

Infanticide in pre Islam Era: Phenomenon Investigation

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Abstract

This research investigates the spread of infanticide that apparently prevailed in pre – Islamic era, which many people have reported claiming that burying female children alive was a common happening during that time. This paper proposes that the spread of infanticide among Arabs in the Pre-Islamic era was not true. Accusations of infanticide moved down among Arabs from generation to another until it became deeply rooted in the minds of Arabs in subsequent generations. The present paper attempts to shed light on many issues, which will hopefully cover this phenomenon from various aspects:

- who claimed that Arabs practiced infanticide against their female children;
- whether all Arabs followed this practice;
- whether there were some Arabs voiced their rejection of this practice;
- whether there were some Arabs that urged others to stop this alleged practice.

The paper comes to close with some conclusions.

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Prohibition of Infanticide

Many have spoken at length on this issue, and had disseminated the information that it was a common practice, during the era of al-Jahiliyya (Pre-Islamic state of ignorance). This is, by my soul, one of those calumnies, with which the era of al-Jahiliyya has been accused, and the accusation had become so widespread amongst people, over generations, that it had planted in the minds of people the impression, that not one girl had been spared the fate of infanticide and burial.

What concerns us here, is to answer the following questions, which I feel, would cover the subject from its multi-faceted angles, namely:

- Were all the Arabs prone to burying their new born?
- Did the Arabs find amongst them those who are repelled by this deed, and would refrain from perpetrating it?
- Were there amongst them those who confronted infanticide and, urged others to refrain from it?

The first thing that surprises us in this matter, is what al-Alusi mentioned. He said: "Al-Haitham ibn 'Adii said, as quoted by al-Maidani that infanticide was practiced in all Arab tribes. In Islam, one would resort to it, and then would abandon it."⁽¹⁾

(1) See *Bulugh Al-Irab*, 3:42.

The said quotation requires from us two things:

To look into what al-Haitham ibn ‘Adii was noted for, in terms of distortions and sheer lies. Imam Shams-uddin al-Thahabi is quoted as having said: "Abbas al-Dori said that some of our companions have narrated that the maid of Haitham ibn Addi narrated the following, “My master would spend much of the night praying, and when he wakes up, he would lie.”⁽²⁾ Ibn Mu’een and Abu Daoud described him as a liar⁽³⁾ Al-Bukhari said: they refrained from quoting him⁽⁴⁾, while al-Nisa`i and others simply disqualified his statements.⁽⁵⁾

Since this man is a liar, and his quotations of the Hadiths are disqualified, and he compromises the Hadiths of no less than the person of the messenger of God, it follows that he would not have hesitated in fabricating historical events, by additions or deletions, and therefore, his report should be discarded.

The other matter is: that Haitham asserts categorically that all Arab tribes used to engage in infanticide. This allegation is unsubstantiated and arbitrary, for the following reasons: First: How are we to explain that, the opening verses of many poems in the Jahilliya, started with praises of a loved women, and generous descriptions of her beauty, good companionship, and presence.

(2) See *Siyar A`lam Al-Nubala`a*, 10:104.

(3) *Tarikh Ibn Mu`een*: 226, and *Tarikh Baghdad* 14:53.

(4) *Al-Tarikh Al-Kabir* 8:218.

(5) *Al-Du`afa`a W`al Matrukun of Al-Nisa`i*: 104.

Second: How are we to explain that many of the poets of al-Jahiliyya era make references to the al-Tha`ain voyage and, celebrate such a voyage? Do these references not mean respect, veneration and caring for women?

Third: How are we to understand that many women remained alive during the Jahiliyya and, embraced Islam, such as Khadija bint Khuwailed, Hind bint `Otbah, and Zeinab bint Jahsh and many others?

Fourth: This leads us to assert that not all the Arabs were in agreement on infanticide. Al-Qurtubi, in his interpretation of verse:

(And they assign daughters unto Allâh! Glorified (and Exalted) be He above all that they associate with Him! And unto themselves what they desire;)

Qur'an (16: 57), said that the cause underlying the verse, was connected with the tribes of Khuza'a and Kinana, for they had alleged that the angels were the daughters of God. They used to say: let girls go, one after the other.⁽⁶⁾

He also said in interpreting the verse:

(And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief! He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dishonour or bury her in the earth? Certainly, evil is their decision.)

Qur'an (16: 58-59)

(6) See Al-Jami` Li Ahkam al-Qur'an: 10:103-104.

Quatada said: Mudhar and Qutada used to bury their newborn alive. The most strident in perpetrating this was Tamim, alleging fear of being subjugated and, that unqualified others would take advantage of them.⁽⁷⁾

Fifth: It is an established fact that poetry is the language of the Arabs, and, it is a register of their multi-faceted lives; and while conceding the loss of many of those poems, yet we do not find in what remained, any mention by the poets of the word *wa'd* (infanticide) or its derivatives, except in rare cases. Thus Hassan ibn Thabet states in a verse: ⁽⁸⁾

Buried beneath earth and settled therein, without any appurtenances of burial, or a pillow on which the dead are given homage.

Ibn al-A'rabi said in a verse:

That the buried newborn, did not receive from his mother's inclemency as much as did all of Thuhul and 'Amer⁽⁹⁾. ⁽¹⁰⁾

My most beloved in-laws are the grave⁽¹¹⁾.

(7) Ibid, 10:104.

(8) See *Al-Lisan/Um Wa Diwan Hassan*: 1:467, 2:319.

(9) See *Al-Lisan, Wa'd, Wa Bulugh al-Irab*, 3:42.

(10) See *Al-Jami`I Li Ahkam Al-Qur'an*, 19:202.

(11) See *Al-Jami`I Li Ahkam Al-Qur'an*, 10:106.

Reasons for infanticide: Some of the Arabs used to resort to infanticide for various reasons⁽¹²⁾.

First: Intense jealousy and fear of being shamed. Those were Banu Tamim, Kinda and other tribes. The background to this fixation was when Banu Tamim refused to pay ransom to Emir Nu'man ibn al-Munther. The brother of Nu'man, named al-Rayyan, fought them, plundered their belongings and enslaved their women folk.

A delegation from Bani Tamim, made representations to the Emir regarding their captive women folk. He ruled that they choose between remaining in his household or, that he return with them. They included the daughter of Qays ibn 'Assem. She chose captivity rather than returning with her husband. Thereupon, Qays swore to bury every daughter born to him, and he did burry scores of new born girls.

In this connection, there is another version. The story tells that the tribe of Rabii'a was the first to have perpetrated infanticide. The tribe was raided and, a girl was abducted for the Emir of the raiders. He recovered her as a part of a peace deal, but she was given the choice, by mutual agreement, between going back with her father or, remaining with her husband. She chose to remain with her husband, which choice angered her father whereupon, he enacted the practice of infanticide amongst his people, and they followed his enactment.

Second: Some of them would bury alive those newborn infants if their color was blue, or if their bodies carried many spots, or were hairy or, physically handicapped, because they regarded them as bad omens.⁽¹³⁾

(₁₂) See *Bulugh Al-Irab*, 3:43-52.

Third: Some would perpetrate infanticide, out of poverty and fear of not being able to sustain their children.

Fourth: Some would take it upon himself, to slaughter one of his children, if ten children were born to his household, as did Abdul Muttalib in his famous episode with his son Abdullah, father of the prophet (pbuh).

Fifth: some would say, that the angels are the daughters of God, god forbid, wherefore they disposed of girls, one after the other.

Methods other than infanticide⁽¹⁴⁾:

Some of the Arabs would dispose of a newborn, not by infanticide, but by throwing her from a height. There is a narrative that a man said to the Prophet: P messenger of God, by God who sent you with this righteous message, I do not find the sweetness of Islam since I embraced it. During the Jahiliyya, I had a daughter, and I instructed my wife to embellish her, and I took her to a deep ditch wherein I interred her. She said: O father, you have killed me, and whenever I remember what she said, nothing gives me relief. The Messenger of God replied: what was prevalent in the Jahiliyya, Islam has

(₁₃) Al-Shayma, Al-Sawda`a, Al-Barsha`a: Al-Barash denotes stark whiteness as in leprosy; al-

Kassha`a, is a girl who walks with a limp.

(₁₄) See *Bulugh Al-Irab*, 3:52.

dismantled, and what guilt is committed in Islam, asking God's forgiveness would vitiate it. Some in the Jahiliyya would drown the newborn and other would slaughter her.

The Murder Of Infants Was Not An Exclusivity Amongst Arabs

Dr. Ahmad al-Houfi narrates that, some other ancient peoples used to commit what was uglier. Sparta would condemn to death all the weaklings, or the distorted, after their birth. They would be abandoned in the wilderness to be devoured by wild beasts or hawks. The mothers used to drench their infants in a wine container, and if they survived, it was considered as a sign of their fortitude and their eligibility for life, and if they perished then society will have gotten ride of a weakling. This system was widespread in Athens and Rome and, Greek philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle endorsed it.

Fathers in primitive societies, were duty-bound to kill some of their children, on religious or economic grounds, the victims being both male and female, and some Eskimo groups would commit infanticide of infant girls, because of the hardships of life, which was dependent on hunting.

The Phoenicians used to offer their infant babes as sacrifices to Venus, God of Ashtar and, in the worship of the God of fire Muloch, by throwing them into bonfires⁽¹⁵⁾.

(15) See *Al-Hayat Al-'Arabiyyah Min Al-Shi`r Al-Jahili*, 227. I relied on certain books which are unavailable.

Refraining from infanticide and pleas for its abandonment

There were amongst the Arabs those who were enlightened, who would refrain from committing this heinous crime. Al-Qurtubi has narrated that “those honorable men amongst them would refrain from committing infanticide and would forbid others from committing it⁽¹⁶⁾. Alussi narrates that: many wise Arabs die not accept that foul practice, and some of them would pay ransom to their parents to save them.⁽¹⁷⁾

We would have liked to see al-Qurtubi or Alussi mention the names of those who had refrained from committing that act, but they only mentioned the names of those who urged its abandonment Zayd ben Amr ben Nafeel used to resurrect the victims of infanticide and, would tell a man who wished to kill his newborn: Do not kill her, I would support her. He would take the infant and raise her until she become of age; then, he would take her to her father and say: if you wish it, I would deliver her to you, and if you wished otherwise, I would take care of her.⁽¹⁸⁾

Al-Qurtubi and al-Alussi narrated that⁽¹⁹⁾, Sa’sa’a ben Najia, grandfather of the poet al-Farazdaq, used to buy the infants whose father wanted to bury them on grounds of destitution. He succeeded in saving sixty six such infants, up to the era of the Messenger of God.

Al-Farazdaq proudly registers this feat in a poem, in which he boasts:

(₁₆) Al-Jami`i Li Ahkam al-Qur'an, 19:202.

(₁₇) Bulugh al-Irab, 3:45.

(₁₈) Ibid, 3:45. Quoting from *Sahih al-Bukhari*; *Al-Muntatham*, 2:331; *Al-Isaba*, 3:310.

(₁₉) Al-Jami`i Li Ahkam al-Qur'an, 19:202; and Bulugh al-Irab, 3:45.

From amongst us are those who resurrected the infanticide and Ghaleb and ‘Amr and those who opposed such acts.

Those are my forefathers, show me their likes,
if o Jareer we meet in confrontation.

Ibn Duraid narrates: “Sa’sa’a was a man of great standing. He would ransom the infants destined to die, during the Jahiliyya, and on the advent of Islam, he had thirty such infants in his hold. Sa’sa’a embraced Islam before the Prophet (pbuh) (20)

Ibn Hajar quotes Sa’sa’a as having said: I had an audience with the Messenger of God (pbuh), and he recited to me verses from the Qur'an. I said: O Messenger of God, I have done good deeds during the Jahiliyya, would I be rewarded for them? The Prophet asked him: what did you do, and he narrated how he had ransomed infants threatened with infanticide. Al-Farazdaq the poet, boasts about it in the following verse(21):

It was my grandfather who forbade infanticide,
and resurrected the victims from perdition.

It is claimed that he was the first to do that. I said, it has been proved that Zeid ben Nafeel used to do so, and therefore if is possible to give pride of place to Sa’sa’a over the Tamim and other tribes, and the precedence of Zeid over the Quraysh(22).

(20) *Al-Ishtiqaq* 239.

(21) In the narration of Al-Naqa`is: Wa Minna Allathi:667.

(22) *Al-Isaba*, 3:245.

Ibn al-Jawzi narrates in his biography of Sa'sa'a, his story with a man who wanted to perpetrate infanticide against his infant girl. The story is long but, I shall narrate it nonetheless. Sa'sa'a said: "I went searching for two of my camels which went astray. I saw a fire from a distance and I traveled in its direction. I was about to disembark when the fire kindled intermittently. It continued so until I said: O God, I pledge that if you enable me to reach that fire, and I find that its household were kindling the fire, in request of assistance for a dire event which had befallen them, that I would alleviate their suffering. He continued: "I walked only a short distance when I found myself on the scene of the fire. There I found an old man from bani Anmar stoking the fire, in front of his home, and there were women assembled around a woman who had given birth. The Sheikh inquired as to who I was, and I replied that I was Sa'sa'a son of Najia. The Sheikh said: welcome sir, what is your problem my nephew? And I said that I was searching for my two camels which went astray. He answered: you found them because you relieved, a household from amongst you people. I then asked: why is it that you are lighting your fire this evening? and he replied: "I lighted the fire for a woman who had given birth and who had kept us confined for three days. The women shouted that a baby has been born, and the Sheikh said: if he was a boy, I do not know what to do with him, and if the baby were a girl, I would kill her as soon as I hear her voice. I said to the man: leave her alone, she is a slave and God would take care of her. When I appealed to him to spare her he said: "I find you inclined towards the baby, why don't you buy her from me? I said I would purchase her from you. He said, what would you give me in exchange? I said, one of my camels. He said no. I said I will give you another camel. He looked at my camel and said I would accept the camel on which you are riding, its colours are fair and it looks young

and buoyant. I agreed, provided he would arrange for me to go home. He agreed and I bought the newborn from him, and took his pledge that he would look well after her so long as she was alive, and until she either departs from his care or unto death. When I left this encampment, I said to my self: this is a gracious deed, which no other Arab had done before me. Then I pledged myself that whenever I hear of an Arab wanting to bury his babe alive, that I would buy her from him with a female camel and a male camel. Subsequently, God sent Muhammad (pbuh), when, by that time I had saved one hundred would-be victims, and Islam prohibited this practice of infanticide. Other narratives claim that he had saved three hundred and sixty to four hundred newborn babies.

Sa'sa'a visited the messenger of god, where he embraced Islam and learnt the Qur'an. He told the Prophet about his feat in ransoming those babies, and he told him that God has rewarded him by embracing Islam. He died in the year 53H⁽²³⁾.

I found cases during the Jahiliyya where men protested against the practice of infanticide, but these were rare cases involving sisters, and do not match the feats of Zeid ben 'Amr, or Sa'sa'a ben Najia. Ibn Hajar narrates in his biography of 'Alatha be Wahb Khalifa al-Ghanawi that "He wanted to burry two of his newborns during the Jahiliyya, and his son Rabee' ben 'Allatha said to his father: why don't you leave them alone, and he did. When Islam came, 'Allatha and his sons embraced Islam, including the two daughters⁽²⁴⁾.

(₂₃) *Al-Muntatham*, 5:264-265.

(₂₄) *Al-Isaba*, 7:441.

We found some cases where the perpetrator of infanticide felt deep remorse, and this is what happened with Bani Laqita. Khazanal al-Adab narrates a verse on Laqita, by poet Qurayt ben Anif al-‘Anbari. He said:

If I belonged to Mazen [tribe], the sons of Laqita

Would not have plundered my camels

She is Um Hisn ben Hathifa. She was given this name because her father did not have any other children, and the Arabs during that era were prone to commit infanticide. When he saw her his heart softened towards her, and said to her mother: breast feed her and hide her from the sight of people. Thus, she was named Laqita⁽²⁵⁾.

The historian Ibn al-Athir narrates a similar case. He mentions that there was a close brotherly relationship between ‘Awf ben Muhallam and Hajar. He said to him: you best of youth, return to me my wife Umama, and he did return her while she was pregnant. She gave birth to a daughter for him, and ‘Awf wanted to kill her. ‘Amr ben abi Rabi’ a ransomed her from him and said: perhaps she might give birth to children, whereby she was named Um Unnas. Al-Harith ben ‘Amr ben Hajar married her, and she gave birth to ‘Umar, and became known as Um Unnas⁽²⁶⁾.

This story is narrated in a different version, where we find the women protesting infanticide. Ibn al-Kalbi narrates that ‘Awf ordered his wife Umama to bury the new infant alive. She answered that she did, and brought her up until she became of age. ‘Awf looked at the young girl coming and inquired: who is this girl, oh Umama? She answered

(²⁵) Al-Khazana, 7:443-444.

(²⁶) Al-Kamil F il Tarikh, 1:395.

that she was a maid. Then she asked: would it please you if she was your daughter. He said: how can this be? And Umama answered: she is the baby you ordered to be buried alive. He said: leave her for she might give birth to children, and thus was named Um Unnass. She gave birth to one male al-Harith⁽²⁷⁾.

Ibn Qutayba narrates that Imru'o al-Qays had girls and no male offspring. He was extremely jealous, and whenever a girl was born to him he would commit her to infanticide.

When his women saw this characteristic in him, they dispersed their girls amongst various Arab quarters. When he was informed of this, he pursued and killed them⁽²⁸⁾. This story confirms that women were against infanticide and would protest against it.

Perhaps the whole tribe, at the protest of women, would forgo infanticide. Thus Zahra ben 'Allab did not have any children, so he married 'Aqiula bint 'Abd al-'Azi ben Ghira al-Thaqafi. She gave birth to three boys who died at a young age. He swore that if a baby girl were born to him, he would kill her. His wife did give birth to a girl, and he ordered that she be buried. The tribe of Quraysh said to him: the Arabs were prone to do that infanticide, because of abject poverty, and you have plenty of money. He told them about the circumstances surrounding her birth, and that he had ordered her infanticide, and how her mother hid her. Zahra then had a dream, with a voice telling him: perhaps a young friendly knight, and a leader amongst leaders, and a man of generosity in time of need,

(²⁷) Nasab Ma`ad W`al Yemen Al-Kabir, 1:103.

(²⁸) Al-Munammaq Fi Akhbar Quraysh, 335-336.

would be in the womb of that infanticide baby. Wherefore he kept her alive, named her al-Sawda, and she got married to Amr ben Ka'b, ben Sa'd ben Tayyim ben Murra⁽²⁹⁾.

(29) Abateel Yajib An Tumha Min Al-Tarikh, 34.

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