

The Psychology of the Arab

THE INFLUENCES THAT SHAPE AN ARAB LIFE

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A few years ago I was reading “ The Arab Mind” by Raphael Pattie. I thought; I am the one who should write such a book, because the book deals specifically with the psychology of the Arab. I am a psychologist born in the Arab World but who lives, was educated and works in the United States. Perhaps I am in a better position to write about the Arab mind and psychology . I have been collecting a great deal of materials all these years to equip myself for this perilous adventure. I definitely am unable to give an impartial picture about the Arab psychology because I spent most of my adult life in my beloved adopted country of America.

Moreover, writing about the Arab psychology is a very difficult task, and I am sure I will open myself to all kinds of attacks and criticism, because I am not going to be able to satisfy everyone. As the old wisdom goes; if two people look at the same thing, they will see it differently. There will be people, I am sure, who will be offended; and who want always to present a positive picture about Arab society. They do not want anyone to portray anything other than a rosy picture of the Arab world. As is said in the old expression; do not burst the bubbles that the

Arab has put himself in for such a long time, just keep thing bright and wonderful. Undoubtedly self- reflection in Arab culture is not encouraged; this is why they have stayed the way they are. However, I would say the “ ostrich mentality” is definitely not helpful today.

However; I am venturing out and writing about the Arab psychology because I am a psychologist who worked for thirty years in the West, as in the Middle East. I am inviting the community of behavioral scientists to open a dialogue and have a critical mind to examine together the psychology of the Arab, and make this attempt beneficial to the Arab mind and psyche. Nevertheless, this is an attempt to shed some light on entire cultural practices; and see which ones can be valuable to the whole culture and should be reinforced, and which practices can be a hindrance and a barrier to moving forward toward a global development, this book is an investigation of the Arab culture, to see whether it is able to evolve and adapt to modern life, or if it is still holding onto archaic ways of thinking.

This book is not an attack on the Arab culture by any means. It is an attempt to bring to the attention of Arab individuals some insights into the causes of their behaviors. Once there is an insight then an individual can identify the weaknesses and strengths of their cultural practices, so he can reinforce the good and healthy; and weed out the dysfunctional and neurotic.

I am also attempting to bring to light the positive sides of these cultural practices, so that we may use them as antidotes to speed healing and recovery from a painful reality. Perhaps, sometimes I may fail to accentuate the positive practices of the culture. However, this is not out of malicious purpose, it is simply overlooked or inadvertent on my part, or it might be my unconscious biases. Whether we like it or not, these biases are beyond our control or conscious awareness.

I am writing this project out of my responsibility to the culture and for no other reason. It is a project I hope may stimulate some debate and raise more questions than answers. My aim is to plant the seed of self-examination, hoping that some readers may take it seriously and try to move the culture in the direction of evolution and liberation from self-made bondage.

I am also inviting the reader to put aside the subjectivity of your judgment; and try to see this look at psychological interpretations of Arab through naked eyes. Once you have, then you will benefit from this book. I am sure some interpretations may sound too harsh or difficult to digest. Although, I would say there is nothing wrong in having an eagle eye to spot some of the pathology in Arab behaviors . hence, I never claim to know it all; I am just an investigator in the science of human behavior.

We must also know that Arabs are like everybody else in that they are not totally good or totally bad by nature. They both the higher self and the book, and the caveat here is; when I say "the Arab people", I mean specifically the majority of the people, not the total population. (for example, if we say the Japanese are industrious people , it does not mean there are no lazy people in book, the Quran, always talks about the majority of people being in darkness, or the majority of people are nonbelievers.... and so on.

I know there are wonderful Arab people who have in their heart the sincere intention to contribute to the welfare of their community. Unfortunately, their voice are often not heard; and they are often run over by the opportunistic and hypocritical segments of society.

The Arab countries are rich with an abundance of natural resources, and more importantly healthy young populations. In spite of this, they lag behind many other countries around the world. What is needed in the Arab world is a look deep inside the dynamic of culture and the contributions that have shaped individual's perspective positively or negatively. More importantly, we need to discover how to motivate the Arab to be other than he is.

The look has 21 chapters and deals analytically with the psychological makeup of the Arab people. However, there are three chapters which may address the cores of the dysfunctions in Arab culture: first, the domination of ruthless rulers who have inflicted enormous pain and suffering on the populace, and who are intoxicated with the pathology of narcissism. The entire energy of the population has to go toward massaging the Egos of these megalomaniacal leaders.

Second, we look at the place of women in Arab society. The female is the container of the honor of the family, and that puts her in a very sensitive position, as she may touch the vulnerability of man. Moreover, the male has the weaker sex

(XY) genes, and the male always want to prevail. This is why he often messes up the lives of women. Unfortunately, Arab society has struggled with the issues of women and has subjected them to all sorts of restrictions and sanctions, in the name of protecting them, as they are little wild children who do not know the right from wrong. This book addresses this concern analytically and hopes to create some awareness in order to free the soul of woman from the bondage of Arab cultural practices.

Third, religion is a piece of the fabric of Arab society. Arabs are inclined to focus solely on the ritualistic part of religion and ignore the foundations of religions such as faith in the Almighty God. God sent three major religions to the Arab world. The last one was in the person of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon Him), to ask the Arab to be loving and caring human beings, both toward each other, as well as toward the world around them.

Sadly, Arabs have never deeply absorbed the true teachings of God. They are very loud when it comes to talk, but fall short when it comes to practice. Perhaps they have dual personalities or two systems of values that operate opposite each other at the same time. Nevertheless, the Arab individual seems to be living with those two systems of opposing values comfortably, similar to Dr Jekyll & Mr. Hyde. The soul of the human is comprised of two distinct segments, good and evil. These two separate forces live in continuous and inherent conflict with each other and the world around them.

Moreover, Arabs are struggling with their old Bedouin values such as pride, revenge, aggression, and self-centeredness these stand in conflict with modern human values such as human potential or possibility, common good for others, and justice for all. Perhaps such conflict may never be resolved until there can be a paradigm shift in the collective consciousness of Arab individuals.

In summary, culture in general can have massive hypnotic effect on people. Persons who are born under certain cultural practices and beliefs tend to act according to the set of roles that the culture has designed for them. In most instances; people are paralyzed by these cultural practices. Their conscious mind can be shackled and they can act like a robot; it can shape their psyche. Thus, I say people are not free as long as the culture indoctrinates them with the blueprint of its agreed upon roles. Whether the culture is Arab or American or Brazilian ; all are the same.

Therefore, humanly speaking, we rally need to be less judgmental about any cultural practice. Although, some cultures give people some level of freedom within their lives. These cultures have less of a dysfunctional pathology, while the rigid culture, which does not allow people some measure of freedom over their lives, may have more neuroses and dysfunction. That is the core difference when it comes to human behaviors.

In the wisdom of the Tao, wise men do not need to prove their point;

Men who need to prove their point are not wise

CHAPTER ONE: Is There Such A Thing As an Arab Psychology?

The science of psychology has begun with the founding father of experimental psychology, Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920). Then Sigmund Freud, in the middle of last century, revolutionized the whole concept of the human behavior. These men and others like them offered distinctive perspectives about human behavior by factoring in cultural practices, family upbringing, economic conditions and educational level.

In other words, an individual is born in a specific place in a specific time and under certain circumstances; all of these factors have a tremendous impact on the formation of his

psychological makeup. Throughout much of the 20th century, psychology remained embedded in these European and North American patterns of thought.

In recent decades, however, our planet has become more of a "global village". Therefore, many cultures took the science of psychology and tailored it to suit their prevailing values or cultural practices. Carl Jung accentuated the impact of the collective conscience, which mostly is comprised of the cultural practices people inherited from their ancestors.

In answer to the question, "Is there such thing an Arab psychology?" yes, there certainly is, just as there is a Japanese psychology or a Chinese psychology. Each group around the globe: 1) lives in a specific geographic location; 2) shares the same historical struggles; 3) eats certain foods; 4) wears a certain type of clothing; 5) follows the same customs, traditions and cultural practices; 6) speaks a specific language; 7) shares the same religious beliefs; and 8) has a particular educational system. All of these components work collectively to shape the individual psychology for each group, differentiating it from others living elsewhere with a different set of values and cultural practices.

Although there is the above universal principle that shapes behavior in a similar fashion worldwide, it is equally meaningful to conceive of culture as a system that has its own dynamic bounds. These boundaries can create phenomena that appear contradictory to the universal notion of how humans function in their locale, or how their world should be understood by the outsider.

Nevertheless, the psychology of Arabs who lived a hundred years ago was diabolically different from the psychology of Arabs today. It very similar to saying the people who live in the Amazon region in Brazil are completely different then the people who live in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The surrounding environment can shape the psychology of its inhabitants. Thus, there IS a psychology of the Arab, and it is a very complicated one. The tenet of this book is to explore all facets of Arab psychology.

The psychology of the Arab has been shaped by living in the desert; by its shifting sands, which make the Arab temperament volatile. It is shaped by lack of water, causing Arabs to be nomads who move from place to place, to look for water and food for human and animal alike. This is why the Arabs do not have strong alliances to their land; they like to move and immigrate to other places in the world.

The psychology of the Arab has also been shaped by a strong affinity to the tribe to which he belongs. Thus, the concept of nationality is a relative one, because Arabs' alliances must first be to their tribe or community.

It is also worth mentioning that the psychology of the Arab has been shaped by their pompous language, which is very rich in descriptions of their lives in the desert, or their lives under abusive rulers, or their glorious lives in the distant past. Linguists around the world agree that language can sculpt the depth of the psychological structures of people; it is thus with the Arabic language. The Arabic language carved its place in the psyche of the Arab, because it is the language of the holy book, the Quran. English-speaking peoples do not attach to the English language because it is not the language of Christianity. The language of Christianity is Aramaic, the language that Jesus Christ spoke. Aramaic is now spoken by a group of Iraqi Christians called Chaldean.

Moreover, Arab society is a collectivist one, meaning the individual self-concept can be derived from community approval or community acceptance or recognition. It is not the individualistic society as in the West, in which a person derives his own self-concept from his personal merit, or his personal accomplishments and achievements. This factor alone can

shape the Arab individual differently from others. Arab culture may be similar to Japanese culture, which also focuses on community. The benefit of society is placed ahead of individual interests.

All these factors collectively characterize the Arab individual and make his psychology unique. The study of the individual within the content of his environment gives a clear picture about his uniqueness. People do not live in isolation; they are surrounded by an environment or culture that influences each reciprocally. There is fluid dynamic interaction among all the cultural factors that make up an Arab psychology, which makes it worthwhile to investigate such a psychology. The purpose is to develop some understanding of why the Arab people behave as they do. Once that is understood by others, they can be less harsh in their judgments, and more compassionate toward Arabs, because they have been through hellish conditions.

Exploring the Arab psychology may give Arabs themselves a fresh looks at their behavior through psychological lenses. In addition, they may try to arm themselves with some courage to change what one might consider neurotic inclinations, which dominate their behavior and make them unhappy people.

Certain views and attitudes can be found in any culture, and these views or attitudes normally characterize people who are living in that culture. If those attitudes are positive or helpful it can color the society with such positivism, as may be seen in Norwegian or Danish society; they have scored very high in the scale of well-being. However, if those views or attitudes are negative then such negativity may become contagious, as we see in Arab society.

Complaints are the prevailing norm in any Arab conversation. You do not see two people getting together without reciting a list of complains over many things in their daily lives. From the poor educational system to poor infrastructure, from lack of sanitation to daily humiliation at the hands of the regime, not to mention the embezzlement of the nation's wealth, Arab culture is infected with many negative elements. Therefore, it is essential to study Arab psychology and shed some light on such psychological phenomena, and therefore help people to have a clear understanding of the causes of Arabs' pain and agony.

Often cultural conditioning allows for the construction of a false sense of self, which may be based on fears. The creative part of the self normally is based on love of life. This is clearly what this book is about: analyzing whether the culture of fear has limited individual possibilities, and manufactured a person who is ruled by neurosis and tyranny.

CONCLUSIONS

There are a few observations that can be summarized after reading this book. It can be of value for future applications as well as for improvement of existing conditions.

People in general are like plants; they take from the earth the nutrients suitable to their structures. Thus, Arab behavior is a product of the circumstances that surround them, and if we need different behaviors then we have to change the circumstances.

1) Cutting dead branches from a tree does not make the tree healthy; perhaps we need to change the soil. A total transformation to the entire existing archaic system in the Arab world may be needed on many levels. For instance, the educational system, family scripts and the most of all the governmental system need to be overhauled. The government has to be democratic rather than run by a bunch of despots who rule forever.

2) The majority of Arabs are fascinated, consciously or unconsciously, with the **cult of personality**. Everyone wants to have an idol to worship or glorify. Such disorder has been practiced for many, many years, and it seems to be indelible in the Arab's neurons. Arabs are also inclined to assign a certain

amount of holiness to their "chosen people" and they become enamored of them. Undoubtedly, those chosen people, whether they are governmental rulers, religious figures, head of an organization or the head of a community, will abuse their power and position and eventually will cause a lot of pain and suffering.

It is disheartening to see that; perhaps the soil of the Arab world is fertile for growing dictators. It may have the necessary nutrients for the growth of dictators, because the Arab people throughout history have produced in abundance the most brutal, callous dictators in the history of mankind. Fortunately, today we are witnessing the demise of those dictators. However, the damage is done; they have held the Arab back. They let Arab society fall behind the progress of the human community, even though they have huge reservoirs of natural resources, and sit on some of the most valuable real estate on earth. The only salvation from such destructive trends is the total emancipation of the Arab soul from the cult of personality, or idol worship

3) Women in the Arab world must be treated with respect and appreciation, rather than as a threat to male members of society. The female has to have a good foundation of self-esteem in order to rear a generation of healthy children, rather than cripple them psychologically.

4) Arabs also have been obsessed with female sexuality. We can understand that from a historical perspective, when tribes raided each other in the desert. They took women as well as livestock and abused the women. It seems however that even in modern times Arabs are unable to transcend the historical practice and look at female sexuality as something private and more of a biological matter. They still attach a certain degree of holiness to female sexuality. Unfortunately, men always assume devious intentions and mistrust when it comes to women, and that puts women in a defensive posture most of the time. In such situations, society loses tremendous energy, which could normally be channeled for the good of society.

5) There is a serious conflict in the Arab psyche between Bedouins values and Islamic values. The Bedouin values encourage pride, selfishness, greed, violation of others, and the use of force to settle conflicts. Islamic values focus on helping each other, being human, settling conflicts by the law of God, taking care of the needy and the weak in society, respecting the sanctity of life and being humble. The conflict exists in all levels of society, and the main reason for such conflict is that the Arab has not absorbed the true teaching of God, but instead focuses on the **ritualistic practices of religion**. Sadly, the **Jahelia values are in force** [time before Islam]. At present what the Arab needs is to hold onto faith in God, which can enlighten his/her empty heart and free his/her soul from the darkness.

6) The old culture tends to have a lot of do's and don'ts. All of this discipline can be like a steamroller, killing all creativity and generating fears. The Arabs must realize that and free themselves.

7) Since early history, Arabs and Jews were traders; this may explain why the Arab tends to "wheel and deal". They also calculate benefits and losses in their daily transactions. That can have a psychological impact on people's behavior and the way they view the world. Friendship can be the best example. Someone is a friend as long as he benefits from the friendship. Once that benefit is absent, he walks away and casts aside his former "friend". Arab popular songs testify as to the difficulty in finding true and lasting friendships. People often form a relationship based on ulterior motive, not just for the sake of friendship only. Perhaps that is part of human nature.

8) Unfortunately, the Arab world has refused to face up to the challenge that has been presented to it recently, and they use projection as a defense mechanism. They tend to blame

everyone else for their own societal ills and never look to themselves and their contributions to their painful reality. Arab rulers blame foreign intervention if any one of their people raises an objection; they never blame their own mismanagement of the country. That has to be understood and changed otherwise Arabs will stay in the same vicious cycle.

9) Assertiveness in Arab culture has not been nurtured; on the contrary, compliance is encouraged. That can have serious psychological ramifications on the individual. It also can breed some neurotic tendencies, as the conflict builds between societal demands and individual needs and aspirations.

10) The **Wasta** practice, the Arabic word for **favoritism and nepotism**, can be an incurable disease that infects the body of Arab society. It needs to be eradicated; everyone should be treated based on his merits rather than on whom he knows. That is disgraceful to the whole society and people feel bitter about it. Sadly, the entire governmental structure is built on nepotism.

11) The hidden reality is that the world, as we see it around us, is what our past thoughts and experiences have created. If we need or desire a different world, we have to change our thinking to create a fresh, healthy world around us. The Arab culture has inherited a lot of useless practices and meaningless values that do not nurture the creativity of the population.

12) The Arab culture is oppressive, and normally an oppressive culture tends to breed a lot of neuroses, such as mistrust, anger, frustration, and suspicion, not only within the psyche of the individual, but even among family members. People by nature want to be free. Individual freedom is not a luxury; it is a necessity and indispensable for the psychological well-being of every individual in any society.

13) My last conclusion is a recommendation to the human community, [particularly the Arab people]. We have to establish "**human radar**" to watch for any growth of dictators in any part of the world, but mainly the Arab world. If a dictatorship appears, we have to do whatever it may take to prevent such growth. Leaving a dictator to establish himself in any part of the world can have a mammoth cost to the entire human community. It is more dangerous than the tsunami, both in the cost of human lives as well as in the destruction of human civilization.

For example, the dictators of Africa have embezzled all national wealth and left the continent reeling under poverty, wars and diseases. Or in the latest development in Libya, Gaddafi ruled Libya for more than four decades, yet he has not even built a decent hospital in the country. He has squandered the wealth of the people, and when the people revolted again him and wanted to remove him, he engaged them in very destructive war.

In order to avoid such an apocalyptic future from those dictator who are possessed by the demonic power, the human community needs to be watchful. The consequence of dictatorship is immeasurable destructions; it is worse than any epidemic of disease in the world. Moreover, it will have serious ripple effect on every corner on the globe. It is not confined to a specific country, but it will harm the rest of the human community as we had seen in the rise of Hitler.

What has brought me to this recommendation is that I am a psychologist who is deeply concerned with the well being of people in any part of the world. I have witnessed the dictators' rules in the Arab world and seen how much damage they have caused. The sad diagnosis for those living under the rule of dictators is depression, anxiety, paranoia, adjustment disorder, psychosomatic illness, and delusional thinking. In summery, the consequences of living under dictators a people who feel worthless, and are deeply troubled psychologically, thus, they can not offer anything either to themselves or to human community other than pain and suffering.