

Pre Islamic Arabia

Tribal / Political System in Arabia before Islam.

The period of pre Islamic Arabia lasted for approximately 6 centuries from the elevation of prophet Isa (as) till the spreading of Islam by the last prophet Muhammad (s). During that time the Arabs were divided into city and desert dwellers. The following will elaborate on the tribal system.

1. As mentioned, the Bedouin Arabs lived as nomads in tribal groups. In fact, a group of families made a clan and a group of clans made a tribe. There were many tribes at that time and each had its own rules and regulations. What could be prohibited in one tribe could be well allowed in another tribe. Their own different rules and regulations were meant to create a code of conduct within a specific tribe, though they could be different from other tribes. It is mentioned that when a tribe became great in number, they used to say “Amira, the children of so and so”.¹ Members of a tribe could amount to many hundreds.
2. **Secondly**, due to the varieties of tribes with different concepts, they were constantly at war with each other over scarce resources. These fights would last for generations in a more dramatic and drastic way. It is said that if a man of Quraizah killed a man of Nadir, he would be killed in return.² Sometimes they would make an oath known as Qasamah swearing that they had not killed so and so.³ Only a few small settled communities such as in Makkah and Ta’if relied on trade and religion where the carving of idols became a business. The messenger (s) said that whoever fights for a cause that is not clear, advocating tribalism, getting angry for the sake of tribalism, then he has died a death of Jaahiliyyah.⁴
3. **Moreover**, these tribes were formed on basis of blood and kinship. Family relationship was important to them. This evolved into a tribal chivalric (respectful) code of honour known as “muruwah”. This gave meaning to their lives and encouraged towards different elements such as courage, avenging wrongs, patience, endurance, hospitality and generosity above all. The Arabs were adamant in abiding by that code of conduct. It was important as a code of conduct for each member of the tribe. Rarely we could see that someone was accepted not based on blood and kinship relationship.
4. **Furthermore**, the Shaikh (chief or leader) was selected by council of elders as best person for job, regardless of parentage or privilege though his tribe should be famous. He should be known through his intellect, maturity, courage, authority, administration, fluency in language and business. He should know how to make treaties with other groups or tribes and contracts within the business spheres. He should be a person who would devote his time and energy for the survival of the tribe. He should be someone having the knowledge of written Arabic language and knowledge of poetry.
5. **Fifthly**, the Shaikh was the ultimate authority controlling over his people and administrative affairs. He was also to protect the tribe. The Shaikh was the judge in disputes and he was to distribute possessions and goods equally. He also took care of weaker members. The tribe did offer the woman protection if she was maltreated by her husband.⁵ The prophet said that anyone who would live during that time would have listened to the leader and carried out his orders even if his back was flogged and his wealth snatched, he would listen and obey.⁶

¹ Swahih Al Bukhariy Vol 6 Book 60 Hadith 234

² Sunan An Nasa’i 4732

³ Sunan An Nasa’i 4709

⁴ Sunan An Nasa’i 4115

⁵ Sechzer, Jeri (September 2004). "Islam and Woman: Where Tradition Meets Modernity: History and Interpretations of Islamic Women's Status"

⁶ Muslim 1847

6. **Added to the above**, the sense of patriotism was strictly tribal. Everything was subordinate to the interest of the group not to say that they neglected the individuality of a person. They favoured their tribes to such an extent that they defamed the ancestry of other families.⁷ They would do anything to honour the names of their tribes and their leaders. They would narrate the achievement of their leaders, warriors and their tribes. Honour and prestige from patriotism were important to them.
7. **Besides**, pre Islamic Arabs were known for their poetry and their poets sang glories of the tribe, of their heroes of war, of their leaders but rarely of their gods. There were poem competitions held at the Ukaz or Ukaiz market⁸ on annual basis. The winner would be given much wealth and status in the society. He would be considered as a leader. It is said that Jabir sat more than one hundred times with the prophet while the companions would recite poetry and talk about things of Jaahiliyyah period and the prophet (s) would remain silent and would smile along with them.⁹
8. **Eighthly**, each member was fully protected and only the Shaikh / tribe could ensure personal survival in difficult times where there was no room for individualism. This means that ideas like egoism, selfishness and independency were rejected. There was solidarity and loyalty towards the Shaikh. Each tribe had to avenge the death of a single member, hence feuds went on for generations. It was a cycle of violence. It is said that during these days if a person would graze the goat of a tribe and didn't find anyone except the slave girl, he would commit adultery with her.¹⁰ This would lead to fighting which was like a fun for them.
9. **Ninthly**, there was so much competition among these tribes that the balance of power depended on raids to capture camels, cattle or goods; turnover of wealth and fortune was part of tribal existence. It was a constant 'fight' to control the business route and fame. Only the strong would survive and the weak were exploited, hence position of women and female babies at risk. It sometimes resulted in merger of two or more groups or rather taking over of the weak groups / tribes. The survival of the weak depended on the larger and more influential group.
10. **Last but not least**, was that the Bedouins would join together in a meeting in order to take decisions for the benefit of the people. That decision resulted due to the constant fighting periods and unrest in the Arabian countries. As such it would be better for everyone to bring moments of peace where each tribe was able to conduct its own business trade. They would protect their interest but if ever a member got married with another member of another tribe, then both would be rejected from the 2 tribes. Still, there are rules and regulations to be observed.

Changes Brought By Islam.

1. With the coming of Islam, many aspects from different fields changed. The **first point** is that tribal loyalties remained strong but overshadowed by ideals / principles of Islam. They were loyal to their fallible leaders but now they were loyal to Allah and His prophet (s). Allah orders us to obey Him, the prophet and those in authority among us.¹¹ It was slow but inevitable as the message of equality in Islam spread and Muslims grew in number. There was loyalty to the divine book / Qur'an and the Inspired words and deeds of the prophet / Hadith and Sunnah.
2. The **second point** is that Islam incorporated the best of 'muruwah' that is the chivalric code of conduct but extended it to include all Muslims rather than just tribe. Each member was to endeavour himself to a moral code of conduct and patriotism with the idea of helping his neighbour. It was no more the idea

⁷ Swahih Al Bukhariy 3850

⁸ Swahih Al Bukhariy 1770

⁹ Jami' Tirmidhi Vol 5 Book 41 hadith 2850

¹⁰ Muslim 2865

¹¹ Qur'an 4: 60

of tribal survival. Instead it was everything around the survival of both the individual Muslim and the Ummah / Muslim community. Each member of the Ummah is important for his / her own development and success.

3. **Moreover**, the Arabs were used to tribal egalitarianism / fairness in the selection of the Shaikh where weaknesses could be found specially when it came to choosing a leader based on his reputation. The idea of selection or rather election characterised the life of the Prophet and the spirit of early Muslims but with divine help. It was more a selection based on the knowledge, sincerity, Imaan / faith, piety and humility of a person to become the leader. Islam capitalized on the religious as well as the administrative abilities to choose someone as leader.
4. **Furthermore**, the Prophet Muhammad (s) gave importance to all individuals, Muslims and non-Muslims, regardless of who they were or what were their tribe or lineage. There is equality among all members. Being a member of Ummah became more important than tribal membership. The idea of being in a Jama'ah and congregation was more important. This means that security, peace, freedom of religion, freedom and liberty of business and any other elements related to individual way of life for both the Muslims and the non-Muslims were given and respected.
5. The **fifth point** was seen in the idea of Allah being the Judge. The Arabs had the notion of vendetta where there would be inter-tribal wars lasting for over generations. The prophet stopped it and brought their faith and fate in the hands of Allah. The idea of Tawakkul, that is, to trust Allah completely in all kinds of circumstances was introduced to the Arabs. Henceforth, they should rely only upon the decision of Allah accepting their fate / destiny with patience. No one can be a better decision maker and judge than Allah.
6. **More to the point**, it can be seen in poems being written. The Arabs used to have poem competitions annually as a custom among tribes. Some poems were banned but others for the praise of Allah and His prophet (s) were allowed and encouraged. The idea of using the Arabic language in the best way to praise and worship Allah and at the same time to send salutations upon the prophet (s) was the principle of the pious people. Rough and obscene words and language are not allowed in Islam. Our prophet Muhammad (s) wanted to purify that Arabic language and his followers.
7. **Another aspect** which was changed by the prophet (s) was in marriage. There was no intertribal marriage during the time of pre Islamic Arabia. The prophet (s) stopped that practice and allowed marriage between any male and female Muslim member of his community. However, both should be Muslims. As long as all requirements are met, there is no reason to delay or reject a marriage proposal. Islam brought marriage known as Nikah to eliminate all kinds of sins related to adultery, prostitution and fornication among others.
8. **Eighthly**, though the Bedouins were perseverant, patient and hardworking people, many of the tribes were engaged in looting the cultivation of the city dwellers. The prophet (s) encouraged them with the perseverance but prohibited them from looting. He rather encouraged them to earn a halal living. Robbery, haram gain and all kinds illicit activities were banned and discouraged by the prophet (s). Islam capitalizes on halal gain, licit activities and protection of the wealth of others. Muslims must make the most of moral values.
9. **Added to the above**, the Bedouins of the tribes would engage in rearing of sheep and goats among other different animals like camels, oxen, horses and would deal in the business of buying and selling or barter system. The prophet continued the practice but with a sense of equity, justice, fairness and halal dealing. The idea and implication of weightage with reasonable price was ordained by the prophet (s). Agriculture, rearing of animals and doing business with them were encouraged as the prophet (s) was himself a shepherd and a businessman.

10. **Last but not least**, the tribes would deal in polytheism and idol worshipping. They would have different gods for different purposes. At the same time, they would engage in idol business especially during the time of pilgrimage. The prophet changed their situations to adopting monotheism that is the worshipping of only one god, Allah. The idea of idol worshipping and the sales of idols thus disappeared. The prophet (s) brought a religion where there should be no association of anyone or anything with Allah.

There had been many adapted and adopted concepts as well as many changes through the coming of the prophet within a tribal system. These were done as blessings for the whole of Mankind, Muslims and non-Muslims.