



## *Diversity in People: A Glimpse Into The Arab Culture*

“The Arab World” encompasses many countries that cover a vast territory. These countries include: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Although differences are notable among the countries, Arab countries share many traits in common, among them, a common language (Arabic) and a view of themselves as a cultural unit.



Although a small percentage of Arabs belong to other religions including Christianity and Hinduism, the overwhelming majority of Arabs are Muslim, followers of the Islamic faith. The word Islam means “submission” - submission of the self to the will of God. The Islamic religion plays a central role in Muslim societies.

The Quran, the holy book, spells out well-defined rules and laws for the everyday behavior of it’s followers. In many cases, the close tie between laws of government and laws of religion make it almost meaningless to distinguish between the moral and legal aspects of an action. A sin is a crime and a crime is a sin. And in education, the dominant theme in all textbooks and teaching materials is man’s relationship to God.

In addition to religion, one way to gain a better understanding of the Arab culture is to better understand the basic values and beliefs of the Arab people. The following will describe selected values, beliefs, and behavioral practices of Arab peoples.

Loyalty to family is a strong value. The traditional ideal household structure is an extended family made up of the father, his wife, one or more married sons and their families, and all unmarried daughters and sons. The ideal household, however, is changing for some as groups become more westernized. Loyalty and obligations to family members are considered more important than loyalty to friends or to a job. The family is a safety net and members are expected to help and support each other. In many ways, the family is treated as a unit. The reputation of any one member of the family reflects on that of all members of the

*(Continued to page 2)*

### In This Issue

- **Diversity in People: A Glimpse Into The Arab Culture**
- **Diversity Activity: Cultural Pursuit**
- **Diversity in the Workplace: Confronting Prejudicial Remarks**
- **Diversity Resource: Cultural Crafts Kits**
- **Diversity Around the State: Diversity Activities for Youth Workshop**

family. The maintenance of a person's dignity, honor, and reputation are of great importance. And since the family is viewed as a unit, there is great pressure to conform to accepted patterns of behavior and avoid bringing dishonor to the entire family. Ties among family members may be closer than ties among spouses.

Arab men are recognized as head of the household and wives are expected to show deference to their husbands in public. Within the privacy of the home, however, the wife may be less submissive. Negotiation and compromise are part of decision-making. If compromise cannot be reached, however, the decision of the father or older man is honored. Men are responsible for the behavior of their women kin and a man's honor is to a large extent dependent upon his ability to protect the women of his household.

Age is respected in Arab cultures. The opinions of older family members are quite influential in family matters. Children are expected to show great respect for adults. When parents are older, they are taken care of by their children. Placement of one's parents in a nursing home or other public institution would be unthinkable. To cherish one's parents is second only to the worship of God.

In some Arab countries, women operate freely as part of the workplace. However, interaction between men and women in all social settings and in public settings outside of the workplace is restricted and controlled. Women wear loose fitting clothing and veil their faces in public to minimize direct male-female interaction. Unmarried men and women must avoid being alone together at any time. Women do not interact freely with men other than their husbands and close male relatives. Any activity that may suggest too much familiarity with the opposite sex may be interpreted as a threat to the honor of the woman and her family. Often, in social gatherings, men and women separate into their own conversation groups. Public display of intimacy, even holding hands, is strictly forbidden for unmarried couples, and is considered


unacceptable behavior even for husbands and wives.

While Americans place a great emphasis on objectivity and logic, the same is not true for the Arab culture. Americans tend to believe that man has the ability to control his environment and destiny. Arabs, on the other hand, are more likely than Americans to believe that certain events in life are out of man's control. Some things are simply believed to be God's will. Therefore, less focus is placed on preparing for a future which has already been predetermined.

Differences in communication patterns may lead to misunderstandings among Arabs and Americans. The open display of emotion, extensive use of gestures, and "exaggeration for effect" may lead some Americans to wonder if they are in a conversation or an argument. The use of louder voices and interruptions during conversations are often done for momentary dramatic effect and are not meant to be taken literally. Arabs tend, also, to require a smaller amount of personal space and may stand "too close for comfort." Conversations often involve more physical touching than is typical in American conversations. Holding hands is a sign of friendship and is commonplace among men.

Due to the strong concern for maintaining honor, one should be careful about the way in which criticism is given. Even justified criticism which is phrased too bluntly may be taken as an insult. Praising a person's good points before giving criticism helps to preserve the person's dignity.

The following are some specific tips to consider when interacting with people of the Arab culture.

-  Be prepared to begin business meetings with conversations about one's health and well-being. Do not expect to get right down to business.

*(Continued on page 8)*

## *Diversity Activity: Cultural Pursuit*

This activity is a good ice-breaker or introduction to a diversity-related program. Each person is given a card (or sheet). The object is to mingle with others in the room, collecting the signatures of someone who knows the answer to an item. Try to get a signature for every square.

**Directions:**

1. Read your pursuit card and note mentally which questions you can answer.
2. Be prepared to sign your name and share what you know or feel with others.
3. Each person may sign only one square on a card. Plan to circulate.

<i>Find Someone Who...</i>			
Knows what an upside down pink triangle represents <hr/>	Knows the # of African Americans who have received the Nobel Peace Prize <hr/>	Knows what the world's fastest growing religion is <hr/>	Knows the barrier labeled the hardest to overcome for people with disabilities <hr/>
Knows what actor has a learning disability & learns his lines by hearing them on tape <hr/>	Knows what a "TDD" is <hr/>	Knows why the court case Brown v. Board of Education is important <hr/>	Knows what person from India advocated peaceful resistance as a means of social protest <hr/>
Knows what the 3/5 rule was <hr/>	Knows how many Native Americans lived in America when Columbus arrived <hr/>	Knows what the FBI estimates as the most frequently occurring crime in the country <hr/>	Knows who the first female astronaut in space was <hr/>
Knows why the Irish immigrated to the U.S. in 1880 <hr/>	Knows what Kwanzaa means <hr/>	Knows someone who is physically challenged <hr/>	Observes Yom Kippur <hr/>
Knows the significance of Cinco de Mayo <hr/>	Knows what Rosa Parks did <hr/>	Knows what "comparable worth" signifies <hr/>	Knows the significance of Eagle feathers <hr/>



## *Cultural Pursuit Answers*

- *The upside down pink triangle was a symbol used in Nazi Germany to identify homosexuals.*
- *Two African Americans have received the Nobel Peace Prize; Ralph Bunche and Martin Luther King, Jr.*
- *Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world.*
- *Other people's attitudes are the hardest barrier for people with disabilities to overcome.*
- *Tom Cruise learns his lines by listening to them on tape, due to a learning disability.*
- *A TDD is a telephone device which allows accessibility for the hearing impaired.*
- *Brown v. Board of Education was the precedent setting 1954 Supreme Court case determining that segregation is illegal.*
- *Mahatma Ghandi advocated non-violent civil disobedience in fighting for India's independence from Great Britain.*
- *Slaves were once counted as 3/5 of a person for voting purposes.*
- *Ten to twelve million Native Americans lived in America when Columbus arrived.*
- *Wife beating is estimated by the FBI to be the most frequently occurring crime in the country.*
- *Sally Ride was the first woman in space.*
- *The Irish immigrated to the U.S. in 1880 to escape starvation during Ireland's potato blight.*
- *Kwanzaa is an African American Holiday meaning "first fruits of harvest."*
- *Yom Kippur is the Jewish Day of Atonement.*
- *Cinco de Mayo, the fifth of May, is Mexico's Independence Day*
- *Rosa Parks was a black woman who, in 1958, refused to sit at the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, precipitating the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The boycott was one of the first major events of the modern Civil Rights Movement.*
- *Comparable worth means equal compensation for jobs of comparable skill, effort, and working conditions.*
- *Eagle feathers are a symbol of accomplishment and rank among Native Americans.*

*Adapted from and used with permission of Kappa Omicron Nu.*

## *Diversity in the Workplace: Confronting Prejudicial Remarks*

Most of us have been in a workplace situation where someone in the group tells a joke, or makes a remark that is prejudicial or intolerant. What do you do?

Although the remark may make us feel uncomfortable, many choose to turn our backs or remain silent. Not only is confrontation potentially unpleasant, confrontation may also come with a price tag. What if the person who made the insensitive remark is in a supervisory position; or perhaps he or she is someone you must work closely with. The person may be a friend that you have good feelings about. Criticizing the speaker may even socially separate you from the rest of the group.

However, turning our backs or remaining silent only makes an unfortunate situation even worse. Prejudice and discrimination contribute to a hostile work environment and saps energy that may otherwise be used constructively. Kay Dupont (1997) suggests that we approach responding to prejudice as giving feedback rather than as starting a confrontation. In giving feedback, one does not criticize a person, but describes what the person is doing and your reaction to it. The message is that you like the person, but do not like the behavior.

The following are guidelines for providing feedback. (Dupont, 1997)

- Check to make sure the person has the time to discuss the situation. Hold the conversation in private.
- State the problem as **your** problem, for example "I had a problem with the joke you told this afternoon."



- Express how you feel and the effect the behavior had on you or the rest of the group, for example, "... it was offensive to me and embarrassed others in the group."
- Be empathetic. Listen, be sensitive and acknowledge the person's needs and point of view.
- If the situation becomes heated, acknowledge the person's feelings, for example, "I can see that you're angry about this." Listen, listen, listen.
- Don't shame or blame anyone. Avoid using "yes, but."
- Ask clarifying questions if you don't really understand or are uncertain of the other person's thoughts.
- Ask for help from the other person to change the situation, for example, "How can we change this situation?"
- Review the agreement that was reached. If feedback must be given to a particularly difficult or sensitive person, use statements that provide the person with an "escape route."

*(Continued on page 8)*

*He draws a circle that shuts me out-  
Heretic, rebel, a thing of flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win;  
We drew a circle that took him in.  
Edwin Markham*

## *Diversity Resource: Cultural Craft Kits*

Prima International, Ltd. Offers Cultural Connections – Award Winning Cultural Craft Kits. Boxed kits feature authentic ethnic craft items started by real artisans in various countries of the world. The child is provided with the components to finish and/or customize the item. Each kit is self-contained, making them as much fun on the road as at home. Boxed kits feature an exclusive Pen Pal Program in which the child is encouraged to write a letter to a child in the country where the artisan lives. The letters are forwarded to teachers in that country, and the child usually receives a reply from a foreign child within a couple of months.

Kits are also available in polybags. Polybagged kits feature clear bags allowing customers to see the contents, and while they don't include the Pen Pal Program or, in the case of painting kits, the plastic cups featured in the boxed kits, they are offered at a lower price.

Kits have been used successfully at 4-H Camps and Expo events. Kits are being offered to 4-H programs at a substantially reduced rate. Boxed kits range from \$3.69 to \$4.15 each. Polybag kits are priced at \$3.32 each. Individuals may order kits at \$10.00 each plus \$5.00 shipping and handling. Contact Prima International, Ltd., Albuquerque, NM at 1-800-724-6784.

The following 14 kits are available:

- Rainstick Radness – Chilean Rainstick Construction Kit
- Lizard Lovers – Chilean Wigglewood Lizard Painting Kit
- Tootie Flutie! – Bolivian Flute Painting Kit
- Funky Flute! – Chilean Pan Flute Construction Kit
- Design-a-Saurus – Chilean Wigglewood Dinosaur Painting Kit
- Mystic Mumbo Masque-Haitian Palm Leaf Painting Kit
- Silly Snake! – Chilean Wigglewood Snake Painting Kit
- Crocodile Style – Chilean Wigglewood Crocodile Painting Kit
- Rainstick Rage – Chilean Cactus Rainstick Painting Kit
- Flippin' Fish! – Chilean Wigglewood Fish Painting Kit
- Groovy Ghana Guy – African Water Spirit Painting Kit
- Fanorama – Chinese Silk Fan Painting Kit
- Terrific Hieroglyphic – Egyptian Papyrus Painting and Code Kit
- Critter Combo – Chilean Wigglewood Snake, Mini Gator, Fish Keychain Painting Kit

## *Diversity Around The State: Diversity Activities for Youth Workshop*

Debbie Dietrich, Berks County 4-H Extension Agent, offered a workshop to youth-serving agency staff that run summer youth day camps to share the new release of the publication *Diversity Activities for Youth and Adults*. The goal of the workshop was to provide agency staff with simple activities that they could use during free or down time in their camp schedules. It highlighted many of the activities in the publication with a few additions from Debbie's activity file. The workshop was attended by 15 agency staff members who represented diverse populations and programs.

When asked on the workshop evaluation "Did the training add significant, valuable resources to your 'planning file'," all the attendees said, "Yes!" One attendee added, "It added simple activities to throw into the summer program." All of the attendees identified several activities that they plan to use this summer. One participant commented on his evaluation form, "It (the workshop) helped me see how simple discussing diversity is."

An attempt was made to determine if the workshop helped agency staff feel more confident about conducting diversity activities with youth. Of the 4 participants who did not already feel "very confident", their confidence level increased an average of 2.5 steps on a 6 step scale. One participant commented, "I still feel confident, but now I have some great activities to do with the children."



There appears to be interest in future workshops on similar topics including teaching tolerance and character development. Debbie plans to conduct an informal end-of-the-summer survey to determine whether agency staff actually used the activities.

*Thanks to Debbie Deitrich of Berks County for sharing her workshop and results.*

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***“All races need to communicate with each other and a good way to start is with a smile and a prayer.”***

Princess Pale Moon  
Cherokee Nation

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***Diverse Issues is available on the Web***

**Web Address:**

**<http://www.cas.psu.edu/docs/casdept/familyliving/pi/pimenu.html>**

(Continued from page 2)

- 🌍 The pace of business is slower. Pressuring for quick decisions should be avoided.
- 🌍 Be ready to compromise on some issue, not for any practical reason, but to save a person's dignity.
- 🌍 A "yes" does not necessarily mean yes. It often means "possibly."
- 🌍 Alcohol and pork are prohibited to strict Muslims.
- 🌍 Avoid using the left hand for eating or gesturing. The left hand is reserved for activities which are considered unclean.
- 🌍 When seated, avoid crossing ones legs in a manner that would expose the bottom of the shoe to an Arab. This is considered insulting.
- 🌍 Avoid giving too much admiration for small expensive objects owned by Arabs. The Arab may insist that you take it as a gift.

Source: Nydell, M. K. (1996). *Understanding Arabs: A guide for westerners (2nd ed.)*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, Inc.

(Continued from page 5)

- "I'm sure you're not aware of this, but..."
- "I know you didn't mean to be offensive, but..."
- "I feel uncomfortable bringing this up, but..."
- "I have a problem, and I need our help."

This process allows you to express your feelings, needs, and ideas and to stand up for your rights in a way that does not violate the rights of the other person. Standing up for your rights demonstrates to others that you respect yourself. It also earns respect from others.

Source: Dupont, K. (1997). *Handling diversity in the workplace: Communication is the key*. West Des Moines, Iowa: American Media Publishing.

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