



154573 - How was life in Arabia before Islam?

the question

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Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Before Islam, Arabia was in a very bad state. When they were blessed with Islam and became followers of this faith, the people of Arabia found themselves in the best state, for they became leaders of nations and the best nation that was ever brought forth for humanity.

The evil that was present in Arabia before Islam was manifested in many ways; we cannot list them all in this answer because there were so many. But this does not prevent us from mentioning the most significant of them. They include:

1. Beliefs

1. The Arabs were idol worshippers; they would seek to draw close to them, offer sacrifices before them and venerate them completely. The idols were made by other humans like them, and sometimes they made them themselves, from dates, clay and other things. The number of idols around the Holy Ka'bah was approximately 360.

Allah, may He be exalted, says, describing those ignorant people (interpretation of the meaning):

“And they worship other than Allah that which neither harms them nor benefits them, and they say, ‘These are our intercessors with Allah’”

[Yoonus 10:18].

1. They used to seek omens, so if one of them wanted to get married, or travel, or engage in trade, he would throw a bird into the air, and if it flew right, he would go ahead with his plans



and would believe that they were good and beneficial, but if the bird flew left, he would cancel his plans and not go ahead with them, and would believe that they were bad.

They believed in evil omens; if one of them heard the sound of an owl, or saw a crow, he would feel anxious and believe that some harm would befall him on that day. They would not get married in the month of Shawwaal, believing that marriage in that month would not succeed.

1. The loyalty of the people of Arabia was to different great powers of their time. Some of them were loyal to the Byzantines, others to the Persians, and others to the Ethiopians.
1. Morals and manners, conduct, and customs
1. During the Jaahiliyyah, the Arabs would attack and kill one another for the most trivial of reasons. Wars among them would continue for many years, in which the men would be killed and the women and children taken captive.

One example of that was the War of al-Basoos, which lasted for thirty years, because of a she-camel that stepped on the egg of a lark [a type of bird] and broke it. Another was the War of Daahis and al-Ghabraa', which lasted for forty years, because one horse beat another in a race.

1. They did not refrain from eating unclean things. For example, they used to eat the meat of animals that died of natural causes, and drink blood.
2. Tribes other than Quraysh used to circumambulate the Ka'bah (tawaaf) naked, women and men alike, if the people of Quraysh did not do them the favour of giving them clothes to wear. They believed that a garment in which one had committed sin was not fit to be worn when doing tawaaf. A woman would say: "Today all of it or some of it appears, and whatever of it appears, I do not permit it"!
3. Zina (fornication, adultery) was widespread among them, along with its consequences, the worst of which was attributing a child to someone other than the husband.

It was narrated that 'Aa'ishah, the wife of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: There were four types of marriage during the Jaahiliyyah [period before Islam]:



One type was like the marriage of people today: one man would ask another for permission to marry a woman under his guardianship or his daughter, and he would give her a dowry, then marry her.

The second type was when a man would say to his wife, when she became pure following her menses: Send for So-and-so and have relations with him. Then her husband would stay away from her and not touch her until it became clear that she had got pregnant from that man with whom she was having relations. When her pregnancy became evident, her husband would have relations with her if he wanted to. He only did that so that he might have a child with good characteristics. This kind of marriage was called nikaah al-istibdaa'.

Another kind of marriage was where a group of men, less than ten, would get together and go to a woman, and all have relations with her. Then if she became pregnant and gave birth, a few days after giving birth she would send for them, and not one of them would refuse to come. When they all gathered before her, she would say to them: You know what you have done, and now I have given birth. He is your son, O So-and-so – naming whoever she wanted, and her child would be attributed to him and he could not refuse to take him.

The fourth type of marriage was where many people would go to a woman and she never refused anyone who came to her. Those were the prostitutes, who used to put flags at their doors as a sign, so anyone who wanted to could go in (and have relations with them). If one of them got pregnant and gave birth, all those men would be brought together and they would call those who were skilled in recognizing the resemblance of a child to his father, then they would attribute the child to the one whom those skilled people thought that he resembled; the child would be called his son, and he could not refuse that.

But when Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was sent with the truth, he abolished all the kinds of marriage that were known during the Jaahiliyyah, except the kind of marriage that people know today.

Narrated by al-Bukhaari (4834).



1. They used to kill their children because of the poverty they were suffering, or because they feared falling into poverty. Some of them would bury their daughters alive for fear that they would be taken captive, thus bringing shame upon them. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“and do not kill your children out of poverty; We will provide for you and them”

[al-An'aam 6:151].

“And do not kill your children for fear of poverty. We provide for them and for you. Indeed, their killing is ever a great sin”

[al-Isra' 17:31]

“And when one of them is informed of [the birth of] a female, his face becomes dark, and he suppresses grief.

He hides himself from the people because of the ill of which he has been informed. Should he keep it in humiliation or bury it in the ground? Unquestionably, evil is what they decide”

[an-Nahl 16:58-59].

1. They felt pride in their forefathers and lineage, to the extent that they would remember their forefathers and boast of them during Hajj season and when performing the rituals of Hajj.

It was narrated that Abu Hurayrah said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, has taken away your pride of Jaahiliyyah and your boasting about your forefathers. One is either a righteous believer or a doomed evildoer. You are the sons of Adam and Adam was created from dust. Men should stop boasting about people [their forefathers] who are no more than the coal of Hell, or they will certainly be more insignificant before Allah than the beetle that rolls dung with its nose.”

Narrated by at-Tirmidhi (3955) and Abu Dawood (5116); classed as hasan by al-Albaani in Saheeh at-Tirmidhi.



1. They used to deal in riba (usury) in various forms.

Ja'far ibn Abi Taalib (may Allah be pleased with him) summed up their situation during the Jaahiliyyah when he said before the Negus (ruler) in Ethiopia, when he migrated there: "We were a people of ignorance, worshipping idols, eating dead meat, committing abominations, severing ties of kinship, treating neighbours badly, and the strong among us devoured the weak.

Narrated by Ahmad (3/265); classed as hasan by the commentators on al-Musnad.

1. Women during the Jaahiliyyah

Women were vulnerable to the worst types of mistreatment, humiliation and degradation during the Jaahiliyyah. That took many forms, apart from being buried alive in infancy, as referred to above:

1. Women would be deprived of inheritance altogether, so a woman would have no share of whatever wealth her son, father or mother left behind, even if it was great; rather they would treat her as chattels to be inherited! That is referred to in the verse (interpretation of the meaning):

"O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion"

[an-Nisaa' 4:19].

Al-Bukhaari (4303) narrated that Ibn 'Abbaas said: When a man died, his heirs would have more right to his wife. If one of them wanted to marry her, he would do so, and if they wanted to they would give her in marriage to someone else, or if they wanted to they would not arrange a marriage for her, because they had more right to her than her own family. Then this verse was revealed concerning that.

1. They would force a woman to marry someone she did not like, or they would prevent her from getting married.
2. Some husbands would leave their wives suspended, as it were, so a woman would not be



treated with dignity as his wife, but she would not be able to marry anyone else. For example, a man would forbid his wife to himself, and make her like his mother or sister; or he would swear an oath not to have intercourse with her, so she would be left hanging, as it were. Then Islam came and prohibited zihar [a jahili form of divorce in which a man would say to his wife, "You are to me like my mother's back]; and it set a time limit for the one who swore that he would not have intercourse with his wife, namely four months, after which he must either offer expiation for his oath and have intercourse with her, or he would be compelled to divorce her. This is what is called eela', and it is mentioned in the verses (interpretation of the meaning):

"For those who swear not to have sexual relations with their wives is a waiting time of four months, but if they return [to normal relations] - then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.

And if they decide on divorce - then indeed, Allah is Hearing and Merciful"

[al-Baqarah 2:226-227].

1. We may read what a wife used to do after her husband died:

Zaynab bint Abi Salamah said: If a woman's husband died, she would go into a hut and wear her worst clothes, and she would not put on perfume until one year had passed. Then an animal would be brought - a donkey or a sheep or a bird - and she would rub her hands over it, and rarely did (such a woman) rub her hands over anything but it died, then she would come out and would be given a piece of dung which she would throw.

Narrated by al-Bukhaari (5024) and Muslim (1489).

Islam, with its wise rulings, changed all these ignorant customs and rulings, and replaced them with something better. We do not have room here to list all the changes that were made to the ways of Jaahiliyyah; doing so would require a large volume. It is sufficient for us to mention some of the ways of Jaahiliyyah and some of the changes that Islam brought. For more information, please see Buloogh al-Arab fi Ma'rifat Ahwaal al-'Arab by Mahmoud Shukri al-Aloosi; al-Mufassal fi



Taareekh al-'Arab qabl al-Islam; and Taareekh al-'Arab qabl al-Islam.

And Allah knows best.