

Shame: Muslim culture's armour. Weapon? Humour.

Written by Nicolai Sennels
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Time travelling is actually possible: If you want to know how the culture was one and a half millennium ago on the Arab peninsular, you just need to visit an Islamic country - or a Muslim parallel society in your own country for that matter. They may have cars, cell phones and Nike shoes, but it is all invented and created by non-Muslims, and does not change the essence of the original Muslim culture - which has stayed virtually the same since the time of their much beloved prophet.

Cultures need certain self preserving mechanisms in order to stay intact. One such mechanism, the feeling and celebration of national pride, is very low in Europe. One main reason is the European Union's steadfast work on substituting national identity with loyalty towards the bureaucracy in Brussels. Another is a widespread feeling of guilt over something, that completely other people in a completely other time did to the Jews in the early 20th century. Resistance towards the corrosive effect on our culture, safety and economy resulting from mass immigration from a very different culture is therefore dangerously low.

The Muslim culture on the other hand has very strong self preserving mechanisms. Some of the most important ones are of course the fact that taking up a non-Muslim lifestyle are often be punished by social isolation, violence or even death and that Muslims are only allowed to marry Muslims, thus preventing non-Muslim traditions and values from entering the families and community. Marrying within the same family (despite the serious risk of mental and physical illness), wearing characteristic clothing (Islamic veils, niqabs and burqas), eating special food (halal), a strong identification with the umma which is opposed to the non-Muslims and not being allowed to have real friendship with non-Muslims also creates a culture and a identity that distance Muslims from non-Muslims. For these reasons Muslim culture has been able to stay the way it is the last 1,400 years, in spite of the breathtaking cultural and scientific developments that has taken place and is taking place all around it.

Shame

All this is common knowledge but as a psychologist I would like to emphasise the importance of a certain psychological phenomena: The feeling of shame. Shame is the feeling that appears when one break the social rules in the culture that one is raised in. The German professor in evolution history at the University of Kiel, Jörg Wettlaufer, claims that "shaming rituals seem to produce stigmatizing and exclusive effects which may hinder reformation and social reintegration". In other words: Shame is the antidote to cultural evolution.

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The Department of Research in Humour (yes, we have such a thing) at the University of Aalborg, Denmark, have measured the degree of a neurosis called gelotophobia in 73 countries around the world. Gelotophobia is "the fear of being laughed at" and gelotophobics are thus very careful not to do anything that make them feel ashamed. It turns out that Danes are the least gelotophobic people in the world (1,67 percent suffers from mild gelotophobia), while the most gelotophobic people live in Middle East (33 percent suffers from gelotophobia).

The concept of shame is dominating the Muslim culture and makes Muslims prevent themselves from deviating from cultural norms and behaviours. Installing a strong concept of shame thus becomes a psychological armour protecting the Muslim culture from changing.

The best medicine against shame? The ability to laugh about oneself. This might be part of the reason for the obvious lack of self-irony in the Islamic world - even though it is much needed and often relevant. Except for consequence, humour is probably the most underestimated weapon against religious fanaticism and lack of integration among Muslims. It is needed for breaking open a culture mummified by shame and for pointing out weaknesses in its behaviour and religion. No wonder that a majority of the worlds' Muslims react so aggressively against the Mohamed cartoons and Islam-critical satire in general. Nonetheless, this is the medicine that is needed and this is what we never stop serving them. With a smile.

[Nicolai Sennels](#) is a psychologist and the author of *"Among Criminal Muslims: A Psychologist's experiences with the Copenhagen Municipality"*.