

# A STUDY ON "HONOR CRIMES" IN LEBANON<sup>(1)</sup>

"A young woman's status in oriental society is pitiful indeed. If she falls in love, her brother gets angry. If she marries the man of her choice, her father will reject her. If she is seduced by a dishonest man, the members of her family hold a counsel by which they decide to wash their honor with her blood." (Said Mirza, Prosecuting Attorney of Beirut, 1973).

"In oriental society, a young girl has no right to lead a normal life. A look from her may be an equivalent to sin. A smile may be an invitation to immorality. Even the joy she displays, the laughter she utters, are suspected as a sign of loose conduct and a source of shame. As soon as she raises her head, a blood thirsty beast is ready to confront her with angry, blood-red eyes."<sup>(2)</sup>

Why should a woman symbolize the "honor" of her family or tribe? What is the relation between "blood" and "honor"? Why should the woman and not the man, be sacrificed like a scapegoat to atone for guilt committed by both of them?

These and other similar questions occupied for a long time the author of a recent study on "honor crimes" in Lebanon and led her to prepare a Ph. D. thesis on this topic which she presented, after six years of work, to the University of Strasbourg.

The researcher, Mrs. Laila Shikhani Nakouz, is a specialist in social psychology and occupies the position of chairman of the psychology department at the Lebanese University.

When asked about the reasons why she chose this topic for her thesis she said that she was first moved by the large number of "honor crimes" reported by daily papers and carrying such titles as: "He washed his shame with her blood," and "He slew her from vein to vein." She was also affected by an act of injustice committed against one of her girl friends who was forced by her parents to marry a man twenty years her senior, after enduring imprisonment at home for more than two months.

In preparing her study, she used the documentary method, by reading the files of 130 honor crimes committed in Lebanon within six years, which showed that, in this country, 13 women were slain every year because of erroneous social concepts.

These concepts are derived from certain archaic, tribal principles which, originated by violent, primitive jealousy and possessiveness, consider adultery as a major guilt, hence a source of shame not only to the individuals in question but to the whole family as well. Only blood, the symbol of sacrifice for atonement, can wash away the family shame. But, instead of sacrificing both the man and the woman who were partners in the act, only the

woman is killed because she is the weaker and the less important individual. Killing the man might raise a series of protests and conflicts leading to intertribal or interfamilial warfare. There is surely here the impact of the double standard which requires that a woman be treated differently from a man, i.e. receive a more severe and harsh penalty if she has sinned.

Those who are charged by the family council of "washing the family honor by blood" are usually illiterate or semi-literate people, unemployed or engaged in illegal trade, who have been inculcated since their early years with the idea that killing an adulterous or wayward woman is an act of heroism. The woman's guilt does not have to be proved. It may sometimes be mere suspicion or even a marriage that she planned without the family's consent.

As a treatment for this primitive custom, Mrs. Nakouz proposes first an amendment of the laws of the penal code which grant alleviating circumstances to men committing this crime.<sup>(3)</sup>

The mentality of our society must be changed through education and socialization, especially in backward areas which still consider retaliation and avenging blood with blood as a sacred law. Their women refuse to mourn their men who were killed until they have been avenged. Even when the codes of law have been modernized, **tribal laws and social stereotypes remain the stronger and more effective patterns of conduct**, particularly in underdeveloped communities. In this case, education has to play a major role.

The persistence of tribal law in the larger part of Lebanon (in the North, the Beqaa and the South) shows how little certain sections have been affected by modern civilization. The general state of backwardness which characterizes these areas is further aggravated by the persistency of the feudal system which imposes blind adherence to a hereditary leader whose claim to leadership rests on his descent from a dictatorial ancestor or a privileged family.

These backward areas in Lebanon or elsewhere form dangerous spots which favor the sudden rise of terrorism, setting the whole country ablaze.

## MOVEMENT TO BAN WAR TOYS GAINS STRENGTH

West Berlin's "Kindertage" (Children's Days), a permanent body for the defence of children's interests, is campaigning against "war toys" from September to November. During the school holidays a "summer camp" will be held in Turkey, for German and Turkish children. A special programme of 10 films for children will be shown during the International Film Festival in Berlin. And the Highlight of the year's activities will be an international conference on the Rights of the Child, in West Berlin, in December.

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(1) This article is based on an interview with the author of the study, Mrs. Laila Shikhani Nakouz, reported by Wafa el-Oud, and published in *Al-Hasna Magazine*, no. 870, July 6, 1979, p. 6.

(2) Ibid.

(3) See *Al-Raida* no. 4, June 1978. p.10 and no. 9, vol. II, Feb. 1979, p. 6.