

I. Who are the Arabs?

The Core Contemporary Arabs belong to a race known as the Caucasian or the West Asians. The popular term used for them and the people who share similar traits however is "SEMITE" or "SEMITIC". The "Semitic" people are said to have descended from Shem or Sam, the son of Prophet Noah. The ancestral line of the Arabs is often traced through two lines of descent from Sam or Sham. The Northern Arabs' descent is traced from Adnan, a descendant of Prophet Ismā'īl (Ishmael), while Southern Arabs descent is traced back to Qaḥṭān who has been identified with Yoqtan (Joktan) the son of Abir (Eber). The other Semitic people are the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Hebrews, the Phoenicians, the Arameans, the Abyssinians and the Serbians. Though the classification of these people into race of linguistic and cultural affinity is not wholly ethnologically appropriate, yet they are related in many ways. The Old Testament appears to have been the basis of these assumptions that were later corroborated by some Muslim historians themselves. We can all still remember the story of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) and how he took his son Ismā'īl (Ishmael) and his mother Hajar (Hagar) to the plains of Arabia and left them there. The Jurhumites, the descendants of Qaḥṭān (Yoqtan) were said to have seen them there and resolved to settle beside them. Among them Ismā'īl grew up, learnt their language, their ways and married among them. These people that are the descendants of Qaḥṭān were called al-'Arab al-Āribah (The Arabizing Arabs) while the descendants of Ismā'īl were called Al-'Arab al-Musta'ribah (The Arabized Arabs). The Quraysh, the tribe of Prophet Muhammad belonged to the class of Arabized Arabs and they were the Northern Arabs. The Arabian ancestries are comprising the countries known today as Yemen, Saudi Arabian, Syria and Iraq. The Yemen is said the origin of Arabs.

1. SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Who are the Semites and from whom did they descend?

The Arabs are said to have two ancestral lines. These ancestral lines are traced to whom and which part of Arabia belongs to them?

Who are the Jurhumites?

Which countries constitute ancestral Arabs?

II. The Pre-Islamic Arab Environment

The huge land mass of what is known as the Arabian Peninsula covers an area of about 1,200 miles wide and 1,500 miles in length. It is situated in South West Asia consisting of a desert and a fertile land; the desert covers larger unit while the fertile line is smaller; the desert is sparsely populated while the fertile land has a lot of people living there. However, the desert too has several oases with vegetation and enough water at specific areas in its stretch. If you have ever visited the desert areas of Northern Nigeria, you will quickly understand what we are saying. Date palms, wheat and corn were grown in abundance in the desert areas while other kinds of fruit were grown in the fertile areas and areas close to the oases.

2. SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Identify areas in Nigeria that look like the not too fertile areas of Arabian Peninsula?

Mention three crops that constituted staple food in the Arabian Peninsula?

III. Social, Political and Religious Life of the Arabs

The pre-Islam Arab social structure was of two kinds the desert social life and the social system of the city dwellers. The social life of the desert dwellers was not structured in a systematic manner. This is due to their nomadic nature. They drove their herds and flocks from place to place in search of water and grasses. This nomadic nature prevented an organized political structure. The loyalty of the individual was therefore to the tribe with which he roams the earth. The tribe was his world, his security, his strength and his pride. The harsh climatic conditions imposed upon him the virtues of generosity, perseverance, courage, chivalry and fortune.

As for the city dwellers, they were more stable and better organized. They built cities and civilizations that were well known. Among these were Yemen, Hīrah, Ghassān, Makkah, Yathrib and Ṭāif.

The Pre-Islamic Arab society was a home to a number of religions while the polytheists were in the majority, Zoroastrianism was among the Tamīm tribe Judaism was among the tribes of Kindah and Banū Hārith, Christianity was among the tribes of Rabī ‘ah Ghassān and Qudācah.

3. SELF ASSESSMENT EXERCISE

Explain kinds of Pre Islamic social lives?

Compare between the life of rural and urban Arabs in Pre-Islamic period?

State types of religion among the pre-Islamic Arabs?

- IV. **CONCLUSION** An understanding of the culture of the Pre-Islamic Arab society, its value system and way of life is very necessary for a proper understanding of the literary productions of the period and these literary productions on their own part are the most authentic records of the way of life of the Arabs of the time.