or pseudo-Il Khanid" rulers of Iran – the Turcoman Qara-Qoyunlu and Aq-Qoyunlu – the Persian Gulf's crucial position within the Maritime Silk Route system of communication was almost totally neglected by the continental rulers! As seen through the perspective of the Persian Gulf and its immediate *hinterland,* and in comparison to pre-Mongol conditions, navigation and maritime trade were clearly in some crisis around 1400 A. D. and later on, in the fifteenth century, this was a fantastic example for "the interaction between the random and the long term" (CHAUDHURI) which offered the otherwise not very potent Portuguese navigators a unique possibility of entering the

structures of the Indian Ocean and, subsequently, of the whole Maritime Silk Route system. No need to mention that they were soon followed by the much more effective Dutch and ultimately the British colonialist traders, the consequences of which are known well enough.

In comparison with the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries' Mongol World Empire, one may visualize Ming and especially Ching (Manju) China as the successors of the Yüans' Mongol empire, and Russian rulers as those of the Golden Horde. This would mean that ultimately, down to the end of the eighteenth century A.D., nothing substantial did remain of the two Chinggizid Khanates located in between: Chaghatay and Il-Khanid Iran. Eastern parts of Chaghatay were gradually incorporated into the realm of Chinese domination, and from the beginning of the nineteenth century onward, Persia and Transoxiana became gradually objects to the interest of Russian colonialism. It is interesting to interpret eighteenth century's Nader Shah's martial foreign policy as a late- and abortive attempt to reestablish Persia's embeddedness in the Continental Silk Road system, which, in fact, had already stopped to function about 1600 when, due to then actual political conditions, the transcontinental caravans had stopped transporting Chinese goods to Isfahan, as well as Chinese ships stopped to sail to the Persian Gulf. The temporarily reestablishment Persian-Safavid-commercial fleet was not anymore in a situation to compete seriously with the Western maritime systems in the Indian Ocean, in the long run.

Iran's long term continental and maritime connections with China and the Far East once had been, as I tried to illustrate, a crucial and constituent factor in the development of early Islamic civilization, having then covered and integrated the mutual bordering areas of the Mediterranean, and eastwards, the Continental and Maritime Silk Route systems. The contemporary individuality of Iran but, moreover, Afghanistan and some of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia had been intensely pre-shaped by the second Perso-Islamic subsystem, the Chinggizid period, having prevailed much longer than proper Chinggizid rule did politically! But, with the breakdown or, at least, alienation of, firstly, the maritime, and, secondly, the continental connections with the Far East , Iran turned out more and more to be a rather marginal element in what, due to modern. Western perceptions of the world, is nowadays called the Middle East. Subsequently, the Persian language had lost many of its historical positions in Central Asia and in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, and in other areas like Anatolia or the Caucasus, too, during the nm of the nineteenth century A.D. Again the

venture of this language offers us a good parameter for the changing general conditions in the part of the world I dealt with.

It is much too early than to speak about a systemic theory to be offered by this paper. Nevertheless, I myself have the impression that with these three systems of communication and their dynamic functionability, my attempt to embed Islamic civilization at the crossroads of these systems as a "connective meta-system" and, subsequently, to work out a dynamic and temporarily limited Perso-Islamic subsystem exacting temporarily limited cultural hegemony within Islam, may help to question, to investigate and to analyse a wide range of historical phenomena more thoroughly than this was done until now by otherwise remarkable and highly respectable experts on that subject. By the way: if you prefer, call "my" subsystem a "Turko-Perso-Islamic" one but, one should not refrain from taking into consideration that in this subsystem's second stage Ottoman Turkey was definitely not integrated within it. No need to emphasize the fact, that demographically and under aspects of politically and militarily leading layers this subsystem was by large ethnically dominated by Turks and other non-Persians. But there can hardly be any serious doubt about the strictly hegemonial character of the Iranian cultural element within this structure.

I am aware of the fact that this concept will find a lot of serious criticism from those arguing in favour of a solid and coherent "Islamic World" as a basic structural element within World History (as, for instance, in the tradition of Marshall HODGSON or Xavier DE PLANHOL). If I conceive the Silk Routes and the Mediterranean Sea as systems of communication and exchange, early – or classic – Islam ought to be perceived as a meta-structure in comparison to them. If the system of communication is to be defined as a materialist structure, it is clear that Islam ought to be conceived on a higher, much more complex level.

But, in post-Mongol times I am enclined to doubt the survival of this structural coherence of earlier Islam. At the latest, from the sixteenth century A. D. onward, the Ottomans resembled by far a Mediterranean entity recalling pre-Islamic Romans or Byzantines, while the Sefavids remind us in their attitudes towards transcontinental communication of the ancient Sasanians. But one must never forget: these superficial similarities were not anymore the results of their anymore the results of their own historical choice: changing structures of the expanding Modern World System in early Modern Times

did not anymore allow them to decide in favour of this or that strategy. In a, may be at random, temporary stage of crisis of the Silk Routes in consequence to the breakdown of the Mongol principalities between China and Iran, Western powers had established their own structures of communication and exchange, not having any more allowed the traditional systems to recover – at least, until the time being.