

MARRIAGE IN ARABIA

Marriage customs and rites in the Arabia Marriage, is the oldest contract between two individuals even before Islam. Nowadays; with all the social and economic frustration it is not an easy decision to take. For a person to decide that he is ready to marry he has to choose between; if he wants an arranged marriage or he will marry a girl whom he chose. What is meant by arranged marriage is marriage that is arranged between two families without even the couples having seen each other yet, and in many cases it is usually between kin. Although there is modernization in the Arabian region yet; there are customs and traditions that can not be discarded. For example; a highly educated man who may be living a westernised life when it come to marry he will choose to marry in the traditional way and follow the rites of the marriage like the dowry, the wedding ceremony, the engagement. These kinds of customs are practiced in Arabia with no differentiation between the Muslims community and the Christians community in Arabia; they both follow the same sort of marriage rites.

This essay tries to throw a light of some of the marriage rites and traditions in some Arabian countries like Lebanon, Jordan and specifically in Sudan. The paper does not only cover some of the Arabs' tradition concerning marriage, but it tries to show a contrast between how Modernization and

Westernization did had only a slight effect on marriage traditions, and rites. The paper also; with a slight focus identifies how there has been a change in women's role in the Arabia. It is just an attempt to give a cultural understanding of marriage in the Arabia. The book of *Law of Desire*, gave a definition to marriage that "it is a contract of exchange that involves a sort of ownership. They gain an exclusive right of sexual union. (Shahla: 33).

Among tribes of Arabia, tribes that consist of people who call themselves of one kin, three kinds of marriage custom are possible: If the tribe is endogamous, the man that is not allowed to marry outsiders of his own stock. If the tribe is exogamous, a man is not allowed to marry a woman of his own stock. Marriage is allowed with kinsfolk and aliens indifferently. In the past, there was a slight law of endogamy among Arabs. A man might find often a wife by agreement in a friendly tribe, where there could be no political reason for the woman's kin objecting to the match. Marriage with a woman not of the kin was even preferred, because it was thought that the children of such a match were stronger and better. (Robertson: 75). However, starting from the 19th century there was a stronger preference in Arabia for the marriage of cousins. They see it as a symbol that unites people who are already united with no sociological difference. Among the Bedouins it is a rare thing for a woman to leave her tribe, while a stranger is permitted to settle down and have a wife (Robertson: 78).

Well established customs of marriage: The Dowry: It is paid by the husband to the bride. It can be a price of compensation for taking the bride from her family, or it is a present from the groom. While the deferred payment is considered a protection for the bride, Data shows that the custom of requiring a symbolic advanced payment is very strong in Beirut upper class families and widespread among upper and middle classes in Amman and Damascus.(Prothero:39). The custom of giving a bride price was until this century widespread in non Islamic as well as Islamic parts of Africa and Asia. (Robertson: 89). This shows the importance of the Dowry custom that has not been faded till now.

As for the”Zeffa “or the train of people escorting the bride to her bridegroom, it is assumed to be a symbol of a party returning from a successful raid and bearing the bride with them. This is the tradition among the Bedouins. (Robertson: 67). The “Zeffa” is much occurring in villages, and country sides to escort the bride from her house to her husband’s house. On interviewing a friend from university Ashraf Elhay, who is a Sudanese student at the RMIT University in Bundoora, he said that in Sudan there is the custom that the bride should put Henna on her hand palm and her legs on the day of her marriage, as Henna is considered like make-up for them , they call it “Zeina”. (Personal Interview).

Early marriage of girls is common in agrarian societies which is a parental arrangement of marriages, so we are not surprised to learn that in traditional families the girls married at early age. At the same time, nowadays all the characteristics are undergoing change as the society modernizes, so we could expect the age of marriage to be increasing. Arab demanded that the girl should reach puberty. By 1940 data indicated that 19, 20 was the average age for marriage of Muslim Palestinians at Pati cities, and also in Beirut starting in 1950. (Prothero: 22). By 1970 the average range was from 17 to 22 in Beirut and Amman. There are some class differences even concerning marriage age. The upper class women generally marry later than the others, since she spends time in the education process. Prothero, the author of the book *Changing Family patterns in the Arab east*, said that “There is also a contrast between age of marriage of men and that of women. While; data shows that the increase in age of marriage of women nowadays is a sign of the growing independence of women and is probably a result of the changing role of women in Arabian society”.(Prothero :54-55).

The engagement is a period that precedes the marriage, and it did not appear except in cities while among villages and tribe, and Bedouins it does not exist, since the groom is not even allowed to see the bride before their marriage. In the cities, the groom visits his bride house and arranges the wedding needs, then he asks about the dowry and if agreement reached then there is a

reception held at the bride's house called engagement. Then the next step towards marriage is writing the marriage contract. (Holy: 35).

Some Arab countries customs concerning marriage: In Arab border villages in Israel units called hamula. There is the notion that a man's marriage to a hamula girl is not only his right but his duty as it is a symbolic expression of the closeness of the angelic connection between hamula members. Also, the author, Holy of the book of *kinship, honor and solidarity* said that the "Arabs in Israel are aware of the symbolic meaning of specific marriage choices." their closeness expresses the significant of particular relation it is within the cultural context. (Holy: 86). The Arabs there want to preserve their clan's purity.

In Jordan There is a data from kufr Al ma village convey a similar picture. The three main clans in the village are (Beni Yasin, Beni Dumi and Beni Amr). The Beni Yasin adhere more the cousin marriage from within the village. They base it on the purity of their descent from one common ancestor, which they contrast with the mixed origin of the other two clans. In Amman during 1955-60, a survey of questioning a small group of married women showed that only one fifth of the older women age 40 had participated in the choosing of their husbands either by making a selection or by giving consent. (Prothero: 120). That is why, since the arranging of marriage in cities was

traditionally a bit more complex than in villages. Several studies in Arab cities have shown an increasing tendency to consult the girl before making the final choice of husband.

Lebanon, is more liberal, the girl is not only gaining more freedom in the selection of her mate, but is also being steadily relieved of many of other restrictions on her premarital freedom of association.(Prothero: 122). Concerning the concept of marrying within the family kin, the concept is asserted with highly statistics in a marionette village in the chouf in Lebanon and in Arab villages in the lower Galilee of Israel. (Holy: 85).

In Sudan there is a strong preference in the Arabia for the marriage of cousins. In the book of *Kinship, honour, and solidarity* the author said that “my interest in cousins marriage stems from my field work among the Berti of Sudan, who practice this kind of marriage and expresses a preference for it. They are having the tradition of both Muslims living in South Africa”. (Holy: 33). The Berti tribe believes like most other tribes in Sudan that they should marry within the house. The Berti also, have a tradition that a widow must not be let alone without a husband.

Marriage in Sudan, has a specific meaning for men which are not shared by women. The woman is under the authority of her family. The father does not

need to persuade his daughter about the advantage of her prospective marriage, for she has less opportunity to assert her own view about it. (Robin: 16). It is a tradition for them to say that “when a man marries he marries the guardians.” The man is not much concerned with the bride’s character as much as with the character of her guardian.

What is awkward, among the Berti is the tradition they have that during the first year of marriage the wife still lives in her parent’s household and her husband visits her there periodically. He has his own shelter in his parents in law households, in which he stays there alone and eats alone while his wife associates with the members of her parents’ household and their visitors. He is not allowed to even eat in his father in law presence except if he allows him. That is the reason why they prefer to marry kin, since the husband will not be under the authority of a stranger. From the shameful tradition for the Berti is for the father to offer his daughter to others to marry her, yet when a stranger of other family asks the girl’s father for marriage, he fulfills his obligation by informing his brothers and seeking their approval of the proposed marriage, by this he gives each one of them the opportunity to exercise the marriage right of his son and to claim the girl for him. (Robertson: 54-56).

Similarly in another village in Sudan Burri al lamaab village the occurrence of patrilateral parallel cousin marriage is highest in the most numerous lineages. (Holy 17). The wedding rituals in Sudan Khartoum; First, of all to be mentioned before talking about the marriage rituals, is the suddenness preference to marry women who are circumcised. In the book *Seasons of immigration to the north*, the author writes with description of the wedding ceremony in Khartoum. First, of all the marriage for the mother of the bride and of the groom is to recoup themselves for the presents they gave to other villagers on the marriage of their sons and daughters. For example; the mother pays money at wedding feasts. (Salah: 250).

On interviewing Ashraf Elhay a Sudanese student at RMIT University in Bundoora, he talked about some of the Sudanese tradition concerning marriage rituals. He said that the majority of the Sudanese with no difference of which tribe they do not see the their bride during the wedding ceremony since it is believed of bringing bad luck, he also said that the bride goes out from her father house only with her wedding gown, and that it is a custom for the groom to buy everything for the bride in dozen. For example; he buys her 12 tub and 12 pair of chooses. As for the dowry he said that it can be either in gold, animals or money. It was a custom to be followed that the marriage ceremony can last for seven days, but nowadays due to the economic

constraints it is only the rich families that perform this custom (personal Interview).

The marriage that occurred in the story of El Tayb Salah, which is called *Seasons of Immigration to the North*, was that of cousins since they believe like what the author said that “from the point of view of formalities the girl is reserved for marriage to her cousin is an irrefutable agreement according to the contentious of village folk; it was an ancient tradition with them” (Salah:226). The marriage rites are first performed in the mosque by the Imam. When the contract of marriage is completed they place down the dowry on a tray so that everyone could see it. This rite is only for men to attend or if the father of the groom was dead the mother only attend. This is followed by the hitting of a brass drum to announce the start of the ceremony. People come from other villages to attend the ceremony, for example; the kouz Bedouin gather and the talha were they are welcomed and offered food and drink. In every house in the village there was a party to host other villagers. A rifle is shot joyfully, there is also the slaughter of camels and oxen and herds of sheep. The groom is dressed in kaftan of white silk, and an aba, and a turban. The next thing is the attending of dancers, singers and drummers. While in one of the houses the sheik will be reciting the Koran, while the girls danced in another house, and the men drank in another. (Salah: 257).

In conclusion marriage was a family affair; it required commitments, emotional as well as financial between families. The traditional arrangement is today under attack. We can conclude that the ancient practice of the father choosing a bride for his son usually throughout the women of his family and that of the brides family deciding for her whether to accept or not leaving for her only the formal words of consent, is slowly undergoing modernization. As young people have more freedom, they have more opportunity to meet a prospective spouse before the engagement, and thus to participate in the family decision of marriage. This means that the Arab families are changing, and are accommodating greater individual freedom into the traditional pattern.

Wedding celebration in the villages is becoming less extended than formally. And among upper classes in several societies the initial bride price is more often symbolic than before. At the same time there is an increasing emphasis on the late payment, which is due to cases of divorce. There are some tradition apparently that have undergone modernization, but it was for the sake of the people. The economic reason was one of the factors to affect some of the weddings rites. Fortunately; from the advantages of modernization are, education which raised the marriage age, and the engagement period which gave the couple the chance to know each other personalities. It can be said that modernization has lessen some of the applicable rites, but it has not

abolished it. Tradition and customs for Arabs are a cultural heritage that they are proud of, and expresses them as a national identity for them as Arabs. As for Arabs to have the same sort of customs this is a kind of unification for them, that does not differentiate between religions and gather Arabs.

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