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### ARAB CUSTOMS AND CULTURE

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The twenty-two countries of the Arab world enjoy an array of cultural habits. Research conducted by the United Nations in 2009 shows that the total population of the Arab world is approximately 359 million (Mirkin, 2010, p. 5), so it is only natural that cultural differences exist among Arabs. One main reason for the Arab world's diversity is that it is the cradle of three major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Although these religions share many common values, each religion has its own devotions, tenets and loyalties. Arab culture grew and developed through a combination of the main principles of these three religions; nevertheless, Islam has had the greatest effect on Arab culture. Furthermore, the Arab world was the crossroads of world trade, which fomented cultural exchange through commerce among the Persians, Romans, Greeks, Indians, Chinese and Turks. Being the cradle of the three main religions and a center of commerce united the societies and cultures of the Arab world and at the same time created variations in cultural aspects. These dissimilarities might be found in clothing, music, food or dialects. At the same time, there are fundamental values and traditions that are shared between all Arabs regardless of differences in social status or class. Therefore, the common guiding principles and fundamental values of cultures and customs in the Arab world are presented here.

It is worthy to note, that when relating customs to the teaching of Islam, the goal is to explain how this tradition was established and developed or where it came from which does not

mean that all Arabs are familiar with the Islamic teaching mentioned. This is to say, for example, Arabs grew and were directed to eat with their right hand as it is the proper way to eat. Therefore, almost all Arabs would use the right hand because it is the culture more than following directions of a religion.

### **High-context and Low-context Culture**

Both Arab and American cultures have their own distinctive features. Although American culture is a melting pot of diverse cultures, with variations across the fifty states, the term “American culture” represents structures acknowledged by intercultural scholars such as Stewart in 1972 and 1989. These characteristics are widespread and prevalent in the media and public communication. In this section, we will examine one main variance between Arab and American cultures in communication and usage of language by discussing the concept of high-context and low-context cultures. The difference between high- and low-context cultures depends on how much meaning is initiated in the context. Hall (1982) states that meaning and context are “inextricably bound up with each other” (p. 18). He added that “most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (p.18).

Arab culture is a high-context culture, in which more meaning is embedded in the context. This means that the listener must understand contextual indications or signals to comprehend the full message presented. In other words, it is the listeners’ job to understand what has been said. Henle (1962) stated that the listener needs to “go to considerable lengths to make sense of an oral message” (p. 371). Consequently, the auditors play a significant role in constructing meaning. Gold (1988) agreed, stating that “the audience cooperates with the speaker

by trying to understand the meaning or ‘gist’ rather than the actual content” (p. 170). Thus, listeners are active partners. Hall summarized the difference between low- and high-context culture when he wrote:

People raised in high-context systems expect more from others than do the participants in low-context systems. When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his interlocutor to know what's bothering him, so that he doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly -- this keystone -- is the role of his interlocutor. (1976, p. 98)

For example, an Arab visitor would say, “I am thirsty,” and it is the host’s job to get some water for the visitor. When they need money, Arabs would talk about how difficult life is, describe the situations they face and give a few examples of the hardships in their lives. The listener then must interpret that the real message is a request for a loan or financial support. One more example for high-context culture is when a speaker asks an Arab for help, instead of saying no or “sorry, I cannot help you,” the Arab will often say, “I will try” or “Let me see what I can do” regardless of how difficult or even impossible it may be to help. After several times of saying “Not yet” or “I am still checking,” the person who asked for help would know that the real response is no. The friendship will remain intact as long as there was not a direct no. Additionally, it is also common to respond to yes-and-no questions, such as “Do you understand?” with yes. Arabs feel it is impolite to say no, which would require the speaker to explain things again or make the speaker feel that he is not very clear. Saying no also could be interpreted as a sign of unhappiness or a desire to end a conversation or relationship.

In contrast, low-context American culture assigns more meaning to the actual words and language used rather than the context. American communication is clear, direct, analytical and to the point (Ting-Toomey, 1985). In low-context culture, it is the speaker's role to convey the meaning accurately and methodically without the clear participation of the listener. Other scholars have used the terms direct versus indirect to distinguish between Arab and American communications to describe this difference. Levine (1985) stated that there are many common expressions used in American culture reflecting direct and clear communication. Some of these expressions include "What do you mean," "Be specific," "Don't beat around the bush," and "Get to the point" (p. 29). Arabs, however, do not have such direct expressions in their communications. For example, criticism of an Arab requires an indirect approach that might include some positive comments in addition to criticism.

On the other hand, Arabs tend to express their feelings and emotions in what might look to the Western eye like a forceful and exaggerated fashion. Arabs in turn often feel that Westerners are cold people. For example, friends may shout and scream at each other when angry, but they also hug and kiss on the cheeks when they miss each other. Likewise, the Arab response to death includes much screaming, weeping and loud wailing. One more example is when parents are mad at their children, they express their feelings by screaming, shouting at them and might even hit them. However, children do not scream back, they just listen and sit still. For Americans, this might be considered as abuse but for Arabs it is only part of bringing up children as all parents are full of love for their children and work hard to give them the best they can.

It is necessary to look at differences between cultures without being judgmental. However, many people have an unconscious tendency to view cultural variances as undesirable and negative compared with one's own culture (Zaharna, 2016). Norman Daniels (1975) confirmed this point, explaining that we need to absorb differences and deal with them as differences only rather than professing them as right or wrong.

### **Greetings and Visits**

One very important factor constituting to a person's character is good manners, which starts with greetings. Arabs shake hands using only the right hand when they meet and say goodbye. Sometimes failure to shake hands might be considered rude, especially among older generations. Close friends and people whom one has not seen for a while may hug and kiss on both cheeks when greeting. Arab men kiss other men and women kiss other women. However, women and men do not kiss, as this is considered immodest and shameful unless they are close family members such as brothers and sisters, daughters and fathers or nieces and uncles. When meeting older family members such as parents, uncles or grandparents, it is customary to kiss either forehead, nose, or right hand of that person, depending on family's tradition, to show admiration and respect.

When a guest arrives, all people sitting in the room stand up to greet the newcomer, who shakes hands and kisses all attendees starting with those on his right side. Some Arabs, among them those from the Gulf countries, place their right hand on their heart after shaking hands as a sign of respect and love. Sometimes, when an Arab woman is introduced to a man who is not a family member, it is the woman's choice to shake hands or not. Some Arab women might initiate the handshake while others do not, depending on their background and family rules.

It is common to have separate seating for men and women. Usually, when entering a house as a guest, males and females are directed to different rooms. In the Gulf countries, most houses have separate entrances for men and women.

During visits, one sits properly without drooping, wiggling or sliding down in one's seat, especially in a gathering among different age groups. While seated, Arabs do not put their feet or shoes facing one another or pointing at someone's face, as it is considered disrespectful; visitors usually keep both feet on the floor. These seating traditions are required particularly when older people are in the room; however, friends of the same age may sit however they feel comfortable. In conversation, it is disrespectful to lean against the wall or put one's hands in one's pockets, as it reflects tiredness, boredom or lack of enthusiasm for the conversation.

The most popular greeting is "*as-salaamu alaykum,*" meaning "peace be blessed upon you." The response to it is "*wa alaykum as-salaam wa rahmatu Allah wa barakatuh,*" which means "and upon you peace and God's mercy and blessings." It is the same as both hello and goodbye in the United States.

Greeting with a smile and showing feelings are rooted in Islamic teachings, as the religion encourages its followers to greet each other and all people they meet to spread love, peace and friendship. The Prophet said, "You will never enter Paradise until you believe, and you will never believe fully until you love each other. Shall I not lead you to something that if you do it, you will love each other? Spread the greetings of 'Salaam' amongst yourselves" (Muslim, Vol. 1, # 68). Additionally, when someone greets you, it is your obligation to respond to his greetings as Allah says in the Qur'an: "When you are greeted with a greeting, greet in return with what is better than it, or (at least) return it equally" (4:86). The teachings of the Prophet clarified who should initiate the greeting, as he said, "A rider should greet a pedestrian, a

pedestrian should greet one who is seated, and a smaller group of people should greet a larger” (Muslim, Vol. 1, # 857).

The social interaction of Arabs stresses the importance of politeness and generosity in greeting etiquette. For example, a host should welcome his visitors in a pleasant and friendly manner accompanied by a big smile (Hammad, 1989). When a host or hostess does not smile or use welcoming expressions, it signifies that there is something wrong or guests are not welcome. The guest would ask if there is something wrong and might leave, depending on the response.

When saying goodbye, guests and hosts shake hands again and sometimes kiss. It is very common to see Arabs standing and talking at the door, where they might start another conversation and spend few more minutes talking. The host usually accompanies his guests to the door and to their cars if they are the last to leave.

On a side note, the Arab concept of time differs from that in the West. For example, Arabs use “see you before lunch” instead of defining the exact time. Being late is expected and no one gets angry about lateness in others. It is quite common for a host to invite guests for dinner at six o’clock, with many people starting to arrive at seven o’clock and the last guests arriving at eight. Hosts should not be upset about cold food because they are expected to plan according to Arab custom. However, living in the United States does change some cultural habits for Arabs, who might agree when planning a picnic with other Arab friends, for example, to meet at the park at one o’clock, but the host may ask guests not to come late because they will start serving the food at three o’clock.

### **Hospitality and Food**

A hallmark of Arab cultural practice is hospitality and generosity. As an example, when someone praises an object, be it a picture frame on the wall, a watch, a purse or item of clothing, an Arab may give it to the admirer and insist that he take it. They would say, “Since you like it so much, it is yours.” As long as it is something they can live without, it will be generously offered.

In terms of hospitality toward guests, in regular visits (not an invitation for a meal), when Arabs have a visitor, they start by offering juice or soda, followed by hot tea with assorted sweets such as cakes, cookies and other popular local confections. Nuts such as pistachios, almonds, peanuts, cashews and seeds are presented after the refreshments and kept on the table so the visitor may enjoy them during the visit. At the end of the visit, the host presents coffee perhaps accompanied with chocolates or dates, as is common in Gulf countries. Arab hospitality requires that when presenting something, the host should offer it at least three times and insist on the guest tasting what is on offer before finally accepting a guest’s negative response. It is not considered polite to ask a guest whether he prefers tea or soda, for example, but rather to present a beverage and allow the guests to either drink it all or have a sip of it.

Lunch is the main meal in Arab countries. Government jobs start at about seven o’clock in the morning and conclude at one or two o’clock in the afternoon, thus allowing Arab families to share lunch and spend quality time together. Some private-sector companies have a long lunch break for three to four hours, after which employees might go back to work in the afternoon until seven or eight o’clock in the evening. Those with a long lunch break may take a nap, return to work early, spend time with friends or, in the case of students, finish schoolwork.



Lunch is also the main meal to which guests are invited, and if a friend, neighbor or family member knocks at the door during lunch time, an Arab usually insists that the visitor come in and have lunch with them.

Although, using the right hand is an Islamic custom rather than simply an Arab custom, however, using the right hand while eating and drinking is the cultural norm. Muslims believe that Islam organizes all aspects of life, with verses from the Qur'an or sayings of the Prophet directing Muslims what to do and not to do. Among the directions for acts of worship, morals, manners, interactions with others and private affairs are customs for eating and drinking. The Prophet said, in teaching a companion eating with his left hand, "Oh young man, say the name of Allah, eat with your right hand and eat from what is nearest to you" (Al-Bukhari, Vol 7, Book 65, # 288). This *hadith*, or utterance of the Prophet, also directs Muslims to begin eating by saying "*bismillah*" or "in the name of Allah" while using the right hand and to eat what is front of him if the food is presented on one communal tray. Today most Arabs provide individual plates for each guest, so they can choose what they wish to eat. Use of the left hand to eat is only acceptable if one is unable to use the right hand for medical reasons.

It is customary practice for a guest to taste everything offered on the table. When served something unfamiliar, guests may ask about the dish and how it was prepared. Hosts usually invite guests to take a second and third serving. It is recommended to take a second serving, even if it is very small, to show appreciation to the host. After the meal, fruits, sweets, hot tea and coffee are served. Throughout the meal, the guests usually praise the food and compliment the host. It is impolite and may be considered shameful for a guest to criticize the food presented by a host. This also goes back to the teachings of the Prophet, as noted in Sahih Al-Bukhari that

“The Messenger of Allah has never criticized any food. If he liked it he would eat it, if not he would leave it” (Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 4, Hadith 764). When they are done eating, guests usually wish the host a full table all the time. It is customary for guests to reciprocate by inviting the host to a meal.

During lunch, many different dishes are presented to the guests. It is considered shameful to cook only one dish when having guests. While each Arab country has its own main dish, meat and rice are the primary components of a meal, with bread accompanying the meal. Lamb and chicken are the most common meats, while beef and camel are less popular. Pork is prohibited for Muslims, but Arab Christians such as those in Lebanon and Jordan do eat pork when available. In coastal regions of some North African and Gulf countries, fish is also popular.

Examples of the main dishes include stuffed grape leaves with rice and ground meat in Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon; stuffed lamb with rice and meat in the Gulf areas and Jordan; and *couscous* (made from wheat and millet) in place of rice in North African countries. Muslims use *halal* meat only, which is like kosher meat for Jews. Additionally, some Arabs prepare a variety of vegetables, such as peas, zucchini, spinach, okra, mulukhiyah (similar to spinach) and lentils, cooked with or without meat depending on the family’s preferences. However, when inviting guests to a meal, meat is included in the dishes. Appetizers include salads, hummus, falafel, ful medames (a fava bean dish) and tabbouleh.

Dates are very popular, especially in Gulf countries, and are often served with hot coffee. In addition to coffee, hot tea, especially with mint, is popular with many Arabs. Although alcoholic drinks are forbidden by Islam and are not served or used in cooking, alcohol is sold in some Arab countries to tourists or non-Muslims.

Islam, like Judaism, demands a clear dietary code, and these dietary codes apply equally when dining in someone's home or at a restaurant. Muslims dining out in the United States often ask if the food they are served contains any pork.

### **Religious Life**

As explained earlier, regional variations exist in the Arab world. Islamic philosophies and interpretations change gradually from generation to generation and from one country to another, but there are some common beliefs shared among all. For Arabs, a religious affiliation is an essential part of life. Arabs respect other religious groups and practices but do not appreciate atheists or agnostics.

Arabs tend to make their religious identity public (Saeeda, 2006, p. 370) by means of a head scarf and modest clothing for women. Additionally, almost all Arabs decorate their buildings, houses, cars and offices with ornaments and pendants inscribed with Qur'anic verses. They wear jewelry that has Qur'anic verses or with the word "Allah" engraved on it. It is common to see Arabs wearing necklaces holding miniature Qur'ans or hanging them in their cars. Businesses and residential buildings have the words "This is from Allah," "In the name of Allah" or "Masha Allah" written in Arabic at the entrance. Even formal letters have the words "*Bismillah ArRahman Ar-Rahim*," meaning "In the Name of Allah the Most Merciful, Most Compassionate" printed at the top of it, to symbolize that we start everything with the name of Allah. The same term is used at the beginning of speeches or when writing letters to friends and family. Additionally, the term is used at the beginning of a meal, starting a journey, going to bed or starting any task.

Another common term used by all Arabs, both Muslims and non-Muslims, is “*Inshallah*,” meaning “If God wills” or “God willing.” It is used to discuss future events and to respond to requests. Instead of a clear yes, an Arab might say “*Inshallah*.” It is also used to indicate “Let me think about it” or to deflect additional requests. Sometimes and at home environment, parents might use “*Inshallah*,” to make their children stop asking for something.

Arabs also respond first with “*alhamdulillah*,” meaning thanks for Allah, when they are asked, “How are you?” The “*alhamdulillah*” precedes the rest of the response that might be news or complaints.

In general, Arabs believe that humans must worship Allah and follow His orders. Yet this does not mean that all Arabs are religious. Some follow Allah’s orders while others do not as the case in all other religions.

### **Belief in Destiny**

One common belief is “fate,” or *qadar* in Arabic. Arabs believe that what happens in the world is controlled by Allah rather than by human beings or natural forces. They believe in the power of Allah and his authority over all things. They also believe everything that happens in the world is related to our behavior and is a consequence of our deeds; Arabs believe that our actions have a metaphysical effect on everything in the world. What we do is reflected on us. For example, natural disasters, earthquakes and volcanoes are not seen as meteorological or geological occurrences, but rather because of human behaviors. Some Westerners might view this as old-fashioned, superstitious, or even ignorant because they cannot relate to the Arab world view. Arabs think that these disasters happen because of our sins and straying from Allah’s orders. At the same time, when good things happen, such as rain when we need it, it is because we humans did something good and rain is a gift for us from Allah. This perception is applied to

almost all events, whether related to nature or to regular daily events. If one's car breaks down on the way to school, work or any other destination, it is because that person did something wrong. Arabs feel that Allah is watching everyone's actions, and people will be punished or rewarded for their actions here in this life as well as in the hereafter. This is not to say, Arabs do not believe in science or environmental occurrences, they believe it happened because humans are doing something wrong and at the same time they accept its scientific factors..

Dependency on God often makes reactions to events much easier. For example, in the case of a death in the family, Arabs feel this is the will of Allah and they might not try to learn about the cause of death. This is why, it is recommended that the dead be buried at the same day or the next day at the most.

As part of believing in destiny, when a woman gets pregnant, it is a gift from Allah, and every child comes with his own livelihood (Lutfiyya, 1970). Miscarriage after forty days of pregnancy is prohibited in Islam so it is not an option. Muslims believe that after forty days in the mother's womb the child is given a soul, so miscarriages are forbidden and are considered as killing a soul. Therefore, miscarriage is not a frequent practice in the Arab world. Hence, children are never considered a financial burden on the family.

Nevertheless, some Arabs abstain from sins and strive for good behavior in their daily lives because they fear Allah's punishment. At the same time, others deviate completely from Islamic behavior and do whatever they please.

### **Death**

Arabs view death as a family and community occasion requiring care and support from all family members and the larger community. When a person dies, Arab tradition encourages a quick burial with respect and dignity in a ritual called *janaza*. For Arabs, death means the

person's soul is sent to the afterlife for judgement. People present at the time of death encourage the dying person to testify to their faith and recite verses from the Qur'an beside him. There is no need to call a cleric to perform these tasks. After death, a certified man for dead males and a certified woman for dead females cleans the body and wraps it in one piece of white cloth covering all the body. The white cloth represents the belief that all people are equal, coming into the world with no clothes and leaving with a simple white rag. It does not matter how rich or poor a person was in his life; all that counts are his actions and deeds.

Janaza also involves visitation of family and close friends, prayer and unfettered expression of feelings and emotion. The body is taken to a cemetery for burial as soon as possible rather than waiting for several days, as is often customary in the United States. In addition, Arabs usually refuse autopsies unless necessary, because they consider autopsies to be disrespectful to the dead, and, regardless, death is the will of Allah. Here in the US, there is a cemetery for Muslims. Sometimes, if an Arab immigrant dies in a Western country, his family may prefer him to be buried in his country of origin. In this case, they would permit embalming to be done so they can fly the body overseas for burial; however, cosmetic preparations are not accepted.

The janaza prayer is announced to family, friends and community members. People are encouraged to attend a prayer and go to cemetery to attend the burial. Usually, people from the community would go and visit the closest family member for three days after the burial. Close friends would provide food for the family and their visitors and spend almost all their time with the sad family trying to comfort them. After three days, people would stop their visitation, but close friends and family members keep visiting for a while.

The death of parents with small children is taken very seriously. The oldest adult brother or closest family member of the deceased takes full responsibility for the children. No legal papers or documentations are required. If the father dies, family members ensure the well-being of the survivors. For example, my father was the oldest of seven brothers. After the death of my grandfather, my father and the second-oldest brother were responsible for their mother and other brothers. They supported them financially and paid for their housing, daily expenses and even for university educations in different countries including Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey and Jordan. If the mother dies, then the paternal grandmother takes care of the children or the father marries someone who will help him take care of the children.

### **Family Structure**

Western media often portray Arab families as Bedouins, tribal societies or other nomadic groups. However, the Bedouin way of life has almost disappeared in nearly all Arab countries beyond the Gulf states and Morocco. What is more accurate is that religious affiliation, place of birth, occupation and ethnicity are now more important than one's tribe. Almost every Arab can classify himself by his original clan or tribe, yet he will not employ this allegiance for any social purpose as used to be the case.

For Arabs, the center of obligation and loyalty is the family. Arabs have close relationships with their relatives but even tighter relationships with their own immediate families. The most authoritative social obligation is the family, rather than friends, jobs or any other social affiliation. Arabs take more pride in the accomplishments of their family and tribe than in their own personal accomplishments, as is often the case in the West. Individuality is not encouraged and is not considered as important as family association. People hold profound respect for the familial expectations and integrity upon which they base their actions and

decisions. They pay great heed to their family's reputation as well, because social approval is usually gained through good relations with one's own family. Any member's accomplishment advances the entire family's reputation, while his mischievous actions can harm the whole family. Because negative actions by one family member affect the entire family, not just the individual, such actions result in increased shame. The feeling of kinship and association with one's family is so strong, in fact, that the easiest way to insult an Arab is to curse one of his relatives.

Maintaining the family's name applies to women as well as men. Even after marriage, a woman keeps her family name and does not change it to her husband's family name, as is often the case in the United States. In addition, when a married couple has their first child, people stop referring to the parents by their first names. They are called by the name of their first child with a prefix to indicate "father of" or "mother of." For example, if a couple named their first child Ahmad, the father is called *Abu* Ahmad and the mother is called *Um* Ahmad. Furthermore, parents typically name their first male child after the paternal grandfather to show admiration and love for parents.

In the past, Arab families were large and had profound influence on their members' lives, as several generations often lived together in the same house. Once married, children continued to live in a parent's home. However, this is not the situation anymore. Recently, families have become smaller and have less influence on individuals, with married children moving to their own homes. Nevertheless, even today most Arabs live with their parents until they get married, regardless of their age at marriage. Those who do not marry remain in the home of their parents.

It is worthy to note, there are four categories of family units. The highest and most important is the nuclear unit represented by the father, mother, brothers and sisters. It is called



*usrah*, or family in Arabic. The father is the head of the family, the supporter who is respected and obeyed by all. Arab societies are hierarchal and patriarchal, as fathers and male elders in the family have the final say. Yet Arab families are also considered partnerships in which the husband and wife are assigned to complimentary duties and responsibilities. The husband supports the family financially, while the wife takes care of children and the household. The wife is not expected to have a job to support the family. If she does, then it is not her responsibility to pay for family's expenses. It is the father's full responsibility. In real life and in many situations, the working mother is a partner and participates with her family's expenses.

The second category is the extended family, or *ayla* in Arabic, consisting of sons' wives, their children, aunts and uncles; in other words, blood relatives and the women who marry into the family. All people in this unit look to the grandfather or eldest male in the family for guidance. The importance of extended family should not be underestimated. Usually, the extended family resides in the same area and supports each other. It is common for Arabs to ask the opinion or advice of older males in the family before making a decision. The elders enjoy obedience and respect from all family members and at the same time are expected to guide and discuss family matters wisely. For Westerners, this might be considered meddling or a constraint on individuality, but Arabs accept this structure as part of their culture. If a family member does not agree with an elder's advice or opinion, he usually does not announce his disagreement but instead feigns agreement and then does what he wants or has decided for himself.

Growing up in Kuwait, my father was the eldest of his brothers and cousins. Although every family lived in a different area, I remember how respectfully everyone treated my father. They consulted with him about personal matters and followed his suggestions, and when he spoke, everyone would stop talking and give him their full attention.

The third category is the clan, or *hammula* in Arabic, which is a combination of joint families. Members of the clan are related through a male ancestor. The importance of clans varies from one Arab country to another. In some areas, the clan may seem to surpass the extended family unit in influence, while in other areas the clan may not have any obvious role in societal structure. Members of the clan know each other very well and know the exact descendants and relatives of other members. They relate themselves to one another systematically, referring to each other. Interestingly, there are different words to distinguish paternal uncles from maternal uncles, which reflects the importance of family structure and knowing how people are related to each other. For example, the paternal uncle is called “*amm*,” while the maternal uncle is called “*khaal*.” Similarly, the paternal aunt is called “*amma*,” while the maternal aunt is called “*khaala*.” However, these names are not exclusively used for family members. It is very common to call older people *amm* (for males) or *khaala* (for females) because it is not polite to call older people by their first names when they are not relatives. Another example is with the terms *ibn 'amm*, meaning paternal first cousin for males, and *bint 'amm*, for a paternal female cousin. Such identifications reflect how each clan member is connected and is part of a larger family beyond his closer biological one.

The fourth and last category is the tribe, which consists of several clans. Tribes may vary in size, with some numbering a few hundred people and others ranging in the thousands. Many villages have three to four tribes. Tribes do not convey inheritance rights, as members might not be related. Each tribe has a leader called a *sheikh*. When the sheikh dies, the tribal council meets and decides who is most fit to be the new leader. The sheikh is very well respected and loved by his tribe as he governs through affection and respect and acts according to his tribal interests and needs. The sheikh represents his tribe, maintains the tribe’s status in the neighborhood and

strives to exceed in generosity, hospitality and strength. As explained earlier, the tribes are not popular now in most Arab countries.

One last example of the importance of family is that in the Arab world, a person's legal identification cards hold four names, starting with his given name, his father's name, then his grandfather's name and finally the tribe's name. As for loyalty, family comes first, followed by clan and then tribe as a social unit.

### **Children**

In the past, cultural and family pressure strongly motivated Arabs to have many children. This social pressure still exists in rural areas, but not in the entire Arab world. In the past, a strong motivation for marriage was to have children who can maintain family lineage and inherit family property, in addition to strengthening the family in numbers. A popular Arab saying is "Every baby comes with his own provision," (Fowler, Kirkham, Sawatzky & Elizabeth, 2012, p. 241). Similarly, a verse in the Qur'an states: "Do not abandon your children out of fear of poverty. We will provide for them and for you" (17:242). However, families are becoming smaller with fewer children born in each generation; most Arab families today have two to three children at most.

Although Arabs believe that all children are a gift from God, the birth of a baby boy is celebrated more than that of a baby girl. Males represent future security for parents, as it is the responsibility of males to take care of their parents and support them when they get old and can no longer work.

Arab parents devote their lives, time and love to their children and have great expectations of their children. Usually parents pay for their children's college education and support their children until they get married. There is almost no pressure on adult children to

seek independence, as is often the case in the United States. This is to say, fulfillment of a child's economic and educational needs is the principal goal of the family.

Child discipline consists of rewards and punishment. It is common for parents to use strong verbal reprimands and even scream at or raid their children. During childhood, one's mother is the primary disciplinarian, but as children reach their teenage years, the father becomes the authority figure.

Arab children are brought up to respect and obey their parents, no matter how old they get. Obedience to parents is a lifelong commitment that supersedes all other social commitments, including marital obligations. Correspondingly, it is considered shameful in Arab culture for children to place their parents in a nursing home. Usually it is the eldest son's responsibility to provide for his parents and bring them to live with him in his own house if needed. Other male children are expected to help take care of their parents. Daughters may help with other support but are not required to contribute monetarily, usually only doing so if they can afford it. Daughters, usually help in buying clothes, cleaning their house, preparing food and all other emotional care and support. Sons provide the money as they are the ones responsible to work and they spend time with their parents in the afternoons and evenings.

Obedience to elders extends beyond one's parents. When an older person enters the room, for example, a child is expected to stand up and offer his seat to the older person, not raise his voice, speak politely, wait until the older person stops talking before speaking and, in the case of an elderly person, kiss the hand of the newcomer. Children must greet everyone who visits whether they know them or not. Children are taught that the family's interest comes first and they must live according to the family's expectations (Hammad, 1989). This plays a role in having strong family relation.

## **Modesty and Sex Separation**

Generally, interaction between sexes is limited to family members. However, there is a significant difference in gender separation from one Arab country to another. Gulf countries have more restrictions than other Arab countries, whereas Levantine and North African Arab countries are more flexible.

Eye contact is not encouraged in cross-gender interactions outside the family structure. Males do not look directly at females, and females do not look directly at males when speaking together. Men and women do not interact socially in public outside of their extended family unit because of Islamic teachings. Arabs do not allow dating, and any sexual relations before marriage are strictly prohibited. Premarital sexual relations are considered highly shameful and divisive. An Arab girl is expected to be a virgin on her wedding night, and an unchaste bride or groom brings shame on herself or himself as well as on their family. However, the stricture against sexual relations applies to females more than it does to males because a girl's pride and dignity represent the honor of her family. As explained earlier, Arabs place immense value on the family's name, reputation and honor and will protect that honor with their own lives.

When meeting an Arab woman, there are few things that are not accepted especially in front of male family members. For example, showing any interest as in staring or trying to take pictures with them; asking about female members and starting a conversation without being introduced or not respecting the woman's privacy. When meeting each other, one should ask about the family in general and not a wife, sister or daughter.

On the other hand, women do play an important role in the workforce. Separation between males and females is maintained in the workplace in Saudi Arabia only. In all other Arab countries, there is no separation between sexes. As for professional careers, females are

encouraged to be teachers, nurses, doctors and caregivers, and although there are many female lawyers and engineers, depending on the country, these careers are less preferable.

Contrary to popular Western belief about Muslims, restricting women to certain jobs or professions is an Arab cultural norm rather than an Islamic tradition. There is no Islamic law that requires women to stay home or to refrain from having a job. However, when a woman chooses to work she is entitled to equal pay, as the Qur'an states:

“And in no wise covet those things in which Allah hath bestowed His gifts more freely on some of you than on others: To men is allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn: But ask Allah of His bounty. For Allah hath full knowledge of all things” (4:32)

Interestingly, Prophet's Mohammed's first wife, Khadija, was a business owner and she hired him to take care of her trade before she proposed to him. More details about this topic will be discussed in the “Arab Woman Between Islam and Culture.”

### **Dress**

Currently, many Arabs wear Western dress, from blue jeans, t-shirts and shorts to miniskirts and three-piece suits, and they follow European and American brand names and clothing styles. The trend began with colonialism and European dominance over Arab countries during World War I, and it has continued since then, especially among younger generations. At the same time, many Arabs young and old, continue to wear traditional attire, especially in traditional gatherings and during celebrations. Traditional Arab attire includes long, loose robes that cover the whole body. It is called *dishdasha* for men and *thawb* for women. Dishdasha and thawb have slight variations in styling, colors and designs from one country to the next and even from one village to another. Usually, Arab men wear a light-colored dishdasha in summer or in

desert environments, such as Gulf countries, Iraq or Egypt; strong breezes circulating through the dishdasha provide a cooling effect in the summer. Men wear a dark-colored dishdasha in winter, and often in countries with more rain and vegetation, such as Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, the dress is more colorful. As for thawb, it has assorted color according to the country. For example, in Tunisia, women wear white and green thawb; in Egypt the thawb is often solid white or blue with embroidery; in Syria and Palestine, it is often black with colorful embroidery, and in Gulf countries the thawb is black.

Traditional dress for men also includes a head dress, called a *ghotra*, for protection from the sun during hot summers and from the cold in winters. The color varies among countries, with men in Gulf countries using a white ghotra and men in Jordan and Palestine using a red-and-white checkered ghotra.

### **Veiling**

Arabs use the word *hijab* to refer to the veil that many Muslim women wear. The exact meaning of the word hijab is a garment or curtain that separates things. The hijab is a scarf covering the hair, neck and sometimes the shoulders, leaving the face uncovered, depending on how large a scarf the woman chooses or the style she prefers. This modest apparel covers the hair, trunk and limbs, but not necessarily the face. Most Muslim scholars understand Islamic veiling as covering the entire body except for the face and hands (Stowasser, 1993, p. 17). There is also the *niqab*, which is a small piece of cloth that women may use in addition to the hijab to cover their faces, leaving an opening for the eyes.

Yet head coverings are not exclusive to Islamic tradition. Throughout history, women have covered their hair for several reasons, including religious beliefs, a mark of social status, cultural traditions or fashion statements. The first records of veiling go back to the thirteenth

century BC in Assyria. To differentiate themselves from women of a lower social status, noblewomen began to cover their hair (Cross-Cultural Head Coverings, p. 1). Veiling was practiced in Mesopotamia, Greece, ancient Persia, and pre-Islamic Arabia (Scarce, 1975, p. 5-6). In medieval times, to wear a veil meant “to become a nun” or “to enter a convent” (Oxford English Dictionary 2, 1971, p. 3599). In Islam, Judaism and Christianity, covering women’s hair was associated with modesty and respectability. This is clear in Judaism and Christianity, in that all representations of Mary, the mother of Jesus, show her wearing a head covering and a long, loose dress. Christian women used to cover their hair in public (Yohannan, 2011), and it is still quite common to see elderly non-Muslim women in Europe wearing headscarves, especially in Russia.

Today, head or hair coverings for religious reasons are most frequently associated with Muslim women, Catholic nuns, and Amish and Mennonite women. In addition, some Jewish sects require married women to wear scarves as a sign of modesty. These scarves are known as *tichels* or snoods (Elisabet, 1997). Currently, married women in some Near East countries wear a veil as an announcement that their beauty and magnetism are only for their husbands and they will not expose themselves to other men, which is precisely why Muslim women wear veils.

In the Qur’an, Allah told the Prophet: “O Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and the womenfolk of the believers to draw their hijab close about them. That is most appropriate so that they be recognized and not be molested. God is forgiving and merciful” (33:59). Some might say that this order is for the Prophet’s wives only, but that is not the case. For Muslims, all orders and practices of the Prophet apply to all Muslims to imitate and follow. In another chapter of the Qur’an, Allah says: “Tell the female believers that they should lower their gaze, guard their chastity, to reveal of their adornments only that which is apparent, and to cast their veils



over their bosoms” (24:31). This is a clear admonishment for Muslim women to practice modesty. Muslim or not, however, because of the Islamic influence in Arab countries, many but not all Arab women wear modest clothing, whether European or traditional, when going out in public.

Of course, not all Arab women cover their hair, but veiling is widespread in all Arab countries. The difference lies in the degree of how much of her body a woman should cover. In all Arab countries, one can see women wearing the *abaya*, a long, loose black dress, their heads and faces covered, walking side-by-side with women wearing tight, colored dresses or pants. Some restrictions exist in Saudi Arabia and in rural areas, but there is a vast array of veils with assorted colors and styles in use by women.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the process of forsaking the veil in the Arab world started first with Christian and Jewish Arab women due to a strong European influence. In Beirut in 1890, Christian women had abandoned the veil (Baer, 1964, p. 42); however, the abandonment of the hijab by Muslim women started much later. The earliest occurrences of Muslim women abandoning the hijab took place in Turkey, which is not an Arab country. In the nineteenth century, upper-class women started to wear European-inspired clothing as a sign of modernization. Initially they wore European styles indoors while keeping the face covering when outdoors. Later, they started to wear thin, transparent face veils exposing their features (Micklewright, 1986, p. 217). The second step in abandoning the hijab took place in the early twentieth century, with some Turkish women wearing “European-style face veils that were attached to large European-style women’s hats” (Norton, 1997, p. 155). Following that, Egyptian women were the first Arab women to forsake the hijab. In the middle of the twentieth century, many Muslim women stopped wearing the hijab, which invited Oxford historian Albert

Hourani to publish an article in the UNESCO *Courier* titled “The Vanishing Veil a Challenge to the Old Order” in 1956. In his article, he described the disappearing hijab in many Arab countries (Hourani, 1956, p. 35-37). However, there is another phenomenon taking place, which is the return of hijab or veiling in its different forms.

As an interesting side note, most of the time Western media describe the hijab using words *niqab* or *burqa*. Both *niqab* and *burqa* refer to an extra piece of cloth worn to cover the nose and mouth but keep the eyes uncovered. However, *burqa* is an Afghani word for a cloth that covers the whole body. Although it is a Muslim country, Afghanistan is not an Arab country, and the Afghani *burqa* is not an accurate term to describe the head covering used by Arab women.

### **Marriage**

One of the primary foundations of Arab society is marriage. From an early age, whenever a child does something good, it is customary to praise him with a wish for a happy married life and wish that parents live long enough to see their children’s weddings and enjoy their grandchildren.

The age of marriage differs from one region to another. In the past, girls and boys married in their teenage years. However, now most parents encourage their children to finish their studies with a university degree and have well-established careers before getting married. According to a United Nations World Fertility Report in 2003, in the 1970s about forty percent of women in Kuwait and Libya were married by the age of fifteen to nineteen. However, by 1990 this percentage had dropped to five percent. Women now tend to marry in their late twenties or early thirties. Although less common overall today, early marriages are still prevalent in Yemen, Oman, rural areas in Egypt and Palestine in Gaza (Rashad, H., Osman, M. & Roudi-Fahimi, F.,

2005). Additionally, women now tend to have jobs, which has changed the role of women and marriage trends.

One common Western perception is that first-cousin marriages are the norm in the Arab world. Looking through history reveals that marriage between close biological relatives is not an Arab tradition, and the practice predates Islam. First cousin marriage goes back to the Greeks and Romans. Even in more recent history, members of royal families in Europe often married cousins because traditionally they were not allowed to marry non-royals, because they are from a lower status. Recently, members of royal families have permission to marry for love and not just for status (Sennels, 2010), thereby allowing them to marry non-royals and reducing first-cousin marriages.

First-cousin marriages are still popular in some areas of the Middle East, Africa, the United Kingdom and Australia. However, parts of Europe, China, and the United States prohibit these marriages (Bittles, 1994). Permission and prohibitions also vary from one religion to the next. First-cousin marriage is permitted in Islam and Buddhism but forbidden by “Christian Orthodox churches and require special permission for members of the Roman Catholic Church” (Shareen Joshi, Sriya Iyer & Quy Toan Do, p. 1). Marriage rates between close relatives range “from 30-50% in Middle Eastern countries, 20-40% in North Africa, and 10-20% in South Asia” (Kapadia, 1958: 117- 137; Naderi, 1979; Maian and Mushtaq, 1994; Bittles, 1998; Bittles, 2001; Bittles, 2008).

First-cousin marriage was encouraged in the past because daughters get a percent of the inheritance, so to keep the property in the family it was the norm. Researchers explain that marriage between cousins was encouraged to mainly preserve cultural values, secure a family’s wealth, strengthen family relationships and develop closer bonds between a wife and her in-laws

(Conniff, 2003). Bittles and Hussain confirm these reasons and add that first-cousin marriages would reduce the possibilities for conflict and sometimes reduce dowry payments (Bittles, 1994; Hussain, 1999). The larger the family or clan, the more control they would have over land and wealth, and consequently the more powerful they would be, especially in rural societies as almost all Arab countries were in the past. The percentage of first-cousin marriage reaches ninety percent among Bedouins of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, compared with forty percent in all other Arab countries (Teebi, 1997) and ten percent worldwide (Kershaw, Sarah, 2009). Marriage between relatives of the same family, not only first cousin, is high in Saudi Arabia, Libya and Sudan. Marriage of a relative does not mean arranged marriages, it might be because the couple see each other a lot in family occasion and fell I love.

Islam neither encourages nor prohibits first-cousin marriages. Although the Prophet Mohammed did not forbid Muslims from practicing it, he advised against it, as children of first-cousin marriages might have genetic disorders. Scientists have shown that children of first-cousin marriages do indeed have double the risk (six percent) of genetic diseases, as opposed to three percent for children whose parents are genetically not related (Paul DB, Spencer HG, 2008). First-cousin marriage was a cultural norm but with decreased tribal influence in modern Arab culture, this practice is disappearing. Young people today usually refuse first-cousin marriages because they consider their cousins to be like sisters or brothers rather than future spouses.

In Islam, marriage is the only accepted way to produce children and replenish the earth, as family is considered the basic unit of society. The Prophet Mohammed said, "Marriage is my Sunnah (divinely guided way of life). Whoever is displeased with my Sunnah is not from among us" (Al-Bukhari, Vol. 7, Pp. 1-2, # 1). This is to say that marriage is designed to protect people

against immortality and it is highly appreciated and encouraged in Islam. In many hadith, he asked men to be gentle and kind to their wives. One such hadith is: “The most perfect believer in faith is the best of them in character and the best of you in character is he who is best to his family” (At-Tirmithi, Vol. 1, p. 340, # 928). Another hadith is: “Fear Allah in dealing with your women because you have taken them in your trust by Allah’s permission...” (Muslim, Vol. 2, Pp. 615-6, # 2083). Two other verses are “And women have right corresponding to the obligations on them, according to what is equitable...” (2:228) and “...Live with them (women) in equity....” (4:19).

Traditionally, the groom, with the support of his family, is responsible for marriage expenses as: ceremonies, bridal gifts, housing and paying a dowry for the bride. The festive culture surrounding the marriage, makes it costly and in some cases as an economic burden on the groom. One popular culture in wedding is to invite all relatives, neighbors and friends to the wedding. The attendees would be in hundreds of numbers and dinner should be served for all. To conclude this section, in the Arab world, marriage is the norm as pre-marital relations are not allowed and considered shameful.

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### **Polygamy**

The earliest study of polygamy was conducted in the 1970s and found that Arab countries had rates of polygamy of less than five percent (Deeb and Sayegh, 1997). Polygyny is the most ordinary form, in which a man has more than one wife. Several societies accept polygamy. The Ethnographic Atlas noted that 588 societies among the 1,231 in the world had frequent polygamy. Goody argued that the main reason for polygamy is to ensure large families with as many dependent males as possible (Goody, 1973, p. 189). Polygyny is practiced and even

preferred in elite societies to increase wealth and political power. For example, in highlands of Madagascar, one king had twelve wives and each of them lived in her own palace in a different part of the country (Coontz, 2006).

Religious attitudes towards polygamy vary. In Hinduism, when the oldest scriptures were composed from 1500 to 500 BCE, polygamy was permitted and was popular for men from the higher classes. The only rule was that the first wife must have the same social status as the husband, with the other wives from a lower class if desired. Lower and middle-class men in India were able to marry another wife if the first wife could not bear a son (Larson, 2001, p. 153). However, this changed in 1955 when the Indian Parliament outlawed polygamy in the country, with an exception for Muslims (Fries, 2005). In Judaism, many important Jewish figures had more than one wife, including “Esau (Gen 26:34; 28:6-9), Moses (Ex 2:21; Num 12:1), Jacob (Gen 29:15-28), Elkanah (1 Samuel 1:1-8), David (1 Samuel 25:39-44; 2 Samuel 3:2-5; 5:13-16), and Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-3)” (Coogan, 2010, p. 78). However, polygamy no longer exists in the Jewish community except in limited numbers in countries that allow it.

As for Christianity, in the Old Testament polygamy is not forbidden; however, it is not addressed in New Testament. In 1650, after the Thirty Years’ War, the Parliament at Nuremberg ruled that every man had the permission to marry up to ten women because many men had died during the war (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series I, Volume V, On Marriage and Concupiscence, Book I, Chapter 10). More recently, Roman Catholic theologians asserted that polygamy is not ideal but may be considered legitimate in some areas, such as in Africa (Compton, 1996). Additionally, polygamy was encouraged and widespread in the early days of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Most U.S. states made polygamy illegal and men who had more than one wife faced harsh discipline, which led some Mormons to migrate to

Canada and Mexico. In 1890, the Mormon Church issued a manifesto declaring that plural marriages were no longer acceptable under church doctrine. Nevertheless, polygamy still exists in Utah and neighboring states (Musser, 1943).

As for Arabs, before Islam, men could have as many wives as they wished with no limitation. With the advent of Islam, Arabs were advised that women are men's partners and supporters: "And one of His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them and He put between you love and compassion" (30:21). Following the Battle of Uhud in 625 AD (3 Shawwal 3 AH in the Islamic calendar), many men died, leaving many orphans and widows in the community. Islam allowed polygamy but limited it to four wives with one important rule. The Qur'an says: "...marry such women as seem good to you, two or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then (marry) only one" (4:3). Therefore, if a man cannot treat all four wives equally, then he should have only one wife. Another verse said: "You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire" (4:129). In short, Allah permitted polygamy as a social solution, but it is not encouraged.

Polygamy is legal in all Muslim and Arab countries, except for those that have outlawed the practice: Turkey, Tunisia, Albania and countries in Central Asia (Al-Krenawi, 2006). Countries allowing polygamy require the husband to prove that he is able to financially support more than one wife and to acquire permission from his first wife or wives. In Morocco, before a man may take a second wife, he must justify his reasons in a court hearing (Dalrymple, 2013). In 2001, the Sudanese government encouraged polygamy to increase the country's population.

In conclusion, polygamy was first permitted in Islam as a social solution, to take care of the orphans and the needy but at the same time it has its own rules and is not encouraged. In the past, it was widespread in the Arab world, but not anymore as explained earlier. Polygamy is not spread in Arab countries as the media introduced. Many women refuse to be the second wife and would not accept to share her house with another female.

### **Divorce**

As in many parts of the world, divorce is frowned upon among Arabs, who encourage couples to bear an unhappy marriage with patience for the sake of children. However, when it occurs, Arab laws and culture support the man more than the woman. A woman may ask for a divorce at a religious court if she provides justification for her request. Under Islamic law, a man is responsible for providing shelter, food and clothing for his wife and children. Failure to do so is an acceptable reason for divorce. However, divorce in these situations often makes it even more difficult for the wife to support her children, whom she often must leave with her husband. A divorced wife returns to live with her parents or her eldest brother; Arab culture does not accept a divorced wife to live by herself. If her eldest son is old enough, she might live with him.

Even though it is easier for men to get a divorce, very few Arab men seek one because the Prophet Mohammed said, “With Allah, the most detestable of all things permitted is divorce” (AD. 13:3.). Divorce is a last resort and only permitted in extreme cases in which no other solutions exist. The Qur’an says: “If you fear a breach between them twain, appoint (two) arbiters, one from his family, and the other from hers; if they wish for peace, Allah will cause their reconciliation: For Allah hath full knowledge, and is acquainted with all things” (4:35). In other words, when a problem occurs between a husband and wife, one wise person from her family and one from his family judge the situation and resolve the problem between the couple.



After consulting with people from both sides of the family, the couple may separate for three months to evaluate the situation, and if they both insist, they may get a divorce.

Additionally, some non-religious factors discourage divorce. For example, in the case of a divorce, the husband must pay his wife a certain amount of money agreed on at the time of marriage, which is written in the marriage contract. Family intervention is another factor, with parents and relatives of both parties striving to solve the couple's marital problems. Finally, divorce is considered culturally shameful among Arabs, and it is very difficult for divorced people to remarry.

### **Gestures and Body Language**

I will conclude this chapter with examples of some common Arab gestures and displays of body language which may have different meanings in the West. Below are some examples.

- Usually, when using the hand for any activity as eating, drinking or shaking hands, the right hand is used.
- Nodding the head down is a sign of agreement.
- Raising the eyebrows, moving the head from right to left, moving an open palm from right to left, using the tongue to make a clicking sound or tilting the head up are ways of saying “no.”
- To open the left-hand palm and hit it with the right fist means condescension or offensiveness.
- Making a circle using the thumb and index fingers indicates a threat or “I am coming to get you.”
- Holding the fingers together while pointing the tips up and moving the hand up and down is a sign to slow down, be careful or wait.

- Touching the forehead with the fingertips and bowing the head shows respect and appreciation.
- A man stroking his mustache reflects seriousness and honesty.
- To point at someone with the index finger and move it up and down indicates condescension toward that person or threatening him to stop what he is doing.
- To open the right-hand palm and move it right to left means no, in contrast to its meaning as “hello” for Westerners.
- To put the right-hand forefinger in the mouth and pretend to bite it means “I am angry with you” or “I am coming to get you.”
- To touch the tip of the nose or the lower eyelid with the right hand or its forefinger means a promise to do something or an obligation.
- To grasp the chin with the right-hand thumb indicates wisdom or “I am thinking.”

As the cradle of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and a crossroads of international commerce, the Arab world shows elements of a unified culture as well as a great deal of cultural variation. Despite differences in clothing, music, food and dialects from one Arab country to another, common fundamental values of Arab culture and customs merit exploration and explanation to foster greater understanding in the West. Westerners who interact with Arabs will find a useful frame of reference in this chapter’s insights about Arab greetings, hospitality and food; the context of communications; attitudes toward religious life, destiny and death; family structure and sex separation; and dress and body language.

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