

# The distinctive Features of the Arab culture

By . Ali M. Al-Kasimi, Ph. D.

## 1. Introduction

All of us aspire to world peace, international cooperation and human welfare. This noble objective cannot be dully achieved, without mutual our understanding, of the other people's culture can be enhanced if that culture is contrasted with our own. One of the few books in this category is Pierre Danino's book, *Les Carnets du Major Thompson «Major Thompsens' diary»* which displays a very instructive and contrastive analysis of the British and the French cultures in a humorous and amusing style. Unfortunately, I have neither Monsieur Danino's sense of humour nor the time to present a contrastive study of the Arab and other cultures in a humorous and amusing style. I shall only try to outline the distinctive features of the Arab culture. Therefore, I'll do my best to answer the following questions briefly :

First, what is culture ? Second, who is an Arab ? Third, is there one Arab Culture or several distinct cultures ? Fourth, what are the characteristic traits of the Arab Culture.

### I. What is Culture ?

The term «Culture» is by no means self-evident. It has been used in different ways.

Etymologically, the word «culture» derives from the Latin words «cultura» and «cultus» which mean care or cultivation of something. Our word «agriculture» derives from the Latin composite *Agri Cultura* which means the cultivation of the soil. However, in the Middle Ages, the connotations of the term were used in different situations such as the worship of God, and the cultivation of mind *cultura animi* whose meaning was broadened to cover the cultivation of arts and letters, and of intellectual capacities in general (2). We still use the term in this connotation when we refer to an educated person as a «cultivated man». Since the rise of modern nations and territorial states in the sixteenth century, the term «culture» has been used to signify the various national customs and institutions. And in the 19th Century the concept «culture» has been used to signify a particular style of life of ethnic communities. In this sense, modern anthropologists use the term culture when they explore and study tribal groups.

For the purposes of this talk the term culture is defined as :

«The system of values and meanings shared by a group or society, including the embodiment of those values and meanings in material objects.» (3) Accordingly, there are three major components of any culture :

(1) Cognitive aspects of culture which include the system of knowledge, ranging, from beliefs (i.e. ideas about natural and supernatural realities) to technology (i.e. the practical application of knowledge in the physical and social world).

(2) Normative aspects of culture which include  
(a) **norms**, or formal and informal codes of conduct.

(b) **Values**, or abstract ideas about what is good, or right, or wise, or beneficial.

(c) **institutions**, or formal and stable ways of pursuing social activities. For example the family is an institution.

(d) **sanctions**, or rewards and punishments to enforce conformity to norms.

(3) Material aspects of culture, or what is sometimes called the **material culture**, which includes all the artifacts used to manipulate and shape the environment, such as machines, tools, books, clothing, and so on.

## II. Who Is An Arab ?

Having defined the term «culture» and listed its major components, I am going to discuss the other term namely «Arab». Who is an Arab ?

At first sight, this may appear to be a simple question ; but, as a matter of fact, numerous researchers, both Arab and Western, have encountered a remarkable difficulty in answering the question. Their definitions of an Arab were based on one or more of the following criteria ?

(1) The religious criterion : Some people say that Arabs are those who believe in Islam. But, as you might know, not all Moslems are Arabs, nor all Arabs are Moslems. This criterion is a result of the association between Arabs and Islam. Arabic is the official language of Islam and the Arabs spread Islam in the world. But at present, there are about 800 million Moslems all over the world ; only 150 million of them are Arabs. Moslem countries such as Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria, Indonesia, Albania are not Arab countries. Besides, in the Arab World itself there are many Arabs who are not Moslem, still they are recognized and considered as Arabs by everybody.

(2) The racial criterion : Some say that Arabs are those who share a common descent and blood. A moment's reflection will suffice to show that this criterion cannot hold good for all Arabs. The land where the Arabs live now had been invaded and inhabited by other nations and races such as Greeks, Romans, Persians, and Turks. One cannot speak of pure blood relationship. Besides, the diversity of racial traits in the Arab World defies this criterion. (We have blacks in Somalia and Sudan, browns and whites in the other Arab countries).

(3) The historical criterion : One of the pioneers of Modern Arab Nationalism was Mr. Sati'al-Husri who argued that «the basic factor in the formation of the nation and nationalism is the unity of the nation and of its history. «(4) Mr. Al-Husri asserted that the common descent and blood, which must be discarded from such a definition» (5).

(4) The political criterion : According to Mr. Clovis Maqsd and a host of other Arab political thinkers, «an Arab is one whose destiny is, either by force of circumstances or intentionally, bound to the Arab World as a whole».

(6) Accordingly, the label «Arab» is attached to kurds, Negros, Armenians and other minorities that have inhabited an Arab country.

(5) The geographical criterion : This criterion is not really different from the political one, for an Arab is defined here, as any person who has been brought up and/or lives in an Arab country.

For the purpose of this talk, I am going to adopt a new criterion which can be labeled as a sociolinguistic criterion and I define an Arab as anyone who speaks Arabic as his own functional language and is consequently stamped by Arab culture traits.

## III Is there one Arab culture or several distinct cultures ?

Taking a bird's view at the Arab World, we find a great diversity which manifest itself in two dimensions :

(1) There are differences among the Arab countries (2) There are three different patterns of living in each Arab country : the desert, the village and the city.

As you know, there are 21 Arab countries in Asia and Africa, extending from Iraq in the east end of the Arab World to Morocco in the west end. Many observers pointed out so many differences among these countries in their political, social, economic and educational institutions. To demonstrate some of these differences, a quick comparison between Iraq and Morocco might be illustrative. From the political point of view, Iraq is a republic and Morocco is a monarchy. From the economic point of view, Iraq's main revenue comes from oil ; whereas Morocco's revenue comes from phosphate. From the educational point of view, Iraq follows the British educational system and teaches English as a second language ; whereas Morocco follows the French educational system and teaches French as a second language. From the demographical point of view, the major ethnic minority in Iraq is Kurdish, whereas in Morocco is Berber. From the religious point of view Iraq is Shiete and Hanafi, and Morocco is Maliki. From the linguistic point of view, the Iraqi dialect is very distinct from the Moroccan dialect.

Having listened to this short comparison, one wonders whether these two countries share the same culture or have two separate cultures.

#### Different Patterns of Living

On the other hand, in every Arab country, there are three different patterns of life, namely, the desert, the village, and the city. One general criterion of differentiation among the three is their social organization. In the city, there is a certain occupational specialization or division of labor geared to a market. In the desert, there is no such division of labor. As for the village, it lies between the desert and the city, i.e. there is some division of labor within agriculture, mainly between the owners of land and those who work on the land.

(a) **The desert** : The desert offers a very harsh mode of life. Arab bedouins live in the desert as nomads. It should be pointed out that Arab nomads do not wander through desert aimlessly, but a nomadic tribe usually keeps herds of camels, sheep, or goats and follows a regular pattern of movement between desert oases and the edges of agricultural communities or towns. (7) For western observers, Bedouins live in poverty and isolation from the rest of the world. But the bedouin himself, the pattern of his living is normal and natural. As a matter of

fact, westerners cannot understand the desert pattern of living. An American sociologist said, «How, indeed, are we to comprehend a type of society whose level of living cannot be measured in national income per capital, where there is little cash, no police force, no written literature, none of the many specialized devices of settled life such as schools, shops, courtrooms, post offices ?» (8)

(b) **The village** : More than two third of the Arabs live in village. The rural communities derive their income from agriculture. Whereas in the desert life the two major elements are man and desert, the village life is a combination of five elements : water, land, man, animal, and plant. (9)

An Arab village consists of a group of houses made of stone or mud with a few shops, all surrounded by the fields which sustain it. In the Arab village, land is held to be the greatest value. The villagers live on, from, and for the land.

(c) **The City** : the city does not differ much from other cities in the developing countries. It consists of three major parts : a small area of nice villas where the rich live, a larger area of apartment buildings or small houses, and slums in the skirts of the city in which crowd the migrants from the village. The three centers of socioeconomic activity in the Arab city are : shops, factories and offices. As commercial, educational, and health facilities are more available in the city than in the village in the Arab World, dwellers enjoy a higher standard of living than that of the village in the Arab world and this continuously attracts more rural migrants to the city.

Ecologists (9a) assert that social behavior is essentially a form of adaptation to environment. If there are three different environments, then we have the right to expect three different patterns of human behavior. In other words, the people's culture is shaped by the environment in which they live, and different environments produce different cultures. Taking this ecological principle into consideration, one may conclude that in each Arab country, there are three cultures : the Bedouin, the rural, and the urban. One may also argue that an Arab bedouin, who knows nothing of the world but his tent, camels and tribe, can not possibly share the same culture with a young sophisticated Arab who studied in Europe and America and now operates his computer in his business flat in

Beirut or Cairo.

However, my standpoint is that all the Arab countries with all their different patterns of living, the desert, the village, and the city, basically share the same culture, namely the Arab culture. This thesis is based on two sociological facts :

1. The major elements of culture are the beliefs, values and meanings which are shared by a group or society. The material objects form just a minor component of the culture. And I argue here that inspite of the differences in the material objects among the Arab countries and the different environments in each country, the Arabs share the same beliefs, values, norms, and meanings. Any difference in these concepts between two Arab countries or environments must be a difference in degree rather than in nature.

2. From the practical point of view, there is no culture that is made up of a single set of norms and values accepted equally by every member of the society. A culture in actual practice, is a sort of average of all the cultural behavior found within the society. That is why sociologists talk about «subcultures». A subculture can be defined as a way of cultural behavior that includes the dominant features of the cultural average but also includes certain features not found elsewhere in the society. (10) A subculture may reflect an occupational difference as does the subculture of the military people, or a racial and ethnic difference, as does the subculture of the Black Americans, or regional differences as do the subcultures of the different Arab countries.

According to this theoretical principle, I am of the opinion that the Arab World has one culture which includes subcultures containing the distinctive features of the Arab cultural average.

Now it is time to discuss the distinctive features of the Arab Culture.

### 5. Distinctive Feature of the Arab Culture

In my opinion, there are three main features that differentiate the Arab culture from any other culture and that, generally speaking, most members of the Arab nation share all these 3 features.

- (1) The Arabic language.
- (2) Islam
- (3) The Bedouin tradition.

#### 1. The Arabic Language

Why do I consider language as the most important distinctive feature of any culture ? Not only because culture cannot be transmitted without language but also because culture cannot be created at all without language. Culture depends for its existence on language, because man's ability to create and learn a culture is based on his ability to communicate through language. The structure of our language chapes our perception of reality and molds our attitudes to life. Although psycholinguists have not yet answered the question. «Can thought exist independant of language ?» one can safely say that there is a strong relationship between language and thought, feeling or emotion. As one British linguist concluded «to some extent, we are controlled in our thoughts and actions by the language we know». (11) A leading American sociologist went further and declared that« the vocabulary and structure of our language contain a set of unconscious assumptions, giving us a particular perspective that makes it easier to convey some ideas or concepts than others.» (12)

Since no two languages are identical, societies with different mother tongues will have different cultural behaviors.

The Arabic language is spoken all over the Arab world. It is true that there are different regional and social dialects, but they are dialects and not different languages, i.e. they share the basic characteristics of the Arabic language that make them mutually intelligible.

How is the Arab language different from other language ?

(a) phonologically : Arabic is a guttural language ( i.e.it has such phonemes as and a higher tone than the European languages, and thus it sounds a little bit rough and emotional to the European hearer.

(b) Morphologically : in coining new words Arabic does not often resort to blending and compounding as is the case in the germanic languages (e.g. tag, mittag, nachmittag). Arabic coins its new words by derivation, or by impos-

ing certain vowel patterns on the radicals of the root. Hence, philosophers of language may conclude that whereas the Germanic mind tends to be synthetic, the Arabic mind tends to be analytic.

(c) Syntactically, the elements of the Arabic sentence have more freedom, and can change their positions without changing the meaning of the whole sentence. Besides, an individual Arabic word can stand for a complete sentence (e.g. *رأيتنه* . I saw him). This might have something to do with the personality of the Arabs who are described by western sociologists as strong individualists and believers in equality, and freedom (13).

(d) Orthographically, Arabic uses the Alphabetical system of writing just like the European languages: As a matter of fact it was the Arabs who invented the Alphabet which was adopted later by Greek and Latin and is still called Alphabet which is made up of two Arabic words. Although our writings (i.e. Latin & Arabic) have the same system, they use different sets of characters and that Arabic is written from right to left. This has something to do with our concept of movement and direction. (Early in this century, the British administration in some Arab countries failed to convince the Arabs to drive on the left side of the road.)

(e) Semantically, Arabic linguistic elements (i.e. words, expressions, structures, etc.) have more connotations than in any other language, simply because Arabic is the oldest living language in the world, which has had a continuous and uninterrupted linguistic usage and literary tradition for the last 2000 years at least. Of course linguistic change takes place and that is why we find several cases of Arabic words with old and modern connotations side by side. It is suggested here that meanings, concepts and values, which are naturally transmitted by language, live longer in the Arab World.

The second distinctive feature of the Arab Culture is (2) Islam : I shall briefly define Islam and say how it constitutes a distinctive feature of the Arab Culture.

The basic pillars of Islam are very simple.

The prophet Mohammed (may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said, «Islam is to testify that there is no god but Allah and

Mohammed is the Messenger of Allah, to perform the prayers, to pay the Zakat (poor-due), to fast in Ramadan, and to Make the pilgrimage to the House (of Kaba and Holy Mosque in Mecca) if you are able to do so». (14)

Islam is distinguished from any other religion in the sense that it does not regulate the relationship between Man and Allah only, but between man and man and himself as well. In other words, Islam regulates all the aspects of social life. As an American Arabist puts it, «To Western observers Islam appears secular, also, in its greater emphasis upon action than upon doctrine, upon conduct rather than belief once its few and simple articles of faith are accepted.» (15)

As we saw earlier in this paper, one of the connotations of the word «culture» is the style or way of life of a community». And Islam shapes the culture of the Arabs, by regulating all the aspects of social life and providing them with all the ethical rules of conduct.

### (3) The Bedouin Tradition

The third distinctive feature of the Arab culture is the Bedouin tradition. The thesis I am advocating here is that the Arab culture is essentially a Bedouin culture in its ethnics, values, attitudes, and feelings. Wherever the Arabs live, in the desert, in the village or in the city, they share the Bedouin tradition. Differences may exist among the Arabs of different environments, but they are differences in degree rather than in nature.

This conclusion is based on the following facts :

1 – Historically, there is a great association between Arab and the desert. As a matter of fact, the term «Arabs» referred in pre-Islamic periods to the camel - herding people who inhabited the Arabian Peninsula (including the Syrian and Iraqi desert now.)

(2) Geographically and demographically, every Arab country contains a large desert, and Arab villages and towns used to be just oases in the desert.

(3) Islam approved of many of the Bedouin values, moral practices, and virtues. Both sources of Islamic law, i.e. Holy Koran and the

Prophet's tradition have indicated that point.

(4) There has been an intimate relation among the desert, the village, and the city. The usual procedure is that a Bedouin tribe or clan finds a piece of fertile land, settles down, and becomes a sedentary agricultural community. Then villagers migrate to the city. The people sent by the desert and the village to the urban communities carry their values and ethics with them.

(5) Arabic literature of all periods has been dedicated to the glorification of Bedouin ideals and values. Our school-boys all over the Arab World study and appreciate this literature and consequently admire and identify with the people of the desert. Not only our literature pays tribute to the desert, but our modern media as well. Many contemporary plays, films and TV serials derive their themes from the desert.

Now, what is meant by the Bedouin tradition? To me, as to many other students of the Arab Culture, the basic three distinctive features of the bedouin ethnics of virtue which predominate all over the Arab World are :

- (1) Dignity and self-respect.
- (2) Hospitality and generosity.
- (3) Bravery and Courage.

These features are interrelated, as we will see.

#### (1) Dignity and self-respect :

In the desert life there are no socio-economic classes. Not only because the means of production cannot bring about these classes, but also because the social system on which the Bedouin life is based does not permit their existence. The social life of the Bedouin is based on the tribe, the clan, or the family. All the members of the tribe are related by blood, all men have the same duties and enjoy the same rights. Therefore, they are all equal and strong believers in equality. This belief in equality led to their feeling of self-respect or self-esteem which was sometimes taken by non-participant observers for egotism.

This value of the Bedouin personality requires that the individual must always act in an honorable way, that the conduct of all the members of his family is acceptable, and that others respect him.

## (2) Hospitality and Generosity

«Hospitality in part grows out of human helplessness in the desert. the utter dependence of man upon other men» (16) And hospitality partly grows out of the Bedouin's self-esteem and his willingness to show respect to others. Hospitality in the desert is granted not only to travellers, but also to anyone in need of protection.

A guest is considered as a sacred trust, though he is not supposed to stay with his host for more than three days.

The concept of generosity does not cover the kind treatment of guests only, but covers also other values such as showing kindness and gratitude to parents ; kindness toward dinsfolk ; orphans ; and the poor : politeness in greeting and addressing others.

## (3) Bravery and Courage.

By bravery is meant the bedouin is willing to risk his life for the benefit of his group, and courage refers to his ability to stand physical pain or emotional strain with self-control.(17)

I would like to conclude my remarks on the bedouin tradition with a quotation from Morroe Berger. Mr. Berger said,

«Though bedouin society plays a declining role in the modernizing Arab world, certain bedouin values have so permeated Arab Life and Islam that these values persist through the changes. They persist as personality traits and as ideals : bravery, pride, generosity, cunning. These qualities are both fact and legend in all types of Arab community but the factual element is greatest in the nomadic.»(18)

## References

1. Berger, Morroe. *The Arab World Today* (Garden City : New York . Doubleday & Co., 1962).
2. Bernard, H. Russell and Pelto, Pertti J. (eds.) *Technology and Social change* (New York : Mcmillan, 1972).
3. Ibrahim, E. and Johnson-Davies, Denys. *An-nawawi's Forty Hadith* (Damascus :The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1977).

4. Karpal, Kemal H. (ed.) *Political and Social thought in the contemporary Middle East* New York : Praeger Publishers, 1968).

5. John, Laffin. *The Arab Mind* (London : Cassell, 1975).

6. Lerner, Daniel: *The Passing of Traditional Society* (London : Collier-Macmillan, 1958).

7. Montager, M.F. Ashley. *Culture* (London : Oxford Univ. Press, 1968).

8. Patai, Raphael. *The Arab Mind* (New York :

#### Footnotes

\* (1) One of a series of lectures delivered at the Mindanao State University, Marawi City, the Philippines, 1978.

\*(2) Erich Kahler, «Culture and evolution», in *Culture*. ed. by M.F.A. Montagu (London : Oxford Univ. Press, 1968) p.3.

\*(3) David Popenoe, *Sociology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974) p.112.

\*(4) Sati' al-Husri, *What is Nationalism* (Beirut : Dar al-ilm lil-malayin, 1979) p. 250.

\* (5) Sati' al-Husri as quoted in Kemal H. Karpal, ed. *Political and Social Thought in the Contemporary Middle East* (New York : Praeger Publishers, 1968) p. 57.

\* (6) *Op.cit.*, p. 59.

\* (7) Morroe Berger, *The Arab World Today* (New York : Doubleday & Co., 1964). p. 43.

\* (8) *op. cit.*, p. 44.

Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973).

9. Polk, William R. and Chambers, Richard L. *Beginnings of Modernizations in the Middle East* (Chicago : The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968).

10. Popenoe, David, *Sociology* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey : Prentice-Hall, 1974).

11. Tütsch, Hans E. *Facets of Arab Nationalism* (Detroit : Wayne State Univ. Press, 1965).

12. Wallwork, J.F. *Language and Linguistics* (London : Heinemann, 1969).

\* (9) Jacques Berque as quoted in *op.cit.*, p. 67  
\* (9a) Ecology is «the study of ( interrelationships between organisms (including man) and their environment».

\* (10) David Popenoe, p. 107.

\* (11) J.F. Wallwork, *Language and Linguistics*, p. 10.

\* (12) Popenoe, p. 110.

\* (13) Morroe Berger, p. 46.

\* (14) As translated by Eszdin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies, *An-Nawawi's 40 Hadith* (Damascus : The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1977) pp. 28-30.

\* (15) Berger, p. 30.

\* (16) Berger p. 50.

\* (17) Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind*, p.89.

\* (18) Berger, p. 49.