

Traditional Family Relations in the Arab World

- In the absence of a national feeling and national unity in a country, the family tends to form a state within a state and to build its own prestige at the expense of that of the legal authority.
- A successful democracy has its basis in a democratic family. People who practice democratic behavior in their own homes are prone to practice it with their fellow citizens.

A study was made in 1957, repeated in 1958, by two American University professors in Beirut, Melikian and Diab, on men and women students representing various religions and nationalities in the Arab World. The questionnaire tried to obtain the students' response regarding the rank they gave to each of their following affiliations: family, religion, citizenship, race and political party.

In both groups, the classification of the above mentioned ties, notwithstanding minor insignificant differences, came as follows: family, race, religion, citizenship, political party.

Another survey made by Dr. Halim Barakat⁽¹⁾ in 1977, embracing various samples of students in the Lebanese, American and Jesuit Universities in Beirut, shows that leftist influence during the last ten years has contributed to the alienation of students from their families. "But," he concluded, "despite the existence of several conditions in Arab society that undermine the family as an agency of political socialization, Arab students in Lebanon were found to be highly integrated into their families."⁽²⁾ "Since the family tends to monopolize socialization in early years, it must be very effective in determining their attitudes, values, etc."⁽³⁾

In the opinion of many observers, the family in the Arab world plays the role of the tribe in pre-Islamic days, especially in rural districts and among isolated communities that live away from the capital and other urban centers.

In bedouin communities such as those that predominated Arab life in pre-Islamic days, the tribal system, based on kinship or blood-ties, created among the Arabs independent units or clans equivalent to mini-states which, in some cases, formed alliances, but, in most cases, fought against each other and used inter-tribal war as a means of conquest and spoliation. Tribal laws bound together the members of the tribe. Loyalty to these laws and mutual help among kinsmen were required in return for protection. In the absence of a central government, each

tribe had to create its own laws and its own means of survival and defence. The law of vengeance, or vendetta, required that blood be avenged by blood; otherwise the family of the culprit should pay a fixed sum of money in return for cessation of hostilities. This law was omnipotent among the Arabs and often led to long inter-tribal wars.

In our days, the same conditions that brought about and consolidated the tribal system in pre-Islamic Arabia, have contributed to the consolidation of family ties in the Arab World. Absence of an effective central authority has favored the persistence of semi-independent districts dominated by feudal lords who derive their power from the support of their families.

Taking Lebanon as an example, the political significance of family solidarity has led many families to form unions headed by their richest or most prominent members. These unions hold regular meetings, impose political views on their members, and, in return, pledge material support to the needy among them, assert their readiness to give them other forms of support by way of employment, promotion, vindictive measures against an enemy, protection from a revenging pursuer. Family unions thus formed become, like religious divisions, one of the most important factors of national disruption.

Besides political disruption, the family, in order to protect its identity and prerogatives, becomes the guardian of entrenched traditions which stand against progress and evolution.

"Since the family is the most important agency of socialization in traditional societies and even post-traditional societies, one would expect that the greater the integration into family life, the greater the resistance to social and political transformation would be. The family in such societies promotes traditional value orientations."⁽³⁾ It tends to preserve the traits of the tribe, which it is supposed to continue. Many families still practice the tribal tradition of endogamous marriage, i.e. marriage between cousins and close relatives, with the aim of consolidating their unity and keeping within the family its property and

(1) Halim Barakat, "Lebanon in Strife", University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1977

(2) & (3) Barakat, Op. cit. p. 102 & p. 93.

(3) Barakat, Op. cit. p. 80.

land, which is considered a symbol of prestige⁽⁴⁾. Another harmful tradition is the perpetuation of feudal privileges enjoyed by certain families which monopolize political leadership in a certain district exploiting the inhabitants and subjugating them to their own interests.

Among the tribal traits, we may also mention the law of vengeance which still persists as in tribal days; the inheritance of honorary titles and positions, (sheikh, bey, emir), and preference of males because they perpetuate the name of the family, constitute the fighters, protectors and defendants of its rights and privileges. Fathers and mothers are honored by the title or surname which confirms their ownership of a son: abou... (father of...) umm...(mother of...). If they have only female children, they are deprived of this title which stands as a sign of prestige.

As a result of the inferior condition of woman in a traditional family, it is natural to relegate her to the menial tasks, to withhold from her some or all of her share in inheritance. Though women's work at home or in the field is of great value and importance to the whole family, it is taken for granted and fails to be recognized. A woman's position in the family requires her to accept the double standard imposed on her, to tolerate male domination, to practice the feminine virtues of self-sacrifice and chastity because as such she is the guardian of the family honor. "The woman's sexual behavior is equated with her total honor and the man's honor is primarily defined by the sexual conduct of his womanfolk. If a man's honor is bismirched, the stigma of immoral behavior falls on him."⁽⁵⁾

During the last fifty years, the family in many Arab countries has been evolving from extended to nuclear. Children, upon marriage try to form their own families and to be independent from their parents.⁽⁶⁾ Nevertheless, family unions, including parents, children, grandparents, uncles, aunts, ascendant and collateral relatives to the third degree or more, persist as a means of political and social advantages already referred to.

Attachment to the family as a protective power continues to have its grip on individuals in isolated districts, more particularly in periods of social crises. This fact was clear during the Lebanese war (1975-1979), when complete disrusion of authority obliged individuals to seek refuge in their families.

The deeper causes of this strong attachment have been analyzed as follows by Mrs. Sania Hamady in her book already quoted:

"In Arab society, the family and not the individual is the social unit. Status within it and in the outer group is defined largely by it. Born into a group, the individual remains a part of it through no special effort to please or belong... The Arab individual and his family never cease to have claims on each other. Even after marriage he remains dependent on his parents and they on him."⁽⁷⁾

(4) Germanos-Ghazaly, Liliane, *Le Paysan, la Terre et la Femme*, Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, Paris, 1978, ch. IV, pp. 113-171.

(5) Sania Hamady, *Temperament and Character of the Arabs*, Twayne Publishers, N.Y. 1960.

(6) See Al-Raida Nov. 1978, No. 6, p. 8-9

(7) Ibid. p. 87

Further on the author explains this condition as follows: "Arab society has no structure for an individualistic life. The person who has broken with his family finds no circle and no accommodations apart from it. The collectivist rather than the humanist approach appears in every fact of Islamic thought and institution."⁽⁸⁾

A further elucidation of the problem will show that Arab countries and any other countries which have failed to evolve socially,⁽⁹⁾ have failed to create substitutes for the family: first, in the form of social security and free educational system, capable of liberating the individual from dependence on his family for his schooling expenses and for personal care in disease and old age; second, in the form of social centers and cultural clubs capable of offering friendly relations and moral support to those who have no family life or have been alienated from their families and are seeking social contacts beyond those of the narrow family circle. The fact that citizenship came fourth in the list of priorities obtained from the study made by Diab and Melikian shows the little importance given by the students to a national bond. If questioned about the cause of their indifference, many would answer: "What has our country offered us that helps to develop our loyalty to it?"

The family bond may be a blessing to everyone if it fulfills the individual's need for warm and genuine companionship; if it succeeds in being both a stable and a flexible institution. The first quality presupposes that the family members are joined together by disinterested affection, mutual respect and understanding, and democratic behavior which prevents them from oppressing and exploiting each other. The second means that this institution is ready to keep pace with the times and to adopt innovative ideas which have proved their value to the welfare of the family and that of the country.

The progressive evolution of the family is of great importance to women's status because the old, rigid family structure, as already pointed out, confirms the belief in woman's inferiority and her subjugation to an oppressive double standard.

On the other hand, a reform in the family system requires a reform in the state and vice versa. Democracy, Justice and national unity have to start in the family. Building a democratic state imposes, as a first step, building a democratic family.

From a feminist point of view, we may conclude that, in view of the inferior status imposed on women by the traditional family, it is necessary for feminists to claim and support all laws and measures abolishing sexual discrimination in the family and other civil, economic and penal laws.

From a nationalist point of view we may agree with Halim Barakat when he says that "**confessionalism and familism constitute** the most pervasive, diffuse and enduring loyalties undermining nationalism in Lebanon"⁽¹⁰⁾ and, we may add, in any other country.

(8) Ibid. p. 93

(9) See Al-Raida, Vol. II, No. 10, pp. 3-4 & Vol. III, No. 11, pp. 8-9 on "Cultural Values and Population Action Program in Turkey."

(10) Barakat, Op. cit. p. 33.