

## Qur'anic General Account on the Arab Jahiliyyah's Socio-Economic Life

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### ABSTRACT

*Much has been written concerning the Arab jahiliyyah's life which lay great emphasis on historical perspective. Ibn Hisham in his al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah and Ibn Ishaq in Kitab al-Siyar wa al-Maghazi have been regarded as two authentic sources which are discussing the related theme. Besides these two references, there are other books on Sirah which are also highlighting the jahiliyyah life. The prominent of them are Al-Bidayah Wa al-Nihayah by Ibn Kathir, Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh by Ibn Athir and Al-Mufasssol Fi Tarikh al-<sup>o</sup>Arab Qabl al-Islam by Dr Jawad <sup>o</sup>Ali. The principal aim of this article is to explore several aspects of the Arab's socio-economy life during jahiliyyah' s (ignorance) period strictly in the light of the Qur'an. As there are many Qur'anic commentaries related to the theme, it is not difficult to comprehend this particular issue.*

### ABSTRAK

*Kehidupan masyarakat Arab jahiliyyah telah banyak dibincang dari perspektif sejarah. Ibn Hisham dengan 'al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah' nya dan Ibn Ishaq dengan karyanya 'Kitab al-Siyar wa al-Maghazi' dianggap sebagai dua sumber muktabar yang membincangkan tema berkaitan. Di samping kedua-dua sumber tersebut terdapat buku-buku lain yang menampilkan kehidupan masyarakat jahiliyyah. Antaranya yang terkenal ialah Al-Bidayah Wa al-Nihayah oleh Ibn Kathir, Al-Kamil Fi al-Tarikh oleh Ibn Athir dan Al-Mufasssol Fi Tarikh al-<sup>o</sup>Arab Qabl al-Islam oleh Dr.Jawad <sup>o</sup>Ali. Tujuan utama artikel ini ialah untuk mendedahkan beberapa aspek sosio-ekonomi kehidupan Arab Jahiliyyah berdasarkan perspektif al-Qur'an. Tema ini (sosio-ekonomi Arab jahiliyyah) tidak sukar difahami memandangkan terdapat tafsir-tafsir al-Qur'an yang jelas mengenainya.*

### INTRODUCTION

The term of jahiliyyah has always been associated with the Arabs before the advent of The Prophet Muhammad s.a.w as a Messenger of Allah. It was their negative attitude and way of life which led to the said label. This article will concentrate on the jahiliyyah's socio-economic life. Among the prominent

issues related to their socio-economic life (the Arabians) are burying daughters alive, adultery, murder, alcoholism and gambling, usury and love for worldly life. These issues will be discussed as follows:

#### BURYING DAUGHTERS ALIVE

The position of women in ancient Arabian society was precarious. They were regarded as a source of weakness, humiliation and poverty. Cruelty to women reached its zenith when the Arabians did not even hesitate to bury their newborn baby daughters alive, believing strongly that they would bring disgrace to their family if allowed to live alive. Fakhru al-Din al-Razī while commenting on the verse:

Slay not your children, fearing a fall to poverty. We shall provide for them and for you. Lo! the slaying of them is great sin." (al-Isra':31) observed that it was a usual practice for them that whenever they found out that their wives were pregnant they tried their best to keep it as secret as possible until they knew the gender of the baby. If it was a baby boy they were delighted. On the other hand, if it was a baby girl then they were very sad and kept vigil in their house for several days and planned to get rid of the baby. (Fakhru al-Din al-Razī n.d:55).

The principle reason for this practice was that they were afraid that they might become poor and these daughters would bring disgrace to the family. This cruelty is emphatically condemned by the Qur'an:

Slay not your children, fearing a fall to poverty. (al-Isra':31)

Al-Razī (al-Razī n.d:56) has provided the following methods of killing daughters commonly practised by the Arabians during Jahiliyyah period:

1. Digging a grave and burying the baby alive.
2. Throwing the baby down from a mountain top.
3. Drowning the baby in water.
4. Slaughtering the baby.

Those who for some reasons did not kill their daughters were humiliated. The Qur'an testifies this:

Shall he retain it on sufferance and contempt. (al-Nahl:59)

The Qur'an treats this practice of burying daughters alive as evil, *sa'a* (al-Nahl:59) and even characterises it as the great sin, *khut'an kabir* (al-Isra':31). Furthermore the Qur'an provides a remedy by prohibiting them to kill their daughters and rejects their false assumptions that keeping their daughters alive would led to poverty and disgrace (al-Nahl:51, al-Isra':31).

The Prophet also in one of his traditions is reported to have said:

Whosoever has a daughter and does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favour his son over her, God will enter him into paradise. (Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, no. 1957)

The above hadith of the Prophet clearly manifests this cruel practice and its wide ranging effects on *Jahili* society.

#### ADULTERY

*Zina*, adultery in Arabic denotes illegal sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. The Pagan Arabians did not consider '*zina*' an abominable act. They rather took pride in its performance. To them it was their unrestricted privilege to have sexual intercourse with any woman they liked. It has been related that whenever the woman conceived after *zina* and gave birth to a baby, the baby was regarded as legitimate (Jawad Ali 1977, 5:560). There were two types of '*zina*' committed by the Arabians at that time, (i) adultery with unmarried women; (ii) adultery with married women. The first was considered as legal while the second was regarded as illegal and punishable. Later, Islam acknowledged and adopted the jahiliyyah punishment by stoning married woman who has committed adultery.

The Qur'an does not only prohibits *zina* but also forbids people to go near to it (al-Isra':32) and calls it '*al-fahushah*', indecent act and '*Sa'a al-Sabil*', evil way (al-Isra':32). In his '*Tafsir*', al-Razi equates '*fahushah*' as the destroyer of human progeny and '*sa'a al-sabil*' which does not discriminate between the actions of human beings and animals (al-Razi n.d, vol. 20:199). Its implication as explained by al-Tabarsi destroys the family structure such that there is no proper relationship between husband and wife and between father and children (al-Tabarsi 1936, 3:413).

#### MURDER

The Arabians during the days of ignorance taking revenge for killing to its extreme. If a relative of a person was killed then he would take revenge by killing the murderer and his family members including the father, mother and children (Sayyid Qutb 1982, 4:225).

The Qur'an strongly prohibits unjust killing (al-Isra':33) and gives alternatives or solutions for this problem. The Qur'an has provided the following alternatives for the first time in Arab history for the revenge of an unjust killing:

1. Only the killer has been proved guilty can be killed (al-Isra':33)
2. The killer can be forgiven (42:37)

3. The oppressed party can accept *qisas*, retaliation for killing and the '*diyah*', compensation can be settled by the killer (al-Baqarah:178).

#### ALCOHOLISM AND GAMBLING

Alcoholism and gambling are two habits that signify the outstanding characteristics of the Arabs *jahiliyyah* society. The influence of alcohol and love for the consumption of alcohol were so great that they occupied a special place in their poetic collections. This indicates clearly that the Arabs were feeling proud about its consumption. Alcohol was available everywhere and served at occasions. *Aqar*, *al-sikkir* and *al-mudmun* are among the names of wines which were known by the Arabians. It has been narrated that in Makkah, taverns were found at all parts and most of them were owned by Jews. As a result of heavy drinking social injustice was commonly practised and it has been reported that many drug addicts committed suicide. Among those who have committed due to alcoholism as reported by Jawad °Ali were 'Amru Ibn Kulthum al-Tha'labi, al-Barh Ibn Mashr al-Ta'i, Zuhair Ibn Jibab Ibn Hubl and Abu al-Bara' Ibn Malik Ibn Ja'far.

There was a group of people who abstained from taking alcohol. It includes the chief, the noble people and the upright people, *Hunafa'* For example, al-Walid Ibn al-Mughirah, Abdullah Ibn Jud'an, Waraqah Ibn Nawfal and Harth Ibn °Abid al-Makhzumī did not consume alcohol. Ibn al-Mughirah even prohibited alcohol for his family and punished his son, Hisham, who was once found drunk (Jawad 1977, 4:671).

The *jahili* Arabians were heavily involved in gambling. Al-Dahhak reported on the authority of Ibn Abbas, gambling was known as *al-Qimar* during the *jahiliyyah* period. He added that there were several forms of gambling practised by the Arabians such as 'divine arrows', *al-Darb bi al-Qadh*, and *al-Nusb*, and arrow shaft *zalima* (Ibn Kathir 1986, 2:94-95).

The Qur'an uses two terms pertaining to gambling, *al-nusb* and *zalima* (al-Ma'idah:90) and *al-nard* has been mentioned in one of the traditions of the Prophet (al-Albanī 1989:933),

Whoever plays backgammon, *al-nard*, indeed he is rebellious to God and the Prophet.

Both alcoholism and gambling are categorised by the Qur'an as a 'great sin' (al-Baqarah:219) and 'an abomination (al-Ma'idah:90). Their effects could lead people to enmity and keep them away from remembrance of Allah and prayer (al-Ma'idah:91). Therefore God commands the believers to abstain from alcoholism and gambling for their own welfare.

#### USURY

Usury (*riba*) is one of the outstanding features during the *Jahiliyyah* period and was a common practice among the Arabians. There are a number of scholars and commentators who have tried to trace the forms and practice of usury during that period.

According to Jawad Ali, the system of usury which was known and practised by the Arabs during *Jahiliyyah* period was lending some dirhams and dinars for a specific time and at the same time increasing the agreeable amount (Jawad 1977, 7:427).

Al-Tabari in his Tafsir illustrates the practice of usury during that period. A debtor would say to his creditor that he would give him so much if he granted him extension of time (al-Tabari 1954, vol. 3:69). In addition, al-Razi says that the *Jahiliyyah* Arabs used to advance their money and recover usury monthly without affecting the principal loan. When the time for settlement approaches, the principal amount lent was demanded and if the debtor was unable to pay, the creditor increased the amount in his own favour and granted the debtor an extension time (al-Razi n.d, 7:91). Thus it is evident that the definition of usury provided by al-Razi is almost similar to the present idea of compound interest.

From the above explanations, it can be said that the usury which was prevalent during the *Jahiliyyah* period consisted of two salient characteristics. Firstly, 'the extending of the time limit' and secondly, the amount being increased was so much that the borrower in the end will have to pay double or more than the original amount to his creditor. Therefore, as M.A. Mannan observed, that if it is judged by any standard of socio-economic ethics, the rate of usury was excessively high (Abdul Mannan 1986:119).

The prohibition of usury according to Umer Chapra appears in the Qur'an in four different revelations (Umer Chapra 1985:56). First (30:39), in Makkah, it was emphasised that while interest deprived wealth of God's blessings, charity increased it manifold. Second (al-Nisa':161), in the early Madinah period, it was vehemently condemned as follows:

We have prepared for those among them who reject faith a grievous punishment. (al-Nisa':161).

Third (al-Imran:130-132), around the second or third year after migration, Muslims were enjoined to keep away from usury (doubled and multiplied) if they desired their own welfare. Finally (al-Baqarah:275-281), near the completion of the Prophet's *da'wah* severely condemned those who practised usury, established a clear distinction between trade and usury, and required them to annul all outstanding usury and warned them harshly if they continued to practise it. With this final revelation concerning usury, the Qur'an totally prohibited usury which was previously practised and this prohibition remains to the present time.

The Qur'an provided an alternative by promoting trade instead of usury and recognises it was not only as a lawful profession but as morally praise worthy. The Qur'an lays down in explicit terms:

Allah permitteth trading and forbiddeth interest. (al-Baqarah:275)

The prohibition of usury also existed in the Prophet's tradition. On the occasion of his Farewell Pilgrimage the Prophet gave the sermon (Samullah 1982:36):

Usury is forbidden but you will be entitled to recover your principal. Do not wrong and you shall not be wronged. Allah has decreed that there should be no usury and I am making a beginning by remitting the amount of interest which Abbas Ibn Abd al-Muttalib has to receive. Verily it is remitted in its entirety.

#### LOVE FOR WORLDLY LIFE

This materialistic values have taken place as one of the main characteristics of *jahiliyyah* life. There was a privileged class who were proud of their wealth and privileges which they enjoyed in the society. The Qur'anic evidence proved the proudness of this privileged class towards their material worldly life. The Holy Qur'an says:

The mutual rivalry for piling up (the good things of this world) diverts you. (al-Takathur:1)

The above revelation is concerning Banu Sahn and Banu Abd Manaf who were proud of their wealth and their children (al-Baydawi n.d:194).

On the account of material privileges, the privileged class become more inclined towards luxuries and comforts which considerably increased social injustice. Consequently, the less privileged class such as slaves, the weak, the poor and orphans lost their support and were humiliated and exploited by them. The Qur'an speaks of this social injustice in a number of places:

Then such is the (man) who repulses the orphan (with harshness), and encourages not the feeding of the indigent. (al-Ma'un:2-3)

The Qur'an states:

Know ye (all), that the life of this world is but play and amusement, poem and mutual boasting and multiplying, (in rivalry) among yourselves, riches and children. Here is a similitude: How rain and the growth which it brings forth, delight (The hearts of) tillers; soon it withers; thou wilt see it grow yellow; then it becomes dry and crumbles away. But in the hereafter is a penalty severe (for the devotees wrong). And what is the life of this world, but goods and chattels of deception. (al-Hadid:20)

Al-Baydawi relates the verse (107:2-3) to the several eminent figures during the '*jahiliyyah*' period who used to oppress the orphan and the needy.

They were Abu Jahl, Abu Sufyan and al-Walid Ibn al-Mughirah (al-Baydawi n.d:195).

In (al-Humazah:3) the Qur'an clearly expresses their belief that their wealth will remain with them forever. For them the worldly life was the only life and they rejected the life hereafter (al-Jathiah:24).

Indulgence in materialism at the cost of a spiritual life was condemned and rejected by the Qur'an. The method of the Qur'an in dealing with this privileged class and their negative attitude towards other people as mentioned above is that they had been warned from time to time about the punishment in the life hereafter. The Qur'an expresses these in the following verses:

You shall certainly see hellfire. (al-Takathur:6)

Similarly the Qur'an repeats:

Those who rest not their hope on their meeting with us, but are pleased and satisfied with the life of the present and those who heed not our signs. Their abode is the fire, because of the (evil) they earned. (Yunus:78)

Again the Qur'an says.

The life of this world that deceived them. So against themselves will they bear witness that they rejected faith. Thus, for thy Lord is not mindful of anything that they do. (al-An'am:130-131)

The Qur'an repeated this in several other 'surahs' such as 17:75, 18:104-106, 13:26, 34, 16:107-109.

## CONCLUSION

The Arabians life style before the advent of the Prophet were in a precarious conditions. Their moral value crisis reached its zenith when burying the daughters alive were widely practised. Adultery was regarded as legal. Alcoholism, gambling, usury and love for worldly life were deeply rooted in their daily life. For the solution of the said moral crisis and for the sake of their own welfare (the Arabians), the Qur'an did not only criticised such shabby acts but also provided a clear guidance to pave way out for the problem. For example, trading was promoted instead of usury (al-Baqarah:275). For the continuity of human progeny, adultery was prohibited and married reckoned as legal (al-Nisa':3). These rules has been remaining useful and applicable for present time.

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