

## LIFE IN THE CAMEL LANE – EMBRACE THE ADVENTURE

By Doreen M. Cumberford

### Excerpt from Chapter 9: Weddings as Cultural Education

#### Wedding Bells, Saudi Style

In traditional country weddings back then, the celebrations were complete when the groom showed up at the bride's home to claim her. Stories abounded about people being stranded in a Saudi home for several days, wondering if the groom had got cold feet or was rejoicing with his pals so long that he didn't want to break up the party (Saudi parties can last for several days).

Jaffer, like so many Saudis, had two wives residing in the same house, with five children from each. One of his older children was studying in the US, so like so many Saudis, he quickly built an affinity with Americans. However, he was unable to reassure Linda as to how long the wedding would be. He gave her the typical *inshallah* response—meaning the time and conclusion of the celebrations would remain unpredictable. He did reassure her that she would not be alone; other Westerners would be present.

She dressed in a sparkly caftan and evening sandals. Since no men would be present, she could show her arms. She wore gold jewelry as is the custom even in the most modest of households. Jaffer picked Linda up, and they drove out the security gates of Dhahran, entering a different world.

This wedding was a typical country wedding and would be held in the large Shiite suburb of Qatif. They pulled up in front of a walled clay and concrete house. Jaffer deposited her outside the gate where she made her way up to an open door. Linda peered inside; no one was there. Finally, someone came from another room and greeted her in Arabic. Linda handed her the wedding gift, and the gal's smile revealed some missing teeth. Linda says, "I was compelled to follow my own wedding traditions, removing some beautiful copper leaves from my living room wall and wrapping them in wedding paper." But who really knows if the bride ever received them or if the hostess kept them.

The woman said, "Shukran," and motioned to follow her upstairs onto the rooftop. A rather large group of women in long colorful dresses milled about quietly. Spotting three or four expatriate women, who clearly stood out and were also Jaffer's "special friends," Linda made her way over to them. They chatted, got to know one another and speculated about the timing and what might happen next. This was a very alien happening for these Westerners. They even wondered aloud how they would recognize the bride.

Along one wall was a velour chair (perhaps a car seat?) on a carpeted platform. It seemed to be a place of honor. A group of women in abayas showed up looking for a space to set down their drums. They selected a corner, removed their abayas and sat cross-legged on the rooftop. One of the expats presumed they were the local "band" hired from a neighboring village to play for the celebration.

Some very old women sitting down were smoking from hookah pipes. The drums started and rhythms got faster. Saudi women started dancing, the tempo quickened, and they started throwing their heads around flinging their long hair from side to side, backward and forward. Linda was surprised at the seductive nature of the dancing and thought, *All this energy for other women?* This was followed by high-pitched ululating from women all over the rooftop. This was becoming a more *National Geographic* experience moment by moment.

One of the British women joined the dancing, and Linda followed suit. It wasn't long before she too was consumed by the primal rhythms and throwing her hair about. The night was sweltering hot and sweat poured down her back. The Saudi women seemed pleased with Linda's dancing and urged her on by ululating and clapping. The musicians, all old women, smiled, their stained or missing teeth evident, then played even faster. Linda transformed into a whirling dervish!

Later, she realized that Jaffer had provided his family with entertainment in the form of expats. It was not simply a kind gesture to be invited; it was actually a calculated move. The foreigners became the highlight of the evening. When Linda ceased dancing, the onlookers were disappointed. The music subsided at eleven o'clock, then the bride appeared in a long pastel dress and a rhinestone tiara and was escorted to the velour seat. She started to read from the Quran. Women proceeded

to bring out bolts of fabric and unfurl them in front of her. The spreading of fabric ensued for a while prior to food arriving on simple round aluminum trays about three feet wide. With no choice but to sit down on the hot rooftop to eat, Linda and her new expat friends joined the Saudi women, who seemed perfectly comfortable with extreme heat.

Fresh goat meat was served. No doubt the animal had been killed that day then prayed over. The rice that accompanied the meat was uniquely Saudi Arabian and delicious. Everyone eats with the right hand, the left hand being considered unclean. Tea was served in small handle-less cups. Sliced oranges were passed around, dinner was completed and calmer drumming ensued. They had danced, the bride had made her grand appearance and finally they had eaten. The only item of business left was for the appearance of the groom to claim his bride.

By now it was well after midnight and the expat women were sleepy. During the hotter months, especially several decades ago, Saudi women rested or slept during the day. They tended to be more active during the night when it is cooler. By this time, the expats were wondering when they would get off the rooftop. They had seemingly exhausted all mutual interests and became subdued. One hour stretched into the next. They observed the band gathering their instruments and noted the bride was gone—finally, the silent sign that the wedding was over. Though the groom hadn't presented himself to the women, he had come for her downstairs and apparently they were off on their new life together.

Linda recalls arriving home around 4 a.m. The question is, was she set up to be the evening's entertainment in the form of an expat performance or was she truly an honored and special guest? Perhaps the answer lies in "yes and." Clearly this was an example of how the Saudi culture was not straightforward and things were seldom as they appeared.