

SOCIO-POLITICAL/ECONOMIC
CONDITION OF ARABIA BEFORE THE ADVENT
OF ISLAM
WITH PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO
PRE-ISLAMIC ATTITUDE TO WOMEN

PREPARED BY

UZODIMMA JOSEPH IFEANYICHUKWU
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TO

DR. VICTOR A. ATEGWU(PH.D)

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INTRODUCTION

The Arabian Peninsula is the world's largest peninsula by area, covering 3.2 million square kilometers. It was formed between 56 and 23 million years ago, following the rifting of the Red Sea. Geographically, the peninsula can be referred to as Arabian Subcontinent since it lies on its tectonic plate, known as the Arabian plate. The Arabian Peninsula is located in Western Asia. It is bordered to the southwest and west by the Red Sea, northeast by the , east by the Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz, and southwest by the Arabian Sea. It is also bordered by the Somali Sea, Guardafui Channel, and Gulf of Eden to the south. The peninsula is located northeast of the Africa continent and separated from the continent by the Babel-Mandeb Strait.

The inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula spoke Arabic, which is considered the most ancient of the Semitic languages; the oldest discovered inscriptions written in Arabic date back to the fourth Gregorian century. There was an active verbal literary movement in poetry and prose that was accompanied by another movement of criticism for speeches and poems that were recited in the Markets of Jaahiliyyah ('Ukaath, Al-Mirbad, Mijannah, et al). These meetings assisted in uniting the language of the Arabs as the language of the Quraysh, which was also the language the Quran was revealed in. Therefore, all the Arabs were able to understand the Quran as their languages and dialects were very similar. Their poetry and speeches prior to the advent of Islam demonstrate how eloquent and linguistically talented they were. This proves that their literature was highly developed, something that paved the way for the miracle of the Quran, which challenged them in the very discipline in which they excelled. The Quran succeeded in uniting the Arabs with regard to language, for it was the first book written in Arabic in their history after their literary scripts.

It is important to note that the Arabs were not affected by Greek philosophies or Roman Laws and did not have complex schools of thought. Therefore, they were ready to receive the message of Islam and convey it in its original purity without being influenced by any foreign ideas. This was, in fact, one of the conditions that were prepared by Allah The Almighty to enable the Arabs to be ready to receive the message of Islam.

The Arabian Peninsula is considered a desert. It consists of sand, rocks, and has little to no vegetation. Oases dot the interior with vegetation springing up around them. Overall, the geography of the peninsula is viewed by people as being the one of the harshest in the world.

The people of the Arabian Peninsula prior to Islam were commonly called Bedouins. These Bedouins carved a living as being nomadic traders and herders. They traveled from oasis to oasis trading goods and raising goats as they traveled. The Bedouins lived in a clan, then tribe setting. Their leaders were addressed with titles like SHEIKS, REIS, RAB, EMIR or SAYYID similar to a chieftain. Their lives were full of conflicts with neighboring tribes. Life in general was very dangerous and rough for the people living on the peninsula.

Regarding the female gender, Arabia was a male-dominated society. Women had no status of any kind other than as sex objects. They were deprived of inheritance and when captured during wars, are forced into prostitution to make gains for her masters or used forcefully by the men.

Social Conditions of Arabia Before Islam

Arabia was a male-dominated society. Women had no status of any kind other than as sex objects. The number of women a man could marry was not fixed. When a man died, his son "inherited" all his wives except his own mother.

A Woman, In the sight of many tribes, was just like trash. She was inherited. Her husband's eldest son from another wife had the right to marry her after the death of his father, or at least obstinately prevent her from marriage. However, Islam came to prohibit this. It was custom that a son would marry his father's wife after the latter's death, but Allah The Almighty revealed (what means):

"And do not marry those [women] whom your fathers married, except what has already occurred. Indeed, it was an immorality and hateful [to Allah] and was evil as a way." [Quran 4:22].

However, it was prohibited among the Arabs to marry one's ascendants like mothers, descendants like daughters, the father's descendants like sisters, and the first degree of the grandfather's descendants like maternal and paternal aunts.

It was their custom to have girls, women and children inherit nothing and to only give inheritance to those who gained war booty and took part in fighting (in defense of their people).

On the other hand, the Arabs would humiliate one another on account of females, for a girl was not sent out to fight, nor did she protect the group (of the tribe) from attackers, nor work and earn money like a man, and if she was captured she would be taken for sexual intercourse and moved from one person to another. Moreover, she might be forced under compulsion to be a prostitute in order that her master would take her earnings and add it to his wealth, which was permitted by the Arabs at that time. All of that developed fear, stress, grief, and humiliation on the part of the father whenever a girl was born to him. The Quran tells us about the state of such persons who had girls born to them where He Says (what means):

"And when one of them is informed of [the birth of] a female, his face becomes dark, and he suppresses grief. He hides himself from the people because of the ill of which he has been informed. Should he keep it in humiliation or bury it in the ground? Unquestionably, evil is what they decide."

[Quran 16:58-59]

Some tribes also respected women and took her consent in the matter of her marriage. The free Arab woman disdained to enable anyone to have sexual intercourse with her other than her husband who was lawful for her. She was brave and would march behind the warriors at the time of war in order to encourage them, and perhaps even take part in the fighting if necessary. The Arab Bedouin woman would take part with her husband in pasturing and watering the cattle, spinning the wool (of animals), and weaving garments, mantles and coverings. She, also, preserved her chastity.

A savage custom of the Arabs was to bury their female infants alive. Even if an Arab did not wish to bury his daughter alive,

he still had to uphold this “honorable” tradition, being unable to resist social pressures.

Drunkenness was a common vice of the Arabs. With drunkenness went their gambling. They were compulsive drinkers and compulsive gamblers. The relations of the sexes were extremely loose. Many women sold sex to make their living since there was little else they could do. These women flew flags on their houses, and were called “ladies of the flags” (dhat-er-rayyat).

In pre-islamic society, marriage was not regarded as an institution that guaranteed family life. Though the major method of marriage was one in which a man would marry a woman who was a member of a tribe and branch equal to the man's tribe and he paid a dowry, many other different forms of marriage or relationship actually existed as follows;

1. One in which a woman would sleep with another man with the consent of her husband in order to have a child.
2. One in which a woman would live with a man as his mistress and will not be regarded as an adulteress due to her independence.
3. A situation where a woman would concurrently be married to ten different men.
4. WIFE SWAPPING: a situation where men exchanged wives on casual basis.
5. A situation wherein a man dies, his son inherits all his father's wives excluding his mother or two sisters marrying the same man.

Divorce was practiced without fixing a limited number of divorces. A man would divorce his wife, then take her back then divorce her, then take her back, and so on, without end. This custom remained in force even up to the early beginnings of Islam; then, Allah The Almighty revealed (what means): {Divorce is twice. Then, either keep [her] in an acceptable manner or release [her] with good treatment.} [Quran 2:229] in this way, Islam fixed the number of divorces, and gave the husband a chance to resolve the matter and take his wife back twice. However, if he pronounced the third divorce, the tie of marriage would be broken in the sense that

she would not become lawful for him to marry unless she had married another husband (and then he had divorced her). Allah The Almighty Says in the Quran (what means): {And if he has divorced her [for the third time], then she is not lawful to him afterward until [after] she marries a husband other than him. And if the latter husband divorces her [or dies], there is no blame upon the woman and her former husband for returning to each other if they think that they can keep [within] the Limits of Allah.} [Quran 2:230]

Thihaar was also a form of prohibition (of a woman from her husband) like divorce. This took the form of a man saying to his wife, "You are [as unlawful] to me as the back of my mother." It was an eternal prohibition. It remained as such until Islam came and described it as an objectionable statement and a falsehood, and made for the husband a way out of it through making an expiation for it, as shown in the verse where Allah The Almighty Says (what means): { Those who pronounce Thihaar among you [to separate] from their wives - they are not [consequently] their mothers. Their mothers are none but those who gave birth to them. And indeed, they are saying an objectionable statement and a falsehood. But indeed, Allah is Pardoning and Forgiving. And those who pronounce Thihaar from their wives and then [wish to] go back on what they said - then [there must be] the freeing of a slave before they touch one another. That is what you are admonished thereby; and Allah is Acquainted with what you do. And he who does not find [a slave] - then a fast for two months consecutively before they touch one another; and he who is unable - then the feeding of sixty poor persons. That is for you to believe [completely] in Allah and His Messenger; and those are the limits [set by] Allah. And for the disbelievers is a painful punishment.} [Quran 58:2-4]

Men were regarded as the most important fighting components of the tribes in the harsh desert conditions, where manliness and physical strength meant a great deal. Men were considered Superior to women and women were considered a burden. Women in pre-islamic Arabia were deprived of the right of inheritance, they had zero social status, their parental rights over their children were taken from them, infact, they were generally regarded as second class individuals whose only major importance in a family were to give birth to children and thus, every newborn girl was treated a valueless member of the family and the pre-islamic Arabians saw no harm in sentencing these girls to death.

Though it was believed that the major reasons for killing young females was due to the harsh desert conditions, it is obvious that females were despised.

In a society where Bedouin men(also spelled Beduin, Arabic Badawi and plural Badw , Arabic -speaking nomadic peoples of the Middle Eastern deserts, especially of North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula , Egypt , Israel , Iraq , Syria , and Jordan .

Most Bedouins are animal herders who migrate into the desert during the rainy winter season and move back toward the

cultivated land in the dry summer months. Bedouin tribes have traditionally been classified according to the animal species that are the basis of their livelihood. Camel nomads occupy huge territories and are organized into large tribes in the Sahara, Syrian, and Arabian deserts. Sheep and goat nomads have smaller ranges, staying mainly near the cultivated regions of Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. Cattle nomads are found chiefly in South Arabia and in Sudan , where they are called Baqqārah (Baggara). Historically many Bedouin groups also raided trade caravans and villages at the margins of settled areas or extracted payments from settled areas in return for protection.) passed their time talking about women or love, or sleeping because of the heat, many task fell to the women during the day. Apart from duties of giving birth to children, women had many other responsibilities such as preparing meals, milking the animals, washing clothes, weaving materials for ground cloths, etc. However, in a society where the means of enlarging a family was to increase the number of men, the major responsibility of a woman was to give birth to boys.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF ARABIA BEFORE ISLAM

The most remarkable feature of the political life of Arabia before Islam was the total absence of political organization in any form. With the exception of Yemen in the south-west, no part of the Arabian peninsula had any government at any time, and the Arabs never acknowledged any authority other than the authority of the chiefs of their tribes. The authority

of the tribal chiefs, however, rested, in most cases, on their character and personality, and was moral rather than political.

The modern student of history finds it incredible that the Arabs lived, generation after generation, century after century, without a government of any kind. Since there was no government, there was no law and no order. The only law of the land was lawlessness. In the event a crime was committed, the injured party took law in its own hands, and tried to administer "justice" to the offender. This system led very frequently to acts of horrendous cruelty. If the Arab ever exercised any modicum of restraint, it was not because of any susceptibility he had to questions of right or wrong but because of the fear of provoking reprisals and vendetta. Vendetta consumed whole generations of Arabs. Since there were no such things as police, courts or judges, the only protection a man could find from his enemies, was in his own tribe. The tribe had an obligation to protect its members even if they had committed crimes. Tribalism or 'asabiyya (the clan spirit) took precedence over ethics. A tribe that failed to protect its members from their enemies, exposed itself to ridicule, obloquy and contempt. Ethics, of course, did not enter the picture anywhere. Since Arabia did not have a government, and since the Arabs were anarchists by instinct, they were locked up in ceaseless warfare.

War was a permanent institution of the Arabian society. The desert could support only a limited number of people, and the state of inter-tribal war maintained a rigid control over the growth of population. But the Arabs themselves did not see war in this light. To them, war was a pastime or rather a dangerous sport, or a species of tribal drama, waged by professionals, according to old and gallant codes, while the "audience" cheered. Eternal peace held no appeal for them, and war provided an escape from drudgery and from the monotony of life in the desert.

They, therefore, courted the excitement of the clash of arms. War gave them an opportunity to display several of their skills at archery, fencing and horsemanship, and also, in war, they could distinguish themselves by their heroism and at the same time win glory and honor for their tribes. wars were means of acquiring fame and glory and In many cases, the

Arabs fought for the sake of fighting, whether or not there was a cause belli. During the Jaahiliyyah, the Arabs would attack and kill one another for the most trivial of reasons. Wars among them would continue for many years, in which the men would be killed and the women and children taken captive.

One of these wars is the Day of Basoos, on which war broke out between the two tribes Bakr and Taghlib because of a she-camel belonging to Al-Jirmiyy, a neighbor of Al-Basoos bint Munqith, the maternal aunt of Jassaas bin Murrah. Kulayb, the chief of the tribe of Taghlib, had assigned a protected zone for his camels. When he saw this she-camel therein, he killed it. Al-Jirmiyy and Al-Basoos were upset at this, and so when Jassaas witnessed this, he watched for the suitable moment to kill Kulayb, and then did so. Thereafter, destructive wars broke out between the two tribes and continued for forty years.

Another was the War of Daahis and al-Ghabraa', which lasted for forty years. War broke out because of a horse race between Daahis, a stallion belonging to Qays bin Zuhayr, and Al-Ghabraa', a mare belonging to Huthayfah bin Badr. The latter encouraged a man to stand in a valley in order to obstruct Daahis in case it preceded Al-Ghabraa'. He did accordingly, and slapped the horse until he caused it to fall into water, with the result that Al-Ghabraa' won the race. That event led to killing and retaliation from both sides, and war broke out between both tribes of 'Abs and Thibyaan.

G. E. Grunebaum said;

“In the century before the rise of Islam the tribes dissipated all their energies in tribal guerrilla fighting, all against all.” (Classical Islam – A History 600-1258 – 1970).

The nomadic tribes ranged over the peninsula and plundered the caravans and the small settlements. Many caravans and villages bought immunity from these raids by paying a fixed amount of money to the nomadic freebooters. It is important to grasp the fact that on the eve of the birth of Islam there was no government at any level in Arabia, and this fact may even have affected the rise of Islam itself. The total absence of

government, even in its most rudimentary form, was a phenomenon so extraordinary that it has been noted and commented upon by many orientalist, among them:

Maxime Rodinson observed that;

“Manslaughter carried severe penalties according to the unwritten law of the desert. In practice the free Arabs were bound by no written code of law, and no state existed to enforce its statutes with the backing of a police force. The only protection for a man's life was the certainty established by custom, that it would be dearly bought. Blood for blood and a life for a life. The vendetta, tha'r in Arabic, is one of the pillars of Bedouin society.” (Mohammed, 1971).

The more important tribes exercised a certain amount of authority in their respective areas. In Makkah the dominant tribe was the Quraysh; in Yathrib, the dominant tribes were the Arab tribes of Aus and Khazraj, and the Jewish tribes of Nadheer, Qaynuqaa and Qurayza. The Quraysh of Makkah considered themselves superior to the Bedouins but the latter had only contempt for the town-dwellers who for them were only a “nation of shopkeepers.”

All Arabs were notorious for certain characteristics such as arrogance, conceit, boastfulness, vindictiveness and excessive love of plunder. Their arrogance was partly responsible for their failure to establish a state of their own. They lacked political discipline, and until the rise of Islam, never acknowledged any authority as paramount in Arabia. They acknowledged the authority of a man who led them into a foray but he could command their obedience only if they had an assurance of receiving a fair share of the booty, and his authority lapsed as soon as the expedition was over.

The leader had no power of sanction, they were majorly responsible for;

1. Managing tribal meetings.
2. Representing their tribes in relations to other tribes.
3. Issuing declarations of war.

4. Commanding the army during war.
5. Sharing out loots and so on.

Matters concerning justice were handled by ARBITRATORS in Bedouin social life. Failure to obey the decision of the Arbitrators led to expulsion from the tribe, but matters of the tribe were handled by the MELA ASSEMBLY (*The Mela assembly was the only administrative assembly in MECCA and was made up of leaders and prominent figures of various tribes. This assembly took decision unanimously after discussing the matters and those decisions were regarded as effective, but despite this, they had no executive power. This assembly was responsible for handling matters of the tribe and deciding punishments and rewards*).

Economic Conditions in Arabia before Islam.

Pre Islamic Arabia also known as the Jaahiliyyah period lasted for approximately 6 centuries from the elevation of prophet Isa till the spreading of Islam by the last prophet Muhammad (s). During that time the Arabs were divided into the city and the desert dwellers. The following will elaborate on the economy of the Arabs of that time. During that period the economy was divided into different aspects like agriculture, industries, markets, trade and different ways of funds.

Economically, the Jews were the leaders of Arabia. They were the owners of the best arable lands in Hijaz, and they were the best farmers in the country. They were also the entrepreneurs of such industries as existed in Arabia in those days, and they enjoyed a monopoly of the armaments industry.

Slavery was an economic institution of the Arabs. Male and female slaves were sold and bought like animals, and they formed the most depressed class of the Arabian society. The most powerful class of the Arabs was made up by the capitalists and money-lenders. The rates of interest which they charged on loans were exorbitant, and were especially designed to make them richer and richer, and the borrowers

poorer and poorer.

The most important urban centers of Arabia were Makkah and Yathrib, both in Hijaz. The citizens of Makkah were mostly merchants, traders and money-lenders. Their caravans traveled in summer to Syria and in winter to Yemen. They also traveled to Bahrain in the east and to Iraq in the northeast. The caravan trade was basic to the economy of Makkah, and its organization called for considerable skill, experience and ability.

1. At the outset, on the agricultural sector, the land of Makkah was not fertile and only dates were able to be cultivated. They were thus used locally by the local people. These dates were sold on the local markets available for the people of Makkah. However, the land of Madinah and Ta'if was so much fertile that products like dates, grapes, barley, wheat, rice as such were cultivated. The produce was so beneficial that they were used both locally and for export. They were sold in the local markets as well as exported to different parts of the world such as Africa, India and china. It is worth noted that the people of Ta'if were experts in transplantation. It is narrated that there were those who were engaged in agriculture and livestock. It is said that if their livestock are destroyed, they would return to palm-trees and agriculture.

2. Secondly, the city of Ta'if was known as the industrial city where skins of dead animals like oxen, sheep, goats, camels and many others were transported there for treatment in various tanneries and then in industries for the production of bags, shoes, belts, luxuries and fantasies. They were thus sent to the different parts of the country and to different other countries as exported goods. There were those experts in other domains. Their expertise was not limited to the industrial city. It is said that the prophet(s) and Abu Bakr (r) hired Abdullah bin Uraiqit (a non-muslim) as a guide to leave Makkah for Madinah. There was a Persian who was the neighbour of the prophet (s) and he was an expert in preparation of soup. There were those who were experts in horse riding and being an archer. There were those experts in tracing relationship (child and parent etc) from physical features. There were those who were experts in tracking people. It is said that Khabbab (r) was an expert blacksmith during Jaahiliyyah period.

3. Furthermore, there were three kinds of markets in the main cities of Hijaz. It is said that Majanna, Dhul Majaz and 'Ukaz were the markets of the people of Jaahiliyyah. The "common" market was used by each and every one. All Arabs had access therein and there was no discrimination. The "slave" market was meant for the buying and selling of slaves and was occupied by the middle class and rich people. Access to such market was possible only if one was able to buy or sell slaves. The poor people were excluded. The "aristocrat" market was meant only for the rich where only luxuries were sold. Goods and services of high qualities were sold and offered there. All these markets were owned by the rich people of Makkah but their employees or workers were from the middle or low class. They would work hard for only a little share of the profit. During that time they would practice the Manabadhah (it is when one says I will throw my garment and you will throw yours, then they will buy each other's clothes) and Mulamasah (it is when one will sell his garment against another's garment like a barter system). The prophet (s) forbade that practice.

4. Moreover, the rich Arabs would engage in business with different countries. They would trade with China for luxuries, Africa for crafts, Syria for carpet and India for spices. The prophet (s) also encouraged us to treat with the Indian incense for it has healing for seven diseases. In return they would sell their dates, leather products, agricultural products and slaves to these countries. They would either engage in barter and monetary systems. The Bedouins would follow the same track if ever they had the means to do so. All these business trades would take place in caravans. The Arabs would also engage in the business of idols. They knew that during the month of Dhul Hijjah there would be many pilgrims who would come for the pilgrimage. They would carve different models of the 360 idols present in and around the sanctuary of the Ka'bah. They would deal in such business. It is said that there were merchants doing business in Shaam that is Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan at that time.

5. Fifthly, there were different ways the Arabs would fund their business and become richer and richer. Levies were imposed on anyone, such as travellers, foreigners and caravans for entering, staying and leaving the city of Makkah. Another levy would be paid for catering for their animals and

belongings. Bribes were common among them for “progress”. Any desire for favouritism would lead to bribes. High rate of interest was imposed on the borrowers. The lenders were mainly the chiefs of Makkah or the Jews. Each year it would increase by one hundred percent and at the end of the third year, beginning the fourth year, the properties of the borrower would become the properties of the lender, including wife and children. It is said that Usury in the Jaahiliyyah was that a man would give a loan to a man for a set term after which either it will be paid or increased.

CONCLUSION

In pre-islamic Arabian society which was based on a tribal system of people believed to have descended from the same fore-fathers. During the AGE OF IGNORANCE, Arabians lived with a collective consciousness as part of a tribe. They developed their own concepts of morality and virtue as they tried to adapt to the harsh desert conditions. Bravery and strength in battle, patience in disaster, insistence in seeking revenge etcetra were all perceived as virtues and praised.

These played an important role in increasing cooperation. Regardless of the male harsh treatment on female gender, the fundamental element of unity within tribes was sensitivity to tribal traditions, protecting the weak and standing up to the strong.