

## WOMEN IN PRESENT-DAY IRAQ

BY WINIFRED SMEATON

FOR THREE YEARS it was my privilege to be a member of an Iraqi household in Baghdad, and during that time I not only shared the life of the most advanced and educated group in the capital, but was also able, in traveling about, to observe the mode of life among the tribes and villages. The diversity of population is one of the most fascinating things about this new Oriental nation whose country and ancestors were responsible for the earliest civilization.

Since long before the beginnings of written history, the fertile valley of the Two Rivers has attracted people from less-favored regions on all sides. Relics of all the invasions are still to be found in different sections of the population, although most of it is, or considers itself, Arab. In the northern part of the country, in the mountains, the people are mainly Kurds, who come of a different racial stock from the Arabs, and whose language is Iranian. Besides these two most important divisions of the population, there are a number of Christian groups, Arab, Assyrian, and Chaldaean, old communities of Jews, and various smaller groups, Mandaeans or Subbi, Turkomans, and Yezidis, who are often erroneously known as devil-worshippers.

The religious divisions of the population are almost as many as the racial, but by far the majority of the people are Moslems, with Shi'ahs and Sunnis both represented. Roughly speaking, the Shi'ahs are numerically strong in the south, and Sunnis in the north. Nearly all members of the government are Moslems, although minority groups are represented proportionally in the Parliament.

In spite of the diversity of race, language, and religion, there is a certain resemblance between the groups, at least as seen by western eyes, which may best be ascribed to the traditions of Oriental civilization. One of the most striking manifestations of this Oriental complex is the social structure, with its rigid separation of men and women. The separation is less marked in some communities than others, and is probably strongest among Moslems. It is a mistake, however, to consider the segregation of women as a result of Islam, for it is a far older institution.

Outside the family circle, men and women live entirely different lives and have different interests. Strict seclusion is found only among city dwellers and families of high rank, but the general attitude on this point is gradually changing. Peasant women and women of the tribes do not cover their faces and go about freely, but they have few contacts with men outside their own families. The family is a close-knit circle, especially among the Arabs, where marriage of cousins is usual. Within the family circle there is complete freedom, especially in the large patriarchal households.

This rather astonished me the first time I was a guest in a black Arab tent. The tent was divided into two compartments, one for the men, and one for the women. We were first entertained by the men, and then when the two women of our party went in to see the feminine half of the family, we were accompanied not only by one or two of the men, but also by a young Englishman who had been living among the Arabs, studying their ways, and who was completely accepted as a member of the family. The women, however, do not go into the men's part of the tent, and never eat with them.

It cannot be denied that men come first in Iraq, as in other parts of the Orient. Life is ordered for their convenience and pleasure in so far as it can be ordered, for in spite of certain natural advantages, life is hard in Iraq, and the standard of living low compared with ours. To be sure, we make altogether too much of our scale of living, and there is an advantage in being able to work and live with a minimum of material. The age of machinery and labor-saving is just beginning to arrive in Iraq.

The soil of most of the country is rich, and there is an abundance of water, but not in the easy form of rainfall. It must be lifted from the river and conveyed to wherever it is needed, a perpetual labor. Irrigation is being developed, and pumps are being installed, but outside the towns, and even to quite an extent in the towns, water for household purposes must still be carried by the women.

Carrying water and collecting fuel are two of the hardest tasks of peasant women. Fuel, however, is almost more of a problem than water, since there are very few trees besides the date palm, which are much too precious to be used for fuel. Low thorny bushes and animal dung, both of which are gathered by the women and girls, are the usual fuel. It is not unusual to see a file of women in



YEZIDI GIRL SPINNING GOAT'S HAIR



SHEIK'S DAUGHTER WITH A NEGRO SLAVE

the open country staggering home under loads of camel-thorn bigger than themselves. In the cities firewood can be bought, for bundles of branches are brought by rafts from the northern areas, where trees are to be found.

It might be supposed that oil or natural gas would be readily available for heating, considering the rich oil-fields in Iraq. So far, except, I believe, in the company houses at Kirkuk and Khanqin, neither gas nor oil is used; but with further organization, it is to be hoped that such natural resources will be cheap and at the disposal of the people.

The other duties of women are what they are all over the world, cooking, sewing, looking after the children and the house, spinning and sometimes weaving. But as elsewhere, these depend on the economic status of the various groups. Life in the cities is vastly different from the life of the nomad Beduin or of the *Fellāhīn* or cultivators. The wife of a government official lives in a different world from that of a poor peasant.

The daily life of Baghdad ladies is not very different from that of our leisured women. They have servants to do the housework and to look after the children under their supervision. The servants are generally of rather poor quality, for although a great deal is demanded of them, it does not include real efficiency. For this reason, it takes several servants to run a house—a cook, perhaps his helper, one or more houseboys, probably a maid, a gardener, and a chauffeur. Labor-saving appliances are still rare, and looked on with suspicion by servants in those households, usually foreign, which have tried to introduce them.

Some men with old-fashioned notions demand a great deal of personal attention from their wives, with no consideration for the time of day or night, or for any plans their wives may have made. But that is not usual, and as a matter of fact, the seclusion of women is becoming less strict all the time. A few families do not allow their women out except on rare occasions, but most upper and middle-class women have a wide circle of friends, and visit each other frequently.

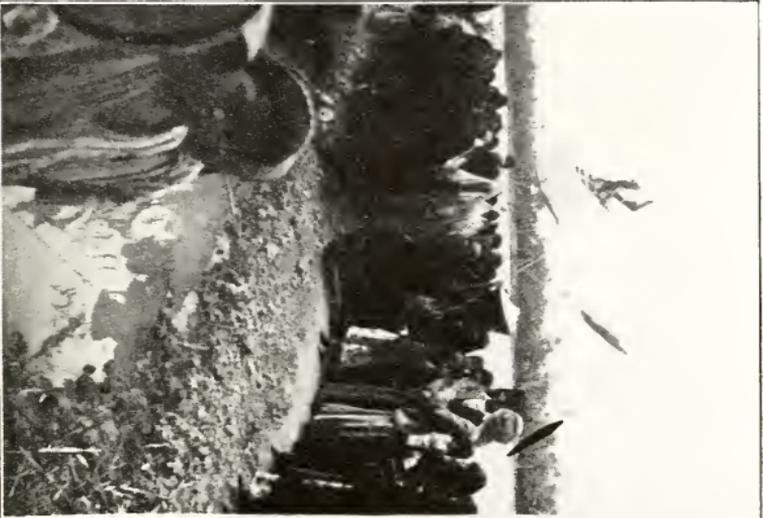
We are apt to think of rich and influential Moslems as living in the midst of luxurious well-stocked harems. Allow me to shatter any such quaint romantic notions, for there is very little polygamy. Of all my acquaintances in Baghdad, I knew only one polygamous household. Great sheiks and important personages in the tribes and

villages, whether Arab or Kurdish, may have two or three wives, but for economic reasons, if for no other, most men have only one wife, or at least one wife at a time. Divorce is very easy for men, and in practice the advantages are all with them, including the disposition of the children, although there are laws in regard to restoring at least part of the wife's dowry.

One of the big sheiks in the marsh country, whom several of us visited for a few days, has had thirty-three wives altogether, and about a hundred children, although nobody seems to know the exact number. But he has one permanent wife (the first wife, who is carefully chosen and probably a relative, is apt to be a permanent fixture), who told us with a good deal of satisfaction that her magic had caused her husband to divorce most of his wives soon after marrying them. We strongly suspected that most of the magic lay in the power of her tongue!

On another occasion our party stayed with the Mir, or head of all the Yezidis, who has six or seven wives. The only one we saw was the latest and youngest, whom I had met before her marriage while she was at school in Baghdad. We understood that the others lived together in another house with their common mother-in-law, a most formidable old lady. But these are exceptional cases, and most men stick to one wife.

Among themselves the women have quite a gay time, and calling is one of the chief occupations of those who have leisure. In Baghdad each lady has her day at home once a week. Her friends are expected to come frequently, and are heaped with reproaches and accusations of unfriendliness if they stay away too long. Picnics and pleasure excursions are greatly enjoyed. Several families (without the men) will go together with a hubbub of children, quantities of food, servants, and fine Persian rugs to spread on the ground. Poorer women, who must have more excuse for such excursions, go forth on *ziyārah* or pilgrimage to the tombs of local saints, and enjoy themselves just as much. If even that much leisure is impossible, work may sometimes be made an excuse for getting together. In Mosul all day long there is a congregation of women washing clothes in a side stream of the river, and the cheerful sound of the wooden paddles with which they beat the long-suffering clothes against the rocks can be heard for a long distance. Children splash in and out, and the clothes are spread on convenient parts of the landscape to



MANDEAN WEDDING



CHALDEAN COURTYARD

drv. Only near sunset do the women gather up their bundles and offspring, and go home to their undoubtedly ravenous menfolk.

In all communities weddings and births call for celebration, and in the case of death the women of the family and their friends join together in wailing for the deceased. The men also celebrate weddings and mourn for the dead, but it is the women who preserve the old ways and ideas. The men are more exposed to outside influences and become more sophisticated. With the spread of education among girls as well as boys, it will become less and less true, but at present (and probably always) in the country districts the old culture is kept by the women much more than the men.

Magic practices are very popular, as indeed they are everywhere. Written charms may be bought for nearly all contingencies, and men or women with a reputation for magic have a flourishing practice. The charms are generally to be worn in the clothing, or in special cases to be buried, or mixed into bread and fed to a black dog. I once bought a whole series of such charms in the town of Nasiriya from a charming and affable *Sayyid*, a descendant of the Prophet. There was a charm against scorpion bites, one against dogs, one for headache, two or three varieties of love charms, and a general cure-all, invoking the seal of Solomon, for all the evils which might conceivably befall one. Men as a rule scoff at these charms, but women find them very comforting. The children, and especially the boys, are hung with them and with amuletic stones, which the women also wear.

The visits to saints' tombs have more than a purely social purpose: generally the women go to tie a rag from their clothing onto a railing or window-grating of the tomb or a branch of a sacred tree, taking in its place a wisp of cloth or wool which had been tied there by some previous visitor. This may insure the protection of the saint, or more often, secure his intervention in the matter of having children, for women in the Orient want children more than anything else in life.

Most of the country women of Iraq, not only Arabs, but Kurds, Yezidis and Turkomans also, are very fond of tattooing, and some are elaborately decorated on the face, hands, and body. It is chiefly a form of feminine vanity, for good tattooing is esteemed as enhancing the charms. But some tattooing is supposed to have magic power, and is employed to cure pain or illness, to guard against other

charms, or to attract or repel a man, according to the circumstances. Three dots tattooed in the palm of the right hand while some one reads passages from the Koran is effective in attracting and keeping the affection of one's husband. If for some reason one does not wish his affections, three dots tattooed similarly in the left palm will keep him away. But imagine the havoc if the wrong hand were tattooed!

It will be a sorry day indeed when the women of Iraq, to say nothing of the men, entirely give up their old way of dressing. Already the inevitable change has begun, and the veil and *'abah* are losing ground. In the towns most well-to-do women, Moslems and others, wear European dresses and shoes. But in the street they still wear the all-enveloping *'abah*, which covers them from head not quite to toe, as the length varies with prevailing fashions. The same type of garment is worn by men, but in a different way. It is a straight wide garment, worn over other clothes, open down the front, with small openings for the arms. Men wear the *'abah* across the shoulders, with the arms through the openings, and women wear it over the head like a cape. In addition, many women in the towns cover their faces with a strip of black veil, which considerably interferes with the wearer's vision.

Jewish women, and formerly Christians as well, wear a different type of covering garment, the *izār*, which is a rectangle of cloth pulled around the body, but not over the head. It is clumsy in shape, but made of most exquisite gold or silver brocaded silk. Before the war, some *'ababs* were made of similar material, and were also worn chiefly by Jews and Christians.

Conservative older women among the Moslems do not wear European dress, but the old type of garment, the *zibūn* which is a carefully cut and well-moulded dress with long sleeves, open down the front and overlapping, and slit up from the hem at both sides. It is usually black, and may be of any material. With it goes a headdress of two black kerchiefs, one folded triangularly, so that the ends hang down with the braids of hair, and the other folded into a band and fastened around the head. In Basrah and the south, the typical costume is, or rather was, a very wide straight dress with an opening for the head, and very long arm-holes. One or both sides may be draped over the head for convenience, which makes the dress fall into very graceful lines. With this is worn the *fūtah*, a headdress

of gauzy material, generally black, which is wrapped around the head, framing the face, and covering the throat. But alas, fewer and fewer women wear the old dresses, although among the tribes there is as yet little change, and the women still wear *sibūn*, *fūtah*, and *'abah*.

The typical Kurdish costume is also very attractive, and is said to have been copied from seventeenth and eighteenth century European dress. It consists of two dresses worn over full ankle-length bloomers. The inner dress is high in the neck, opening down the front, with long pointed sleeves, the ends of which are wound around the arms, or tied together across the back. The outer one has three-quarter length sleeves, and a full gathered skirt, and is cut down to the waist in front, showing the inner dress. The headdress is a voluminous sort of turban made of two large kerchiefs edged with fringe or tassels, sometimes wound over a foundation like a fez.

Yezidi women in most of the villages wear white, and in the Sinjar area they wear an enormous white headdress.

It is always a pity when local costumes disappear, but that will be one of the effects of general education in Iraq. Since the benefits to the women of the country will far outweigh the loss of a certain picturesqueness, one must not begrudge the spread of education.

Very few women in Iraq have any real intellectual interests, chiefly because they have not had the opportunity to develop them. There are a number of educated and intelligent women in certain circles, especially in Baghdad, but most women in the country, even in families in which the boys are educated as a matter of course, have not had the same chance. The next generation will be most interesting to watch, for many girls are now sent to school. With this opportunity for women's education, and the gradual permeation of new ideas, there is every reason to hope that the future Iraq will rest on a solid foundation of educated men and women.