

Chapter 6: Pre Islamic Arabian Thought

Pre Islamic Arabian Thought by Shaikh Inayatullah , M.A Ph.D., Formerly, Professor of Arabic, University of the Panjab, Lahore (Pakistan)

In the present chapter, we are concerned only with the people of Arabia who lived in the age immediately preceding the rise of Islam. The ancient civilized inhabitants of southern Arabia, the Sabaeans and Himyarites, have been left out of account, not only because the relevant materials at our disposal are scanty and fragmentary, but also because they are far removed from the Islamic times, with which the present volume is primarily and directly concerned.

We cannot hope to understand properly the religious or philosophical ideas of a people without comprehending their economic and social background. A few words about the social structure of pre-Islamic Arabs should, therefore Form a suitable and helpful prelude to a description of their religious outlook.

The land of Arabia is mainly a sandy plain, which is partly steppe-land and partly desert. Except in the oases which are few and far between, the land is bare and monotonous, unfit for cultivation and unable to support settled communities. From times immemorial, its inhabitants have been of necessity nomadic, living on the produce of their camels and sheep.

The majority of the ancient Arabs were, therefore, pastoralists who were constantly on the move in search of grass and water for their herds and flocks. Restless and rootless, with no permanent habitations, they stood at a low level of culture and were innocent of those arts and sciences which are associated in our minds with civilized life.

The art of reading and writing was confined only to a few individuals in certain commercial centres, while illiteracy was almost universal among the sons of the desert. Their mental horizon was narrow, and the struggle for existence in their inhospitable environment was so severe that their energies were exhausted in satisfying the practical and material needs of daily life, and they had little time or inclination for religious or philosophic speculation.

Their religion was a vague polytheism and their philosophy was summed up in a number of pithy sayings.

Although the ancient Arabs had no written literature, they possessed a language which was distinguished for its extraordinary rich vocabulary. In the absence of painting and sculpture, they had cultivated their language as a fine art and were justly proud of its enormous power of expression. Accordingly, the poets and orators who could make an effective and aesthetic use of its wonderful resources were held in especially high esteem among them.

Judging by the evidence furnished by the pre-Islamic poets, polemical passages in the Qur'an and the later Islamic literature, idolatry based on polytheism prevailed throughout ancient Arabia. Almost every tribe had its own god, which were the centre of its religious life and the immediate object of its devotion. The ancient Arabs, however, at the same time believed in the existence of a Supreme God, whom they called Allah.

But this belief was rather vague and their faith in Him was correspondingly weak. They might invoke Allah in time of danger, but as soon as the danger was over they forgot all about Him. They also recognized and worshipped a large number of other subordinate gods along with Him, or at least thought that they would intercede for them with Him.

Three deities in particular, viz., al-`Uzza, al-Manat, and al-Lat, were accorded special veneration as the daughters of Allah. It was this association of subordinate deities with Allah which is technically known as shirk (association of gods with Allah) and which was condemned by the Prophet as an unpardonable sin. Shirk was held in special abhorrence, as it obscured belief in the oneness of God.

The innumerable deities, which the pagan Arabs worshipped, form a long series and are the subject of a monograph, written by ibn al-Kalbi, who flourished in the second century of the Islamic era and is counted among the leading authorities on Arabian antiquity.¹ A few of them have been incidentally mentioned in the Qur'an also.

These Arabian deities, which were of diverse nature, fell into different Categories. Some of them were personifications of abstract ideas, such as jadd (luck), sa'd (fortunate, auspicious), rida' (good-will, favour), wadd (friendship, affection), and manaf (height, high place). Though originally abstract in character, they were conceived in a thoroughly concrete fashion. Some deities derived their names from the places where they were venerated. Dhu al-Khalasah and Dhu al-Shara may be cited as examples of this kind.

The heavenly bodies and other powers of nature, venerated as deities, occupied an important place in the Arabian pantheon. The sun (shams, regarded as feminine) was worshipped by several Arab tribes, and was honoured with a sanctuary and an idol. The name `Abd Shams, "Servant of the Sun," was found in many parts of the country. The sun was referred to by descriptive titles also, such as shariq, "the brilliant one."

The constellation of the Pleiades (al-Thurayya), which was believed to bestow rain, also appears as a deity in the name `Abd al-Thurayya. The planet Venus, which shines with remarkable brilliance in the clear skies of Arabia, was revered as a great goddess under the name of al-`Uzza, which may be translated as “the Most Mighty.”

It had a sanctuary at Nakhlah near Mecca. The name `Abd al-`Uzza was very common among the pre-Islamic Arabs. The Arabian cult of the planet Venus has been mentioned by several classical and Syriac authors.

There were certain Arabian deities whose titles in themselves indicate that they occupied a position of supreme importance in the eyes of their votaries. Such deities were: al-Malik, “the King” (compare the personal name, `Abd al-Malik); and Ba'1 or Ba'al, “the Lord” which was very common among the northern Semites.

The deities of heathen Arabia were represented by idols, sacred stones, and other objects of worship. Sacred stones served at the same time as altars; the blood of the victims was poured over them or smeared over them. At the period with which we are dealing, the Arabs sacrificed camels, sheep, goats, and, less often, kine.

The flesh of the sacrifice was usually eaten by the worshippers, the god contenting himself with the blood alone. Originally, every sacrifice was regarded as food to be consumed by the god concerned or at least as a means of pacifying him. The sacrifice was, thus, believed to bring the worshipper into close connection with the deity. Hence the Arabic terms, qurba and qurban (derived from the root, QRB, to be near), which are used for a sacrifice.

The Arabs, like the Hebrews, were in the habit of sacrificing the firstlings of their flocks and herds (fara¹). Soon after the birth of an infant, his head was shaven and a sheep was sacrificed on his behalf. This practice has survived among the Arabs and other Muslim peoples to the present day under the name of `aqiqah. Perhaps, this was originally a ransom, offered as a substitute for the child himself.

The gods of heathen Arabia were represented not only by rude blocks of stone (nusub, pl. ansab), but also by statues, made with more or less skill. The usual word for a divine statue, whether of stone or wood, was sanam. The other word used for this purpose was wathan, which seems primarily to mean nothing more than a stone.

Examples of tree-worship are also found among the ancient Arabs. The tree known as dhat al-anwat “that on which things are hung,” received divine honours; weapons and other objects were suspended from it. At Nakhlah, the goddess `Uzza is said to have been worshipped in the form of three trees.

The gods of the heathen Arabs were mostly represented by idols, which were placed in temples. These temples served as places of worship, where offerings and sacrifices were made by their votaries. The temples were by no means imposing buildings like those of the Egyptians or the Greeks.

They were simple structures, sometimes mere walls or enclosures marked by stones. Not only the temples were venerated as holy places, but sometimes the surrounding areas were also treated as sacred and inviolable (hima), and were supposed to be under the special protection of their respective gods.

In connection with several temples, we read of priests who served as their custodians (sadin, pl. sadana). They received the worshippers and gave them admission to the shrine. The office was generally hereditary, since we read of priestly families which were attached to particular temples.

Another word used for a priest was kahin, a term which was employed for a soothsayer as well. The priests were believed to be under the influence of the gods and to possess the power of foretelling future events and of performing other superhuman feats.

In this way, their pronouncements resembled the ancient Greek oracles and were likewise vague and equivocal. In course of time, the priest who was in the beginning simply the custodian of the temple developed the character of a soothsayer as well, and thus the term kahin came to acquire the sense of a soothsayer and seer.

There were female soothsayers as well. Arabic literature has preserved many stories about kahin and many utterances are attributed to them. These utterances were usually made in rhymed prose, and are interesting not only in respect of their content but also with regard to their style. Their pronouncements consisted of a few concise sentences, which ended in words having the same rhyme. This mode of expression was known as saj`.

The same style is found in the earliest revelations received by the Prophet which now constitute the last chapters of the Qur'an. It is, therefore, not surprising that the contemporaries of the Prophet called him a kahin, a position which he firmly repudiated.

While in the beginning, the Qur'an adopted the style peculiar to saj`, it raised the conception to a level far beyond the imagination of the soothsayers. There is another point of similarity which should be noted here.

The utterances of the kahins were prefaced by oaths, swearing by the earth and sky, the sun, moon, and stars, light and darkness, and plants and animals of all kinds. These oaths offer an interesting point of comparison with the oaths used in the Qur'an.

The temples of the heathen Arabs were for them not only places of worship but also places of pilgrimage. They assembled there periodically at certain times of the year, when these assemblies assumed the character of fairs and festivals.

An important sanctuary of this kind was located at Mecca, a town in western Arabia, which was situated at a distance of about fifty miles inland from the Red Sea. The town lay on the trade-route which led

along the sea from the Yemen to Syria, and its situation may have been partly determined by the presence of a well, called Zamzam, which has a considerable and fairly constant supply of water. The sanctuary consisted of a simple stone structure of cube-like appearance, which was called the Ka'bah by the Arabs.

One of the walls contained a black stone (al-hajar al-aswad). Inside the Ka'bah was the statue of the god, Hubal. At its feet, there was a small pit in which offerings to the temple were deposited. Besides Hubal, al-Lat, al-'Uzza, and al-Manat were also worshipped at Mecca and are mentioned in the Qur'an. At the rise of Islam, the temple is said to have contained as many as three hundred and sixty idols.

It seems that in course of time the various Arab tribes had brought in their gods and placed them in the Ka'bah, which had consequently acquired the character of the national pantheon for the whole of Arabia.

From times immemorial, the Ka'bah at Mecca had been the centre of a great pilgrimage, in which the most diverse tribes from all over Arabia took part. But this was possible only when peace reigned in the land.

For this purpose, the month of Dhu al-Hijjah in which the rites and ceremonies connected with the pilgrimage were performed and the preceding and succeeding months of Dhu al-Qa'dah and Muharram altogether three consecutive months were regarded as sacred months, during which tribal warfare was prohibited.

This period was sufficiently long to enable the tribes from the remotest corners of Arabia to visit the Ka'bah and return to their homes in peace. The territory around Mecca was also treated as sacred (haram); and the pilgrims laid aside their weapons when they reached this holy territory. The pilgrimage was called hajj.

During the pilgrimage, the pilgrims had to perform a number of rites and ceremonies, which lasted for several days and which can be described here only with the utmost brevity.

As soon as the pilgrims entered the sacred territory, the haram, they had to practise self-denial by observing a number of prohibitions: they had to abstain from hunting, fighting, sexual intercourse, and certain other things.

They circumambulated the Ka'bah, and also kissed the Black Stone which was fixed in one of its walls. An essential rite of the hajj was a visit to the hill of 'Arafat on the ninth of Dhu al-Hijjah, when the pilgrims assembled in the adjoining plain and stayed there till sunset for the prescribed wuquf (the stays or halts). The hill of 'Arafat is said to have borne another name, Ilal, which may have been the name of the shrine or rather of the deity worshipped there in ancient times.²

The pilgrims then went to Muzdalifah, which was consecrated to Quzah, the thunder god. Here they

spent the night, when a fire was kindled on the sacred hill. At sunrise the pilgrims left for Mina, an open plain, where they sacrificed the animals, camels, goats, and sheep, which they had brought with them for the purpose.

The animals meant for sacrifice were distinguished by special coverings or other marks. During their stay at Mina, the pilgrims also used to throw stones at three prescribed sites as a part of the pilgrimage ceremonial. After staying at Mina for three days, the pilgrims left for their homes. Women took part in the pilgrimage along with men.

The hajj as described above was retained by the Prophet as a major religious institution of Islam, with certain modifications of its ceremonials which were intended to break the link with their pagan associations. While the position of the Ka'bah was emphasized as the house built by the Patriarch Abraham for the service of Allah, the halts (wuquf) at 'Arafat (along with the one at Muzdalifah) was retained as an essential feature of the Islamic hajj.

In addition to the innumerable gods, the heathen Arabs also believed in the existence of demons, shadowy beings, which they called the jinn (variant: jann). The word probably means covered or hidden. Hence the jinn meant beings invisible to the eye. They were regarded as crafty and mischievous, almost malevolent, and were consequently held in fear.

They were supposed to haunt places dreaded either for their loneliness or for their unhealthy climate. The fear of the jinn, therefore, gave rise to various stories, in which they are said to have killed or carried off human beings. Like many other primitive peoples, the heathen Arabs believed in demoniacal possession.

The jinn were supposed to enter human beings and even animals, rendering them "possessed" or mad. According to the testimony of the Qur'an, the Meccans believed that there was a kinship between Allah and the jinn, and that they were His partners. Accordingly they made offerings to them and sought aid from them.

In spite of the bewildering multiplicity of the subordinate gods whom the pre-Islamic Arabs venerated, they believed in the existence of a Supreme God whom they called Allah. The word Allah is found in the inscriptions of northern Arabia and also enters into the composition of the numerous personal names among them.

There are a large number of passages in the poetry of the heathen Arabs in which Allah is mentioned as a great deity. Allah also occurs in many idiomatic phrases which are in constant use among them.

The Qur'an itself testifies that the heathens themselves regarded Allah as the Supreme Being. Their sin, however, consisted in the fact that they worshipped other gods besides Him. It was against this shirk that the Prophet waged an unrelenting war. In any case, it is important to note that the Qur'anic monotheism did not find it necessary to introduce an altogether new name for the Supreme Being and, therefore,

adopted Allah, the name already in use.

Even before the advent of Islam, old polytheism was losing its force in Arabia, since the Arabs notion of their gods had always been vague. With the decline of old paganism, a number of men had appeared in various parts of the country who had become convinced of the folly of idolatry, and were seeking another more satisfying faith.

They were fairly numerous and were called Hanifs. The Qur'an uses this term in the sense of a monotheist, and describes Abraham the Patriarch as the first Hanif. But none of these Hanifs had the vision and force of conviction and the proselytizing zeal which distinguished the mission of Muhammad.

The ancient Arabs believed that the human soul was an ethereal or air-like substance quite distinct from the human body. As such, they considered it identical with breath. This identification was so complete in their view that the word for breath, nafs, came to mean human personality itself.

They were confirmed in this belief by their experience that death resulted when a human being ceased to breathe. At the time of death, breath along with life itself escaped through its natural passage, the mouth or the nostrils. When a person passed away on his death-bed, his soul was said to escape through his nostrils (mata hatfa anfihi), and in the case of a violent death, e. g., on a battle-field, through the gaping wound.

When a person was murdered, he was supposed to long for vengeance and to thirst for the blood of the murderer. If the vengeance was not taken, the soul of the murdered man was believed to appear above his grave in the shape of an owl continually crying out, "Give me to drink" (isquni), until the murder was avenged.

The restless soul in the form of a screeching owl was supposed to escape from the skull, the skull being the most characteristic part of the dead body. Certain rites of burial, prevalent among the pre-Islamic Arabs, show that they believed in some sort of future existence of the soul.

In order to show honour to a dead chief, for instance, a camel which had been previously hamstrung was tethered near the grave and was left to starve. This usage can be explained only on the hypothesis that the animal was to be at the service of the dead man. The custom of slaughtering animals at the graves of elders has been kept up in Arabia to the present day.

Ancient poets often express the wish that the graves of those whom they love may be refreshed with abundant rain. Similarly, their sometimes address greetings to the dead. It may be that expressions of this kind are not merely rhetorical figures of speech; they probably indicate their belief in the survival of those who have departed from this world.

Although there are indications that the ancient Arabs had some notion, however hazy, of the survival of the human soul after death, they had no clear notion of life after death. As stated in the Qur'an, they

could not understand how a human being, after his bones had been reduced to dust, could be called to life once again. Since life after death was something beyond their comprehension, the question of retribution for human deeds did not arise in their minds.

The Qur'an uses the word ruh (spirit) as well as nafs for the human soul. Accordingly, the Muslim theologians do not make any distinction between the two terms in designating the soul. The ancient Arabs were generally fatalists. They believed that events in the lives of human beings were preordained by fate, and, therefore, inevitable. However hard they might try, they could not escape the destiny that was in store for them.

The course of events was believed to be determined by dahr or time, so that suruf al-dahr (the changes wrought by time) was a most frequent expression used by the Arabs and their poets for the vicissitudes of human life. The same feeling is expressed in several of their proverbs and maxims. This view was probably born of their practical experience of life.

In no part of the world is human life quite secure against the sudden changes of fortune, but in the peculiar milieu of Arabia man seems to be a helpless victim to the caprice of nature to an unusual degree. The sudden attack of a hostile neighbouring tribe or a murrain in his herds and flocks may reduce a rich man to dire poverty almost overnight; or in the case of a prolonged drought, he may be brought face to face with fearful famine and death.

The peculiar circumstances of desert life, thus, seem to have encouraged the growth of fatalistic tendencies among the Arabs. Bearing in mind the existence of these tendencies among the ancient Arabs, it is not surprising to find that similar views prevailed in the first centuries of Islam and that the dogma of predestination was almost universally accepted among the Muslim masses. Predetermination was, however, divorced from dahr.

The feeling of utter helplessness in the face of inexorable fate has probably given rise to another idea among the Arabs; the idea of resignation as a commendable virtue. Possibly, it has a survival value for those who adopt a submissive attitude towards the hardships and adversities of human life.

Instead of fretting and fuming and hurling oneself in violent revolt against the decree of fate and thus running the risk of complete disintegration, there seem comparative safety and the possibility of ultimate survival in accepting calmly and patiently the dictates of fate. The inculcation of resignation as a virtue, thus, seems to be a natural corollary to the dogma of predestination.

Although religion had little influence on the lives of pre-Islamic Arabs, we must not suppose them to be an all together lawless people. The pagan society of ancient Arabia was built on certain moral ideas, which may be briefly described here.

They had no written code, religious or legal, except the compelling force of traditional custom which was enforced by public opinion; but their moral and social ideals have been faithfully preserved in their

poetry, which is the only form of literature which has come down to us from those old days.

The virtues most highly prized by the ancient Arabs were bravery in battle, patience in misfortune, loyalty to one's fellow-tribesmen, generosity to the needy and the poor, hospitality to the guest and the wayfarer, and persistence in revenge. Courage in battle and fortitude in warfare were particularly required in a land where might was generally right and tribes were constantly engaged in attacking one another.

It is, therefore, not a mere chance that in the famous anthology of Arabian verse, called the *Hamasa*, poems relating to inter-tribal warfare occupy more than half of the book. These poems applaud the virtues most highly prized by the Arabs—bravery in battle, patience in hardship, defiance of the strong, and persistence in revenge.

The tribal organization of the Arabs was then, as now, based on the principle of kinship or common blood, which served as the bond of union and social solidarity. To defend the family and the tribe, individually and collectively, was, therefore, regarded as a sacred duty; and honour required that a man should stand by his people through thick and thin.

If kinsmen sought help, it was to be given promptly, without considering the merits of the case. Chivalrous devotion and disinterested self-sacrifice on behalf of their kinsmen and friends were, therefore, held up as a high ideal of life.

Generosity and hospitality were other virtues which were greatly extolled by the Arab poets. They were personified in Hatim of the tribe of Tayy, of whom many anecdotes are told to this day. Generosity was specially called into play in the frequent famines, with which Arabia is often afflicted through lack of rain.

The Arabian sense of honour also called blood for blood. Vengeance for the slain was an obligation which lay heavy on the conscience of the pagan Arabs. It was taken upon the murderer or upon one of his fellow-tribesmen.

Usually this ended the matter, but sometimes it led to a regular blood-feud, which lasted for a long period and in which many persons lost their lives. The fear of retribution had a salutary effect in restraining the lawless instincts of the Bedouin; but the vendetta in some cases was carried to extreme limits and involved a great loss of human life.

In the century before Muhammad, Arabia was not wholly abandoned to paganism. Both Judaism and Christianity claimed a considerable following among its inhabitants. Almost every calamity that befell the land of Palestine sent a fresh wave of Jewish refugees into Arabia, sometimes as far as the Yemen.

They had probably taken refuge there after the conquest of Palestine by Titus in 70 A. D. Jewish colonists flourished in Medina and several other towns of northern Hijaz. In the time of the Prophet, three large Jewish tribes, viz., Nadir, Quraizah, and Qainuqa, dwelt in the outskirts of Medina, and the fact that

the Prophet made an offensive and defensive alliance with them for the safety of the town shows that they were an important factor in the political life of those times.

These colonies had their own teachers and centres of religious study. Judging by the few extant specimens of their poetry, these refugees, through contact with a people nearly akin to themselves, had become fully Arabicized both in language and sentiment. They, however, remained Jews in the most vital particular, religion, and it is probable that they exerted a strong influence over the Arabs in favour of monotheism.

Another religious factor which was strongly opposed to Arabian paganism was the Christian faith. How early and from what direction Christianity first entered Arabia is a question which it is difficult to answer with certainty; but there is no doubt that Christianity was widely diffused in the southern and northern parts of Arabia at the time of the Prophet.

Christianity is said to have been introduced in the valley of Najran in northern Yemen from Syria, and it remained entrenched in spite of the terrible persecution it suffered at the hands of the Himyarite king, Dhu Nawas, who had adopted the Jewish faith.

The Prophet received at Medina a deputation of the Christians of Najran and held discussions with them on religious questions. Christianity in the south-west of Arabia received a fresh stimulus by the invasion of the Christian Abyssinians, who put an end to the rule of Dhu Nawas. There were Christians in Mecca itself; Waraqah ibn Naufal, a cousin of Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet, was one of them. Christianity was also found among certain tribes of the Euphrates and the Ghassan who lived on the borders of Syria.

Their conversion was due to their contact with the Christian population of the Byzantine Empire. The Ghassanids, who were Monophysites, not only defended their Church against its rivals but also fought against the Muslims as the allies of the Byzantine emperors.

The Christians were also found at Hirah, a town in the north-east of Arabia, where Arab princes of the house of Lakhm ruled under the suzerainty of the Persian kings. These Christians, who were called `Ibad or the "Servants of the Lord," belonged to the Nestorian Church, and contributed to the diffusion of Christian ideas among the Arabs of the Peninsula.

By the sixth century, Judaism and Christianity had made considerable head way in Arabia, and were extending their sphere of influence, leavening the pagan masses, and thus gradually preparing the way for Islam.

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