

**CHAPTER III**  
**THE CONCEPT OF CHARITY OF THE ARAB PEOPLE**  
**BEFORE ISLAM**

**A. The Life of Arab**

Geographically, the area of Arabian Peninsula is located at South-West of Asia continent. The North side of Arabia borders on Sahara Desert of Syria. Whether the East side borders on Persian Gulf and Oman Sea. The South borders on Hindi Ocean, and the West side borders on Red Sea.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hands, the Arabia area is divided into unequal portions by the Red Sea; to the West lies the Sahara, and to the East Arabia. The Arabian Peninsula is a vast rectangle, some 1.300 miles long and 750 wide, stretching South-East from the Fertile Crescent (i.e. Syria and Mesopotamia). Its predominant features are its aridity. This is slightly offset in the North, where desert gives way to semi-desert and even to steppe, and still more in the South where a mountain-less terrain receives a measure of summer rain. But between theses marginal zones lies the bulk of Arabia, and for the most part it is the desert relieved only by scattered oases.<sup>2</sup>

The desert life of Arabian that is dry, barren, and hard, has driven its dweller to move from one place to another. It is aimed to search for the new sources of their life such water and grass for their animals. Most of the population of the Arabian Peninsula, therefore, is Bedouin who do not settle the permanent place.<sup>3</sup> They are majority. Whereas the other population is settled people, or in Arab language called as *hadjar*. The last one dwell in permanent towns and villages. In fulfilling the need of their daily-life, they engage in farming, trading, and hold the

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<sup>1</sup> H.M.H. Al-Hamid Al-Husaini, *Riwayat Kehidupan Nabi Besar Muhammad SAW*, Al-Hamid Al-Husaini Press, Jakarta, 1990, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Cook, *Muhammad*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983, p. 6-7.

<sup>3</sup>The life of Bedouin, who breeds the camel and most moving and reaching to the heart of desert, is caused the trees and grasses existing in mountain are not enough for their camel. The desert, in other hand, also provides the warm climate and as the shelter from the threat of cold season. Desert is also the best place for the camels to grow. See, Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldun*, Transl. Ahmadie Thoha, Pustaka Firdaus, Jakarta, 1986, p. 143.

industry of handcraft. It is different from the Bedouin, who relies on their life only to the breed and hunting.

Bedouin is the people who live outside of town or village. In maintaining the security among them from outside attack, they held a group of troops consisting of the youths. They can be succeeding in their task only if they love to their family and give precedence to the community first. This feel of togetherness creates the social solidarity among them.<sup>4</sup>

The situations of the Arabia before the coming of Islam, the religion meant numerous gods and goodness, often worshipped through trees and stones. While the tribal code encouraged the notion of *murū'ah*, manhood, which was the glorification of tribal chivalry. The treatment of women was abominable. Female infanticide was common. Society was on the verge of anarchy and disorder. This period would be known subsequently as *jāhiliyyah* or the age of ignorance.<sup>5</sup> Regarding this, 'Aliyy ibn Abi> T}ālib has described it, "The religion was numerous, desires have come to be commonly among them. People were grouped into the idolaters, godless, and the heathens of idols and other creatures. The confuse, ignorance, and arrogance have broken to their life."<sup>6</sup>

The principles of the Arab before Islam that guide them in the moral life were tribal tradition or the custom of their ancestors. Those principles have taught them the conception of pessimistic of the earthly life. The sober realism characterizing in a very peculiar way the Bedouin world-view is now well-known among those who are interested in the feature of the Arab culture. It seems to be connected most intimately with the climate of the land. Indeed, it has something which evokes in our minds the arid sands of the desert. At all events it is a fact that lack of imagination has stamped its mark and almost everything that may be recognized as purely Arabic. To the realistic Arab mind, this present world with its myriad colors and forms is the only world that exists. Nothing is more remote

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>5</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, *Islam Today: A Short Introduction to the Moslem World*, I.B. Tauris, New York, 1999, p. 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> H. Rus'an, *Lintasan Sejarah Islam di Zaman Rasulullah SAW*, Wicaksana, Semarang, 1981, p. 17.

from such a mind than a belief in eternal life, the life to come. There can be no existence beyond the limit of this world.<sup>7</sup> Such of Bedouin minds were obviously described by the Qur'an surah al-Jāthiyah (45:24) and al-An'ām (6:29).

Although the Bedouin did not believe in the life after the death, they truly recognized the conception of *khulūd*. In their mind, the term *khulūd* is utilized to describe a long life, so long indeed that it will never come to an end (i.e. eternal existence). But their all too realistic minds could hardly go beyond the horizon of the immediately present. In other words, *khulūd* should be something of this world. By this, some of the Bedouin, especially their women, have attempted for searching something eternalize their life. Wealth is the answer. The life of the famous poet, al-Mukhabbal, has recorded in a poetry, "*Verily wealth means khulūd, and lack of wealth brings near to him his day, i.e. death.*"<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, they were failed of their search. The searching for something eternalizes the life done by them was useless. They obtained nothing, even in the wealth in which they are amazed on. This bitter consciousness of the absolute impossibility of finding eternity in this world was not once the dead and to which heathenism drove itself. According to them, all is vain in this world, and nothing is to be found beyond it, so you must enjoy your ephemeral life to the utmost limit of iys capacity. Hedonism is the only possible conclusion for the wordly-minded people of *jāhiliyyah*.

Many of pre-Islamic poetries have described obviously the pessimistic of earthly life of the Arab and the hedonistic attitude of them. The following poetries are sayings of T}arafah.

1. Well now, thou who censure me because I attend the turmoil of war  
And because I cease not to pursue pleasures  
Canst thou then 'eternalize' my existence?  
However, since thou art unable to defend me from death  
Pray allow me to forestalls it with what wealth I possess

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<sup>7</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, McGill University Press, Montreal, 1966, p. 46-47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

2. Seek me in the assembly of my people, and you will find me there  
Hunt me in the taverns, and you will surely capture me there

Come to me in early morning, I shall fill you a cup of wine to the brim  
If you decline, then decline as you like and be of good cheer

My boon companions are youths white as stars  
At eventide, a singing-girl comes to us in robes striped and saffron-colored

Wide is the opening at her bosoms, delicately soft her nakedness  
When the fingers of my companions touch it and caress

When we say, 'Pray let us hear a song', she begins gently to sing  
With a voluptuous languidness, in a voice subdued

3. Thus I went on drinking wine, and pursuing the pleasures of life  
Selling, dissipating both my own earnings and my patrimony  
Until at last, the whole tribe deserted me,  
And here I am left all alone like a dirty mangy camel

The glamour and hedonistic life of the Arab went on until the coming of Islam. However, the social life has started to come better at first half of sixth century A.D. the reform of social life was signified by appearing of the alliances (*h}ilf*) among the tribes for standing for the right and just. The alliances formed at there were *H}ilf al-Mut}ayyibīn*, *H}ilf al-La'qah*, and *H}ilf al-Fud}ūl* as the most popular one. Those *h}ilf* were formed to against the arbitrariness, unjust, to stand for the weak people, and to punish those who do the crimes. Whole were aimed to maintain the authority and sacredness of the Mecca city.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> H.M.H. Al-husaini, *op. cit.*, p. 94-95.

## B. The Generosity of the Arab

Although the Arab people was well-known by the ignorance, but it was also found many virtues existing among them, such as generosity, courage, loyalty, veracity, and patience. Whole of such attitudes are united in the term of *murū'ah*. It is the highest ethical ideal of the *jāhiliyyah*. The portraying of those attitudes were much recorded in their poetries. Of the attitudes above, courage and generosity are the commonly practiced in their life.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding *murū'ah*, Philip K. Hitti has noted that it is the ideal old Arab virtues besides manliness and honour (*'ird*). The component elements of *murū'ah* are courage, loyalty, and generosity. Courage was measured by the member of raids (*ghazw*) undertaken. Generosity manifested itself in his readiness to sacrifice his camel at the coming of a guest or on behalf of the poor and the helpless.<sup>11</sup> The ideal instance for the hospitality and generosity of Bedouin people is those done by H}ātīm al-T}ā'i (d. +/- 605 A.D.). As a lad in charge of his father's camel, he once slaughtered three those animals to feed passing strangers and distributes the rest among them, which caused his father expel him from home.

The Arab competes and makes proud of their generosity and charity each other. If a hungry guest with cold comes to them, for instance, they will give and feed him anything they possess. Even if they have only one camel, they will slaughter it to give honor-deeply and respect him. This attitude has come to the exaggeration. By this attitude, an Arab was even felt to the bankruptcy caused their debt. But in the mind of Arab people, the proud was the first.<sup>12</sup>

Drinking the wine (*khamr*) in Arabic culture was also regarded as the manifestation of the generosity attitude all at once the extravagances. By this, the tree of grapes is called by them as *al-karam* (the generosity). In addition, the wine

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, The Macmillan Press, Ltd., London, 1974, p. 95.

<sup>12</sup> Safiyy al-Rahman al-Mubarakfuri, *Al-Rahiq al-Mahtum: Bahthun fi al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah 'ala Sahibiha Afdal al-Salah wa al-Salam*, Transl. Kathur Suhardi, Pustaka Al-Kautsar, Jakarta, 2006, p. 63.

that is extracted from the grape was called as *bint al-karam* (the daughter of generosity). The poetry of Antarah has recorded this tradition.

Some slugs of wine I drank  
After passing the intense day  
In the shining of gold glasses  
In which beautiful flowers spread  
I deny honor  
My wealth was sacrificed for gaining the wine  
The high honor I ignored  
If I'm not drunk, the invitation was not neglected  
Coz I knew I'm the generous person

It may profitably recall at this point the fact that the pre-Islamic poets used to boast of their habit of excessive wine drinking as a mark of a genuinely generous nature, that is, as a mark of nobility. A man of noble nature, so they sang, should not care for the morrow. The true meaning of this is that he should perform acts of liberality for the joy of playing the dandy. And, to inspire the greatest degree of admiration in the minds of the onlookers, not to speak the guests themselves, the liberality should naturally go to the extreme of thoughtless prodigality. Hātim al-Tamī of whom many half legendary stories have been handed down to us by tradition, was acknowledgedly a perfect embodiment of the Bedouin ideals of generosity. We should remember in this connection that the adjective *karim* is just the word in Old Arabic for such a combination of the ideas of lavish generosity and nobility. *Karīm*, in the other words, is a man who is acknowledged by everybody to be 'noble' just because he proves his own noble birth concretely in his acts of limitless generosity.<sup>13</sup>

The high willing for performing the generosity among the Arab has driven them to play the gambling. Because, by the benefit taken from gambling, they can feed and give the alms for the poor people. Towards both of the traditions of the Arab—drinking wine and gambling—which were commonly practiced by them, Qur'an do not deny the benefit of both. But, Qur'an stated, the damage of both is

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<sup>13</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

more dangerous than the benefit. Therefore, in forbidding them, Qur'an did not perform it all at once, but gradually, as it was stated in surah al-Baqarah (2:219).<sup>14</sup>

Whole elaborations of generosity just elucidated are a natural phenomenon. It is quite natural that under desert conditions the spirit of charity and generosity should be given an exceedingly high place in the list of noble qualities. In the desert, where even the basic material necessities are very scarce, acts of hospitality and helpfulness are beyond any doubt a necessary aspect of the struggle of existence. But there is something more than that. The generosity in the minds of the Pagan Arabs was closely connected with the *jāhiliyyah* conception of 'honor'. As a great poet of *jāhiliyyah*, Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma, said:

Whoever makes a generosity a shield for his personal honor makes it grow  
But whoever neglects to guard himself from blame, will be blamed

Acts of generosity were held as a proof of genuine nobility. And the more extravagant and impulsive an act of generosity was, the more it tended to arouse admiration. For a pagan Arab, charity was not simply a natural manifestation of his feeling of tribal solidarity, for very often it extended beyond the members of his own tribe to the strangers who happened to be there. Nor was it always dictated by the motive of benevolence and kindness. It was first and foremost an act of chivalry. A man who could make a royal display of his generosity was a true dandy of the desert. Generosity in this sense was a master passion of the Arabs. It was not so much a 'virtue' as a blind, irresistible impulse that was deeply rooted in the Arab heart.<sup>15</sup>

### **C. Islamization of the Generosity of the Arab**

Basically the position adopted by Islam agrees with the outlook of the pagan Arabs in that it, too, places a high value upon charity. For Islam, no less than *jāhiliyyah*, generosity represented an important virtue. The sole fact that he made it the economic basis of the new religio-political community goes to show clearly how high it stood in his estimation. Besides, in itself the nomadic ideal of

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<sup>14</sup> Safiyy al-Rahman al-Mubarakfuri, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *op. cit.*, p. 75-76.

generosity contained nothing offensive to, and incompatible with, the central tenets of the Islamic faith.

I am not a man who lurks about fearfully among the hills

I am here ready to help, whenever people call for my charity

So the *jāhiliyyah* poet, T}arafah, once declared boastingly. Fearfully that is through fear of guests who might come to his tent expecting hospitalities. Nothing prevents such an attitude from being honorable and praiseworthy in the eyes of the Moslems. In fact, we see the famous panegyrist of Muhammad, the poet H}asan ibn Thābit, describing him in an encomium as a man who is lavishly generous with his possessions, whether inherited or newly gained, even in times of hardship when an admittedly liberal man would hesitate to give of his wealth.

Only there is a fundamental difference between the two positions. The difference lies in this, that Islam denied all value to acts of generosity originating in the desire to make a show. Dandyism or chivalry for its own sake was in this view nothing but a satanic passion. What is important is not the act of generosity, but the motive underlying it. All acts of generosity are absolutely values-less those come from the source of vainglory and pride. The Qur'an states:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تُبْطِلُوا صَدَقَاتِكُمْ بِالْمَنِّ وَالْأَذَى كَالَّذِي يُنْفِقُ مَالَهُ رِثَاءَ النَّاسِ وَلَا يُؤْمِرُ  
بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَمَثَلُهُ كَمَثَلِ صَفْوَانٍ عَلَيْهِ تُرَابٌ فَأَصَابُهُ وَابِئًا فَتَرَكَهُ صَلْدًا لَّا يَقْدِرُونَ عَلَى شَيْءٍ  
مِّمَّا كَسَبُوا وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْكَافِرِينَ

It follows that, although generosity is a virtue, it ceases to be a virtue and even becomes positively a vice if it goes to the length of wastefulness. It is significant that in this verse he who does this is explicitly called a *kāfir*.

In order that generosity may become a genuine Islamic virtue, it must first of all be deprived of the thoughtlessness which characterized it in the days of *jāhiliyyah*. One who goes to the length of slaughtering on the spur of the moment, or worse still merely for display, all his camels without stopping a moment to think that his act may reduce him and his family to misery and perdition on the morrow—such a one may very well have been a model of *murū'ah* or *karam* in

*jāhiliyyah*, but is no longer to be considered a man of true generosity. A man of true generosity is he who expends his wealth in God's way, that is, from a pious motive. And being founded on piety, it must be something well-controlled and restrained.

Generosity in Islam is something essentially different from the boastful and excessive charity of which the pagan Arabs were so fond. Thus the duty of almsgiving was offered to the Moslems as the most suitable mold into which they might pour their natural generosity without being led into the satanic vices of haughtiness and extravagance. Almsgiving provided in this way a new outlet for the old instinct of generosity that was deeply rooted in the Arab soul, but it was so calculated, at the same time, as to work as a powerful regulator of its excessive energy.

The believers are strongly exhorted to almsgiving as an act of pious benevolence. It still belongs to the sphere of personal ethics rather than that of social duties. It is a religious duty. It should be noted in this connection that those verses in which almsgiving is enjoined upon the believers—and which are extremely numerous—contain almost always some reference to faith as its ultimate source and eschatological reward as its final result. The Qur'an stated (57:7):

آمَنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَأَنْفَقُوا مِمَّا جَعَلَكُمْ مُسْتَخْلَفِينَ فِيهِ فَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَأَنْفَقُوا لَهُمْ أَجْرٌ كَبِيرٌ

Other verse stated (2:261-262):

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ أَمْوَالَهُمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ كَمَثَلِ حَبَّةٍ أَنْبَتَتْ سَبْعَ سَنَابِلٍ فِي كُلِّ سَنَابِلَةٍ مِئَةٌ حَبَّةٌ وَاللَّهُ

يُضَاعِفُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ أَمْوَالَهُمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ لَا يُتَّبَعُونَ مَا أَنْفَقُوا مَنًّا وَلَا أَدَىٰ لَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ وَلَا

خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

But even here, even in the way of God, thoughtless extravagance is to be avoided. Almsgiving is a religious duty imposed on every Moslem, but to give out

all one has too liberally and thoughtlessly until one is cast by one's own hands into perdition is neither more nor less than to fall back into the godless folly or Jahiliyyah. The following passage from surah al-Baqarah is best understood as referring to this point.

وَأَنْفِقُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ وَأَحْسِنُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ [\*]