



## ENVIRONMENT, ETHNICITY, AND SOCIAL CHANGE: CRITICISM OF ORIENTALIST GUSTAVE LE BON'S VIEWS ON THE PRE- ISLAMIC ARAB NATION

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### Abstract

The Arab is a great nation with a great civilization. So many studies discuss Arabs, including Westerners or Orientalists. One of them is Gustave Le Bon. Le Bon's thoughts about Arabs received positive and negative criticism from many people. This research was conducted to review the environment, ethnicity of the Arabs, and the condition of the pre-Islamic Arabs based on Le Bon's thoughts and to criticize positively and negatively Le Bon's thoughts. This research is library research with a critical study approach. The source used is the book *La Civilization des Arabes* by Gustave Le Bon which was translated into Arabic with the title *Hadarah al-Arab*. The results of this research are that Le Bon's thoughts regarding the Arabs are objective thoughts, supported by data and images so they are easy to accept. Even though many of them conflict with Islamic thinking, Le Bon conveys his thoughts with justifiable arguments. However, there are several things that Le Bon did not include in his work, such as the origins of the Arabs as a whole, only stating that the Arabs came from the Semitic race. In the end, Le Bon's thinking still received positive and negative criticism. However, it can still be used as a reference and source of reference in studying Arab civilization.

### Keywords

Arab; Criticism of Thought; Gustave Le Bon

### مستخلص البحث

العرب أمة عظيمة ذات حضارة عظيمة. هناك العديد من الدراسات التي تناقش العرب، بما في ذلك الغربيين أو المستشرقين. أحدهم هو غوستاف لو بون. تلقت أفكار لو بون عن العرب انتقادات إيجابية وسلبية من العديد من الأشخاص. أجريت هذه الدراسة لاستعراض البيئة والعرقية للعرب وحالة العرب قبل الإسلام بناءً على أفكار لو بون ولانتقاد أفكار لو بون بشكل إيجابي وسلب. هذا البحث هو بحث مكتبي يتبع نهج الدراسة النقدية. المصدر المستخدم هو كتاب "La Civilization des Arabes" لغوستاف لو بون الذي ترجم إلى العربية بعنوان "حضارة العرب". نتائج هذا البحث هي أن أفكار لو بون عن العرب هي أفكار موضوعية، مدعومة بالبيانات والصور، لذا فهي سهلة القبول. على الرغم من أن العديد منها يتعارض مع الفكر الإسلامي، إلا أن لو بون ينقل أفكاره بحجج مبررة. ومع ذلك، هناك عدة أمور لم يدرجها لو بون في عمله، مثل أصول العرب ككل، واكتفى بذكر أن العرب ينحدرون من العرق السامي. في النهاية، لا تزال أفكار لو بون تتلقى انتقادات إيجابية وسلبية. ومع ذلك، لا يزال من الممكن

## INTRODUCTION

The Arabs are not a nation that suddenly appears in world civilization like a revelation descending from the sky. However, the Arab nation has a long history of building its civilization so that we can feel it today. In its development, the laying of the foundation of Islamic teachings will be due to the existence of civilization built by the Arabs (Syaepu and Sauki 2020). The Arabs have played an important role in the development of world civilization, both in the political, economic, and cultural fields.

One of the interesting aspects to study in the context of the Arab nation is the environment and ethnicity of the Arab nation and the condition of the pre-Islamic Arab nation. According to Bakar (2022), before the advent of Islam, pre-Islamic Arab societies, often referred to as the Jahiliyah period, lived in harsh and arid environments. They are divided into two large groups: Bedouins (nomads) who live in the desert and depend on farms, and townspeople who trade. Their social life was heavily influenced by the tribal or tribal system, which often triggered conflicts and wars. The religions practiced are diverse, ranging from polytheism (idolatry) to heavenly religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Magi. Despite having commendable traits such as courage and generosity, pre-Islamic Arab societies also had bad habits such as gambling, drunkenness, and arrogance. Art, especially poetry, is highly valued in their culture. A person's social status is often determined by wealth and the number of slaves owned.

Gustave Le Bon, a French sociologist and orientalist, expressed his opinion about the Arabs through his book *La Civilisation des Arabes* published in 1884. In his book, Le Bon (1884) stated that the pre-Islamic Arabs had a civilization, especially in the fields of literature and language. However, even so, the Arabs are also described as a barbaric nation.

According to Nimah (2021), Orientalism is a way used by Westerners to understand the Eastern world. The Eastern world is their colonial countries that have wealth, centers of civilization, and cultural centers. Gradually, orientalism narrowed down to the study or study of Islam. However, the study of Islam by Westerners or orientalists is often seen as aimed at discrediting Islam. This is different from the Isri (2020)'s opinion who mentioned that not all orientalists are equally negative, many of them also think honestly about the results of their studies on Islam.

Many studies have been conducted to criticize Le Bon's thinking about the Arabs. Among the critics who supported it were Yousef dan Issa (2022). They argue that Le Bon presented his thoughts about the Arab nation honestly, clearly, and fairly. In contrast to Hourani (1983) who argued that Le Bon's thinking about the

Arab nation was not objective, tended to exaggerate and praise the Arab nation and its contribution to civilization. According to him, this is because Le Bon is interested in Arab thinkers.

Le Bon's positive and negative criticism of the Arabs is very important to be studied so that Le Bon's thinking is not seen as biased. However, research related to Le Bon's thinking on the Arab world is still very limited, which focuses on Arab civilization in general (Yousef and Issa 2022) and criticism of Arab civilization in general (Syafni et al. 2024). The novelty of this research is the focus of the research. The focus of this research is on the environment, ethnicity, and social changes of the pre-Islamic Arab nation.

This research aims to examine Le Bon's thinking about the environment and ethnicity of Arabs in-depth and the condition of pre-Islamic Arabs. In addition, this research will also provide positive and negative criticism of Le Bon's thought. This criticism is based on a comprehensive literature review and empirical data analysis. This research is expected to contribute to our understanding of the Arab nation.

## METHOD

The researcher used the library research method in this study. Literature research is a research activity carried out through the collection of data and information with the help of various materials in the library such as books, similar previous research, scientific articles, notes, and various journals related to the problem to be researched. This activity is carried out in a structured manner to collect, process, and conclude data using certain techniques or methods that aim to find answers to the problems faced (Sari 2021).

The researcher used a critical study approach in this literature research. The critical study approach is an approach that functions to provide a critical analysis of a thought or opinion in a text or literature work. This approach focuses on a deep understanding of the social constructions, ideologies, and values contained in the text (Subagiya 2023).

This research used literature sources related to the environment and ethnicity of the Arabs as well as the condition of the pre-Islamic Arabs. The main source in this study was the book *La Civilisation des Arabes* by Gustave Le Bon which was translated into Arabic by Adil Zuaytar (2013) with the title *Hadarah al-Arab*. The focus of this research was discuss about the environment and ethnicity of the Arabs as well as the condition of the pre-Islamic Arabs according to Le Bon's thought. The discussion related to this is contained in Chapter I of the *Hadarah al-Arab*. Then continued with criticism of Le Bon's thought. The criticism given is in the form of positive and negative criticism.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Gustave Le Bon's Biography**

Gustave Le Bon was born in Nogent-le-Rotrou, France on May 7, 1841. In 1860, he began his medical education at the University of Paris and completed his internship at the Hotel-Dieu de Paris six years later. After that, he immediately received a medical license. Le Bon thought that being in the medical world, he would not get the academic support and social recognition he craved. So he decided to use his scientific education to become a writer. Le Bon was a polymath interested in anthropology, psychology, sociology, medicine, and physics. He is most famous for his work entitled *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* in 1895. He died on December 13, 1931, due to bronchopneumonia (Nye 1975).

Le Bon holds the principle that a description cannot stand alone as a theoretical statement but is refined with references derived from concrete social experiences. Following up on these interests, Le Bon finally ventured to Arabia in 1882 and published a book on the Arabs and Islam entitled *La Civilisation des Arabes* in 1884. Subsequently, Le Bon ventured to India and published a book entitled *Les Civilisation de l'Indie* in 1887 (Nye 1975).

Le Bon compiled a theory of history based on racial characteristics that would ultimately determine the political and cultural level of a civilization (Quinn 2008). In his book *La Civilisation des Arabes*, Le Bon praised the contribution of the Arabs to civilization but also Islam as an agent of the stagnation and decline of Arab civilization. Le Bon argues that when religion is born, a new civilization is also born (Hourani 1983).

Le Bon's thoughts on Arabia and Islam are certainly inseparable from his background as an orientalist. Samy in Yurnalis (2019) defines an orientalist as any Westerner who researches the East as a whole or Western studies related to Islam or the East, both in terms of language, civilization, history, creed, and sharia. Because he is an Orientalist, Le Bon's opinion on Arabia and Islam is an objective opinion because concrete social data and experience support it.

### **Gustave Le Bon's Thoughts on the Environment and Ethnicity of the Arabs**

Le Bon argued that the Arabian peninsula is the birthplace of Islam and is a vast territory. The Arabian Peninsula is surrounded by the Red Sea to the west, the Sea of Oman and the Persian Gulf to the east, and the Indian Ocean to the south, and is connected to the African Continent in the west and the Asian Continent in the east. While the northern boundary is unclear, it is thought to extend in the same direction as the line starts from Gaza City in Palestine, lies on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, passes south of the Dead Sea, Damascus, and Euphrates, and ends in the Persian Gulf. The area of the Arabian peninsula exceeds 3,000,000 kilometers.

Drought is the most common thing experienced by the Arabian peninsula since ancient times. Drought in the Arabian peninsula is often accompanied by hot winds. Hot winds and water shortages are the worst disasters faced by caravans on the Arabian peninsula. Dates and coffee are the most important products produced by the Arabian peninsula. Trees are very rare to find on the Arabian peninsula. Palm trees are the most prominent among such trees. Fertile places on the Arabian peninsula are suitable for crops grown in Europe, such as apricots, peaches, figs,

almonds, grapes, wheat, corn, and others. The Arabian Peninsula is known for its pets, such as mules, donkeys, cows, sheep, goats, and others. The Arabian Peninsula is also not spared from many predators such as lions, tigers, and leopards. Horses and camels are the most useful animals in the Arabian peninsula for humans.

In ancient times, the Arabian peninsula was famous for its wealth of precious metals and precious stones. The trading industry in the Arabian peninsula remains the same as it did centuries ago. Jewelry, dates, horses, and others are considered the most important export materials in the Arabian peninsula. Trade was still going on as before, exporting these materials to Europe and importing what they needed from Africa, India, and Persia.

In his book, Le Bon expresses two opinions on the division of the Arabian peninsula. The first opinion states that the Arabian peninsula is divided into three parts, namely the Arab Rock (Batra) region which is the northwestern part of the Arabian peninsula; Arabia Felix (Fertile Arabia) which is the southwestern part; and the Arabian Desert which is the heart and eastern part of it. Other opinions do not consider the Batra region as part of the Arabian peninsula. So that the division of the territory they agreed on was the Hijaz Country covering the central part of the area located on the coast of the Red Sea; Yemen, which is located in the south of the Hijaz country and located in the southwest of the Arabian peninsula and is considered the richest and most fertile region in the Arabian peninsula; The countries of Hadhramout, Mahra, Oman, and Al-Ahsa are next to Yemen, stretching from the Gulf of Aden to the farthest part of the Persian Gulf; and the Land of Najd which is located in the middle of the Arabian peninsula.

Le Bon said that based on the latest literature the number of people in the Arabian peninsula does not exceed ten million people. One-fifth of them are Bedouin Arabs. The races of Arabs who settled on the Arabian peninsula were Arabs, Jews, Phoenicians, Hebrews, Syrians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. They are thought to have originated from a single origin called the Semitic race. The Semitic race built a great civilization, and it is said that three of the world's prevailing religions (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) emerged from two branches of Semitism: the Jews and the Arabs. The kinship relationship between these two nations is very close as evidenced by the similarity of the languages and traditions of the two nations. The kinship of these nations is based on the homogeneity of their language and the similarity of the physical characteristics possessed by their people, such as black hair, thick beards, dull skin tone, and so on.

Many think that the Arabs had no history before the advent of Islam. Although they think so, the emergence of civilization and the language of a nation is the result of slow development, not something that comes suddenly. When a civilization with an advanced culture emerges in history, we can say that civilization is the fruit of a long history and journey.

The view that the Arabs were a barbaric nation before the emergence of Muhammad is not only because of the emptiness of history but also because it does not distinguish between Bedouins and Arabs living in cities. Arabs before the advent of Islam had mature behavior, and sophisticated language, and they had established trade relations with the world's leading nations since ancient times. The reality is that literature and language are not accidental, but are considered evidence of a long past, and arise from the interaction of a nation with other nations as a source of inspiration.

The ancient Arabs were an intermediary between the ancient Europeans and the far Eastern regions. The trade of the Arabs was not only limited to products from their countries but also included goods they brought from Africa and India. Valuable items such as ivory, perfume, avocados, precious stones, raw gold, slaves, and others were the most important items traded by the Arabs.

The worship of the Arab tribes before the advent of Islam was very diverse, and the worship of the sun and the stars was the majority of the others. Among the Arabs, in addition to Christians and Jews who are not small in number in the Arabian peninsula, some worship God Almighty called Hanafi.

### **Positive Criticism of Gustave Le Bon's Thought**

Gustave Le Bon has made a significant contribution to understanding the complexity of pre-Islamic Arab societies. Through direct observation during his exploration of the Arabian Peninsula and by referring to various sources, including the Arabs' thoughts, Le Bon manages to present a more nuanced picture than the generalizations that often appear in Western literature. His thoughts on the environment, ethnicity, and condition of the pre-Islamic Arab nation are conveyed objectively and are complemented by empirical data in the form of experiences and observations.

Mentioned in a study conducted by Nawawi (2020) that several orientalist works objectively study Arabia and Islam, one of which is the work of Gustave Le Bon. He studied Arab and Islamic civilizations. This kind of study is considered worthless by other Westerners. Although Le Bon belongs to the Orientalist group, his more objective and empirical data-based approach can be considered a critique of the general trend in Orientalism that often underestimates and distorts Eastern culture.

Objective studies from orientalists are very helpful for Muslims in obtaining detailed and accurate information about Islam and its problems. Despite its initial objectives, the study was carried out seriously and earnestly. Although many of the orientalists' ideas are tendential and contrary to Western thought, they still present them with arguments that can be accounted for (Supian 2016).

One example of conflicting thinking is related to Le Bon's thought about the pre-Islamic Arab nation. As Muslims, we are often treated to the term *jahiliyah* or ignorance to describe the character and personality of the pre-Islamic Arab nation. The Arabs are often described as a wild and barbaric nation (Haikal, Mahmudah, and Mawardi 2023). In contrast to what Le Bon mentioned in his book that he did justify the existence of a barbaric disposition, the existence of this barbaric disposition was only mentioned for the Bedouin Arabs, not to describe the Arabs who lived in the cities. Le Bon has acknowledged the diversity in pre-Islamic Arab societies, distinguishing between rural (Bedouin) and urban life. This shows a more nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural complexity of Arab society.

Le Bon added that the pre-Islamic Arabs had shown mature behavior, beautiful language, and good trade relations with other nations. The existence of the rich Arab civilization today is due to the long journey and history of the pre-Islamic Arab civilization. This means that Le Bon emphasized that the emergence of Islam only triggered the development of Arab civilization that existed before. Le Bon has emphasized the importance of looking at the history of the Arab nation historically and evolutionarily. He not only focuses on the negative aspects of the Jahiliyah period

but also underlines the positive contribution of pre-Islamic Arab societies to the development of civilization.

The book *Hadarah al-Arab*, which is a translation of *La Civilisation des Arabes* by Gustave Le Bon, contains many pictures related to the environment and ethnicity of the Arab nation. The following is a table of the researchers' findings.

**Table 1. Page Number and Descriptions of Pictures in Chapter 1 of the Book of Hadarah al-Arab**

Number	Page Number	Description
1	45	Map of the Arabian Peninsula
2	49	Hajj Pilgrim Camps in the Hajj Season
3	52	View of Mount Sinai
4	56	Two Photos: Kaaba and Grand Mosque
5	65	Bedouin with their leaders
6	66	Syrian Arabs
7	74	Egyptian Arabs
8	79	Muslims from Nubia
9	86	Moroccan Arabs
10	96	Bedouin Arabs from a Desert in Syria

Source: Le Bon (2013)

Some of these images were taken from the author's shots, in this case, Le Bon while exploring the Arabian peninsula and its surroundings. Some others are quoted from other people's shots. Images are a form of visual media. According to Musliaty (2018), visual media in history learning can help students understand and remember historical material. According to Hakim et al. (2019), images can overcome the limitations of space and time, including history. Historical objects cannot be presented directly so we can understand history through images. Le Bon uses images as a means to facilitate and present an overview of the environment and ethnicity of the Arabs as well as the condition of the pre-Islamic Arabs.

The images presented by Le Bon are not just decorations but serve as empirical data that supports his argument. With this visualization, readers can directly observe the geographical environment, people's lives, and the ethnic diversity of the Arab nation. This makes the reader's understanding more concrete and deep.

In his book, Le Bon also clearly explains the diversity of Arab ethnic groups. It was explained that the Arabs were not only those who lived and settled in the Arabian peninsula but spread to several surrounding regions of Asia. Le Bon explained that there are differences in character and physique between Arabs living in the Arabian peninsula and Arabs scattered outside the Arabian peninsula, such as in Syria, Egypt, Africa, and East Asia, such as China.

The difference in character and physique explained by Le Bon certainly has a good impact. By displaying a variety of images representing various Arab ethnic groups, Le Bon tries to avoid generalizations and stereotypes that are often attached to Arabs. According to Rosetia et al. (2020), stereotypes are very dangerous in diversity because they can be the cause of conflict. Readers are invited to see the diversity and complexity of Arab society. With the presentation of diversity, Le Bon

tries to add to the reader's treasure and strengthen them so that the depiction of the Arab nation is not only limited to the Arabs living in the Arabian peninsula.

### **Negative Criticism of Gustave Le Bon's Thought**

Gustave Le Bon's book *La Civilisation des Arabes* was written and published in 1884. So the data included in this book seems old, especially in the study of the environment and ethnicity of the Arabs. In his book, Le Bon explained that the number of people in the Arabian peninsula did not exceed two million people. According to World Population Review (2023), the population of the Arabian Peninsula has reached 90 million people as of 2022. In addition, the division of territory displayed by Le Bon in his book refers to the division of the territory of the Arabian peninsula based on previous Arab geographers. Currently, the Arabian peninsula has been divided into at least 7 sovereign countries, namely Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

So, based on the exposure of the data above, the researcher assesses that this Le Bon book cannot be used as a reference if we want to find the latest data on the Arab region and population. According to researchers, Le Bon's book is suitable as a reference to know and find references to the environment and ethnicity of the Arabs at least in the 1880s. The study of the Arab nation requires a more dynamic and responsive approach to the changes that continue to occur in the region. So we need to understand the historical context in which the work was produced (Tarigan, Cahya, and Zulkarnain 2024), included in analyzing classical works such as Le Bon's work. This will help us evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments presented.

The next criticism is related to the explanation of the origin of the Arabs. In his book, Le Bon oversimplifies the origins of the Arabs by mentioning only one race of origin, namely the Semites. If we look further, there is a more detailed classification of sub-groups within the Semitic race, especially among the Arabs themselves.

The Arabs came from two great tribes of the Semitic race, namely the Baidah Arabs and the Baqiyah Arabs. The Arab Baidah is an Arab nation that has become extinct long before Islam was born, whose history is not widely known only as enshrined in the holy book of heavenly religion. Among these Baidah Arabs are the 'Ad and Tsamud. Meanwhile, Baqiyah Arabs are divided into two, namely Aribah Arabs and Mustaribah Arabs. The Arabs of Aribah are attributed to the Qathan as their ancestors so they are henceforth referred to as Qathaniyah. Meanwhile, Arab Mustaribah is a descendant of the Prophet Ismail As. so it is also called Ismailiyah or 'Adnaniyun (Satir 2019).

By generalizing in this way, Le Bon ignores the genetic, cultural, and historical diversity that exists among the various Arab groups. Le Bon does not seem to delve deeper into classical Arabic literature that discusses the genealogy and history of the Arabs. Genealogy describes the study of ancestry and the tracing of genealogy (Erlenbusch-Anderson and Nigh 2020). He also makes few comparisons with contemporary studies on genetic anthropology and linguistics that can provide empirical evidence of the origins of the Arabs.

According to researchers, explanations like this should be studied by Le Bon to increase readers' understanding of the origin of the Arabs. Thus, Le Bon should have improved his work by adding stronger references from other experts. In-depth analysis, critical evaluation, systematic problem-solving, making decisions based on

solid evidence, and facing challenges with creative thinking are all skills that writers must have (Ngatminiati, Hidayah, and Suhono 2024). So that this can increase readers' confidence in the opinions given.

## CONCLUSION

Gustave Le Bon provides an in-depth description of the geographical, social, and cultural conditions of the Arabian Peninsula before Islam. Through direct observation and in-depth study, he presents a nuanced picture of the environment, ethnicity, and social conditions of pre-Islamic Arab society. His more objective approach than many other orientalists makes him an important reference in the study of Arab history. Le Bon's work also emphasizes the importance of looking at Arab history historically and evolutionarily, not just from the point of view of stereotypes that are often negative. However, the demographic data and regional division presented in his book are outdated. In addition, Le Bon's generalizations regarding the origins of the Arabs were considered too simplistic and ignored the genetic and cultural diversity that existed. Therefore, Le Bon's work needs to be critically studied by considering the historical context and the development of science. Nonetheless, this work remains a good starting point for further research on Arab history.

Limited researchers conducted this research in Chapter I of the *Hadarah al-Arab*. The book itself contains many interesting topics to study, such as the source of the strength of the Arab nation, the civilization of the Arab nation, the Arab countries, and the decline of the civilization of the Arab nation. So, the researcher hopes that there will be other studies that criticize Gustave Le Bon's thinking on other topics in the book.

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