Leighton House Museum

Leighton and the Middle East website: Empires and People

Daily Life in the Middle East in the 1800s

Employment

Some of the most important cities in the Middle East in the nineteenth century were Istanbul in Turkey, Damascus in Syria, Marrakesh in Morocco, Mecca in Arabia and Cairo in Egypt. The populations of these cities were mostly made up of merchant and trading families followed by shopkeepers and a wide variety of craftspeople.

Muslim societies in the nineteenth century had a hierarchy as to how work was rated. Those people who worked in religious circles such as teachers in educational establishments (madrassas) and experts in law (sharia) were considered to have a very noble job. Merchants and traders came next in esteem but only as long as they ensured the community as a whole benefited from their profits. Most Muslims took seriously the Koranic teaching that individuals should be fair in their economic dealings with others and not make excessive profit from them. At the end of the spectrum of employment came craftspeople and those who worked in animal industries. People who worked with precious metals such as gold and silver, for example jewellers and artists were held in higher social regard than butchers and the related work of tanning and dyeing animal hides.

Public and private dwelling

A visitor to a large city in the Middle East in the nineteenth century would have seen a layout that had not dramatically altered for centuries. At the centre was the mosque. While serving its primary function as a place of prayer, a mosque unlike the cathedrals and churches of Europe, was then and still is today an important centre for community activities. Located around the mosque were the madrassas devoted to law and theology. Also at the centre of large towns and cities was located the main marketplace (the *suq*). Moving out beyond the centre were the residence quarters of the population of the city. Wealthy families built houses of stone,

Frank Dillon The House of Moufti Sheikh el Mahadi, Cairo*, 1873 (courtesy Victoria & Albert Museum, London). This painting shows the sparsely furnished, but richly decorated interiors typical of a wealthy urban house in Egypt.*

however, the norm for most people were houses built of brick, which was cheaper. The homes of the rich and poor were usually built around a courtyard with poorer people living in tenements above each other. A common feature of the homes of both rich and poor was the simple undecorated exteriors of their houses. Rich decoration was usually kept for the interiors. Interior

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furnishing was very different from European homes. Most notable was the lack of furniture. While chests were used for storage, textiles took the place of furniture in the Middle Eastern home. On floors, elaborate carpets and cushions were used for sitting and sleeping on. Carpets were also used for wall hangings. Meals were usually served on large silver or copper trays and people ate from earthenware implements. Porcelain cups along with knives and forks were used only in the homes of the wealthy. At the outer limits of the cities lived the very poor. Their homes were built from mud-brick. In order to survive they mostly produced what they needed for themselves. Due to their circumstances, many were wandering nomads and moved from city to city to seek out a better way of life.

Diet

Bread was the staple food of the poor. Throughout the nineteenth century as in previous centuries riots were common if grain supplies were endangered for any reason. While the poor ate bread and a limited range of vegetables the rich had much more choice of foodstuffs. Meat, an expensive luxury to the poor and only eaten on special occasions was widely available to the wealthy. Records from the time also show that alcohol although prohibited in the Koran was imported from Europe and consumed all over the Middle East.

Education

By the nineteenth century primary and secondary schools for boys and girls had been established by the Ottoman government in most of their large cities. However, it was only the children of the wealthy that could afford to attend. As in Victorian Britain it was only the boys who were expected to go on to further education. They mostly got jobs in business, legal and government employment. It was considered enough for girls to be literate so as to assist their husbands and run their households. On a professional level, the only jobs largely available for women were as teachers or

A school in Cairo c.1900. (Coloured photograph, courtesy Bibliotheque des Arts Decoratifs, Paris/ Archives Charmet)

nurses. The schools opened by the Ottomans in the nineteenth century were dramatically different from the schools of previous centuries. Education in Muslim societies from the birth of Islam in 622 BCE had always been done in conjunction with the teachings in the Koran. In madrassas across the Middle East, young men and in some instances women, were taught the ethics and philosophies of ancient civilizations (Greek, Roman, Persian) in relation to what the Koran had to say on such topics. These students graduated to be the senior officials in whatever government was ruling at a given time or else became sharia judges. By the end of the nineteenth century however the Ottomans had decisively secularised education.

School syllabuses were modelled on European examples and French was the main language being taught. At higher-level institutes the majority of the professors were Europeans. The changes introduced in the nineteenth century were a shock to the age-old system of education in the region. People were

concerned about the removal of the Koran from education – essentially seen by them as a removal of God. The influence of Europe also worried parents who felt their children were being taught an alien way of life that may turn them away from their own culture. It was also challenging for students who had to not only learn a foreign language but also a syllabus designed from a European viewpoint.

Law and Order – the Sharia

Throughout the Middle East the dominant method of legal practice that kept society together was the Sharia Law. For many people today the word Sharia conjures up images of repressive and brutal punishments. While it is true that the Sharia laws were used to pass death sentences in the Islamic world, as a code of law it was predominantly used historically to deal with personal issues such as marriage, divorce and inheritance rights. The association of the Sharia with solely capital punishment is a recent phenomenon promoted by radical elements on all sides with an incorrect view of historical Islam.

The Sharia laws were developed by scholars over the first few centuries of Islam and were based on the writings of the Koran and the sayings (Hadith) of the Prophet Mohammed. There are four main legal schools of thought in Islam, Hanbali, Hanafi, Maliki and Shafii. The legal texts were particularly based on those writings that dealt with everyday life. This in itself led to limitations in the scope of what the Sharia could pronounce upon. While the Koran makes direct reference to issues of marriage, divorce and family life, it is more philosophical on ethics, morality and politics.

In such a situation the Sharia laws blended with local customs and therefore differed from region to region. For some Muslim societies today, Sharia law is contentious particularly because it is so interlinked with regional customs and beliefs. Equality for women is often at the heart of the debate. While the Koran is clear on the equality of the sexes 'whoso doeth right, whether male or female and is a believer, all such will enter the Garden' the Sharia as interpreted over the centuries imposed limitations on women. Daughters could only inherit half as much as sons, in legal cases a woman's testimony had half the weight of a man's. Such discrimination was not simply confined to Islam, the debate on women's rights was also an important issue for the preceding Christian and Jewish religions. It is important to recognise that the roots of women's unequal social status with men lie prior to the emergence of monotheism in the Near East.

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- The Middle East and North Africa in Leighton's time (1830-1896)
- Britain's relationship with the Middle East in the 1800's
- Attitudes to Race and Ethnicity in the British and Ottoman Empires
- Frederic Leighton's views on race