

# “Evolution of the Structures of the Arab Family”

BY DR. ZUHAIR HATAB – BEIRUT 1976

Dr. Zuhair Hatab, author of this study of 288 large-sized pages, holds a doctorate in sociology. In handling his topic, he uses the sociological approach based on objectivity and extensive research. He studies the roots of the Arab family from early pre-Islamic days and tries to show that its evolution through the ages has resulted from definite structures developed by society throughout a long march. In other words, “the author places the problems of the family at the center of the socio-historical evolutionary process experienced by the Arab world.”

In the introduction he says: “We have to distinguish between two kinds of laws: those related to faith, which have the character of dogmas and therefore have the right to stability, and those defining human relationships and hence are liable to change by means of progressive interpretation and speculation.”

From this standpoint which draws a line between stable divine laws and flexible social regulations, the author exposes in detail the history and evolution of the Arab family from pre-Islamic days to the present time, showing how the way of life of societies and their relationships, whether established by religious or by civil authority, have always been affected by environmental conditions and have reflected the characteristics of the period.

## Pre-Islamic Society

In pre-Islamic society, the Arabs were in constant struggle for existence and this struggle was a factor of evolution. Some scholars assume that the matriarchal system dominated the early pre-Islamic period, the history of which is totally enveloped in darkness. They try to prove their theory by economic and social factors while their opponents find other factors to disprove that theory.

We know for sure that the patriarchal system prevailed in the late pre-Islamic period which produced great classical poetry and other literature that throw some light on the period.

In pre-Islamic society, monogamy was practised in tribal society and endogamous marriage of cousins was required as a means of keeping the common property within the family.

The tribe was the social unit and it had subdivisions of which the smallest was the family. All the members of the tribe had to submit to tribal laws which were enforced by the chief and the tribal council. Marriage was a tribal affair and several forms of it were allowed: Monogamy, polygamy, polyandry, promiscuity, temporary marriage, exchange marriage, etc. Besides the various forms of marriage, there existed also various forms of divorce all of which confirmed the privileged condition of males and the oppression of females. Only in Mecca,

which was a flourishing commercial center, did women enjoy certain privileges due to their wealth or the fact that they belonged to wealthy families. We know, for example, that Khadija, a wealthy widow from the powerful Khorash tribe, owned a trade and conducted business. She arranged her marriage with her business manager who belonged to the same tribe and who later became the prophet Muhammad. Though much younger than she, he never married a second wife during her life-time.

## Islamic reform of family laws

Among other reforms, that of the family had an important place in Islam. It ordered the good treatment of parents and of relatives, established laws for marriage, divorce and inheritance. The mahr or dowry was to be paid by the husband; divorce was submitted to certain restrictions; a woman had a share in inheritance equivalent to half of a man's share, while a man became obliged to support the aged, the minors and the women of his family.

These regulations were considered progressive because they maintained positive customs of the pre-Islamic era and abolished negative ones like the burying of baby girls alive and the deprivation of women from inheritance. Polygamy and divorce were restricted; the right of women to divorce was recognized; the way was prepared for further change required by new circumstances, even for the discovery of reasons requiring the change in this particular field (p. 106).

Islamic law helped to strengthen the unity of the family and weaken loyalty to the tribe by converting it into loyalty to God and His prophet. The tribe was no more obliged to wander about in search for water and livelihood. It had a stable abode; its members obeyed laws which all other tribes had to obey. No single tribe could keep its independent law and modes of behavior. The new religion gave a number of women the chance to show their talents by sharing in various leadership roles.

This was during the early years of Islam and the early part of the Omayyad period when prominent women like Sukayna Bint-al-Hussain and Aisha Bint-Talha mixed freely with men and presided literary discussions. With the spread of conquest and the development of the empire, the Arabs indulged in luxurious living, kept large numbers of women slaves, and imposed on their wives a strict observance of the veil.

## The family, a factor of stagnation

In the Abbasid period, the family appeared under three forms: the tribal family, the extended family, and the compound aristocratic family.

The tribal family or clan developed in the desert or in suburbs where living involved hardships and tribal solidarity was a necessary means of protection and mutual help.

The extended family spread in rural areas where solid relations were maintained between relatives and kinsmen for the sake of material and social help.

The compound aristocratic family grew in aristocratic groups who claimed descentance from the Prophet and were tied together by the desire to protect their rights and ranks.

Clannish solidarity of the family led to 1) the maintenance of property within the family through the inheritance system, 2) the persistence of social and moral traditions inherited by succeeding generations, like land and possessions.

Thus the family became a factor of stagnation and persistence of traditional ways of life and thinking, including the concept of man's domination and woman's inferiority, especially, in rural districts where the family forms the basis of the peasant's life. In such an environment, the favorite wife was one who was young and capable of breeding a large number of children who could help till the land and insure its inheritance. The larger the land, the more the man was ready to marry several wives who would increase the number of his helpers.

Though men greatly depended on women as house-keepers, co-workers in the field, mothers of their children, women continued to be regarded as an inferior sex, either because men were physically stronger (hence capable of beating women), or because they owned the land or were in charge of it. Moreover, a man was by tradition the head of the family who could use when he pleased his right to divorce and polygamy. Like the sword of Damocles, he held that right over his wife's head.

In the period of Arab decline, 12th-19th C., no significant change occurred in the conditions of the Arab family. The Ottoman rule (16th-19th C.) endeavored to keep the status quo both socially and economically.

In spite of the commercial and industrial development which occurred as a result of commercial agreements between the Ottoman rulers and the European Mediterranean states, traders and merchants suffered from restrictions imposed on them by the government. Opening a shop was a privilege which had to be bought. Each trade had its own special market. The same rule was applied to the various industries. Censorship, exploitation and confiscation of goods were common forms of oppression.

The restrictive conditions which characterized economic life were reflected in the family. In time, the following traditions came to be known as permanent traits in the Arab family:

- 1 - Arranged marriage.
- 2 - Domination of the father whom all other members of the family must obey.
- 3 - Hierarchical character of the family and differentiation in the scale of kinship.
- 4 - Hero-worship of males and degradation of females.
- 5 - Imposing the veil on women.

6 - Polygamy.

7 - Illiteracy and ignorance.

8 - Spread of superstitious beliefs and practices.

### Modern Evolution

The 19th century was a period of awakening which gave rise to radical changes carried out by great reformers: Muhammad Ali and his sons in Egypt and neighboring Arab countries, Daoud Pasha in Iraq, Bashir II in Lebanon, Sultan Abdul-Majid who proclaimed a series of reforms called *Tanzimat*. To these reformers' achievements, we should add the activities of the French scientific mission which Napoleon Bonaparte brought to Egypt in 1798 and the efforts of foreign missions in the field of education, printing, translation, writing of books, and publication of manuscripts.

The reforms had varied aspects: agrarian, fiscal, political and cultural. They did not fail to affect family conditions in the following ways:

1. New classes of officers and employers appeared and acquired wealth. They competed with landlords, thus inducing the latter to sell their lands and seek wealth through trade, industry or professional training.

2. Foreign companies multiplied and created increased demand for trained employees. The way was thus opened for young employees to achieve financial independence and to create their own families independent of parental control.

3. With the spread of education among both men and women, new categories of working women appeared: the employee and the professional woman who helped support her family and, acquiring economic independence, prepared the way for her social independence.

4. The nuclear family gradually replaced the extended family. Though the tribal family persists in some rural areas, it is hoped that the eradication of illiteracy and the spread of education will lead to its disintegration.

5. Arranged marriage is no more the rule. The right of the girl to choose her husband independently from the parents' influence is recognized more and more.

6. Family planning associations are multiplying. They have been active in helping couples plan the number of their children and solve family problems.

7. Our age has seen the retrogression of polygamy, especially in more developed Arab countries like Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt.

Aside from the above progressive changes, we may mention the disappearance of the veil, the development of mixed marriages, i.e. outside the family, the spreading of the idea of civil marriage, delaying the age of marriage, and claiming for women equal sexual rights with men.

This modern evolution is, according to the author, a natural result of new circumstances and will continue as long as interaction goes on between circumstances and society.

With this optimistic note, Dr. Hatab concludes by saying that "a new treatment of the problems of the Arab family should emanate in the first place from the belief that these problems should not be considered as normative developments but rather as an expression of the evolutionary process which includes society as a whole."