

'Face' Among the Arabs

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The preservation of personal dignity as a wellspring of Muslim behavior.

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George Washington, American children are told, having cut down his father's favorite cherry tree, showed his sterling character by confessing to the deed. An Arab hearing this story not only fails to see the moral beauty of such behavior but wonders why anyone would ever compromise his integrity by admitting thus his guilt. As to Washington's explanation that "I cannot tell a lie," the Arab asks how a man could rise to the presidency if he were not suave enough to use a well-concocted falsehood as a tactic in emergency behavior.

The values and rationale underlying these reactions are an aspect of "national character," a factor said to be of importance in estimating likely courses of national action and certainly of importance in dealing man to man with individuals. A syndrome of the Arab values can be called the face concept, an understanding of which is essential for a case officer in his interpersonal relationships with peoples stretching across North Africa and from Greece to Japan. Although we are concerned here specifically with Arabs, the same concept is applicable in a broad way to most Muslim groups and to some Far Eastern peoples.

An understanding of the concept will help define an area of potential difficulty in personal relations and give insight into stated and unstated Eastern attitudes. It will explain the extreme difficulty of resurrecting once-fallen political figures and getting them any public acceptance. It will show motivating forces which may be operationally useful, for example in contriving a character defamation.

The high value which the cultural patterns of the East place upon the concept of personal dignity is central to that behavior from which the frustrated American encountering it for the first time is likely to conclude that an Arab is a living non-sequitur or else deliberately perverse. Although there are many demographic and cultural subgroupings of the Eastern peoples—even the Arab may be an agricultural peasant, a nomad of the desert, a seafarer of the Persian Gulf, a sophisticated urbanite, a university student—the ideal of maintaining face has a universality among them, so that a general analysis of the concept will be pertinent, with minor variations, to all. Yet it should be borne in mind that, since cultural groups consist of individual men, there will be individual deviations from the generalizations drawn in the following discussion.

Dignity vs. Objectivity

A society expects from all its members an adherence to its own norms and values. According to the degree to which they do so adhere, people are judged acceptable or not acceptable in that society. For the American, earning social acceptability by maintaining his honor is a matter of equating honor with personal integrity. The American manifests his integrity by an uncompromising willingness to face objective truth and fact. Personal respect and acclaim go to him who makes a ruthless search for facts regardless of how self-damaging the results may be.

The American can apologize for revealed shortcomings and gain respect and prestige with an honest effort to correct his own errors. In our culturally determined scale of values the achieving of impersonal objectivity with regard to facts and truth is thus more important than preserving a man's personal dignity before the world at large. At all times and in all circumstances the American is culturally obliged to reconcile his position and his person with truthfully interpreted reality: witness the fact that the verb "to rationalize" usually has for us an ethically negative flavor.

The Arab in his society is likewise expected to show personal integrity in order to be socially acceptable. He, however, manifests his honor and integrity by making a public, outward impression of dignity derived from

an ostensible lack of guilt. Even if facts and conditions speak to the contrary, the social veneer of non-guilt must be maintained evident and dominant if he is to achieve the socially demanded face. Dignity and stature are granted only to those who show themselves as flawless; the society of the Arab world has no place or respect for one whose faults or errors come to public knowledge. Blame, fault, or error accruing to an Arab personally brings his immediate fall from social grace and a loss of dignity or face. He therefore feels revulsion and bitterness for anything that tends to compromise him in this way.

Americans and most other Western-bred persons regard it as merely socially inconsiderate or impolite to mention another's errors in public. Management courses teach psychologically graceful ways to correct erring employees without hurting their feelings, suggesting for example "Maybe it would be better if we did this another way" instead of a blunt and ego-damaging "You are doing this all wrong." The Arab would be quick to grasp the wide divergence between the two approaches. But what in American life is a matter of tact and consideration is to him a highly charged social confrontation with many complexities and subtle ramifications of which the American would never have dreamed.

If, as becomes evident after some exposure to Arab behavior, a lack of guilt is what confers on an Arab the dignity or face by which his personal integrity and social acceptability are measures, there must be further consequences flowing from such a displacement of criteria in the social value system as this seems from the viewpoint of Western culture. If lack of guilt gives social dignity, the Arab must maintain his guiltless appearance at all costs. Facts and circumstances can combine in many different ways to reflect unfavorably upon any man, but the Arab cannot afford to allow accrued facts or logic to impute any flaw or guilt to him personally. In self-defense he must interpret the assembled facts subjectively, deny them outright, or reject as illogical any construction that leads to intimations of personal shortcomings. To the American this defense is non-objective, a distortion of truth, and therefore paradoxically destructive of integrity, unless he can take the Arab point of view and recognize personal face as having a higher value than fact or logic in the society.

There are, it is true, many situations in American and Western society in which this kind of defensive thinking tends to arise; but Westerners are expected to be able to recognize and admit the logical flaws when they are pointed out to them. Severe cases of inability to achieve objectivity

are interpreted in American society as manifesting pathological symptoms of neurosis or psychopathic personality. Not so in the Near East. In the dynamics of the Arab social system dignity or face is not compromised for the sake of the lesser values found in fact and logic.

In an oil company installation near the Persian Gulf, an American linguist in the training department, after drafting some exercises to be used in instructing American employees in spoken Arabic, gave them to three bilingual Saudi Arabs working for him to check for syntactic and orthographic correctness before publication. The drafts were all tacitly okayed, returned without change; but after they had been published several glaring errors in the work were discovered. Distressed, the linguist questioned the three Arabs, who reluctantly explained that the inaccuracies had of course been obvious to them but they did not feel it would be right to point them out and thereby cause embarrassment to their boss and good friend!

Here the incompatible American and Arab attitudes reflected well the different dominant criteria of each. The American was interested solely in the objective accuracy of the work, a matter which was of secondary importance to the Arabs. They believed in good faith that they had acted with honor as gentlemen in protecting the linguist's dignity above all other considerations.

If an American family in the Near East uses domestic help from the local populace, it may often happen that a vase, say, is accidentally knocked over and broken during the cleaning of a room. When the housewife comes upon the pieces, perhaps picked up and disposed of, her only minimally tactful "How did you break the vase?" will be met with a startled look of surprise, a sheepish grin, and then, after a few hesitating moments of agonized embarrassment, likely the reply, "Oh I didn't; I would never break anything of yours!"

The housewife's account of the incident to her husband will probably center on the outrage to her Western ethic-- ". . . and after I saw the pieces he had the nerve to stand right there and deny it to my face." But the servant, though he truly regrets the accident and would not have done anything of the sort on purpose, has by his own lights reacted naturally and properly in repelling the immediate challenge to his dignity. A subtler approach by the housewife, merely taking notice of the debris in the presence of the servant, would probably have elicited from him a discreet explanation of how ". . . the vase fell while I was dusting the

furniture" and thus graciously permitted him to save face.

In matters that may involve him in guilt or blame the Arab's untruths, half-truths, avoidance of reply, or other ploys that jar Westerners do not spring from any perverse desire to deceive; they are facets of the need to maintain that personal dignity and face which in his system of values take precedence.

Public Image vs. Personal Conscience

As the American is taught to respect objectivity and facts, he is also encouraged to reconcile his personal position with the relevant facts in any given situation. From his earliest years he is impressed, by story and example, with the nobility his culture attaches to the act of admitting his guilt or personal failings which have contributed to some acknowledged larger wrong. He is imbued with the conception that it is manly to own up to his guilt straightforwardly, even at the price of self-injury or extreme embarrassment.

So firmly is this idea imposed that every American, except the psychopathic personality, can have intense feelings of personal guilt and may even lie awake nights worrying about wrongs, real or fancied, that he has done to cause hurt to others. He can relieve these guilt feelings by making an apology to the injured party or otherwise rectifying the wrong. The embarrassment entailed in admitting error is of less consequence than the need to alleviate the pangs of guilt.

Christianity emphasizes the personal God within each man, who enforces an ideal of perfection in behaviour and in thought. The sacrifice of the "only begotten Son" dramatizes this personal God interested in each individual soul. The Christian is supposed, by prayer or confession, to ask pardon for every instance of failure to reach perfection, and it is not difficult to see how this concept could instill a sense of personal guilt and obligation beyond self. The development of conscience or capacity for feeling guilt in religious life naturally spills over into non-religious contexts in cultures where Christianity is dominant and so is evident in other acts of life.

Offering sharply contrasting principles to these, Islam--religion, social

force, and almost complete way of life of the Arab Near East-naturally shapes much of the Arabs' cultural attitude. Even the Christian Arabs are immersed in a background of Muslim culture. By definition and profession, Islam is the "surrendering of the self to the will of Allah," and it portrays a God remote, all-pervading, and wholly out of contact with the individual man. In prayers, to be sure, Muslims implore God to do well by them and lead them on the right path. But all of Muslim theology conveys the feeling that God is so all-pervading and at the same time so far above and removed from the individual that all human actions and their consequences are but the sequels of God's doings: the individual is merely an animate pawn. This supremely impersonal God, above and beyond rather than within a person, impresses on the individual no requirement to accept guilt or personal responsibility for anything or to develop a conscience differentiating between intrinsic right and wrong.

Thus when a Westerner tries to show an Arab that he is to blame for something, he never really succeeds in getting the point across. Western personnel at oil installations in Iraq, Syria, and the Persian Gulf area are frustrated in trying to correct mistakes of Arab trainees on industrial equipment. When confronted with having made a wrong move that could have had the most serious of safety or technological consequences, the Arab is unwilling and unable to accept the idea that he should feel either sorry or responsible for his mistake. He dismisses both blame and censure with a casual "min Allah" -- "It is from God." To the remonstrance that it had better not happen again he answers "inshallah," "If God wills it," with exasperating nonchalance. In agent work, where supervision cannot be so close, this indifference to personal responsibility and tendency to atomistic thinking will necessarily be even more troublesome.

To the Arab, all is from Allah, and if Allah does all, the individual cannot be held responsible. Man is required to follow the teachings of the Koran and the Hadith and to perform his religious obligations, but he is not answerable to an inner God, a conscience. Instead of a sense of personal responsibility for his acts, the Arab has a deeply inculcated fear of outside forces; he realizes he must answer for his actions to society. This social sensitivity, together with his all-is-from-Allah fatalism, may in some measure explain why the Arab world knows scarcely any suicides, that common aberration of Christian living in the West. At any rate it explains why he is more interested in the face he presents to society than in exposing the facts of a situation.

The Surrogate

The Arab's need to project his self in a form completely acceptable to the harsh judgments of society renders his face, his dignity mask, a type of surrogate as thought of in the philosophy of Jung, one in which he wraps the very essence of his being. This is another form of that transference of self in complete allegiance which is an easily accomplished maneuver in the Arab world and the entire Near East. In politics the surrogate takes the form of a popular personality who has become the leader. The political surrogate with which the people identify themselves and their very souls must almost undergo deification to be worthy of their complete faith, allegiance, and devotion, and he must necessarily remain free of any conceivable flaw, unblemished in their eyes. At the first sign of failure, faltering, or political error, he immediately loses all allegiance-transferred to some new strong political personality moving in-and suffers his demise without anyone wondering why he was once in such high acclaim. There is a pointed moral here for anyone trying to influence political developments in Muslim countries: once a charismatic leader had been overthrown, it would be most difficult to arouse support or popular following to place him in power again. Promoters of a countercoup would be hawking tainted goods.

A similar surrogate within the individual is the outside mask or face to which the self or ego is transferred by the Arab, along with all his pride and self-esteem. This face presented to society at large then assumes more importance than his real self. The finding of defects or faults in it constitutes an attack on his very being, for there is no alternative surrogate to which the ego can be transferred. Hence the Arab whose integrity or face is challenged and in danger of being found imperfect is in quite a delicate position. He has to go to extremes to keep his social mask intact, thus taking actions completely contrary to the Western ethic and bewildering to the Westerner.

The constant effort to keep up face seems almost paranoiac by Western standards. Entertaining delusions of grandeur, claiming to be persecuted, magnifying faults in others that one wants to hide in oneself, calling constantly for redemption and resurgence of past greatness-all this is behavior typical of paranoia, but it is manifested in

every Arabic political newspaper and among individuals in day-to-day social intercourse. It cannot be considered abnormal in the Arab cultural setting. Given the importance of face to the Arab, such behavior must be recognized as a socially practical and accepted method of warding off or refuting any outside attack on his integrity. The Westerner who, recognizing in the Arab the personality traits which in Western culture signify paranoia or inferiority complex, is pleased with himself for being able to "see through the Arab's attempts at deceit and trickery and his lies" shows his lack of appreciation of the face concept in the Arab culture. It is the Westerner who has learned always to allow the Arab a graceful way to save himself from implications of guilt when difficulties arise who will make him a friend and avoid many frustrations and impasses in the relationship.

There is a proverb in Chinese which can be roughly translated, "Point at the chicken to scold the dog." On its face incomprehensible to the Westerner, it means that if the dog has done something wrong you should berate the chicken in his presence in order to get at the wrongdoer without causing undue embarrassment. The chicken is not embarrassed because everyone knows it was not he who did it, and the dog does not lose face through public shame or direct censure.

This principle was illustrated by an episode which occurred in Teheran but could as easily have come from the Arab world. A small radio had been stolen from the house of an American employing two Iranian servants, A and B. A was clearly the culprit, but direct accusation would have brought a quick denial and reduced the chances for recovery of the radio. Servant B was consulted; he advised the American housewife to chastize him severely in front of A. She did, and the radio was recovered with a minimum of interpersonal difficulty.

An incident cited by an American sociologist¹ illustrates another kind of situation. An Arab who caught another man in bed with his wife leveled a gun at them, but instead of shooting he offered to let the man off if he would keep the affair secret. The man promised and was let go. Later the Arab divorced his wife quietly, and the incident was considered closed. The double murder that might have been the outcome in Western cultures would have made newspaper headlines, a result diametrically opposed to the Arab's priority considerations. His pledging the wife and cuckold to secrecy on pain of death guaranteed that no outsiders would learn of the matter and thus saved him an embarrassing loss of face. The quiet divorce rid him of his problem. The

emotional distress which other husbands might have felt was for the Arab a problem of secondary importance; he could tell himself that Allah determines all and therefore not to trouble himself with the sequels of any acts. This story illustrates well the principle that the Arab is the reverse of the Westerner in that he feels very strongly the force of public shame in loss of face but is able to slough off the feelings of personal inadequacy which would be acute in a Westerner.

Subjective Fact

In Western cultures a fact is an objective absolute not subject to mutation through human interpretation. But the Arab mentality treats fact and truth as relative, to some extent a projection of the mind for the benefit of the self or ego. With this subjective processing the facts become what the Arab emotionally wants to believe is true. They can thus be made to mesh harmoniously with criteria which stand higher on the value scale because connected with the maintenance of face. Neither facts nor their connotations can stand up against the Arab's facade of personal dignity or be arrayed to form an attack on his surrogate of face.

Many concepts of the philosophy of the ancient Greeks have been discussed, adapted, and adopted by major Arab thinkers, but there is little sign in present-day Arab culture that Greek analytical self-critical philosophy ever entered the Near East. The motto "Know thyself" is not quoted by the Arabs; if it were, it would have to have an entirely new meaning. Knowing oneself, to include defining and acknowledging one's weaknesses, would destroy the principle that the surrogate of face or personal dignity must be defended at all costs and ostensible perfection maintained. The concept of self-examination, whether for purposes of self-management or self-improvement, could not be accepted because of its conflict with more honored cultural requirement of blameless dignity. The Arab is likewise quite unacquainted with the idea of examining his conduct to find the sources of his mistakes or misfortunes. If he did engage in such introspection he would be forced to intensify the subjectivity of his factual interpretations in order to avoid findings which might be detrimental to his face. In short, the Arab will not find anything wrong with himself.

Many say that the Arab has no capacity for self-analysis; but this is a rather shallow observation. If he lacked analytical ability, no Bedouin would ever have survived the desert drought problems. It is when analysis impinges upon the prime value of personal dignity that the use of subjective interpretations in order to preclude embarrassing conclusions begins to give outside observers doubts about the Arab's ability to reconcile himself with reality.

During the Israeli invasion of Sinai in October 1956, the Saudi Arabs in the oil fields along the Persian Gulf felt personal concern about the plight of their Egyptian brothers. In one instance some of those at a particular plant were much worried about a news item to the effect that in three days of fighting Israeli troops had captured five thousand Egyptians. They held a powwow, buzzing and chattering about it among themselves. After some time, however, the group broke up and all went away looking relieved and happy. Asked how they had resolved their anxiety, one of the more articulate explained that they had decided Israeli troops could never have captured 5,000 of anything, even sheep, in the Sinai region. Therefore the story was not true, and that ended the matter. All was right with the world again.

A former German army doctor who specialized in psychiatry and the diagnosis of mental disturbances was resident in Damascus during 1953 and 1954. During this time he was denied permission to practice in Syria, with the explanation that although medical doctors were always welcome, there was nothing wrong with Arabs mentally and hence no need for his services.

Knowledgeable Arabs realize that their people and countries fall in some measure short of the progress and development that some other nations have achieved. Unable to find themselves at fault for this, they are naturally led to seek the cause of their troubles in outside sources—the will of Allah, the imperialists, Israel, family and personal obligations, and many real wrongs which have been done them. This saves the collective face from appearing defective and allows those who can accept subjectively interpreted facts to maintain their sense of personal dignity and self-confidence.

The lack of objective self-analysis in the Near East generally permits a type of boasting which is honest in that there is no real discrepancy between an Arab's outward show of, say, fantastic courage and his true feelings. In the absence of analysis he does not realize that he has

weaknesses and could not perform accordingly. Unending talk of courageous endeavor and boasting his own virtues in order to give himself faith in his surrogate of face may make the Arab seem insincere to the Westerner; but if the latter challenges his boasts the two are brought to an impasse. The Arab could not be made to recognize his own weakness, and even if he could he would not admit the threat to his dignity.

Some of the secondary schools of the Middle Eastern countries schedule athletic contests with one another, and after each game members of the losing team will get together and discuss the event. Not infrequently they conclude that "the referee was against us" instead of acknowledging their own faulty plays or the other team's superiority.

In any situation in which shame or guilt threatens the Arab he will be able to explain away whatever impinges on his personal dignity with an array of facts that are meant to be accepted by the listener and not challenged. Whether the story is believed or not and whether the facts are objective or logical are secondary considerations; it is considered quite unmannerly to embarrass him by challenging his explanations. Many of the stories of Juha and his donkey which abound in Arabic folklore have their point for the Arab not in the happenings, logical or illogical, they portray but rather in the quick wit and inventive genius with which the hero survives each incident.

In many phases of the Arabic cultural setting the Westerner with his fetish for objectivity is decidedly out of place, for a subjective interpretation of facts and truth is most suitable in a milieu where face and personal dignity are the things of prime importance.

In summation, the face concept can be said to have three interrelated aspects. The Arab's extreme effort to show himself blameless, an effort which seems too transparent and unrealistic to Westerners, is the product of the high value his culture puts upon personal dignity, of his feeling answerable for his conduct to society rather than to any divine conscience within himself, and of his sense of the subjectivity of fact.

1 Hamady, Sania; *Temperament and Character of the Arabs*, Twayne Publishers, New York. 1960. p. 37.

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