

## Unit 3: Arab Society

### Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

### Be aware of the following

- Broad range of family ties in Saudi Arabian culture
- Importance of clan ties within the Arab world
- Authority given age and males in Arab cultures
- Reasons for Saudi male's aversion to manual labor
  - Relief with which many Saudi Arabian women view cloistering practice within marriage

### Identify

- Social virtues of Saudi males
- Divorce practice in Saudi Arabia
- Accepted behaviors regarding Saudi women/men
  - Guidelines for family members living in Saudi Arabia

### Realize

- Arab women often are guardians of the honor and dignity of a family/clan
- Female/male roles in Arab culture
- Perceptions of impropriety which determine sex separation practice in Saudi Arabia
  - When living in Saudi Arabia, the necessity to accept society for what it is, rather than proving the superiority of one's own values



## Unit 3: Arab Society

### 1. Family Life



**a. Structure** Traditionally, the family has been the basis of the Arab social structure. Although the family is losing ground where social change is occurring most rapidly, family loyalty still predominates all aspects of life. For most Americans the word family denotes a social unit consisting of husband, wife, and children. In Saudi culture, the concept of family is much broader.

An Arab's family is his kin group (or clan), which probably includes several households and all male first cousins on his father's side. The members of this group usually live in close proximity to each other, meet frequently, celebrate feasts and other occasions together and coordinate their business and political activity.

Regard for the well-being of the clan is a key element in Arab psychology. Most students of Arab culture are familiar with the following proverb. "I and my brothers against my cousins; I and my cousins against the stranger." That dictum, apart from commenting on hierarchical loyalties, recalls two relevant facts about Arab society.



The first is that the extended family (or kin group) is the fundamental unit of political and social action. The second is that related kin groups may be allies or enemies depending upon the existing economic and political conditions. Kin ties enhance the security of the individual.

However, they also exact commitments from him, which far exceed those required of the average American. In America, one normally sees the needs of his immediate family as being first and foremost among social concerns. In Saudi Arabia and the Arab World in general, a different norm prevails. An Arab may deny his own children for the sake of a brother, nephew, or cousin when clan interests so dictate.

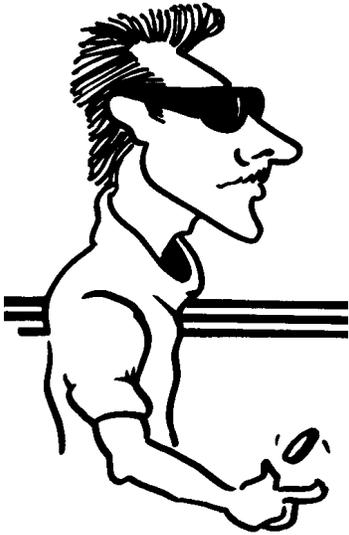
Regard for the welfare of the clan has also influenced attitudes of many Arabs on reproduction, there being considerable inducement to have numerous offspring. The popular notion that Arabs lament the birth of females is a distortion. Daughters eventually marry and leave their clan, yet their betrothal is an important part of alliance building. Inherited status normally outweighs personal achievements in determining one's place in society. Kinship determines a person's identity, status, and prospects for success in life. The individualism which is so prevalent in America has no role in Arab culture.

### b. Authority



Throughout the Arab World, authority is generally related to age and sex. The Arabs associate age with experience and wisdom. Thus, the head of the clan is normally the oldest competent male member. When he dies or becomes incapacitated, his place will likely be taken by his oldest son or one of his own brothers.

When a son succeeds his father as family head, he thereby gains authority over his mother. Arab society is dominated by males--at least in public. Wives are expected to obey and serve their husbands and to defer to them in public, although in many cases they "get their own way" at home. Children are taught to obey and respect their parents as well as the other adult members of the clan.



The roles of parents are more differentiated than they are in American society. The father traditionally acts as the disciplinarian and authority figure. He remains aloof from the task of raising children in their early years. He concerns himself with the upbringing of sons once they have been weaned but leaves the upbringing of daughters to the women of the family.

The mother assumes most of the burdens of child rearing --at least until her offspring are weaned. She pampers sons, not daughters, as nearly all Arabs generally have a preference for male offspring. Children of both sexes are taught to conform to the norms and conventions of Saudi society. They are not encouraged to seek individuality, as they are in America.

Honor and dignity are tied to the good repute of one's family and especially to that of its women. Among the younger generations, however, a gradual trend toward a more liberal life is evident. Most of Arab society is a man's world, where the role of women is severely restricted.



Polygamy, although on the decline, is still a way of life for many Arabs. Women are generally kept veiled and secluded. Marriages are arranged by the family, and the duties of women are seen as service to the males of the household and giving birth to male offspring. Because of more liberal views on education and employment of women in the cities, the situation there is gradually changing.

**2. The Roles of Men and Women** Apart from home life, the roles of men and women in society at large are highly differentiated. Indeed, the persistence of traditional norms limits the participation of women in public affairs. Saudi women are allowed to work, and a growing number of educated females have taken jobs as teachers, nurses, and secretaries.



However, their opportunities for employment are limited to these and a few other occupations. Segregation of the sexes is obligatory, and so agencies or businesses which employ females must provide completely separate facilities for them--work space, lavatory, entrance-exit. Most older Saudi women lack formal education and exposure to Western ways. They are, therefore, disinclined to work outside the home.

Most Saudi men, on their part, are adverse to do work which is traditionally reserved for women or servants, such as housekeeping. They do, however, attend to many family-related chores, partly because Saudi law prohibits women from driving. Unless the family employs a driver, the husband/father must take his wife shopping or do the shopping himself, drive his children to school when they miss the bus, and take his wife or children to the doctor in case of illness or injury. He must also attend to school registration, bill paying, service for vehicle(s) and home, and many other similar chores. Such responsibilities often serve as justification for absence from work.



Otherwise, Saudi men pursue the social virtues--hospitality, generosity, upholding honor, and avoiding shame or disgrace. As shame is avoided, so also manual labor is shunned. The disdain for it is related to notions of tribal nobility. Traditionally, the men of powerful and prominent tribal groups engage in camel breeding and herding, commerce, and, less prestigiously, date cultivation. They do not till soil, cut stone, or cast metals. Such occupations are left to ignoble tribes or non-Arabs, and both the work and people are accordingly despised.

**a. Marriage and Divorce** Due to the enforced segregation of the sexes in public and the continued practice of arranging marriages, there is no dating among Saudi Arabian citizens.



The ideal arrangement is for a man to marry his father's brother's daughter. Other matches may be necessary, and these are socially acceptable so long as there is no significant disparity between the status and nobility of the clans involved. The role of parents in selecting mates varies considerably. In some cases, girls are betrothed even before they reach puberty. In other cases, young people are allowed to choose their mates.

Fathers may have anxiety about the conduct of their daughters as Arab society traditionally demands virginity on the part of unmarried females.

The honor of a clan or tribe is in large part determined by the virtue of the women born into it. In the event that the sexual code of conduct is violated, the head of the clan is obliged to restore its honor--perhaps by decreeing death for the offender. The world became witness to this practice with the "death of a princess" incident in 1980.

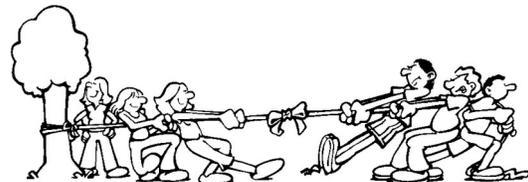


Young Saudis are encouraged, by both family and government, to marry and have children. Some years ago, the government made available monetary grants to help offset the expenses of marriage. Traditionally, the man pays a dowry and hosts a lavish feast for the families involved. The wedding itself is a simple civil ceremony; it is followed by separate festivities for men and women. By Islamic law, Muslim men are allowed to have up to four wives.

The practice of polygamy is diminishing because of economic and demographic constraints. Nonetheless, many Saudi men have more than one wife. The wealthier ones among them may keep their wives in separate homes. Otherwise, there is one household, and the women all share the duties of child rearing and housekeeping.

Regarding divorce, Islamic law makes it much easier for the husband to effect than for the wife. Nonetheless, a woman can seek the protection of her father's clan in the event of severe marital strife. She will most likely return to her parents' home in the event of divorce and live there until she remarries. If children are involved, their father will ultimately have custody, although they may remain with their mother until they reach school age.

**b. Separation of the Sexes** One of the most problematic areas of difference between our cultures is the status and treatment of women in the Gulf area, and the Muslim world, in general.



The near-total separation of the sexes outside the bounds of the family and the cloistering of women fly in the face of American belief in the desirability of freedom and equality.

We feel sorry for these women, who usually don't feel sorry for themselves at all. They often greet marriage with relief, glad that they will no longer have to venture out and deal with the world, even to the limited extent that they had known before marrying. They may well pity the Western woman, who is not properly respected or protected, and consequently must be constantly in a state of anxiety and real danger.



However a visitor may judge this system from a personal standpoint, it is simply a fact of the culture of this area, especially in Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, and must be accepted as such and be treated seriously.

The women of Saudi Arabia are probably the most restricted--or the best protected, depending on your point of view.

They are separated from men outside the family almost totally, including in mosques, schools (where males can instruct girls only through the medium of television), outdoor entertainments such as zoos (in Saudi Arabia, there is a special day for women), social activities within the city and even in automobiles, where women are expected to ride in the back seat.

Saudi women would not go anywhere alone, and would exercise extreme caution, even with a group of women. They are not allowed to drive cars or take buses, and taking a taxi is considered very risky business. Taking a taxi alone would be extremely dangerous, and, in fact, a taxi might refuse to stop for a lone women, Western or Saudi, because of what people would say. One result is that men do most of the shopping and if a woman needs to shop for personal items, she will take her husband or another male relative with her.



These women feel constantly watched and judged, as even a rumor of misbehavior can be devastating to the woman involved and her whole family. It is fairly well-accepted there that if a man and a woman are left alone together, they will not be able to restrain themselves. Thus, the hint of impropriety, such as a woman alone in a taxi, is almost as damaging as proven fact.

Some women who have spent time in the West become poignantly aware of the cost of these attitudes. Their countrywomen, they say, often have no self-confidence, and if actually attacked, would not feel they had the strength—or perhaps the right—to push the man away. They feel defenseless, fearful, going through life like “a bird with broken wings.”

Foreigners can best function in this society by first accepting it and not attempting to prove that their way is superior. For men, especially, it is important to adopt the prescribed behavior in regard to women, as any transgression could be extremely harmful to the woman. Therefore, male visitors should never approach a woman on the street, even to ask directions.

If a man recognizes a woman that he has met somewhere else—perhaps in a private home or in a professional capacity—he should not attempt a conversation in public or greet her by name. Even if a woman drops her packages or falls down, men will hesitate to help her, unless she is obviously in real trouble. And the woman, already frightened and embarrassed by calling attention to herself, would prefer to be left alone to straighten herself out and be on her way.



For Western women, modest caution would not be totally paranoid. It is good to bear in mind that some of the men that they will be dealing with are not accustomed to having women friends or to being alone with a woman. In addition, many people hold a low opinion of Western women and their level of morality, which may make them seem an easy mark. For these reasons, a certain amount of discretion and awareness are advisable, especially when alone.

**c. Behavior Towards Women** Respect the privacy of women wearing the veil.



Do not show any type of--even very casual--interest in any Saudi woman. Avoid staring and lengthy eye contact. Do not try to engage an Arab woman in conversation unless you were formally introduced. Do not attempt to photograph Arab women unless you have permission. You should include male family members in any pictures of women. The only exceptions might be Saudi (or other Arab) women working in hospitals, or in business offices. But you should never try to date them.

When visiting in a Saudi home, never ask about or show interest in the female members of the family. It's quite unlikely that you will even see them.

Also, if you invite a Saudi family or couple to your place, it is very probable that only the male head of the family will come. This may not apply in the case of a Saudi family or couple that has been abroad and learned to speak English. They might follow Western social customs when with Americans.

**3. Notes for Female Family Members** While in the Middle East, you--the American woman--should be aware that as a representative of the United States it will be important to use good judgment, tact, and diplomacy in your daily associations with the Saudis, for you and your family will be observed through the eyes of a people who, for centuries, have maintained rigid Islamic laws and traditions.

You will find your status as an individual radically changed. The many legal and religious restrictions imposed on Muslim women will most likely be imposed on you also. For the Westerner this change will be dramatic. You will have to adjust your frame of mind to the differences in living conditions, social values, customs, and traditions. At first the adjustment may not be easy.

In addition to the guidelines below, you should become thoroughly familiar with the above sections. They are intended to help you and your children avoid situations which can be misinterpreted as disrespectful to your host country, or be considered in violation of Moslem traditions.



### a. Remember Always

- Be aware that men and women in the Saudi social community are two distinct and separate groups. They do not usually intermingle at public or social functions.
- Seek opportunities to participate in social activities for women. There are many volunteer groups and international women's clubs which you can join.
- Offer extra servings and refreshment at least three times when you have guests. Since Saudi custom considers it rude to accept immediately, most Saudis will refuse the first few times.
- Bargain in a *Souk* (market place). Saudi vendors expect this, regardless of the time and effort it takes to agree on a price.
- Know where your children are at all times. They should be discouraged from riding unaccompanied in a taxi, or wandering through the towns. Keep a close watch when you are out in public and discourage any mischief-making.
- Caution your children against making derogatory remarks or making fun of any Saudi person or situation.



## b. Remember to Never

- Drive a car. It is against the law for women.
- Discuss the issue of women's rights, equality, or liberation with either men or women.
- Speak to Arab men unless you have been properly introduced.
- Stare at Saudi men, veiled women, or persons who are praying.
- Visit Arab homes between 2:00 and 4:00 p.m. as this is the customary time for rest and relaxation.
- Linger beyond dinner when you are invited to a Saudi home. Dinner is the final climax of an evening of conversation and entertainment.

- Offer a Saudi any liquor or pork, as these are forbidden by the Moslem religion.



## c. Precautions

All the precautionary measures you would normally take in the United States for the safety and security of your family would, of course, apply while you are in any foreign country.

If you are expecting a servant, or men to service your household utilities, always make sure they show proper identification. Children should be made aware that they are never to accept offers of transportation from strangers. Always keep your doors locked whether you are in your home or sitting in a car waiting for your husband or friends. Be wary of any stranger who might approach you at the airport unless you have prior knowledge of the individual's identification, or have proof that the person is a part of a previously arranged plan to offer you transportation.

## Review Quiz: Arab Society

**True/False** Place a T or an F in the blank provided.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Arab society is primarily a man's world; Arab homes are primarily a woman's world.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The honor of a clan is determined, in large part, by the sword fighting ability of the male members.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ For most Arabs, the concept of family is roughly the same as that of an American.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Emphasis on the individual plays a significant role in Arab culture.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ A candlelight dinner of Virginia ham and Monterey wine would be a good way to introduce a Saudi Arabian Arab friend to American culture.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ When visiting in a Saudi home, it is helpful to inquire about male and female family members.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The extended family is the basic unit of Arab political and social action.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ For many Saudi Arabian Arabs, related kin groups are always allies--regardless of economic or political condition.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ In Saudi society, separation of the sexes is the norm.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Saudi men uphold honor and avoid shame by frequently engaging in manual labor.



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