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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DESERT ENVIRONMENT AND ARAB LIFESTYLES.

Dr. P. K. Baburajan.

Program Chair, General Studies, Higher Colleges of Technology, Madinat Zayed Colleges, P.O. Box No: 58855
 Abu Dhabi, UAE.

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Abstract

This paper examined the relationship between the hot desert conditions and lifestyles of people in the United Arab Emirates. The extremely hot and humid weather, lack of good rain fall, the vast areas of desert, and proximity to ocean are some of the important geographic and climatic characteristics of the UAE society. Several elements of culture of this people are shaped by the environmental and climatic conditions. The Arab's developed many of their life styles as an adaptation to their surroundings. The traditional housings styles, food and clothing pattern, economic activity and family structure of Arabs seem to be related to their environmental and climatic conditions. It appears that the adaptation theory of culture fits well in the case of traditional Arab culture.

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Introduction:-

The role of physical environment in shaping the lifestyles, patterns of settlement, and survival hood activities is significant in human societies. The Arab societies are one of the very good instances of this intricate relationship. People living in Arabian Peninsula are called Arabs. This region extends about 5.25 square miles between the Gulf Ocean and Atlantic Ocean and comprised of 22 states. The recent estimates revealed that there are about 320 million people living in the Arab world ('Arab states', 2010). Many of the Arab state have similar physical and climatic conditions. This might be the major reason as to why the lifestyles of people in the Arab states are strikingly similar. The physical and climatic conditions of the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC countries) are more homogenous compared to the rest of the Arab states. The lifestyles of Arabs in GCC countries are also remarkably alike. An attempt is made in this paper to examine the relationship between desert physical and climatic conditions and lifestyles of Arabs in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The emphasizes is given to the such important elements Arab lifestyles as housing styles, food pattern, clothing pattern, economic activities, and family structure in this paper.

Environment and Lifestyles:-

The physical and climatic condition of the UAE is strikingly similar to the rest of the states on the Arabian Peninsula. These states are characterized by enormous area of desert and less vegetation. Only Sultanate of Oman is an exception to this rule as some parts of Oman are blessed with sizable vegetation. The GCC states also have proximity of oceans that make them similar in environmental conditions. The summer is extremely hot with temperature often reaching 50 degree Celsius. The humidity is also high during the summer season and there is no definite rainy season in this part of the world.

Corresponding Author:- P. K. Baburajan.

Address:- Program Chair, General Studies, Higher Colleges of Technology Madinat Zayed Colleges,
 P.O. Box No: 58855 Abu Dhabi, UAE.

The lifestyles of people in this part of the world are greatly linked to the geographical and climatic conditions. Most of the GCC states had very low population density probably because of the extreme climatic conditions. The unfavorable climatic conditions were less attractive for people to settle down here. Nevertheless, by the mid 20th century large number of people started to move into these regions as the result of discovery and development of oil wealth. The oil wealth brought modern technology into this region. With the introduction of technology GCC states became more comfortable for life. As a result of better living conditions and oil wealth large number of people began flowing into this region since the mid 20th century.

Arabs adapted many of their lifestyles so as to suit their environment. The anthropological analysis on the origin of culture provides that humans develop appropriate patterns of life as a mechanism to adapt to their surroundings. Adaptation is the way of developing proper lifestyles and survival hood means according to the suitability of environment (Kottak, 2002). Humans depend and utilize their surrounding for their livelihood. If we can't change the environment, it is quite sensible to change ourselves according to the suitability of the environment. This adaptability is imperative if we do not have proper technology to deal with the environment. As our ancestors in the past, could not deal with the environment, they had to shape themselves and get adjusted with their surroundings. This adjustment and adaptation can be seen in the lifestyles of Arabs. The way Arabs built their traditional of homes is an important evidence of human's adaptation to their environment. The traditional houses in the Arab world were temporary in nature, with ample of provision for ventilation (Bates & Rassam, 1983). Since the climatic conditions are very hot and humid, building houses with arrangements for good ventilation was indispensable to reduce the effect of heat and humidity.

The building materials used by the people in this part of the world in the past were linked to their environment. The Arabs in the UAE extensively utilized the branches and leaves of palm trees for building their houses are a matter of adaptation. In the given physical and climatic conditions, not many trees were cultivable. The date-palms were only some of the plants and trees cultivable or grow-able here and people made use of these available materials for building their houses too. In fact, the houses built with date-palm leaves and branches were less hot as compared to brick-roofed or concrete houses. The traditional housing styles of the UAE society may well fit into the adaptation theory of culture. The houses constructed with date palms not only provided some relief in reducing the effect of heat by reflecting off heat energy, they were also helpful in providing ample of ventilation.

In addition, Arabs practiced a nomadic life in the past in which they kept moving from one place to another in search of grazing land for their animals. Therefore, they built only temporary houses (Barakat, 1993). The temporary houses have additional adaptive features. This part of the world is known for frequent heavy sand-storms that often damage their houses. The date-palm-built temporary houses will not be resistant to sand storms, nonetheless, it is easy for people to re-fix them even though they are dismantled by heavy sand storms. Generally, Arabs did not built permanent concrete houses in this part of the world. If at all they made permanent houses, they were built by mud and bricks with open roofs. This particular arrangement is also an adaptive characteristic appropriate to their climatic conditions. Since the rainfall is exceptionally rare in this part of the world, the open-roofed houses did not pose any concern of getting rainy water flooded into their houses. At the same time this housing style was truly an effective approach to deal with the extremely hot and humid climatic conditions.

The dressing styles of the UAE Arabs are also linked to their climatic conditions. In this part of the world, men traditionally wear white long floating robes and head coverings. This long-sleeved single-piece dress covers almost their whole body. This clothing style could be seen as a comfortable costume and an adaptation to the extremely hot and humid climatic conditions. It allows ample of air to circulate that helps cool the body during the hot season. The white color of the dresses itself is suitable to deal with sunlight and heat. The Arab men, who often work outdoor, are greatly relieved of heat and sunlight to a great extent by this special Arab costume. The head coverings protect them from heat and sunlight to a great extent. Since the white color does not absorb sunlight and heat energy, white colored dresses of Arab men are of remarkable advantage in getting rid of too much of heat. Moreover, the white floating dress is single-piece garment. It is made purposefully as single piece, is again a matter of adaptation to the surrounding. It prevents the sand particles from getting inside the dress when they work outdoors especially during sand storms. The color and style of male's dresses is the same in other Arab states as well where desert occupies much of the land as in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman, etc. However, the vivid colored dresses are used by men in some Arab states like Palestine and Lebanon because these states are blessed with good amount of rainfall and vegetation (Nydell, 2002).

The traditional Arab males dress also includes a 3-piece head cover. It has cap like bottom piece filled with holes to cover the head. This cap is functional to keep hair in place and the holes on it permit air to circulate. A scarf-like head cover is on top of the cap. This head cover has two functions. It is functional to protect the head from direct sunlight as well as covering the mouth and the nose in case of sand storms. The topmost unit of the head-cover is a black band surrounding the top of the head. This band holds the whole head cover in position. Although men wear white colored costumes, women wear black colored cloths in the UAE and elsewhere in the Arab world. The black clothing styles of women in the UAE and Arab world is quite contrary to the adaptation theory. The traditional women costume is black in color that may appear to contradict the above explanation. However, there are other reasons and explanations for this clothing pattern, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

The influence of environment on the lifestyles of people is evident in the traditional economic activities performed by Arabs. Pastoralism was the prime survival hood strategy performed by Arabs in the past. It is an economic way of life in which people live on animal-herding and animal husbandry (Bates & Rassam, 1983). In fact, pastoralism of Arabs is an adaptation to their surroundings. Pastoralism appeared to be suitable in places that are dry, too uneven, and quite unsuitable for farming or agriculture. In such geographical conditions no other economic activities were really possible. Therefore, Arabs chose the environmentally suitable pastoralism as means of their survival. Even the type of animals Arabs preferred to grow was also according to the suitability of environment. Camels were the most preferred animals by the most of the Arab societies. Camels are suitable to Arab's geographical and climatic conditions where temperature used to be extremely high. Therefore, people in the Arab world domesticated and made use of these animals.

The pastoralism in the Arab societies is slightly different from that of the west. It is called nomadic pastoralism, in which people moved around for the purpose of finding out grazing land for their animals. In the west the animal husbandry is called "Diary farms", in which animals are grown and kept in one particular place rather than herding them from place to another. This variation in animal husbandry between the West and Arab world is primarily due to the geographical factors. In the West, plane landscape is abundantly available for sedentary pastoralism or dairy farming. But the landscape condition is the in the Arab world, especially in the GCC region, is quite different. There is scarcity of land area suitable for dairy farms. This lack of sufficient grazing lands for animals forced the pastoralists to search for pastures for their animals and they kept on moving their animals from one place to another (Bates & Rassam, 1983). The absence of abundant landscape suitable for agriculture was probably the main reason as to why intensive agriculture did not exist in the UAE.

The environmental influence on lifestyles is also manifested in the food pattern of Arabs. People in the UAE and other GCC countries have a great liking towards fish. They also eat a special type of bread called Arabic bread. Proximity of oceans and enormous seashores made the way for developing fishing as one of the important survival-hood activities in this part of the world. Since the natural environment provided Arabs with plenty of marine resources, fish-eating habit became a part of their cultural food. Similarly, the special type of bread – the Arabic bread is made in such a way that it does not get spoiled for many days even in the hot and humid weather conditions. Further, the date is considered to be the cultural fruit of Arabs. This food pattern is also linked to their environment. The geographical and climatic conditions are not conducive for growing all kinds of vegetation or fruits bearing plants. However, the date palms can survive the extremely hot humid desert conditions. Therefore, Arabs cultivated date palms and developed liking towards its fruit. Moreover, the date fruits can be dried and kept for a long period of time without getting spoiled. In all counts, the date palms are suitable to the geographical and climatic conditions of the Arab societies and it became an important item in this food pattern.

There are other evidences of the relationship between environment and cultural food pattern. Although, people in the Arab world eat lots of meat, the meat of pork is not a part of their cultural food. The culture of not eating pork could also be an expression of adaptation to their environment (Inciardi & Rothman, 1990). The amount of fat in the pork meat is extremely high as compared to other meat-food such as chicken or mutton. This extremely high amount of fat of pork meat will produce too much of heat energy when it is digested. If people, who live in extremely hot climatic conditions, consume the pork meat it will create severe discomfort. Therefore, it is an unsuitable food item in such climatic condition. Therefore, people deliberately avoided eating of pork and it became a cultural practice. Eating of pork is a taboo in many hot desert societies. In addition to the discomfort, the meat of pork is likely to get spoiled fast if not refrigerated. Hence, people could not include it as an item in their dishes. This further reveals that eating pork is not an adaptable practice in hot desert conditions. Of course, people in the Arab societies follow

Islamic traditions and there is a religious reason behind the prohibition of eating pork, however, analysis of religious reasons is not the purview of this paper.

The family system and gender roles of Arabs in the UAE are also seem to be related to the environmental conditions. The Arabs follow patriarchal system where power and authority of family is entrusted with male members. Similarly, the male members inherit twice the women's share (Nydell, 2002). Gender roles are distinct in Arab families. While men engaged the duties outside the household, women were assigned of indoor duties. In fact, women are exempted of outdoor activities because of harsh and hostile climatic conditions. The physical nature of women is not suitable to take up activities outside household. As they are physically less suited to perform exhaustive outdoor responsibilities, they were given less difficult indoor tasks and responsibilities that made women as house makers. The physically strong men assumed outdoor activities and economic responsibilities. The dominant role played by men in the families enabled them acquire power and authority as well as larger share of wealth in the family. The dominant role of men in the Arab societies made the way for development of male-favored inheritance pattern, patriarchal system, in Arab culture.

Conclusion:-

The lifestyles of people are rooted in their geographical and climatic conditions. The association between culture and environment is especially evident in the pre-industrial societies where human technology is poor. In the absence of technology, humans could not change the environment, therefore they learned to adapt to their surroundings as seen in the case of traditional Arab societies.

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