

APR 17 1984

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

The Arab Family

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In a patriarchal society like that of the Arabs the father has great authority over his children, and he usually plans and arranges their marriages. The father finds a bride for his son; the father sees that his daughter gets married. If he omits to do this, or if he dies before the children are of marriageable age the mother does it in consultation with their closest male relatives, e.g. an elder brother or a father's brother. Brothers have to help an unmarried brother to find a wife. But if it can be said of a man that during his life he gave away all his children in marriage, it sounds well in the ears of the people. He has fulfilled the duty of his life. The expression: "his father married him" signifies that the father paid all the expenses connected with the marriage.

Even before the birth of the child possible marriage connections are discussed between the parents and their friends. As soon as the child has arrived the future marriage is thought of and: "Blessed be the bride", or, "Blessed be the groom", is said. Sometimes there is a kind of betrothal of a girl at her birth.

Everybody, both man and woman must be married, hence it is wise to take advantage of the most favourable possibilities and arrange marriage even if the boy or girl is very young.

Perhaps the money required has just been collected and

there is the fear of it being squandered. Marriage is largely an economic question.

Moral reasons favour early marriages.

The Arabs are in constant fear of their daughters being associated with scandal. Marriage protects a woman from slander and suspicion. "The husband is protection!"

Especially mothers are anxious lest their sons get into bad ways, and marriage is a protective measure. The sexual instinct will find a natural outlet, and the parents need not fear their sons' morality.

It is considered unnatural for a young man to be compelled to control his sexual desires and live in celibate. It is a sin to allow a girl to remain unmarried if she is physically fit to become a mother.

The important thing is that the father arranges the marriage for his child. This is demanded by public opinion. Questions of principle in the interest of the family and the clan are more highly esteemed as the basis for the marriage than is the mutual affection of the couple to be united.

The young people are subject to the same marriage laws and demands. They have confidence in their own people and know that they will do their best with regard to the marriages.

If a young woman is asked about her own opinion regarding her marriage, she will answer: "I stand behind that which my father thinks right." Or: "As my father wishes, so do I wish."

A young man, especially during the wedding season, is subject to the general marriage hypnosis and thinks more of the joy which he will have from being married than of the love of a certain

girl which may awaken in him.

The great power of adaptability which man possesses, even as regards feelings, must also be remembered: e.g. where cousin marriage is unusual or directly forbidden, a young man does not think of falling in love with his cousin, or it may happen in exceptional cases only, whereas, where cousin marriage is highly esteemed, it is likely that a man will have a tender feeling for his cousin.

Cousin marriage is highly praised. The cousin is the best husband for a girl. He is blamed if he does not marry her but allows a stranger to take her away.

On the other hand, the cousin is the best wife a man can wish for. "His cousin will bear it if things go badly with him, but the stranger wife will be spoiled." And a man is not inclined to take a strange woman for his wife because he "is afraid that she will curse him in the middle of the road". But a cousin cannot curse her husband or his relatives because they are her relatives, too.

A man has a legal right to his girl cousin. "The cousin comes first. He goes before all others. He may take her -- even if she is already sitting on the bridal camel, he can take her down and marry her." And this is not mere theory; when a man really claims his girl cousin any other man must give way.

Cousins as spoken of above means the children of brothers: a father's brother's son and a father's brother's daughter. Also second cousins call them selves "father's brother's son" and "father's brother's daughter". -- They belong to the same clan.

Even if a bride is taken from another clan in the village (village bride) or comes from another place (stranger bride), she may be related to the bridegroom. They may be cross

cousins, or children of two sisters.

Edward Westermarck believed that cousin marriage and in-breeding was connected with lack of women. The people in Artas proudly say that their village is a village of "many and strong men", and the statistics show a surplus of male births.

The Muhammadan Arabs either give a bride for a bride -- the simplest form being when two men exchange their sisters -- or, a bride price is given. The bride price may be given in kind, service, or money. The bride price is no "beauty prize". There is a fixed sum for a cousin bride, a clan bride, a village bride, and a stranger bride. Of these the cousin price is the lowest, which is another advantage. A further distinction is made between the bride price of a virgin and a widow. The theory is that "a widow is only half as valuable".

There are different opinions as to the meaning of and the reason for giving a bride price.

A German ethnologist once said to me: "As soon as a bridegroom gives money for his bride to her relatives, then of course it is a purchase." Some investigators are inclined to consider the bride price a compensation for the work a woman does in her home and which her father's house loses when she goes away to work in another house. If this theory is correct, it may be asked whether the Arabs, and other peoples among whom a bride price is given, have not, in their way and within the bounds of their social arrangements, noticed that the work of a woman in the home is worth a wage. Here is a peculiar fact. It happens that even a man, in some cases, may work outside his father's house but he cannot decide how to use his wages since they do not belong to him, as an individual. They go to the collective property of the family, into the common family purse, which

is in charge of the eldest of the family. "When the father dies the eldest brother takes his place in the house. If his brothers work he arranges with their employer and receives their wages. It is he who pays for the family." This is what I have been told.

Consistently with this, when a woman works outside her father's house -- even if it is in her husband's house -- also her earnings -- a kind of "wife's wage", given in advance in the form of a bride price -- should go to her father's house and be managed by the eldest of the family, particularly as the daughter is considered a member of her father's house even after her marriage.

A certain tendency to consider the bride price belonging to the woman individually, can be traced however. In certain parts, the bride price is sometimes given wholly or partly to her in the form of an outfit and furniture, which remain her special property. Sometimes the bride price is formally offered to her and when she, as is expected, refuses to take it, she is given part of it. It is also said that the bride price is a sin, or forbidden. A proverb says: "Blood-money and bride price have no blessing."

This is connected with the feeling of guilt when a man allows his daughter, a member of the family, to be taken away from her own people. It is shameful. To the daughter it means sadness. Both to the woman herself and to her own people it is a tragedy that she has to go away from her father's house to help strangers and to build up a stranger's house by giving it sons.

In Jerusalem I once mentioned to Mr. Haddad that people consider giving of the bride price equivalent to purchase. Mr. Haddad, an Arab teacher, who had been educated at a German institution in Jerusalem, said: The Arabs, again, say that European women buy them-

selves husbands, and only if the Westerners would consent to call the dowry a form of bridegroom purchase the Arabs might agree to consider giving of a bride price a purchase.

Finally, it may be said that the Arabs make a clear distinction between a bride purchase, when (in times of extreme want and injustice) people may be forced to s e l l their daughters in the bazaar "as cattle or slaves are sold", and a giving of a bride in the ordinary way with all betrothal and wedding ceremonies observed.

The most significant of the betrothal ceremonies is the making of the marriage contract. It is stated: "When the marriage contract is made she becomes his wife, and if he wishes to dissolve it he must divorce her before the Government or the Mufti."

On the wedding-day there is the ceremonial bringing of the bride from her father's house to the bridegroom's home.

On the whole the position of the man is not changed by marriage. He may, of course, establish a new family, become the originator of a new line, but this does not happen immediately. He does not set up a new home after marrying, but remains in his father's house with his wife.

The other family members who left the house on the wedding-day, return when the wedding-week is over. The husband is then allotted only a sleeping space for him and his wife. A man and his wife, his unmarried sons and daughters, and also his married sons and their wives and children live in the same house, perhaps consisting of a single room. They have their meals together and find it specially advantageous to share the expenses; it is much cheaper this way, they realize, than if each branch of the family prepares food for themselves.

This is the custom among peasants. Rich people have large houses with many rooms. -- A common trait is that brothers remain and dwell together, I should think. Marriage does not signify the same emancipation as in the West; on the contrary it only binds a man more closely to his family, who helped him to get his bride and now expect him to realize that he is indebted to them. And he takes part in the work of the house as he did before; he obeys his elder brother or his father as he did before; he belongs to the large family of which he is an integral part only, as before.

Owing to this patriarchal system the wife is not dependant on her husband alone, but she is absorbed into the new home as a supplement to the husband, of course having her special tasks but in any case being only a small part of a large complex. It is the young wife who experiences the greater change. Uprooted from her own circle she is transplanted into an entirely different milieu -- her husband's father's house -- where she must adapt herself to a new position in relation to the members of the new home, her husband's relatives: his parents, his sisters, his brothers and their wives, and others.

Still more complicated is her position, if her husband takes a second wife.

In a polygynous family, a woman speaks of her co-wife as "my husband's wife". A child speaks of its mother's co-wife as "my father's wife", and of her son as "my father's son".

There is a certain gulf between children of co-wives. Only children who have the same father and mother really feel like brothers and sisters. It is said: "He who from my father's 'back' came to my mother's womb, he is my brother." And the following proverb

says the same perhaps even more clearly: "My brother, that is my mother's son and not her co-wife's son, we both turned in the same womb."

In a society where religion and customs place no obstacles in the way of polygyny it is easy for people to find reasons for the desirability, or even the necessity of polygyny. The cause is usually to be sought in the husband, who may wish to have a new wife, because his first wife is old, and has lost her beauty and has reached the age when she can no longer bear children. Nevertheless there may be cases when the wife herself expresses the wish to have a co-wife. The home requires female labour, and it is not the custom to keep women servants. Another cause which may drive a woman to urge her husband to marry a second wife is if she is childless or has only daughters. In case of the husband's death, his relatives would take possession of his portion of land, and the wife would have to leave the house, if she had no son to justify her remaining there.

In my statistics from Artas, near Bethlehem, of a total of 199 husbands, 25 men, or 12.56 per cent, died without leaving sons. -- The man with the largest number of children was polygynous. By his four wives (not all living with him at the same time) he had 31 children of whom 18 were sons and 13 daughters. 12 of these children died at an early age, before they were "marriageable". Of the 19 "surviving" children 12 were sons and 7 daughters. -- The largest number of children ever borne by one woman was 15, and of them, 10 died in infancy, and only 5 survived. -- Of a total of 935 births in the village there were 293 deaths (including 8 deaths at birth) in infancy, i.e. 31.34 per cent of all babies born in the village died at an early age. In other words, almost one third of the villagers

died at the age of less than about seven years. -- In addition there were 13 cases of abortion.

Infant mortality varied greatly in Artas. Of a woman who bore 13 children: 7 boys and 5 girls died and only one child, a son, survived: "It was always being said: Miryam has born a child! and then: The child is dead!" Of women whose children die immediately after birth it is said: "She brings children into the world and buries them." There is also an expression: "The poor thing is pregnant, tell it to the graveyard!" -- "This year many little children have died", said Alya (a woman I met in Artas), in November 1925. But she added: "All the women whose children died are again pregnant." And then triumphantly: "The pregnant ones -- the women -- have conquered the graveyard!"

With this high child mortality there has been no fear of over-population. I do not think that the responsibility towards the unborn, the fear of not being able to feed them, has worried the people. The Arabs say: "Each child brings his wealth with him." And: "Each one brings with him all he needs."

Yet I do not think that women are always willing to have many children. The comparatively long nursing period -- one-and-a-half to two, two-and-a-half, even up to as much as four years -- is probably not only for the sake of the child, to allow it to enjoy mother's milk as long as possible. As it is generally assumed that nursing makes a new pregnancy more difficult it may be thought that this is self-protection, in order to postpone an undesired pregnancy. Women's work is so hard that one cannot believe that they constantly wish to bear a child. Yet there are other circumstances which contradict this attitude.

When it is said: "If there was a noble woman she would not give birth to children at all", it is of course a paradox. The explanation given of this curious expression is: "Two-thirds of pregnancy is jealousy." According to this most cases of child-bearing would be due to envy and jealousy. If a woman sees another woman with children, she envies her, she wishes to be like her or to surpass her. And then there is the fear that if the husband does not have sexual intercourse with her, he may be tempted to take another wife. Or, if he already has a second or a third wife, all these women maintain their right to have intercourse with him. Under such conditions it is clear that a woman must be especially anxious to insist upon her right of intercourse with her husband and to bear him children. Children are an outward sign that she has succeeded in maintaining her position as his wife -- a beloved wife --, and that she has not been separated from his bed in spite of the rivalry of her co-wives.