

The Social Customs of Hejaz

The Social Customs of the Hejaz

Fatima is the fourth and youngest daughter of the Prophet of Islam. She is the youngest daughter of a household to which no sons survived. She is a girl born into a society where both the father and the family place special value upon a son.

The social order of the Arabs had passed beyond the Age of the Matriarch centuries before Islam. During the Age of ignorance, prior to the mission of the Prophet, the Arabs had established the Age of the Patriarch. Their gods had become masculine whereas their idols and their angels were feminine (that is, daughters of the great god, *al-lah*). The tribes were governed by 'white beards' and the family was ruled by the grandfathers. Essentially, their religion was a kind of ancestor worship. They adhered to whatever beliefs and practices their fathers had had.

It was against the religion of ancestral fathers that the great prophets, mentioned in the Qur'an, revolt. When confronted with the revolt against ancestor worship and myths which sought out their first fathers, the tribes stood for the preservation of the masculine traditions. It was a kind of inherited, imitative worship based upon the principle of father worship.

The Prophets bring a revolutionary message. They try to awaken a thought based on the principle of worshipping God. Beyond this, the difficult life of the tribes of the dry desert is filled with hostility between one tribe and another, for the basic principles of life are 'defend and attack' and 'keep your promises'. In this society, the son plays a special role which is based upon the 'uses and needs' of the society's social and military principles.

According to a universal principle of sociology, where profit is substituted for value, being a son is by and of itself of the highest essence. It means embodying virtues, meaningful social and ethical values and human nobility. For this very reason, being a girl or having a daughter is humbling. Her frailness is substituted by 'being weak'. Her 'being weak' pushes her towards slavery and slavery causes her human values to lessen.

She becomes a creature who is the slave of a man, the disgrace of her father, the toy of a man's sexual urges and the 'goal' or slave of the home of her husband. Finally, this creature always shakes her man's sense of honor because she is the highest form of shame and disgrace. For the betterment of society and the relief of one's mind, how much better to kill her while still a baby so that the honor of her fathers, brothers and ancestors, all men for that matter, is not stained. As Ferdowsi tells us in the *Shahnameh*:

It is better to bury women and dragons in the earth.

The world will be better off if cleansed of their existence.

An Arab poet tells us, 'if a father has a daughter he wants to remain, whenever he thinks of her future, he should think about three different son-in-law's: one, the house which will hide her; two, the husband who will keep her and three, the grave which will cover her! And the last one, the grave, is the best.'

The idiom which refers to the grave as being the best son-in-law, has existed in all languages of the wealthiest and most honorable men. All of the indigenous and honorable fathers and brothers who are bound to and place emphasis upon their family, father and male ancestors, all of those who understand the ideals of name and honor are ready for and live in anticipation of dying so that they' can seek the hand of their sister or daughter in marriage. The bride and the frightening groom are united either by their own hands or the best possible son-in-law is chosen for the bride. A poet reminds his daughter of the most beloved of son-in-law's, 'The most beloved son-in-law is the grave.'

This is that very same poem that says women and dragons are both better to be covered by the earth because it is a means of exchange. 'Covering the girls with earth is a way of preserving honor.' This is, why the Qur'an, in the strongest terms, warns of the dangers of this frightening 'highest honor' when it says: *'He hides himself from the people of the evil for the tidings given him. Should he keep her with disgrace or bury her alive in the dust? Behold, evil is what they decide.'* (16:59)

The sensitive point which a contemporary Islamic writer has found in the Qur'an is that the tragedy essentially has economic roots because of society's fear of poverty which was prevalent in the Arab Age of Ignorance.

The principal belief, which most of the sociologists today accept and confirm, is the nobility in having a son and the disgrace and baseness in having a daughter. This ethical and spiritually based belief, this feeling and sensitivity, stems from the discussion of spiritual values about honor, integrity, dignity, respect and the virtue of man and woman or soil and daughter. Girls have been buried alive because of the fear that they may bring dishonor in the future by marrying an unsuitable husband or they fear falling into the hands of an enemy during a war and then becoming slaves in a strange land. All of these are secondary phenomena or, as they say, they are the apparent facts which result from transformed realities which have taken on a new form. But the basic reason is an economic one.

As we previously indicated, in the tribal system, people are faced with the hardships of life and production (particularly in the deserts of Arabia) and the constant difficult relationships among the tribes.

Such a life requires a strong and powerful support. Automatically, a son becomes an important factor in the economic and social situation as well as in the defense of his family or tribe. He is a necessary social element of a family or tribe. A son brings bread but a daughter eats it. It is natural that the sexual differences cause class differences. Men fall into the class of ruling and owning and women fall into that of the ruled and the owned.

The relationship between a man and a woman is like that between a landowner and a peasant. A man and a woman, as economic entities, have a different human and spiritual value placed upon them. As an economic landlord brings about a blood-line, an inherited nobility for his family, as well as ethical and essential values, virtues and great generosity; the opposite is true of a peasant or a woman.

Poverty sends all the male gains or can gain to the four winds. This is why she could become the cause of the family losing self respect. The possibility always exists that she will disgrace the family by marrying someone who is not at the same level as this family. In my opinion, this fear, which is an ethical phenomenon, is related to a clear economic factor, that is, to preserve the ownership of land and to assure the continuation of centralized wealth for –the next generation of the family.

In patriarchal societies, when the father dies, the oldest son inherits everything, not only the land, but also the wives of his father, including his own mother! It was for this very reason that the daughters did not inherit so that the wealth of the father would not be divided up and be distributed to other families through the daughters. This is the reason why in our old wealthy families there is still a very strong emphasis placed upon the daughter marrying within the family. They pledge an uncle's daughter to an uncles' son `in heaven' so that the uncle's daughter does not take her inheritance out of the family which would be the case if she were to marry a stranger in City Hall.

This is why ancient historians and modern scholars who write the history of religion, have different explanations for the burying alive of female children in the Age of Ignorance. Beginning with the fear of shame, disgrace, scorn, prejudice and fear of marriage with an unsuitable person, or, scorn, as some of the scholars say, in primitive religions, girls were sacrificed for the gods. But the Qur'an most strictly and clearly says that the fear was the fear of poverty. In other words, it was an economic factor. The other explanations are just words.

In my opinion, this clear interpretation and description is not only to express scientifically, the reason for these murders, but also to emphatically disgrace and degrade people who talk about the ethical, chaste and noble responsibility a tribe had in burying new born females alive. Their crude, cruel action resulted from their baseness, vileness, fear of poverty and love of wealth It was a direct result of their fear and weakness, their drawing of the curtains of deception to hide their deed by trying to explain it with the noble words of honor, integrity, chastity, respect.

The Qur'an emphasizes, *'Do not kill them from fear of poverty for We will provide for you and your children.* (6:1 51). It expresses the main reason for the tragedy. It awakens people. Secondly, it negates

the false, ethical and human explanations. It directly and straightforwardly says that this practice is neither ethical nor noble but rather, one hundred percent economical. It stems from greed and wealth, from weakness and fear.

Before this, the public was not aware of their real feelings. Other than the deprived class, the majority of the people believed it to be a reaction of the public conscience: They believed it showed a brave spirit and that it protected the family honor. The Arab tribal society gave all the human values to a son, whereas a daughter was considered to lack all virtues and human authenticity.

A boy is not only capable of earning his livelihood, but he is also a help to his father, a protector of his family, the family and tribal hero as well as the pride of his ancestry, the bearer of the values of his heritage, the continuer of the existence of society, the spirit of his family, the owner of a name, the protector of institutions and the flame which lights the family lamp upon the death of his father.

A daughter is an element within the family, a living piece of furniture. After she marries, her personality dissolves in a stranger's house. She becomes the furniture in another house where she cannot even retain her family name. Her children belong to a stranger. They carry his name and are inheritors of a heritage, both of which are strange.

A boy has the material power of economic capital, he aides society and assists in the patriarchal system. He decorates life; he has prestige, fame, value and spiritual credit. He supports the authenticity of the family. He is the giver of security and subsistence and the future authority of that family. But a girl: nothing. She is the total private parts of the house, the bearer of a family. She is so weak that she must always be protected.

Like a bird whose foot is tied to a stone that prevents it from flying freely, she, like the stone, prevents a warrior from freely attacking the tents and castles of the enemies. And when defending his tribe, the warrior is always anxious that she not be taken as a slave. His slightest negligence may put her into the hands of the enemy. Then the entire tribe would suffer the shame of her enslavement.

During times of peace, the family must be careful that she doesn't cause them shame. After all of these troubles, efforts, sufferings, expenses, anxieties, a stranger comes and takes her away. She is like a field that another cultivates and bears off the crops. This is why the best solution is naturally none other than that at the moment she is placed in her mother's arms, she should be given over to her death or at an early age, she should be given away in wedlock and call the cold grave, 'son-in-law'.

A man who has no sons is called 'cut-off'. He has no progeny and no continuation; he is barren. Yet the word *kawthar* in the Qur'an means fullness, advantages, blessings as well as meaning having progeny and many children. God in answer to the disbelievers who called His beloved Prophet 'cut-off' gave him the good news that he will have many progeny.

In such an environment, the moment is ripe for fate to render aside the veil which conceals it. It is the

time to participate and direct the state of things. Life had become a quiet, spoiled lagoon. It is time for a serious, creative revolution. It is the moment for a strong wind to blow. Suddenly an amazing plan is put into action, sweet but difficult. Two people are selected to carry out this plan, a father and a daughter. Muhammad (the father) must carry the heavy load and Fatima (the daughter) must reflect within herself the newly created revolutionary values.

The Birth of Fatima

The largest Arab tribe is the Quraish. The Kaaba is in their hands which, naturally gives them tribal nobility. They are divided into two families, the Bani Omayyad and the Bani Hashimi. The Bani Omayyad are the wealthiest but the Bani Hashimi are the most honorable for they are in charge of looking after the affairs of the Kaaba.

Abdul Muttalib is from this family but at this time, he is dead and his son, Abu Talib, the leader of the Bani Hashim, does not have the power that his father had. He has gone bankrupt in his trading. He is living in poverty and has distributed his children to be cared for among his family.

A very strong rivalry has broken out between the two tribes. The Omayyad's are trying to gain control of all of the property and honors of the Quraish. They wanted to, at the same time, break the spiritual hold of the Hashimis. Among the Hashimi tribe, the family of Muhammad has received new credit. The grandson of Abdul Muttalib has just married Khadijah, a wealthy, well respected widow of Mecca. This gives him a stronger social position.

The personal standing and personality which Muhammad shows, the trust and credibility which he has among people and, in particular, among all the Hashimis and the leaders of the Quraish, makes everyone aware of the fact that he reflects the honor of Abd Manaf and is the protector of the nobility of the Hashimis. In particular, they sense he will be the activator of the honor and nobility which Abdul Muttalib had had.

Hamzeh is a youth; an athlete. Abu Lahab is a man without credit. Abbas is wealthy, but without character. Abu Talib is honorable, but without money. It is only Muhammad, who along with his wife, have character. He has youth as well. They have a respectable amount of wealth and are part of the family tree of the Bani Hashimi. Great developments should be strewn from this family. Their shadow will fall over Mecca.

Everyone is awaiting the sons to be born of this family, sons to bring strength, credit and nobility to the family of Abdul Muttalib.

The first child born is a girl, Zaynab.

But the family is anticipating a son.

The second child is a daughter, Roqiyyeh.

The anticipation grows stronger and the need also increases.

The third, a girl, Umm Khulthum.

Two boys, Qasem and Abdullah are born. They hold great promise. But they do not blossom. They die in infancy. Now there are three children in this house, and all three are girls.

The mother has aged. She is over 60 years old. The father, although he loves his three daughters, shares his tribe's feelings and their anticipation.

Can Khadijah, who is almost at the end of her life, bring forth another child? Hope has become very dim.

Yes! Happiness and hope once again fill the house. The excitement reaches a peak. This is the last chance for the family of Abdul Muttalib, the last hope.

But once again, a daughter.

They name her Fatima.

The happiness and hope of the Hashimi tribe falls to the Omayyad's. The happiness of the enemies! Whispering bad names and screams of 'Muhammad is cut-off', the man who is the last link in his family chain has four daughters. Nothing more.'

How sad. What a beautiful and strange game fate is playing. Life passes on and Muhammad drowns in the storm of his mandate and his being appointed as the Prophet of God. He conquers Mecca and frees all the Quraish prisoners. All of the tribes are under his leadership and his shadow is thrown throughout the whole of the Arabian Peninsula. His sword crushes the faces of the Emperors of the world. His song rings through the heavens and the earth. In one hand, strength, and in the other, prophecy, the full honors which would never even enter the heads of the Omayyad's, the Hashimi tribe or all of the Arabs and non Arabs.

And now, Muhammad is the Prophet. In the city, filled with the most significant waves of happiness, he has the power and greatness which a human being could never conceive? A tree, which does not grow from Abd Manaf nor HasNimi nor Abdul Muttalib, but rather, grows from a light under a mountain, 'Hira'. It extends from one end of the desert to the other, from horizon to horizon of the earth. Till the end of time, it encompasses and will continue to encompass all of the future until the end of history.

And this man has four daughters.

But no, three of them died before he did. And now, he has only one child, a daughter, the youngest, Fatima.

Source URL: <https://www.al-islam.org/fatima-is-fatima-dr-ali-shariati/social-customs-hejaz>