

CUSTOMS, MANNERS AND BELIEFS  
AS REFLECTED BY SOME ARABIC PROVERBS AND IDIOMS

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0 Introduction

Proverbs and idioms are part and parcel of the ethos of the area in which they are current, and Arabic proverbs are no exception. However, as Arabic has, since the advent of Islam, been the vernacular of millions of speakers, in three continents, who use scores of Arabic dialects and have many customs, manners and beliefs in common, it is not surprising that we find some of these echoed in the thousands of Arabic proverbs and idioms, which are found in both literary and colloquial Arabic.

This paper attempts to trace back certain customs, manners and beliefs which were, and to a certain extent, still are, current among Arabs, as reflected by some Arabic proverbs and idioms<sup>1</sup>.

1 Proverbs

1.1 Evil eye (*ʿĕn*)

The Arabs, like many other peoples, believe in the 'evil eye' and its power to harm. It is believed that a mere glance from an envious person can cause the envied man to become unlucky, affect his family, make him lose his property, become ill or even die (cf. e.g. Dickson 1967:505; Thomas 1938:80). Women are more likely to believe in this superstition, but men too believe in it, since the Prophet Muḥammad himself is said to have been "a believer in the baneful influence of an evil eye. Asmā' bint ʿUmays relates that she said: O Prophet, the family of Ğaʿfar are affected by the baneful influences of an evil eye; may I use spells for them or not? The Prophet said: 'Yes, for if there were anything in the world which would overcome fate, it would be an evil eye'"<sup>2</sup>.

Although a person with blue or squint eyes or thick eye-brows, a beardless man or a hairy woman should particularly be avoided, as their glances are full of evil, any person may potentially possess the harming power of the evil eye (cf. Stavsky 1946:340; Frayḥa 1953: No. 3101). Children are particularly vulnerable to the danger of being exposed to

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<sup>1</sup> Though 'proverbs' and 'idioms' are regarded as two general terms referring to combinations of words, classical Arabic includes both of them, as well as all other types of sayings, such as, maxims, adages, aphorisms, etc., in the term *amṭāl*, and only in modern Arabic the term *at-taʿbīr al-iṣṭilāḥī* for 'idiom' has, in the last thirty years or so, begun to appear in Arabic dictionaries and the linguistic literature. Hence, our decision to discuss the two terms here. For a detailed discussion of these terms in Arabic, see Shvitiel 1976:106-110.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes 1982:112 under 'Evil eye'. For other references to the Prophet's belief in the evil eye and popular expressions to avert the evil eye, see Piamenta 1983, particularly, 87-90.

the evil eye. Hence, if one sees a handsome boy he should either say the expression *mā šā'a Allāh* (This is what God has willed) or *ism-allah 'alēh* (God name on him), or *tfū 'alēk, mā abšā'ak* (I spit on you, how ugly you are!), (cf. Lane 1908:256; Piamenta 1983:87, and Meyuhas 1937:183).

To avert the evil eye some parents give their children such names as *Qabīha* (ugly)<sup>3</sup>, and Lane tells us that in Egypt parents used to dress little boys in girls' clothes and other female ornaments to divert the evil eye from the child himself (Lane 1908:58, 513). Also, salt is sprinkled around little children and around the house after the departure of a guest (Lane 1908:510 and Stavsky 1946:339). Amulets, charms and talismans are often worn or carried by the person to be protected, and also necklaces of sky-blue beads, are worn on the neck or on the cap or the head of human beings and even of domestic animals. Other means are also known, including stretching the right hand with all five fingers open or closed and directed at the face of the person who is suspected of having set evil looks on somebody or something (cf. Lane 1908:253-270; Meyuhas 1937:182-185; Stavsky 1946:340).

A few Arabic proverbs and expressions refer to the evil eye and to how one should act if affected by its baneful influence. For example:

1. *al-ḥasūd lā yasūd* or *'ēn al-ḥasūd lā tasūd* – 'May the envier's evil eye never prevail.' These sayings and others have become so popular that some people use them on posters which they hang in homes, offices and cars.
2. *al-ḥasūd bi-'ēnō 'ūd* – '(May) the envier's eye be pierced by a chip of wood.'
3. *al-ḥasūd lā yasūd u-mā bi-mūt illā u-burwa makmūd* – 'May the envier never prevail and may he die only heartbroken.'
4. *'indak 'ēš u-'indī 'ēš u-fağ'at al-'ēn lēš?* – 'You earn your living and I earn mine, so why the evil eye?'
5. *al-'ēn illī bi-tšīb, qal'ha ḥalāl* – 'An eye which harms, its gouging out is legal.'
6. *al-'ēn qattāla* and *al-'ēn twaššil ad-dafn* – 'The evil eye can kill.'
7. *'uyūn zurq, u-snān furq* – 'Blue eyes and teeth with gaps between them', i.e. an evil eye<sup>4</sup>.

## 1.2 Blood feud (*ta'r*)

Blood revenge has been a fundamental practice among the peoples of the Middle East, and it is perhaps one of the best instances for a popular custom which has been legitimized by some codes of laws of the ancient world. Thus, the Old Testament gives details of the procedure for blood revenge (see, Numbers, ch. 35,11-34); while the Qur'ān (4:93), which has reservations about the killing of a Muslim by his fellow Muslim, does not categorically prohibit this Ġāhīlī custom (cf. Levy 1971: 243, 351-353). Moreover, though it is recommended that revenge take place soon after the murder or, indeed any crime punishable by death, circumstances allow blood-revengers to carry out the vendetta after

<sup>3</sup> = 'Apotropaic name'. For further details see Crystal 1992:113.

<sup>4</sup> For the Arabs' attitude to the blue colour in general and to blue eyes in particular, see Shvitiel 1991.

the elapse of many years, no time-limit being imposed, although the acceptable limit is normally five generations (cf. Lane 1908:202; Stavsky 1946:348-362). Blood-revenge may also result in a series of murders, which may only be stopped by an agreement of reconciliation (*ṣulḥa*), which usually involves the payment of blood-money (*diyya*) by the first killer or his family (cf. Lane 1908:108; Stavsky, *loc. cit.*).

Moreover, blood feud was and still is regarded as a heroic act which is a duty as well as a praise-worthy action, and pre-Islamic poetry provides the best evidence for cases of blood revenge among the Arab tribes, as large parts of the odes composed during the Ġāhiliyya are panegyric, in which the revenger is praised for his courage, resolution and sense of commitment (cf. Nicholson 1969:93-100). The custom is still current in all parts of the Middle East and, in particular, in rural areas.

A large number of proverbs refer to blood-revenge, for example:

1. *anā u-inte wi-z-zamān ṭawīl* – 'There are only you and me, and we have got time.' The proverb contains a threat directed at the person one wishes to teach a lesson. It emphasizes the fact that the 'revenger' has patience to wait for the convenient time.
2. *aḥd at-ta'r bi-zīl al-ār* – 'Taking revenge removes shame.' As long as revenge has not been taken, the 'revenger' lives in shame because people may think that he is a coward (see also, Meyuhas 1937:123).
3. *al-ār mā yingasil illā bi-d-dam* – 'Shame can be washed off only with blood.'
4. *al-ēn bi-l-ēn, wi-s-sinn bi-s-sinn* – 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' (cf. Exodus, 21, 24; Leviticus, 24, 20; Deuteronomy, 19, 21).
5. *lammā b-ti'ğaz al-mara 'an al-intiqām, b-tibkī* – 'When a woman fails to take revenge, she cries.' The proverb suggests that revenge is equally important to men and women.
6. *al-badawī aḥad ta'rō bād' arbā' in sane u-qāl istā'galet* – 'The Bedouin took revenge after forty years and said I was hasty.' The importance of revenge is emphasized by this proverb while the number forty only denotes a long period of time.
7. *mā bitrok at-ta'r illā radī' al-ḥāl* – 'No one will give up revenge only a despicable person.'

### 1.3 Dowry (*mahr, siyāq*)

The custom of paying a dowry to the bride's family goes back to ancient times and is well rooted in all old cultures around the Middle East. By paying the bride's family the wife becomes the property of her husband, a fact which is significant so far as her duties and rights are concerned. Since the bride usually moves to live with her husband the dowry is a type of a compensation offered to her family for 'losing' her. The dowry can be paid to the bride's family with money, property, land, products or services. In primitive societies the payment, which is usually made to the father, brother or the guardian of the bride is for his own use (cf. Lane 1908:166, fn. 1; Baer 1960:46). However, in more progressive societies the dowry is largely spent on the newly-married couple (Lane, *loc. cit.*; Lancaster 1981:52), and the rest is used by the bride's family, e.g. to help one of the brothers of the bride to pay a dowry for his own wife. Since the amount to be paid as a dowry is decided arbitrarily by the family according to the bride's merits

(her distinguished lineage, her being a virgin, beautiful, young, healthy, etc.), only wealthy suitors may be able to afford her (cf. Stavsky 1946:231-234; Meyuhas 1937:60-62; Ashkenazy 1957:69). Hence, there have been many cases of marriages of young and poor girls to old and wealthy men. This practice has for years been criticized by many progressive Arabs, both men and women, with a fair amount of success in keeping the number of cases low, especially among urban society, though such marriages are still customary in rural areas (cf. Waschitz 1947:207-208; Stavsky 1946:236). On the other hand, there are many cases of bridegrooms and brides who choose to escape together, an act which may often result in their killing 'to save the face of the family'. Another way to avoid payment of the dowry is by 'cross marriages', i.e. two brothers marry two sisters (cf. Stavsky 1946:238-239; Meyuhas 1937:62).

A number of proverbs are concerned directly with the payment of a dowry, whereas others only allude to the custom:

1. *abuy ba'nī u-ğōzī (i)štarānī* - 'My father has sold me and my husband has bought me.' The proverb indicates that marriage has been agreed upon between the father of the bride and the bridegroom without consulting the bride, as if she were goods for trading.
2. *illi mā bi-ddōš yeğawwez bintō bi-ğallī maherbā* - 'He who does not wish to marry off his daughter puts her price up.' This proverb is usually used metaphorically as a warning to any businessman not to be too greedy, otherwise his goods will not sell.
3. *illi ma'ō flūsō bint as-sultān 'arūsō* - 'He who has money can marry the Sultan's daughter.'
4. *al-fulūs bi-tğib al-'arūs* - 'Money gets the bride.'
5. *wiq fī l-hubb, (i)rtafa' at-taklif* - 'He who falls in love has higher expenses.' The proverb is used metaphorically as a warning to any customer not to show too much enthusiasm about the goods he wishes to buy, otherwise the seller will put up the price.
6. *al-muqaddima mā lahā maber* - 'One does not pay a dowry for a bride who is not a virgin.' This proverb may be used metaphorically to signify that he who sells used goods should not expect a high price for them.
7. *abū l-banāt marzūq* - 'The girls' father is blessed.' This dictum is said to a person who has many daughters, signifying that one day he will be compensated for the sorrow of having no son (cf. Stavsky 1946:234-235).

#### 1.4 Beard (*daqn, lihya*)

The beard was regarded in ancient times as a symbol of manliness and manhood. The Egyptians of Pharaonic times used at first to grow beards, but at a later stage began to shave them, perhaps because of the influence of the Romans, who usually used to shave their beards and moustaches. The Greeks nearly always favoured beards, as evident from drawings and sculptures from ancient Greece, while in Mesopotamia, noble people and officials used to grow beards, whereas beardless males were usually eunuchs (cf. *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, V, 329). The Old Testament refers to man's beard as a sign of nobility (cf. Psalms, 133, 2), while a shaved beard was a mark of shame and ignominy (cf. 2 Samuel, 10, 4-5; see also Meyuhas 1937:117; Stavsky 1946:304).

Arab men also used to grow beards, as they shared the attitudes prevalent in the area regarding the issue, and when men began to shave their beards moustaches were usually left to indicate manhood<sup>5</sup>. The importance of man's beard can be seen from the custom of holding one's own beard or other people's beards or mentioning the beard of the Prophet Muḥammad when taking an oath (cf. Stavsky 1946:243). This practice indicates the integrity and sincerity of the person who swears by the beard, demonstrating either his innocence or his commitment to keeping his promise (cf. Meyuhas 1937:109; Stavsky 1946:300). Hence, in the Yemen the idiom *mahlūq ad-dign* (a beardless man) means an unreliable person. The reason being that he has nothing substantial to take an oath with or that he is as weak as a beardless person, e.g. a woman. Moreover, a saying current in the Yemen is: "If I do not fulfill my promise, shave my beard!" (cf. Yitzhari 1993: II, 31, proverb 208). Furthermore, a beardless person also symbolizes bad luck and accordingly whom one should not associate with (see above p. 2, and Frayḥa 1953: No. 3101).

A number of proverbs in Arabic refer to man's beard and its connotations:

1. *illi bu-bzoq bi-kaffak, ubzoq bi-dagnō* – 'If a person spits on your hand, spit on his beard.' This means that if a person insults you you should insult him even more.
2. *illi bu-bzoq bi-l-ālī, bi-tirḡā' alā dagnō* – 'He who spits upwards the spit falls back on his beard.' This means that if one tries to harm others, especially his superiors, it will affect him in the end.
3. *mā ḥada bi-sallem dagnō la-wlādō* – 'No one gives his beard even to his own children.' This means that no person entrusts his fate even to the hands of his own children.
4. *bayna ḥānā u-mānā dā'at liḥānā* – 'Between Hana and Mana our beard perished.' This means that the person may often be the victim of two rivalries, or fall between two stools.
5. *bāzī wilād ḡērō, u-nāsiḥ dawlitō, u-musirr alā mratō – wāḡeb ḥalq dagnō* – 'He who brings up a child who is not his own, and he who gives advice to his government, and he who tells his wife his secrets – should have his beard shaved.' The proverb indicates that the doer of all these three things deserves to be humiliated. A similar proverb is *man sād šawr marteh yistḥiqq natf liḥyateh* – 'He who supports his wife's views deserves to have his beard plucked out.'
6. *dagn mā tiḥteh fulūs yiḥtāḡ ilā mūs* – 'The beard of the poor deserves to be shaved.' This proverb signifies the shame of being poor.
7. *dagn at-tammā' fī ṭiz al-miflis* – 'The greedy man's beard is inside the bankrupt's anus.' This proverb is said about a greedy usurer who loses his property and consequently his honour because he lent his money to a bankrupt person.

### 1.5 Coffee (*qahwa*)

One of the customs associated with hospitality is coffee drinking and this has gone beyond the simple practice of sipping this popular drink, and has become a part of daily life and a symbol of friendship. Hence, it is the drink offered to conclude deliberations

<sup>5</sup> For customs relating to beard growing in Egypt, see Lane 1908:29.

over a blood-revenge case which ends with peaceful agreement: it is the drink which is offered on the occasion of marriage negotiations; it is the drink offered at the time of rejoicing and mourning and it is in fact the drink offered to guests soon after their arrival.

It is assumed that coffee was first introduced to the Middle East around the fourteenth century<sup>6</sup>, and immediately gained popularity in a society in which the drinking of alcohol was not allowed. Moreover, the word *qahwa* itself from which the word 'coffee' (and other variations current in the European languages) has emerged meant originally 'wine' (cf. *Lisān al-ʿarab*, under *q.h.w.*). However, as coffee became popular, the word *qahwa* began to be used, denoting this drink, while the plant and coffee beans are called *bunn*.

The popularity of coffee can be proved by the role it plays in daily life all around the East. Hence, poets and writers have dedicated some of their works or part of them to this traditional drink. Moreover, a whole myth and folklore have developed over the years with regard to coffee making and the practices of its consumption, including 'formulae' of its preparation, special pots, cups and utensils used, first for making and later for drinking it<sup>7</sup>, and customs related to its serving and drinking (cf. Lane 1908:339-340; Dickson 1967:195-201; Meyuhas 1937:88-90; Stavsky 1946:315-320; Shim'oni 1947:145).

It is therefore only natural that this important commodity and the customs surrounding its consumption are reflected in Arabic proverbs. For example:

1. *bēt bi-lā qahwe, sultān bi-lā farwe* - 'A house without coffee is like a sultan without a fur.' Though clothes made of fur usually associate with wealth, the word has probably been used here because it rhymes with the word coffee.
2. *al-bēt maftūh wa-l-qahwe ʿa-nnār* - 'The door is open and the coffee is on the fire.' That is to say, 'you are most welcome'.
3. *qahwe bi-lā duḥān, miṭl bēt bi-lā ṣibyān* - 'Coffee without smoke is like a house without children.' According to Abbud (1933: No. 3397) this proverb refers to the custom current among Beduins who cook the coffee over firewood which, when burnt, makes much smoke. Hence, no matter how much good merits one has, he is bound to have faults too. It seems to me that Abbud's explanation is far-fetched and that the proverb simply means that good coffee is one which is well-cooked on fire, just like a house which gains its vitality from the children who live in it.
4. *al-qahwe samra lākin tanāḥā abyad* - 'The coffee is black, but its praise is white.' The proverb indicates apparent contradiction between two things by reference to two contrasting colours. The explanation provided by Abbud is that the proverb is said about a person whose actions are commendable, though he himself is poor or ugly (cf. Abbud 1933: No. 3398).

<sup>6</sup> For the various views about this question, see Meyuhas 1937:89.

<sup>7</sup> Such utensils reached Europe in the 17th century, cf. Arnold & Guillaume 1931:150.

5. *awwal finġān la-ddēf, tātī finġān la-l-kēf u-tālet finġān la-ssēf* – ‘The first cup of coffee is for the guest, the second is for enjoyment and the third is for the sword.’ This proverb is current especially among Bedouins and it indicates that if a guest stays too long in the house of his host, he may cause troubles in the end.
6. *al-qabweh in liqyet hamm tzilō, w-in liqyet farah tzidō* – ‘When coffee encounters a problem it gets rid of it, and when it encounters happiness it adds to it.’
7. *al-qabwe miftāh as-salām wi-l-kalām* – ‘Coffee is the key for peace and conversation.’

## 2 Idioms

Like proverbs, idioms are combinations of words which may be syntactically complete sentences. However, unlike proverbs, which are often interpreted literally, but gain their special effect by application to similar situations, the meaning of an idiom is not deducible from the aggregate meaning of its components.

Moreover, like proverbs, some idioms may reflect Arab customs, manners and beliefs, and what may in general be defined as Arab mentality and philosophy. The following examples may illustrate this:

1. As in other Semitic languages, certain Arabic idioms which express ‘relief’, ‘pleasure’ or ‘enjoyment’ use as one of their components words from the semantic field of ‘coldness’, e.g. *‘ays bārid* (lit. cold living) i.e. an easy life; *ġanīma bārida* (lit. cold loot) i.e. an easy prey; *qarrat ‘aynuhu* (lit. his eye cooled) i.e. he was glad, delighted; *qurrat al-‘ayn* (lit. coolness of the eye) i.e. joy, pleasure; *atlaġa šadrahū* (lit. he put snow on his heart) i.e. he pleased him.

It is not difficult to guess that the Arab who had lived all his life in hot areas, mainly in the desert, had suffered the agonies of unbearable hot climate. It was only natural, therefore, that words and expressions referring to ‘heat’ should denote negative concepts (e.g. *wā ḥarra qalbāb* (lit. How hot a heart!) i.e. ‘Oh what a pain, what a burning of the heart’), while words denoting the concept of ‘coolness’ should be chosen to depict the desire and reason for relief and enjoyment, just as ‘sun’ and ‘warmth’ were the high aspiration of the man in Europe. The concept of ‘coldness’, when used with negative connotations, is, according to Blau (1976:56) probably the result of European influence. To this one may add that the same explanation may account for the modern usage of words denoting ‘warmth’ to express strong emotions and friendly feelings, e.g. *salām ḥarr* for ‘warm greetings’.

2. A relatively large number of idioms deal with fate or ‘convey’ fatalistic views<sup>8</sup>. These idioms may be divided into two main categories:

- a. when fate is referred to directly, e.g. *dārat ‘alayhi ad-dā’ira* – (lit. ‘the wheel has turned over him’) – ‘to suffer adversities’; *tawwāḥat bihi at-tawā’ih* – (lit. ‘vicissitudes have made him go astray’) – ‘fate dealt him severe blows’; *afala naġmuhū* – ‘his star has

<sup>8</sup> For more details on Arab fatalism, see Piamenta 1979 & 1983.

- set'; *ibtasam lahu al-hazz* 'fortune smiles on him'; *aqbala 'alayhi ad-dahr*, or *aqbalat 'alayhi ad-dunyā* (lit. time or the world have drawn near him) - 'luck is on his side'.
- b. when fate is challenged by sorcery and divination or by gambling, e.g. *rağama bi-l-ğayb* - (lit. to cast stones at something invisible) - 'to predict the future; *lahu al-qadh al-mu'allā* - (lit. he has the top-scoring arrow) - 'to have a major impact on'; *'alā t-tayr al-maymūn* - (lit. on the bird which flies in the right direction) - 'God speed'; *ka'anna 'alā ru'ūsibim at-tayr* - (lit. as if a bird is hovering over their head) - 'they were motionless out of fear' (see also Genesis 40,16-19); and perhaps also *daraba ahmāsan li-asdāsin* - (lit. to beat fives for sixes) - 'to brood and to intrigue'.

Fatalism as a characteristic feature of the Arab may also be reflected by the large number of idioms which are used euphemistically with reference to death, without using words which denote passing away (an English euphemism!). For example:

He died: *lafaza an-nafas al-ahīr* (lit. to spit out the last breath); *qarad ribātabu* (lit. to cut off his ribbon); *labba nidā' rabbīhi* (lit. he responded to the call of his Creator); *šālat na'āmatuhu* (lit. his tenderness has risen); *madā sabīlahu/lisabīlihi* (lit. he proceeded in his way); *qadā nahbahu/ağalahu* (lit. he completed his fixed time); *intaqala ilā rahmat Allāh* (lit. he moved to the mercy of God); *quđiya amruhu* (lit. his business has been accomplished); *ista'tara Allāh bibi* (lit. God has claimed him); *ista'tarat bibi rahmat Allāh* (lit. God's mercy has claimed him); *ihītarahu Allāh ilā ġiwārihi* (lit. God has chosen him to be in His neighbourhood).

He was buried: *wassadahu at-turāba* (lit. he covered him with soil); *suwwiyat 'alayhi l-ard* (lit. the ground was straightened over him).

The deceased: *al-faqīd* (lit. the lost one); *ar-rāhil* (lit. the one who has travelled); *al-marhūm* (lit. the one God has mercy upon); *al-mağfūr lahu* (lit. the one God has forgiven); *sākin al-ğinān* (lit. the dweller of the Gardens).

Grave: *al-marqad al-ahīr* (lit. the last place of lying).

Funeral: *al-mawkib al-ahīr* (lit. the last parade).

Angel of death: *abū yahyā* (lit. the father of the living).

### 3 Conclusions

This paper has attempted to cast light on some customs, manners and beliefs which may reflect ways of life and outlook on life of the Arabs through some of their proverbs and idioms. There is no doubt that common sayings and 'moulds' of expression do mirror the society in which they are current. Moreover, their use by the speakers of the language to illustrate similar situations or portray people and events often denote the linguistic wealth, the imagination, the education and experience of the speaker.

However, when analyzing proverbs and idioms one should be cautious not to draw impetuous conclusions, because of the heterogeneity and variegation of these popular expressions, the contradictory views they sometimes convey and the occurrence of some of them in other cultures which may reflect their universality as fruit of the thought of mankind at large.

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