

Cultural and Societal Beliefs and Taboos in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This paper aims to report on diverse cultural and societal beliefs and taboos in Saudi Arabia in an attempt to touch on and develop a better understanding thereof concerning the inter-relationship between people, religion and language within the Saudi Arabia cultural context. Given the Saudi Arabians' religious and cultural background as a source of controlling taboo (behaviour and) linguistic expressions, in this paper, it is assumed that identifying the function of linguistic taboos and who is responsible for promoting them is of significance to identify the socio-cultural implications of linguistic expression of taboos. Investigating linguistic taboos, social taboos and religious taboos has ended into having people with a view on taboos as being of a confining function to the social progress of Saudi Arabia and of acting as a stumbling block in the face of Saudi Arabia progressive and globalized world. This paper has identified different taboos as stemming from different cultural opinions and background, but not religious per se. Religion has been identified as one of the critical aspects that have shade on the Saudi socio-cultural activities, particularly those associated with prejudices. That said, this paper stresses the need to explain and sensitise people about common taboos to help minimise prejudices and thus change points of view among many people who are used to many restrictions for a wrong belief that links such restrictions with religion as alleged source thereof. This paper tends to pinpoint Saudi media and Saudi government as being responsible for promoting certain cultural values and beliefs (and thus taboos), and coiling people and modifying their culture for political purposes. This paper advances the existing knowledge base by its findings and conclusions. It is recommended that Saudi Arabia start with educating people about multiple socio-culturally related-taboos, particularly those pertinent to sexually transmitted diseases and sexual problems.

Keywords: beliefs, culture, religion, society, taboos.

1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia, also known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), is situated in Western Asia and is one of the important Arab Sovereign states- having vast area of the Arabia Peninsula. As related to its geographical position, Saudi Arabia is the fifth largest state in entire Asia and is also considered as the second-largest state in the entire Arab world, according to the KSA General Commission for Survey. In 1932 Ibn Saud founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Current total population of KSA is estimated at 28.7 million: 20 million local nationals and 8 million immigrants, according to the General Authority for Statistics. Arabic is identified as official language of Saudi Arabia. For Muslims, Saudi Arabia is looked at as an important religious site, as it holds two Holy mosques of Muslims, namely Great Mosque of Mecca (Albayt Alharam) and Al-Masjid al-Nabawī (the prophet's mosque) which is situated in Medina.

For Saudi Arabia, Islam is regarded as the sole religion practiced in the country. Islam is also considered in affinity with other Saudi culture elements with regards to playing a major role in social behaviour and impacting common rules and the entire judicial law. The Quran and the Sunnah (the prophet traditions and hadith/sayings) are the two main sources of the Saudi Arabian law. That is because the Quran is the holy book of Muslims that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad. The holy book Quran is written in Arabic language and is also recited by Muslims in the same language. Hadith is another source of Islamic values that are identified as verbal record qualified by Prophet Mohammed. It is a detailed description of daily applications of different philosophies integrated into the Quran and the Sunnah that is the living model of Prophet Muhammad.

2. Religious and Cultural Values and Beliefs

There exist different negative taboos in the culture of Saudi Arabia that can be categorised into cultural beliefs and religious beliefs. Religion plays a significant role in the development of Saudi Arabian culture. As it is an Islamic country, it is forbidden (i.e. haram) to be engaged in those activities that violate the ethical values of Islam. These activities may include consumption of alcohol, eating pork or to be involved in adultery or fornication. However, there exist some other limitations that are attributed uniquely to the culture but irrelevant to the religion. These include the role of women gender in public activities including playing sports in public, driving in public or shaking a woman hand. Similarly, nepotism or waste is also identified as a controversial tradition in the culture of Saudi Arabia. Developing an understanding these cultural and religious taboos is important for developing an understanding of the association that exists between religion, people and language in the culture of Saudi Arabia.

According to the notion provided by Stacey (2009), Muslims are provided by a book of guidance that is known as Al Quran by the God. According to the Stacey, this holy book of Muslims holds particular messages and information that motivate believers to obey the rules, worship God, and please Him. These rules include a vast array of implications including consumption of alcohol, eating pork or getting involved in sexual activities. Muslim individuals and communities engage their lives in doing good deeds and submitting themselves to the will of God as directed in the Holy book of Quran.

Stacy (2009) expands and states that eating pork or any other product made up of pig's products is strictly forbidden in Islam and is not acceptable in any condition. This indicates that in Saudi Arabia, food products or any other product made of pig's product is taboo. In fact, this animal is restricted by law and is not farmed, petted in farms or kept in zoos. Even this specific animal is not displayed in animated movies or children stories. Pork is forbidden in Islam due to considering harmful aspects of a pig to people. Studies according to Stacey (2009) have indicated that pigs are omnivores that eat plants like tree bark and also animals including other pigs and carcasses. Moreover, there are fewer sweat glands in pigs due to which they cannot get rid of toxic waste that could result in developing human-related bacterial infections. Related to this, for example, in North America and Mexico, authorities fought against the prevalence of swine flu by executing mass slaughtering of pigs. This action has shed light on that pigs hold parasites that are detrimental to the health of human. According to Meyer-Rochow (2009), during World War II, soldiers fighting in North Africa underwent through toxic ulcers of legs. It was identified that their food contains pork product. When they were provided with a pork-free diet, the ulcers in their legs were died out. In addition to this, the holy Quran has provided a guiding rule in forbidding pork as in the following declaration:

"He has forbidden you only dead animals, and blood, and the swine, and that which is slaughtered as a sacrifice for other than God" (Quran 2:173, as cited in Stacey, 2009).

Muslims all over the world firmly hold this religious value and also in a nation like Saudi Arabia that is completely regulated and governed by Islamic constitution and values. Therefore, pork is strictly barred. Rosenblum (2010) also stresses that it is significant to understand that belief related to not eat pork is not only highly regarded in Islam, but the Jewish belief also considers forbidding pork. In addition to this, in other culture like Romans, pork is a forbidden food item as of metonymic or symbolic, with respect to Roman and Jewish identities.

Regarding sexual activities, in Saudi culture fornication and words related to adultery, for example, are considered as a taboo. Different human body parts are referred to in Arabic language with less offensive effect in its literal meaning in the English language, for instance. These may include the use of '*the front*' phrase to refer to vagina or to use the phrase '*the back*' for the bottom. This kind of 'metaphor' use to refer to sexual parts is considered of less offensive influence when compared with the standard Arabic words for referents as genitalia (Al-Khatib, 1995). The particular taboo related to referring to or discussing the aspects associated with genitalia is often intensified to the fornicated activities that are considered as an offence in Saudi society and also prohibited according to Islamic values and teachings.

Moreover, with respect to relationships of opposite sex, in Saudi Arabia it is also regulated as per the Islamic law. As Islamic values are highly integrated into Saudi culture, they support similar behaviour in cases of relationships; that is, marriage should be the base of relationships, and sexual associations with the opposite sex are consecrated through the wedding. Negative results and implications of illegal relationships are specified in Islam as being related to engaging in premarital relationships or indulging oneself in immoral activities. According to Islamic values, such types of activities may result in sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, the breakdown of family setups and emotional destabilization in relations without any commitments. It has been

explicitly identified in the Quran that these types of activities are forbidden with strict manner. Quran holds that:

“[...] Nor come closer to illicit sexual intimacy for it is a shameful and immoral, opening the door (to other immorality) (Quran 17:32)”.

Similar to what is adopted in Saudi Arabia, the Jordanian society, according to Al-Khatib (1995), holds the same taboos, including such linguistics taboos as those mentioned earlier, due to religious values and considerations. These taboos associated with language, for example, are related to sexual activities as, for instance, the word *fuck* or using words like *making love* which are considered as a shameful act. This is also highlighted in Saudi culture as these types of acts and words are considered as taboo and also intolerable neither by the Saudi culture or by the entire Islamic culture. In addition to Saudi culture, fornication type of activities or words is also intolerable in other different parts of Arab world and Muslim communities, including Pakistan and Indonesia. Having said that, both genders of opposite sex are restricted to punishment for sexual activities by religious members or Saudi community. This is a highly predominant issue as these kinds of activities are punishable in Islam by the divine constitution of the Quran.

However, there exists some kind of issues that have been introduced from different conservative thought; Saudi culture holds ineffective adaptation of ways and means to tackle mistaken practices and these sexuality issues, and is therefore considered primitive in sexual education activities, a thing resulting in negative affect on the Saudi society. Sexual education in Saudi schools does not exist in educational institutions, which leads into less awareness of human rights and health risks among children. This aspect of limited education and awareness level is also common in the entire Middle East region. This results in increasing cases of AIDS transmission problems and unwanted pregnancy issues. This is due to lack of information and constrained awareness level. According to Bennett (2007), this issue is also identified in different Muslim nations including Indonesia- an issue of human rights, health and Islam.

The ban on drinking alcohol is also one of the important beliefs associated with the culture of Saudi Arabia. Alcoholic products are rich in toxins and are also characterized as a source of addictive contagion (Rosenblum, 2010). Drinking alcohol or eating alcoholic products is considered as a contraindication by Saudi Arabians. The reason is that alcohol does not conform with Islamic sacred principles and is considered to be a moral reversal of spiritual well-being in Islamic countries. As cited in Mahdi (2006), according to the Quran 2:219:

“They ask you (O Prophet) concerning alcoholic drink and gambling. Say: ‘In them is a great sin and (some) benefit for men, but their sin is greater than their benefit [...]”.

Islam prohibits drinking completely, even if it is a small amount of alcohol. Drinking or vending alcohol in Saudi Arabia is illegitimate, and accusations of such crimes include a year in prison and the 360 whips by the police. This penalty is similar for both sexes.

In Saudi Arabia, Karl Andree, a 74 year old British man, was found with his homemade wine. This case resulted in the arrest of the offender by Saudi religious police and also he was sentenced for one year in prison along with 360 whips. However, in this case, offender the man was released due to inferior health condition and age (Cacciottolo, 2015). People from other countries are not allowed

to bring any type of alcohol or its related products (www.livinginsaudiarabia.org). The British Drinking Behavior Questionnaire (HDBQ) was carried out in a psychiatric hospital in Kuwait in the form of intercultural studies. The aim was to investigate 96 Muslim Arabs to assess the level of alcohol abuse. Survey shows that samples of Arab people are significantly lower than British samples (Bilal, Kristof & El-Islam, 1987). In modern Israel, Muslims or Arab Muslims and traditional Jewish drink while Muslim traditions (for the Muslims) forbid alcoholic beverages (Neumark, Rahav, Teichman & Hasin, 2001). The impact of religious beliefs seems to show more controlling role in Islamic societies, and by far in Saudi society.

3. Culture and Women Saudi Society

Greetings between people of opposite sex who tend to shake hands (i.e. in case of men to women) are unimaginable and are not accepted in Saudi culture. Paradoxically, there are also some Saudi men who shake hands with Western women even in Saudi Arabia or in other countries (www.circlesofexcellence.com). According to my (i.e. the author's) experience, it is difficult to refuse to shake a man's hand in Australian culture, which may be misleading and sometimes difficult to explain with regard to this principle. To manage the situation, I often put my hand on my chest as an indication of greetings, indicating that I can't shake hands.

In addition, the right hand rather than the left hand shaking is the etiquette of the interaction among men and among women in Saudi Arabia because it is believed that the left hand is meant for inferior actions and shaking in left hands is not in line with the Islamic teachings. Shaking in right hands is seen as a sign of respect and is usually looked up at in group greetings because Saudi members value family values and a greeting sign by right hand would be accepted as a greeting for the whole group (www.circlesofexcellence.com). On the other hand, Bouchara (2015) states that, in Morocco, people in Muslims and Arab communities first greet everyone saying *assalam alikaikum* (meaning that you are in peace) but with limited or no movement of hands.

According to the notion raised by Maktabi (2012), restrictions on women have nothing to do with religion. It is explained that forbidding women on the basis of religious certification from involvement in different physical activities revolves around the indecent aspect of sportswear. On the other hand, it is imperative to consider that this is an inadequate explanation, as women can adequately involve in physical activities through adjusting sports uniforms. Considering Saudi Arabia as only trend holders of women restriction would be not suitable as different Muslim countries also witness this trend of limiting women engagement in sports. In Egypt, as argued by Walseth and Fasting (2003), women hold the belief that Islam supports women for participating in sports activities. However, due to cultural criticism, engagement of women in sports activities is restricted. Again, it can be identified that this aspect is emphasizing on cultural taboo, similar to the use of mandatory veil and gender segregation that is usually encouraged by cultural implications instead of Islam.

Islam supports and values the spiritual and physical progress and development of both sexes. However, this aspect of Islam is eclipsed through the influence of restrictive culture. The taboo association with the sport is changing with gradual means, specifically in Jeddah, which is one the largest city of Saudi Arabia. Changing of taboo related to the involvement of women in physical activities is ascribed to an increased level of participation of women in different sports activities.

According to a female respondent participated in an interview process conducted by Maktabi (2012), she proclaimed that sports activities like football are not against any cultural or religious beliefs. With the progress and modernization, the Saudi society relation with the taboos has changed in gradual approach, particularly when seeing that participation of women in sports, according to Walseth and Strandbu (2004), has included Pakistani women who also consider cultural and religious beliefs as a limiting factor for action.

Women in Saudi Arabia are not permitted to drive (probably not with the current regulations that publicly permit women to drive) - yet, in general culturally it is also integrated into the list of a religious taboo although in fact it is a cultural not religious taboo. A research study conducted by Maktabi (2012) depicts that other Arab nations, including Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates follow Islamic standards and still permit women to drive cars in public. The socio-economic history of Saudi Arabia holds the explicit explanation of prohibiting driving activity of women, but the political inclination seems to no more have such inclination after recent regulation on women driving-permit. Roots of Saudi culture firmly hold the Islamic values that are considered male dominant; therefore, men in Saudi culture are identified as responsible for caring for and looking after the needs of the entire family, including the woman. Moreover, Saudi culture has also identified the role of women, who are assigned with the duty of caring for the family and children. A trusted male driver is employed for accompanying the woman at home if the male members of the family are engaged in their tasks and activities.

Although law and constitution of Saudi Arabia used to prohibit driving of women, however, some Saudi local females would love to drive in Saudi Arabia. It is worthwhile to mention that this desire of Saudi women resulted in executing an organized campaign against the law prohibiting driving of women. In this campaign, a total of twenty-five women participated and drove the car as their protest to declare ban eliminated (Jamjoom & Smith, 2013). These actions resulted in the detention of five women by the police. Although these women were detained in their car instead of prison until the male guardians arrived and women promised for not driving in the future. Despite the recent political decision on women driving, according to some beliefs, the driving of women in Saudi Arabia is considered against the cultural standing and customs; however, it may be acceptable irrespective cultural beliefs.

4. The Custom of *Wasta* in Saudi Society

In Saudi Arabia, *Wasta* is a collective social norm and refers to the behavior of an intercessor that supports desires by doing good things, but the nature of his nepotism makes it controversial. *Wasta* comes from the Arab *WIST*, which means the middle (Aldossari & Robertson, 2016). In the past, *Wasta* initially referred to the cause between two opposing tribes, and an expert individual mediates in conflict resolution (Al-Ramahi, 2008). In practice, however, the importance of *Wasta* has changed to describe interventions that give customers benefits that would otherwise not be available. The reason given by Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993) is that this is usually driven by a deficiency of experiences and skills of the one mediated for. *Wasta* helps with the realization of work, university records, career development and other special life tasks (Kassab, 2016). *Wasta* is used in a wide range of backgrounds, industries and sectors such as the academic world, medical services and numerous government agencies. People have argued that *Wasta* has a major impact on career success, although it is completely immoral and confrontational. Despite the qualifications

and capacities of many candidates, *Wasta* is still a significant environment for manipulating recruitment and promotion decisions (Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011).

Different social norms, in Arab countries, are not unique; the same applies to *Wasta*. In different social settings, individuals are involved in utilizing their equipment, connection, and power and influence to execute services for different groups that may hold similar beliefs and practices. There exist different comparative research studies that have linked Arab *Wasta* to different nations and culture, including Russian *Svyazi*, Brazilian *Jeitinho* and China (Smith et al., 2012). *Wasta* is also related to different Western concepts like string pull, dogmatism and prejudices (Alwerthan & Swanson, 2016; Smith et al., 2012).

The concept of *Wasta* as compared with *Guanxi* has been highlighted in different literature; for Hutchings and Weir (2006), many similarities could be identified between these two practices. These similarities can be associated with two different cultural centers, the Chinese and the Arab culture. Both these cultures are collective in nature and also possess significant power distances (Velez-Calle, Robledo-Ardila & Rodriguez-Rios, 2015; Smith et al., 2012). Besides, Hutchings and Weir (2006) mention that both these communities and societies are characterized as *shame societies*, where the character is a valuable advantage (Hutchings & Weir, 2006).

According to Hom and Xiao (2011), failure related to the provision of services and assistance can lead to shame. In addition to this, it could result in losing attachment from social networks. Provision and adoption of mutual obligation, courtesy, loyalty and trust are considered major indispensable principles that are responsible for transferring and enduring *Guanxi* and *Wasta* (Hutchings & Weir, 2006). On the other hand, the system of management practices in China as well as in Arab countries should focus on the centralization of red tape, procedures related to long bureaucratic and implementation of hierarchical structures at the organization level. In relation with the aforementioned cultural taboos, the implementation of communication aspects in the Saudi society requires an insightful understanding about appreciation of society works entirely.

5. Recommendations

Considering the role played by the media in Arab countries and Saudi Arabia in specific, there is a need for promoting positive cultural values and beliefs for Saudi Arabians as well as people in the region. Such action is expected to lead to the development of mutual understanding and respect for reservations in Saudi Arabia. The governmental bodies in Saudi Arabia are shouldered with provision of education to their population, alongside running awareness campaign targeting cultural beliefs that tend to emerge from the highlighted taboo instead of aligning with them underpinning cultural and religious values. This is especially of great significance when it comes to the limitations projected to female characterization, as it is not easy to understand the treatment in a natural process encompassed by expectations of a society in terms of gender in a number of countries. Moreover, in Saudi Arabia, education of the population about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and other related problems should be made obligatory mainly due to the spread of such diseases at an extensive level, rather than censoring it.

In other words, it can be stated that the paper has attempted to highlight that people in Saudi Arabia are aligned with their religious and cultural beliefs that are responsible for contributing to taboo

behaviour and various expressions. Additionally, it is of a big important to gain insight into the taboo linguistics and functions associated with it for the purpose of identifying the social purposes and drivers, alongside evaluating possibilities of changes that could be integrated into the course of time. Linguistic taboos could be an area for further sociolinguistic research. Considering the traditional practices, an unknown fear has moved the forbidden language forward, leading to a pronounced lack of understanding. However, the world, on the one hand, is aligned with progressive globalization, while the manifestation of taboos has to be described to the population in Saudi Arabia as well as to the outside world for the purpose of diminishing prejudice. On the other hand, religious practices indicated a profound role in the country, and in playing a vital role in describing taboos that generate from cultural opinions.



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