

## **Interpersonal Communication, Human Interaction and Societal Relationships in Islam**

**by Abdur Rahman O. Olayiwola\***

### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to propagate the idea that Islam is a communicative religion. Allah is communicative God Who takes keen interest in the affairs of His creatures. Interpersonal communication, human interaction and societal relationships in Islam are two way processes of sharing ideas and concerns in open and free environments of love and dedication. The paper is a discussion on how Islam deals with every element of the communication process. The paper concludes that society has a duty to work for, preserve and enhance the unity, strength, integrity, tranquillity and development of society through interpersonal communication, human interaction and social relationships.

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# **Communication Interpersonnelle, Interaction Humaine et Rapports dans la Société au Sein de l'Islam**

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## **Résumé**

Ce papier avance l'idée que l'Islam est une religion communicative. Allah est un Dieu communicatif qui s'intéresse de près aux affaires de Ses créatures. La communication interpersonnelle, l'interaction humaine et les rapports dans la société au sein de l'Islam sont des processus à deux sens, processus par lesquels on échange des idées et on discute des problèmes dans un environnement ouvert et libre plein d'amour et de dévouement. Le papier tente d'expliquer comment l'Islam traite chaque élément du processus de la communication. Comme conclusion, le papier avance que la société se doit de préserver et de promouvoir l'unité, la force, l'intégrité, la tranquillité et le développement de la société grâce à la communication interpersonnelle, l'interaction humaine et les rapports sociaux.

## Introduction

O Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily, the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things) (Ali, 1989).

*Gur'an 49:13 YA*

Islam provides distinctive ways for humans to interact with one another. Interpersonal communication is a feature of the social system in which two or more persons interact with one another, in their actions people take account of how the others are likely to act and sometimes the people in the system act together in pursuit of common goals (Davis, 1948). Interpersonal communication in Islam is universal and free from any prejudice based on race, colour, language, religion, culture, or nationality. Islam is a communicative religion. The Islamic God is a communicative God Who takes keen interest in the affairs of His creatures. As such Allah has communicated to mankind through a progression of prophets from Adam to the last Prophet — Muhammad.

The Islamic perspective of interpersonal communication, human interaction and societal relationship is based on the fact that the individual human being cannot secure all the things necessary for his livelihood without cooperation with someone else. Allah says:

Co-operate with one another on the basis of righteousness and God-consciousness, and do not cooperate with one another on the basis of sin and rancour: fear Allah: for Allah is strict in punishment.

*Gur'an 5:2 YA*

Prophet Muhammad was quoted as having given a list of the rights of neighbours and other human beings in interpersonal communication, human interaction and societal relationships:

Help him if he asks your help. Give him relief if he seeks your relief. Lend to him if he needs a loan. Show him concern if he is distressed. Nurse him when he is ill. Attend his funeral if he dies. Congratulate him if he meets any good. Sympathise with him if any calamity befalls him. Do not block his air by raising your building high without his permission. Harass him not. Give him a share when you buy fruits, and if you do not give him, bring what you buy quietly and let not your children take them out to excite the jealousy of his children.

*Hadith: Bukhari and Muslim*

Society is a form of communication and relationship, through which



experience is described, shared, modified and preserved. It is difficult if not impossible for a human being to avoid interpersonal communication within society. In the words of the seventeenth century writer, Hobbes:

The life of man outside society is poor, solitary, nasty, brutish and short.  
(Hobbes, 1914)

Four of the five 'pillars' of Islam (prayer, fasting, alms giving, pilgrimage, the excluded fifth being testimony to the unity of God and the messengership of Muhammad) are perfectly suited to promoting interpersonal communication, esprit de corps, and group solidarity (Enayat, 1982). Allah says:

And hold fast, all together, by the Rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves: ...

*Qur'an 3:103 YA*

### **The importance of interpersonal communication, human interaction and societal relationships**

Interpersonal communication, the sharing of ideas between two or more persons, facilitates understanding. Sharing of ideas consists of many parts but the two most important aspects can be identified. The first is the sharing of facts and information and the second is the sharing of values. The need to share facts, information and values is basic and inherent in human nature. This need has been used as well as abused; used to develop human cultures, ideas, socialization experiences, civilizations, science and technology, and abused in exploiting this need for vested interests. Slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and expansionism are but a few examples of vast human exploitation of their basic instinct—the need to share information, facts and ideas (Bryant and Wallace, 1979).

Communication, in general, may be examined at various levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, cross-cultural, religious organisational, business, health, agricultural, social, economic, political and mass (McQuail, 1983). For example, intrapersonal communication refers to fulfilment of internal human needs and sharing of ideas between the brain and other parts of the body or harmonizing thoughts and actions. The purpose of individual training (*tazkiah*) is to facilitate intrapersonal communication. Mass communication deals with the dissemination of information to impersonal heterogeneous audiences through radio, television, newspapers and a host of other

media, while political communication is any communicatory activity considered political, by virtue of its consequences, actual and / or potential, to the functioning of the political system. It is the intimate relationship between the political process and the communication process (Olayiwola, 1987, 1991).

Communication today is increasingly seen as a process through which the exchange and sharing of meaning is made possible:

Some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions have some kinds of effects. (Berelson, 1948)

Communication, which is the vehicle for the transmission of man's experiences, is a vital resource for his survival, as the air he breathes, the food he eats and the house that shelters him from the harsh elements of nature. According to Schramm, when we communicate, we are trying to share information, an idea, or an attitude. Communication always requires three elements — the source, the message, and the destination (the receiver).

Communication is always a part of something. It represents a relationship not only between individuals, but also between relationships. It is the web that binds society together. (Schramm, 1954)

A convenient way to describe the act of communication is to answer the following question: Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect? (Lasswell, 1948)

## **The Concept of Communication**

Definitions of the concept of communication are legion. In the same vein, there are sundry delineations of communication models, depending upon the point of view of an analyst. We will not be going into details of definition, concept, or theory here; we will only give a fairly comprehensive perspective of the concept in relation to interpersonal communication, human interaction and societal relationship in Islam. According to Dance, a set of fifteen definitions summarizes the whole business of communication, be it interpersonal or otherwise (Dance, 1970). These are:

1. Symbols/verbal/speech: Communication is the verbal interchange of thought or idea.
2. Understanding: Communication is the process by which we understand others and in turn endeavour to be understood by



- them. It is dynamic, constantly changing and shifting in response to the total situation.
3. Interaction/relationship/social process: Interaction, even on the biological level, is a kind of communication, otherwise common acts could not occur.
  4. Reduction of uncertainty: Communication arises out of the need to reduce uncertainty, to act effectively, to defend or strengthen the ego.
  5. Process: Communication: the transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills, etc., by the use of symbols—words, pictures, figures, graphs etc; It is the act or process of transmission that is usually called communication.
  6. Transfer/transmission/interchange: The connecting thread appears to be the idea of something's being transferred from one thing, or person to another. We use this word 'communication' sometimes to refer to what is so transferred, sometimes to the means by which it is transferred, sometimes to the whole process.
  7. Linking/binding: Communication is the process that links discontinuous parts of the living world to one another.
  8. Commonality: It (communication) is a process that makes common to two or several what was the monopoly of one or some (Code, 1959).
  9. Channel/Carrier/Means/Route: The means of sending military messages, orders, etc. as by telephone, telegraph, radio, couriers.
  10. Replicating memories: Communication is the process of conducting the attention of another person for the purpose of replicating memories.
  11. Discriminative response/behaviour-modifying/response/change: 'Communication is the discriminatory response of an organism to a stimulus.' (Stevens, 1950, p. 689). 'So, communication between two animals is said to occur when one animal produces a chemical or physical change in the environment (signal) that influences the behaviour of another...' (Frings, 1967, p. 297)
  12. Stimuli: Every communication act is viewed as a transmission of information, consisting of a discriminative stimulus, from a source to a recipient.
  13. Intentional: In the main, communication has as its central interest those behavioural situations in which a source transmits a message to a receiver(s) with conscious intent to affect the latter's behaviours.
  14. Time/situation: The communication process is one of transition from one structured situation-as-a-whole to another, in preferred design.
  15. Power: Communication is the mechanism by which power is exerted.

## **Factors and Types of Interpersonal Communication, Human Interaction and Societal Relationship in Islam**

As Islam is a complete way of life, catering for all the field of human existence and providing guidance for all walks of life—individual, and social, material and moral, economic and political, legal and cultural, national and international, it has laid down certain factors, rules and regulations to guide all types of interpersonal communication and relationships. Islam, through the *Qur'an*, *hadith* and *sunnah*, has provided principles and methods of interpersonal communication, human interaction and relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, in order to achieve peace, equality, brotherhood, and prosperity in this world and salvation and pleasure of God in the hereafter (Ali, 1950; Olayiwola, 1988; 1989; 1990). Allahsays

Here is a plain statement to men, a guidance and instruction to those who fearAllah.

*Qur'an* 3:138 YA

And this is a Book which We have revealed as a blessing; so follow it and be righteous, that ye may receive mercy.

*Qur'an* 6:155 YA

We send down (stage by stage) in the *Qur'an* that which is a healing and a mercy to those who believe: to the unjust it causes nothing but loss after loss.

*Qur'an* 5:8 YA

### **1. Justice ('Adl)**

The first Islamic principle of interpersonal communication, human interaction and relationship is justice. People are enjoined to ensure that their interpersonal communication and relationships are governed by justice, whether such interpersonal communication is between the ruler and the ruled, rich and poor, husband and wife, parents and children, Muslims and non-Muslims, even if the application of justice will be against themselves or their kith and kin:

Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, that ye may receive admonition.

*Qur'an* 16:90 YA

O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and



depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.

*Qur'an 5:8 YA*

## 2. Good deeds (*ihsan*)

The second Islamic principle of interpersonal communication is the doing of good in any relationship or communication encounter. Islam condemns lying, dishonesty, deceit, untrustworthiness, hypocrisy, envy, hatred and miserliness in interpersonal communications and relationships. Allah says:

For those who persevere in doing good there is the ultimate good in store, and more [than that]. No darkness and no ignominy will overshadow their faces [on Resurrection Day]: it is they who are destined for paradise, therein to abide.

*Qur'an 10:26 MA*

Encouraging the doing of good in interpersonal communication and human interaction, Prophet Muhammad said:

Fear Allah wherever you are, and follow up a bad deed with a good one and it will wipe it out, and behave well towards people.

*Hadith: at-Tirmidhi*

The Prophet also stated that:

There should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm.

*Hadith: Ibn Majah*

It is part of doing good in interpersonal communication to speak well of people in conduct, and even in argumentation. Islam demands and commands positive beautification of every aspect of human life: spiritual, moral, intellectual, and physical. In the words of Prophet Muhammad

Verily Allah hath made obligatory the employment of beauty in respect of everything.

*Hadith: Muslim*

Allah says:

Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching: and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious...

*Qur'an 16:126 YA*



### 3. Lying or false speech (*kadhbu*) prohibited

Islam forbids the telling of lies in interpersonal communication and relationship. This can manifest itself in the mixing up of truth with falsehood, concealing the truth, or assisting falsehood or fraud, duplicity or deeds not conforming to words in interpersonal communication. Allah says:

... and shun the word that is false

*Qur'an* 22:30 YA

Shall I inform you, (O people), on whom it is that the evil ones descend?  
They descend on every lying, wicked person.

*Qur'an* 26:221-222 YA

All the *Qur'anic ayahs* cited above indicate that people are enjoined to be conscientiously truthful, to develop the spirit and activity of truthfulness by upholding the cause of truthfulness and by loving the company of those who are genuinely truthful. Truthfulness in thought, word and deed is, therefore, an Islamic obligatory duty in interpersonal communication and relationships.

### 4. Observance of the spirit of contentment (*Qana'at*)

Islam enjoins contentment in interpersonal relationships. Discontentment can be in respect of one's resources or one's possessions. For instance, someone may feel that if he is able to acquire the patronage of the high-ups in interpersonal relationships, he can increase his resourcefulness, for increasing his possession: wealth, prestige, power etc. Such an ambition leads almost always to debasement of the self, and consequently, to the violation of the virtue of self-respect in interpersonal communication. Hence, a Muslim has been commanded to direct all his needs and all his ambitions to God and God alone.<sup>13</sup> The usual form of discontentment is in respect of what one possesses, and it becomes more damaging morally when one starts cultivating jealousy in interpersonal relationships, in relation to what others possess. Allah has forbidden this outright:

Hence, do not covet the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on some of you than on others. Men shall have a benefit from what they earn, and women shall have a benefit from what they earn. Ask, therefore, God [to give you] out of His bounty: behold, God has indeed full knowledge of everything.

*Qur'an* 4:32 MA

### 5. Patience (*Sabr*)

The virtues of patience, self control, forbearance, equanimity,

perseverance and steadfastness are enjoined in interpersonal communication, human interaction and societal relationship. Allah lays great emphasis on patience in different contexts in the *Qur'an*:

O you who have attained faith! Seek aid in steadfast patience and prayer: for behold, God is with those who are patient.

*Qur'an* 2:153 MA

A man said to the Prophet:

'Counsel me.' He [the Prophet] said: 'Do not become angry.' The man repeated [his request] several times and the Prophet said 'Do not become angry.'

Hadith: Bukhari

## 6. Humility (*Tawadu'u*)

Islam enjoins the cultivation of the spirit of humility and modesty in interpersonal communication and relationship. Allah says:

... and all men and women who humble themselves ... for [all of] them has God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward.

*Qur'an* 33:35 MA

For [true] servants of the Most Gracious are [only] they who walk gently on earth, and who, whenever, the foolish address them, reply with [words of] peace.

*Qur'an* 25:63 MA

And turn not thy cheek away from people in [false] pride, and walk not haughtily on earth: for, behold, God does not love anyone who, out of self-conceit, acts in a boastful manner. Hence, be modest in thy bearing, and lower thy voice: for, behold, the ugliest of all voices is the [loud] voice of asses ...

*Qur'an* 31:18-19 MA

## 7. Fulfilling all promises (*Wa'ad*)

Islam enjoins the fulfilment of all promises, agreements, pledges, covenants, contracts, engagements, and treaties in interpersonal communication and relationships. Allah says:

...And be true to every promise - for verily, [on Judgement Day] you will be called to account for every promise which you have made!

*Qur'an* 17:34 MA

Prophet Muhammad was reported as saying:



The signs of a hypocrite are three: (1) If he talks, he will tell lies; (2) if he promises, he will not fulfil it; and (3) if confidence is reposed in him, he will betray the trust.

Hadith: Bukhari and Muslim

## 8. Conjecture (*Zann*)

Conjecture is a major thing that hampers free and direct communication and the growth of interpersonal communication. It also destroys the basis of interpersonal relationships. Conjecture is the idea of guessing or expressing suspicion about truth or fact. Allah says:

O ye who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible): for suspicion in some cases is a sin: and spy not on each other, nor speak ill of each other behind their backs. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Nay, ye would abhor it ... But fear Allah: for Allah is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful.

*Qur'an* 49:12 YA

Most kinds of suspicion in interpersonal communication are baseless and to be avoided, and some are crimes in themselves: for they do cruel injustice to innocent men and women. Spying, or enquiring too curiously into other people's affairs, means either idle curiosity, and is therefore futile, or suspicion carried a stage further, which almost amounts to sin. Backbiting also is a brood of the same genus. It may be either futile but at the same mischievous, or it may be poisoned with malice in which case it is a sin added to sin.

## 9. Preferring others above one's own self (*ithar*)

'Others first, self, last' is a quality that facilitates interpersonal relationships. If one demonstrates a concern for others first in interpersonal communication, it certainly helps the establishment of a relationship based on trust and confidence. Preferring others above one's own self leads to sacrifice and a higher level of understanding one's goals, environment, and obligations.

For Muslims, the nature of their commitment to Allah and their responsibilities toward their mission as well as toward fellow human beings, demands that they should be ready to offer sacrifices in terms of their time, wealth and other possessions. A true understanding of the sender, message, channel, receiver and effect of communication in Islam makes it quite clear that preferring others above one's own self facilitates interpersonal relationships as well as interpersonal communication. Prophet Muhammad said:

None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes

for himself.

Hadith: Bukhari and Muslim

10. Backbiting others and defamation in general are forbidden

Using obscene language or insulting another person in interpersonal communication is not only shameful but it is absolutely forbidden to a Muslim. Allah says:

O ye who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others: it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): nor let some women laugh at others: it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former): nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames: ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness, (to be used of one) after he has believed: and those who do not desist, are (indeed) doing wrong.

*Qur'an 49:11 YA*

Islam allows that we may laugh *with* people in interpersonal relationship and communication, to share in the happiness of life: but we must never laugh at people in contempt or ridicule. In many things they may be better than ourselves!

Defamation may consist in speaking ill of others by the spoken or written word, or in acting in such a way as to suggest a charge against some person whom we are not in a position to judge. An offensive nickname may amount to defamation. It causes the person being nicknamed some pain and it is bad manners. The only exception in speaking ill of others is where a person has been wronged mischievously and he has to defend his honour by exposing his wicked enemy. Even in that case, however, such a wronged person has been advised to practise forgiveness and to abstain from exposing the evils of his enemy - leaving the affair to God and hoping for His reward because God is 'Forgiving, Powerful'. Allah says:

Allah loveth not that evil should be noised abroad in public speech, except where injustice hath been done; for Allah is He Who heareth and knoweth all things. Whether ye publish a good deed or conceal it or cover evil with pardon, verily Allah doth blot out (sins) and hath power (in the judgement of values).

*Quran 4:148-149 YA*

Prophet Muhammad said:

Part of someone's being a good Muslim is his leaving alone that which does not concern him.

Hadith: at-Tirmidhi



In another hadith the Prophet said:

Let him who believes in Allah and the Last Day either speak good or keep silent ...

Hadith: Bukhari and Muslim  
(Ibrahim and Johnson-Davies, 1976)

## Conclusion

Interpersonal communication, human interaction and societal relationships in Islam is a two way process of sharing of ideas and concerns in an open and free environment of love and dedication. In addition to all the factors and features enumerated in the foregoing discourse, other characteristics of interpersonal communication, human interaction and societal relationship in Islam are mutual respect, patience, trust, and confidence, guarding of the tongue, soberness and sacrifice. Islam deals with every element of the communication process. Qur'anic emphasis on who, the sender, leads to a sound, trustworthy, and concerned source. The message says what, the channel and to whom, the destination, are also well formulated and clear. The destination is not a particular race or nationality, rather, it refers to the entire human-kind. To live in society and interact with others is a natural or inborn characteristic of human beings. People naturally need one another in interpersonal communication and relationship for their mutual benefit. This is why withdrawal from society is not allowed in Islam (Hamid, 1989). And there is no distinction between a Muslim and a non-Muslim as far as the features, needs and rights of human beings are concerned in the Islamic perspective of interpersonal relationship and communication. Human interaction through interpersonal communication is naturally necessary because people are endowed with different abilities and capabilities and Allah has made human beings to need one another, and to live in community and society. It is the duty of all those who belong to the society to work for, preserve, and enhance, the unity, strength, integrity, tranquillity and development of society through interpersonal communication, human interaction and societal relationships.

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