

Problems in Intercultural Communication Related to Cultural Values

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The cultural dimension of a social group is perhaps the most important component to keep in mind when using an intercultural approach. In fact, value systems are the deepest cultural roots of a human being. To cite a metaphor used by one of the fathers of intercultural studies (Hofstede 1991), if culture is a figure with concentric circles, the dimension of cultural values is placed at the central point, representing the most rigid roots of identity for human beings; their equilibrium, their existential views, their vision of the past, present and future.

This depth is fundamental (and therefore essential to investigate) also because these individual value categories are not structured in sealed compartments but constantly interact with one another, creating dynamics that are not always predictable, even within a single social group.

1 The Concept of Time

Time is a component of human life that simultaneously involves awareness and unconsciousness.

For the Sudanese, and in general for a Muslim, time belongs to God and is not managed by human beings. Every reference to time, its flow, deadlines or events, is accompanied by the expression *inshallah*, 'God willing'. This concept vaguely reminds us of the Italian form, *a Dio piacendo*

(‘if God wants’), however its relevance is amplified in the Muslim world.

In the following chapters, we will see how the expression *inshallah* reflects the cultural patterns of some social groups that experience actions and consequences over longer periods of time. In addition, we will see how it reflects the resilience with which negative outcomes are approached. Time dilation and resilience manifest themselves in verbal expressions such as *bukra*, or ‘let’s see tomorrow’, and *malesh*, a sort of ‘darn it’ but also ‘patience’ and even ‘there is no problem’.

Time is important, but there is an unmanageability and a perceived unproductive dilation of time that, in the eyes of the Italian visitor, can seem like a paradox.

In other words, time as a cultural value is held in high esteem in Sudan, and yet (strangely for a foreigner) it seems unmanageable. Such a situation can obviously create a lack of understanding in intercultural communication, especially if the communicative event takes place in the more remote areas of the country, where the spatio-temporal dilation is stronger than in the capital Khartoum, where more international habits (and therefore a rigid perception of time, see Hofstede 1991; Balboni, Caon 2015) are common.

1.1 Religious Time

The Sudanese day revolves around obligatory moments of prayer. In Muslim countries, there are five prayers and this can create situations of intercultural discomfort for a foreigner who is not used to the idea of needing to pray at set times.

The first prayer is at dawn. The presence of numerous mosques in the country ensures that there is almost always one near homes, hotels and other buildings. In addition, the concept of prayer in Muslim countries is strongly linked to the idea of ‘a summons’ to group action; for this reason, mosques are equipped with loudspeakers so that the religious leader can ‘call the faithful’.

This element creates a very strong alliance in values between time, religion and a sense of community, which could lead to an intercultural incident for the unsuspecting foreign visitor who planned on getting an hour of extra sleep in the morning.

It is also true that, as said in Italian, “the whole world is a country”. To put it in the words of a Sudanese informant, “on my last day of vacation in Italy, I would have slept a little more on Sunday morning if it were not for the church bells at the corner that woke me up”.

In Sudan, the Islamic weekend is respected, so the days of rest are Friday and Saturday. Between the two, Friday is the most important day (a bit like Sunday in Italy); there are less people in the street, shops are

closed or are open very late and only after prayers. The evening is dedicated to recreation. Saturday is a day characterised by more activity, and even though it is a rest day, life is more regular.

Knowing the temporal structure of the place (if steeped in religious tradition), especially if one is employed abroad for a longer period of time, can greatly facilitate the intercultural planning of daily activities. A long training seminar, a day of negotiations, a whole day of site visits or business meetings, and a conference are all events that must be adapted to local prayer needs (and from there, to the temporal habits that follow, such as the meal schedule). The beginning and end of an event, including breaks, breakfasts, lunches and dinners, should all be discussed and clearly defined in advance.

To give an example, there is a considerable difference in Sudan when comparing the times that meals are consumed in Italy.

An Italian breakfast usually takes place in the morning before going to work, and is more or less abundant depending on the needs of the individual. In an African country, the morning meal – the so-called *futuur* – takes place between 10:00 am and 11:00 am. It is usually salty, plentiful, and could be considered a hybrid between an Italian's breakfast and lunch.

The above can be quite significant: a business lunch (intended as a mid-day meal) organised by an Italian in Sudan with Sudanese guests, could be unappealing (as they have consumed the *futuur* shortly before) or, on the contrary, very appetising (as they are aware of the 'Italian time' and have fasted since the previous evening to honor the invitation).

1.2 Punctuality

There is a difference in Sudan between time management at work and in one's personal life.

The interpretation of values regarding time in a professional context has been influenced by Sudan's relations with the international community (and therefore other cultures, including Western ones). This has progressively led to the formation of similarities in terms of time management between the Sudanese and Italians. If an appointment is scheduled for 10:00 am, it will usually be respected, and the Sudanese interlocutor would be surprised if a delay is not communicated.

Free time is different. Going back to what has already been said about religious time, especially regarding its unmanageability by human beings as it is considered divine, delays are events that may be experienced with greater frequency. For this reason, they should be tolerated with greater openness, even by a foreigner.

Time for the Sudanese does not mean money or productivity. Being late is not perceived as bad manners. Furthermore, a long day trip to partici-

pate in a social event is not perceived as a waste of time. In Sudan, making a guest wait for a meeting is not an expression of power.

1.3 Scheduling

What has been said above is also reflected in the scheduling of events. Due to an increasing internationalisation of customs, habits and trends, the gradual standardisation of space-time distances throughout the world extends also to Sudan.

In the workplace, a well-planned event, activity, visit or appointment will therefore be of medium-length in terms of preparation, but it is possible that there could be a long to very long period of planning. Also, in the workplace it is important to not be too rigid during the organisational phase. In Sudan, changes, reservations, obtaining supporting documentation and various tasks can often take place last-minute. This element often causes intercultural misunderstandings if the foreign interlocutor has planned some activities that are complementary to and scheduled around the activities planned by their Sudanese interlocutor.

For example, getting an Italian visa to participate in a conference, and booking a trip or accommodations often require participants to work simultaneously and the aforementioned difference in cultural approaches may create problems. Sudden planning on the part of the Sudanese is an element that can possibly, if not frequently (as referred to by an informant as the need of “the pressure of the deadline”), make the Italian counterpart feel irritated, or worse, make them feel that they are collaborating with someone who is unprofessional, an element that can lead to intercultural conflict.

1.4 Meeting Structure

The Sudanese flexible and tolerant approach to time is reflected in the structure of professional meetings. Also in this instance, international exchanges in activity and event planning have made Sudanese customs more similar to those in Italy and many foreign cultures. Starting a meeting, putting together an agenda, time management in terms of speakers, follow ups and conclusions are all common phases, recognizable to most foreigners.

Some knowledge about certain Sudanese peculiarities, however, could better facilitate a communicative event. A meeting should never be scheduled too early. In Sudan it is not customary to schedule a meeting, for example, at 8:00 am. A business meeting in the late afternoon would be exceptional as the afternoon is structured in a different manner. For the

Sudanese, it is important to be able to return home before sunset to honor the prayer schedule.

School time is approached differently, especially for younger pupils. On average, the beginning of the school day is around 7:30 am. Recently in Sudan, there have been further measures taken by the government to permanently set back the clock an hour (which does not fall under the legal hour) in order to gain more daylight in the afternoon.

a. The Agenda

International customs have led many Sudanese public and private entities to embrace the concept of an agenda, and therefore to provide themselves with a list of activities according to a predetermined schedule to be followed by the participants. The agenda is not mandatory, nor is it fixed. For this reason, it can be modified, cancelled, discussed or in the latest analysis, can represent a theoretical outline that in practice can be changed by the dynamics of the day.

The beginning of a meeting, however, especially in more institutional environments and in important or lengthy meetings, is consistently opened with a prayer, a giving of thanks and a blessing request for the participants and the work.

The timing of meetings, even though there is a fixed schedule, undergoes changes with routine frequency. Sometimes meetings set at a certain time begin with a short delay. However, more frequently, there are unexpected extensions due to long and unforeseen interventions by the participants.

It is quite common in Sudan to have a post-meeting summary of what has been said or done, to leave a record and define a point of departure for future activities.

b. Turn-Taking and Interruptions

Conversational timing in Sudan is not chaotic. During meetings, one patiently waits until the end of an intervention, and people ask to participate using a hand signal. There are no interruptions or abrupt speech, although if it happens, it is not considered offensive. This can vary in the presence of certain communicative moves, but the tendency is to show respect for the interlocutor's time.

We can notice a marked difference in Italy. Aggressive communication (or an excess of assertiveness) during a meeting tends to subtract time from the interlocutor. Interruptions are a communicative move and can have different meanings. On one hand, there could be an aggressive interruption with the intent to take away time and undermine the argument of the interlocutor. On the other, an interruption can be purely instrumental, as if to help the interlocutor reveal what they really mean in a sort

of communicative-relational collaboration. The same situation goes for interruptions in everyday conversations. The Italian often participates in an exchange by interrupting as an act of support to their interlocutor ("I am showing you that I understand by inferring about what you want to say and therefore interrupting"). The Sudanese do not use this mode.

The Sudanese privilege harmony in this communicative moment, and this influences their attitude toward the interlocutor who is respected during the time that they speak and with whom they collaborate by searching for shared points of view. As previously mentioned, an intervention in a meeting, conference or public event could be very long, and time is granted to other participants. This characteristic should be seen in the broader spectrum of individualism in Sudanese culture, where harmony is preserved as part of the collectivist social dimension, typical of Muslim communities (Hofstede 1991).

1.5 Pauses and Silence

On average, for an Italian silence causes uneasiness. A prolonged silence is perceived as a symptom of a communicative problem, from which one can take shelter with superficial conversation.

In Sudan there is no particular appreciation of silence. Sudanese behaviour is friendly, jovial and conversational, and like in other African countries, empty spaces in conversation will be filled in with dialogue.

2 The Concept of Space

The use of space, the dynamics within an open or closed setting, small or large, can set the context for an intercultural encounter that can be at times more or less problematic. Let's observe some situations.

2.1 Public and Private Space

The way that space is managed (or one's personal space) remains a key element to respect in order to prevent possible intercultural conflicts.

As in Italy, space can be for everyone; protected by the community as a common good. Alternatively, space can belong to no one, which leads to more indifference in the event of degradation or misuse. In Sudan, public spaces tend to be considered spaces of no one. Hence, there is a degree of disinterest in maintaining common areas that benefit the community. This situation is different in private spaces, where care is more visible.

A clear example of this can be seen in parking lots. This is an area in Sudan that relates more to the good sense of the driver and his ability to park rather than any real boundaries set in space, over time and with the possibility of a cost.

In this sense, the intercultural communication crisis between an Italian and a Sudanese person could reside in different interpretations of what we call 'civil duty'. A limited, ethnocentric vision could therefore lead to negative judgments in managing space and its modes of use.

2.2 Spatial Organisation

A possible point for intercultural comparison between the Italians and Sudanese is the concept of spatial organisation. In Sudan, ordered and uni-directional lines are not the standard. Instead, there is a different system of organisation, and from an Italian point of view, it could be interpreted as disorderly, or worse, over-powering.

In a market, in a store and at a public office, it is not uncommon to be alongside and overshadowed by a local who is buying something or requesting information. However, with careful observation, one understands that there is nothing hostile or deceptive about their intentions. It is simply a cultural mechanism put in motion to assert oneself in a given space, even in the presence of other local people, perhaps even more so. This is very different from the concepts of 'rows' and 'order' in Italy.

An interesting phenomenon can also be observed in traffic.

The Sudanese are typically characterised by politeness, friendliness and sincere generosity. However, when driving there is a struggle to take over the free space, with reckless lane changing and daring turns, at times originating from the most opposite lane. This is combined with the indiscriminate use of high-volume horns and "full throttle" acceleration. They are all phenomena that, if interpreted incorrectly, could lead to the conclusion that Sudanese drivers are malicious, over-powering individuals.

This is not so. Again, we need to observe how the ideas of order and spatial organisation translate differently in the Sudanese context so that we may prevent crises in intercultural communication and avoid premature judgments.

2.3 The Work Space

Although there is not an obsessive need to decorate external and internal public and private buildings, in Sudan the areas where the workforce is concentrated, especially in an office, are quite large. We have not noticed particular shortcomings in rooms at institutions or medium to large size

businesses. As a result, the international expansion of the open space concept, including the intentional sharing of work spaces and equipment like desks or PCs, has not taken hold in Sudan.

Rather, most officials work in single rooms that are generally shared by two or three colleagues.

2.4 Space for Tea and Coffee

Sudanese friendliness is well-known and creates the need for suitable spaces dedicated to dialogue. Even though there is a growing presence of Italian-style bars (an interior area with a counter, more or less decorated, possibly with an outdoor area to sit for a higher cost), in Sudan there are still many meeting places that are open and improvised. They are often set up in available spaces or green areas along the sides of streets where cars regularly pass. They are sometimes permanent, but more often than not, they are characterised by the mobility of the service providers (almost all women) who prepare drinks like tea and coffee, set up chairs and tables, and offer prices much lower than formal establishments.

It is in these places that many Sudanese meet, take a break and stop to talk casually with a beverage. Aside from the ability to consume a product at a lower price, what is most important is the opportunity to gather together, which reveals a characteristic feature of Sudanese culture: joy and interpersonal harmony are some of its most representative, existential expressions. This phenomenon and its communitarian depth is accentuated during the month of Ramadan when shared meals on the roadside proliferate on the occasion of *Iftar*, or the daily break in fasting which begins at sunset.

3 Hierarchy, Respect and Status

Hierarchy is one of those values where differences in cultural approach can often be felt and can create interpersonal discomfort in the absence of knowledge, understanding or an empathetic attitude toward the approach of the other culture.

Hierarchy can generally be observed in the two following categories: explicit/implicit (externally visible or not), permeable/impenetrable (a greater or shorter distance between the hierarchical vertex and its base).

3.1 Hierarchy between Compatriots

Sudan is a multiethnic, multireligious, multicultural, varied and complex country, whose intrinsic diversity is not always easy to manage. Interethnic, interreligious, intertribal and even interclan dynamics are very present in Sudanese social life and regulate relationships, connections and alliances. The presence of seventeen states, united under a federal system, makes centre-periphery relationships crucial, a condition which emphasises the need for a non-Sudanese person to understand well the hierarchical rules and power structures (we sometimes use the terms as synonyms, well aware of the respective semantic differences) on which public and private structures and entities are regulated.

Despite tolerance and an innate, Sudanese tendency to accept diversity, there is both a vertical and horizontal social stratification from which habits, expectations, boundaries and agreements arise. This is visible both at a professional level (in politics, for example, where the principle of ethnic representation is also very important) and at a personal level.

In the latter case, the nature of marriages and the sometimes narrow selection in choosing a spouse, reveal a veiled Sudanese social preference for a life partner that has a similar socio-economic background.

Sudanese hierarchy is quite explicit. The leader, especially in more organised professional, public and institutional structures, is recognizable by their appearance, by the people that surround them and by the respect that is shown to them. There is a certain similarity with the concept of Italian hierarchy, where a leadership position is easily recognizable.

Due to social ramifications described above, it is important to understand how the Sudanese family, clan, tribe, ethnic group, and federal state organise their leaders and their hierarchical vertices, with whom it is important to interact during daily professional activities. For example, a cooperative development project carried out in a peripheral Sudanese state cannot fail to take into account a whole series of relational dynamics that need to be established with the top leaders of that state and even with the ethnic-tribal majority.

In Italy, hierarchy is mainly impenetrable. This means that in the majority of complex structures, the base can communicate with the top only through the filter of figures that act as intermediaries.

In Sudan, hierarchy is more permeable. While respecting those in charge of command, the distance between the top and the bottom is reduced, and the latter has more direct possibilities of contact and communication with top leaders. The extensive familial and parental stratification in Sudan, as well as a shared sense of community based above all on socio-religious roots, facilitates this contact and acts as a means to connect the base and vertex.

3.2 Hierarchy with Foreigners

The dynamics of hierarchy and power described above tend to be toned down in relationships with foreigners.

The foreigner, in general, is positively welcomed and perceived; Westerners tend to be very respected. Sudan is a country open to the diversity that foreigners bring. It is a tolerant, friendly country towards members of the international community. The decolonisation of past decades has not produced particular feelings of revenge against the foreigner.

However, there is a palpable distinction between being Sudanese and being a *khawaja* (or foreigner), especially in the social classes less open to diversity. The term is not derogatory, as it could be in other cultures, but clearly distinguishes the foreigner from a local. After all, the sense of community, especially if based on religious principle like in Sudan, necessarily leads to this differentiation. As cultural practices can be modified by contact with diversity, one preserves habits, traditions, customs, principles and obligations by keeping distance. Therefore, this differentiation should not be interpreted as hostility.

Despite this, overall there is great openness and cordiality towards those who are foreigners.

One of the most evident manifestations of this openness is found in invitations to social events such as dinners, weddings and celebrations. In particular, during the aforementioned celebration of *Iftar* during Ramadan, invitations to foreigners in Sudanese households are common in order to share moments of harmony around the table. This intercultural encounter will take place more often in the suburbs, where foreigners are likely to be welcomed with friendship.

The Italian in Sudan is well-liked and respected, being seen as a bearer of friendship, culture and beauty. This is why Italians are very popular, even professionally. This sentiment manifests itself with positive hierarchical relationships, even when a portion of the workforce is Sudanese and there is an Italian manager. A clear example of such professional harmony is found within the Italian institutions operating in Sudan (like the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development), where the presence of a Sudanese workforce rarely creates problems related to hierarchy involving managerial staff.

3.3 Hierarchy and Respect for the Supervisor

In Sudan, those who manage bring solutions. Even in an atmosphere of exchange and respect regarding the ideas of others, the managerial figure, both in public and private Sudanese structures, must make decisions.

Rarely will there be a task delegated or instructions given using verbal violence. Generally speaking, when performing a task, there will always be a certain calmness and a tone of voice that is assertive but not aggressive. The 'poor treatment' of employees is not part (in terms of Sudanese sentiment) of the local norms. This is an important element to consider in terms of intercultural business collaborations, when an Italian leader has both Italian and Sudanese staff members. The leader will obtain the best results from their employees through dialogue, respect, expressive clarity and assertive yet polite decision-making.

It would be difficult to see Sudanese employees openly disagree with their leader. Opinions will be given in a subdued manner and only if asked, while the decisions of the leader or their commands will not openly be discussed.

As for some countries like Italy, which has also seen rapid changes over the last decades, the hierarchical order is directly proportional to age difference.

In Sudan, the 'experience acquired/position of leadership' equation still applies and it is rare, especially in public institutions, to find young people who hold high power positions.

Hierarchy almost always manifests itself in Sudanese encounters in a pronounced, clear manner. For the leader, there is deference both in body language and in other forms of communication, like greetings and taking leave. There is no overstatement, but an informality with clear indicators regarding who is in charge and who is a collaborator.

The dialogue between an employer and employee can be frank and there will be the opportunity for everyone to express their opinion. However, in line with what has previously been mentioned, a certain amount of distance is to be maintained, and ultimately, there will be one decisive voice, prevailing opinion and command which comes from the top of the hierarchy.

3.4 Hierarchical Role Indicators

Hierarchy in Sudan is a value that manifests itself explicitly, just like in Italy. A leader is visible by a series of indicators, ranging from a high-powered car to elegant clothes and/or expensive rings, from a cane with embellishments to furnishings of greater prestige within larger office spaces, by a greater number of people working under them, to being located on the upper floors of the building.

For women, a higher social status (especially in terms of family origin or money) may be revealed by the presence of gold jewelry or by her wardrobe.

One peculiarity is that at times the leader, especially at a tribal level and in more remote areas of the country, will present themselves wearing extravagant shoes (from a foreigner's point of view), usually a sort of luxury slipper covered with leather (crocodile, snake) or spotted fur (tiger, cheetah).

Also in Italy, with few exceptions, hierarchy is marked by clear symbols and signs.

An important cultural element to highlight regarding communicative events with Sudanese people in positions of power is the possibility of seeing them dress quite differently according to the social event. At times, the Sudanese will wear clothes that are familiar to Western traditions, such as a jacket and tie. At other times, they will wear a traditional Sudanese costume, the *jallabia*, a white tunic with a turban (*emma*), used above all for parties and ceremonies (often in the evening). This element is not to be underestimated as it can cause confusion for the foreigner, especially during initial encounters, who might find it difficult to recognise their interlocutor who in the previous days was wearing a shirt and trousers.

This change in dress is often linked to the importance of the social occasion. Dressing in a traditional way is an expression of participation during an important Sudanese event; also, as reported by some informants, the heat of the scorching months and the necessity to dress lightly, could also be a motivating factor for the use of the *jallabia* rather than a jacket.

In Sudan, hierarchy may not only be visible at an interpersonal level, but also at an inter-institutional level, with certain entities taking greater care of the work environment and work space. Here, we refer above all to important governmental agencies, which are considered priorities for maintaining a well-functioning, institutional structure within the country and are therefore rewarded with greater allocations for the maintenance of their buildings.

3.5 Hierarchy and Income

Like most countries in the world, a leadership position is compensated with a higher salary in Sudan.

However, in comparison to Italy, we do see a difference in the pay rate of top positions in some public institutions (ministries, political bodies). In Sudan, the level of compensation is decidedly lower, as if to highlight the service aspect of the institutions with respect to the remuneration itself.

As a way to almost compensate for the above-mentioned difference in level, we observed a more generous concession of benefits, especially in public institutions. For example, like the large number of individuals (compared to the average composition of an Italian delegation) sent abroad to participate in international events.

In general, an ostentatious display of hierarchy does not seem to be common for the Sudanese, even at the highest levels. A certain seriousness is evident in the behaviour of those who hold high and very high level roles in public and private institutions.

The situation in private homes is different. Furnishings, nice decorations, spaciousness and elegant (relatively speaking) furniture and fin-

ishes are all visible elements and certainly surpass the moderation that characterises the Sudanese houses of those who do not hold top positions.

4 Family, Familiarity and Belonging

Every social structure generally rests strongly on the concept of family. This term can be understood in a restricted way (blood ties) or enlarged (familial connections through marriage, acquired kinships). The concept is extremely dynamic if it intersects with other elements that in some way are reminiscent of the value of belonging (being part of the same tribe or having common ethnic roots).

4.1 Family

In Sudan, family is a fundamental element of corporate and relational dynamics.

It can be considered the tip of an iceberg that hides a more articulate social stratification that is divided into clans, tribes and ethnic groups. This stratification sometimes triggers comparisons based on being or not being part of the same group.

The 'tribal question' in Sudan is deeply felt. Arabs and Africans, Northerners and Southerners, Sudanese from the East and West, Muslims and non-Muslims, native locals and nomads: they are all expressions of diversity and otherness (think of the dozens of dialects and languages) that are reflected in the final composition of a family.

In Sudan, both interpretations of family mentioned above (restricted and enlarged) coexist harmoniously. Blood relatives are distinguished as such, but it is undoubtedly juxtaposed by a more common concept of extended family that includes relatives that are not blood related and who in turn become part of the family in a broader sense, enjoying the benefits related to membership.

Just look at the hundreds of guests invited to Sudanese marriage ceremonies to understand how the concept of family is inclusive. The concept of the extended family can also be seen in multi-family cohabitations that share a single roof; they are large houses, perhaps with several floors, each of which has its own space but also shared areas.

The Sudanese family, like in southern Italy until some decades ago, is undoubtedly characterised by a strong masculine (and patriarchal) imprint. The grandfather, the father, then the eldest son are the founding figures on which the rest of the group revolves. Out of respect for the elderly, the leading male role and its paternal knowledge is to be transmitted to the eldest son. In Sudan, these elements create a family that has a strong male character and that is driven by the male figure.

The female figure also embodies a fundamental role, that is certainly not secondary, as a guardian of harmony, union, evolutionary inclusion, acceptance and hospitality. In the words of a local informant “both inside and outside the home, it would be difficult to find Sudanese men shouting at their women, let alone raising their hands against them”.

Compared to other Muslim countries, the figure of the female in Sudan appears more emancipated. There is a respect for the female figure (although to a lesser extent than males) and she can hold top positions in the workplace (even if this is the exception as the masculine presence is strong). In comparison to other parts of the world, the Sudanese seem more oriented toward creating opportunities for the evolution and growth of female figures.

As previously mentioned, the family is the backbone of Sudanese society.

It is through increased contact and utilising possible kinships to relatives that the Sudanese seek solutions to problems, or they will appoint another interlocutor. According to a local informant, before addressing a delicate issue alone, a Sudanese person “asks help from those that they know in the family network”.

With respect to the more general concept of belonging, we can note how in Sudan, Islam acts as a type of glue for the (predominantly) Muslim community. In areas of the country with a non-Muslim majority, however, this sense of belonging is found in shared ethno-cultural roots. In the Sudanese diaspora, made up of thousands of Sudanese living abroad, this sense of belonging is tied to land and is identified with the part of the family that remained in Sudan.

All this to say, Sudan is a country of great diversity and it knows how to remain united. Despite differences, its people are very proud to be Sudanese. In the words of a local academic interviewed “the Sudanese person lives his tribal individuality in many respects, but if he is attacked, he remembers that he is only and simply Sudanese”.

4.2 Familiarity and Courtesy

The Sudanese are characterised by great generosity. Both in the context of relationships between Italians and other foreigners. Among these, as mentioned, Italians play an important role.

The Sudanese love to make foreigners feel at ease. Invitations to social events, including private ones such as a daughter’s wedding, abound.

In Sudan, spending time together in brotherhood and relational harmony is very important.

In working relationships, it is very rare that a guest in a Sudanese premise will find a lack of dates, water, drinks, snacks, fruit or any other item related to socialising around the table. The higher the status is of the Sudanese host, the more abundant the level of food offered will be.

In comparative terms, the Italians and Sudanese are united by a sense of instinctive courtesy in interpersonal relationships, an element which at a commercial level becomes an important facilitator of business relations. A Sudanese businessman told us during an interview about his “change of supplier, from a representative in a European country to an Italian one, once [he] began to value the level of cordiality expressed by the Italian and the pleasure of doing business when there is also a feeling of natural friendship”.

Sudanese kindness becomes more evident in relation to others, especially the foreigner, the farther away you get from the capital, Khartoum. What positively surprises, especially if one thinks about the economic sacrifice involved in providing food and drink to a visiting foreigner, is that this inclusiveness also reaches very high levels in the least economically advantaged classes of the population.

4.3 Other Forms of Belonging: ‘Immigrants’

Sudan is characterised by thousands of kilometers of borders, inevitably permeable for their length and size, in addition to its daily interethnic exchanges. Very often whole families in Eritrea or South Sudan or Chad depend on employment across the border, making business deals or working in the Sudanese territory to then return home at dusk. This gives us a picture of how naturally open Sudan is in terms of legal immigration, devoted to productivity and shared work.

There are thousands of Sudanese who welcome people from neighboring countries for short or long periods, keeping exchanges and trade relations alive, and the crossings of interstate roads open.

This migratory phenomenon has historical reasons (especially as before colonisation the concept of borders was quite transitory in Africa) and by the management of production. However, this has diminished in recent years by the socio-economic conditions of the aforementioned neighboring countries, and consequently the increase in irregular and illegal migration flows.

Under pressure by the international community, Sudan has also undertaken a series of precautions to mitigate this phenomenon and fight illegal entry into the country (which also brings with it social problems and illegal trade) and has caused some Sudanese to flee. The Sudanese attitude toward the reception (of both legal immigrants and economic migrants, in addition to the individuals who are fleeing tragedy within the country) remains stable and unaffected. There does not seem to be a strategy of interethnic integration in the long-term sense. The tactical and circumstantial management of the phenomenon is more focused on the short-term.

5 The Gender Issue

One of the most controversial value dimensions in intercultural terms is the relationship between men and women, the reciprocal attribution of rights and duties, their roles in society, their purpose, their equality and their dynamics, both privately and professionally.

The value linked to gender presents the possibility of significant intercultural misunderstanding, especially as it intersects with other values related to religion, family and political correctness (or incorrectness).

Let's take a look at the situation in Sudan.

5.1 The Figure of the Female

As we have already mentioned, the role of women in Sudan is characterised by rules, possibilities and limitations of a socio-religious nature. The female figure gives way to a society (strongly Muslim) with a strong male character, where leadership in private and in public sector is predominantly male.

Nevertheless, in Sudan there is great respect for the female figure, her role and her active participation in society. Furthermore, the majority of students in the various Sudanese universities are women.

In the public sector, the number of employed women is very high. There is a certain female presence also at the higher levels in universities, politics and socio-cultural associations, although their representation is the minority. Of course, we are talking about a different context than that to which Italy is accustomed, especially in recent years when there have been the so-called 'pink quotas' that significantly influenced the public and private sectors. However, in Sudan the female figure is respected, appreciated, and at the same time more space is granted to her in comparison with other countries where *Sharia*, the Islamic law, is a force. Suffice it to say that in Sudan, unlike other countries with a Muslim majority and where the *Sharia* applies, shaking the hand of a woman can be an absolutely natural act.

5.2 Sexual Diversity

Islamic law is enforced in Sudan and it is very clear regarding, and critical of, sexual diversity. It is intended as an alternative to an established subdivision between men and women. In particular, homosexuality is not accepted. On the contrary, it is potentially prosecutable under law. This theme is not discussed. In general, one's sex life, family life, and the relationships between men and women are very often subjected to specific instruction according to the Holy Quran and Sunnah.

5.3 Clothing, Decorum and Modesty

In Sudan there is a certain sobriety in women's clothing based on religious dictation that requires the conscious coverage of the neck and hair (*hijab*). The legs should be covered, in addition to the arms with long sleeves. Much less common, in terms of overall percentages, are women who wear the *niqab*, which completely covers the female body with a black tunic and a veil that provides almost full coverage of the face (only the eyes are visible).

It is rare to see Sudanese women (even the very young) in t-shirts, much less in short skirts or with very tight-fitting, transparent or sleeveless dresses. A woman dressed in this way would be the object of repeated looks and embarrassment (and not just from males).

The concept of externalised femininity differs greatly from that which we are used to in Italy, especially in the summer season. Nonetheless, a certain tolerance is demonstrated and visible even within this framework of fixed rules and consequent expectations. There are many women who do not use the *hijab* in a strict sense, but elegantly wear only a veil over the head, partially covering the hair and neck. This is especially true for middle-aged women, being both a symbol of respect and elegance.

However, there are many women who decide not to wear any type of veil (especially in the South) and they generally do not encounter public hostility (especially if they are foreign women).

If we revisit the topic of space, there is always a precise distinction between male and female bathrooms (obviously when possible), as well as different areas designated for prayer.

In the field of healthcare, it is rare to find male doctors who visit women, or vice versa. The clear distinction between the sexes in the medical field is therefore evident.

Moreover, Sudanese women do not smoke in public and will not use vulgar postures or loud voices.

Even for the males (young and old) the clothing is fairly standardised and sober. Among youth, who are more subject to contamination from abroad and a certain unconventionality, clothing is not extravagant nor provocative.

In general, in Sudan there is a common and shared sense of decorum which, as mentioned, tends to lead to a certain standardisation in dressing habits (as judged by the external observer).

6 Political Correctness

Acceptance of diversity, tolerance, and non-aggressive attitudes toward riskier intercultural topics does not automatically mean that one should or can freely talk about them.

On the contrary, in some countries there are topics that are difficult to approach or of which one must not speak.

Let's take a look at some.

6.1 Nudity and Intimacy

As previously mentioned, sexuality is not a particularly appealing conversational topic for Sudanese society. Arguments connected to it will not be the object of dialogue. Sometimes, it is not even mentionable.

Nudity, sex, and anything that in some way refers to intimacy and the body are not topics of conversation: they embarrass, they cause discomfort and remain confined to the private thoughts of the individual.

6.2 Illness

Even if it is true that for common and prevalent illnesses the Sudanese refer to doctors (although to a lesser extent) and to pharmacists (which is more common for a 'do it yourself' therapy), the most serious diseases are not the object of everyday conversation. Unlike the dialogues that can be observed in Italy – if we think of the waiting rooms in medical centres where perfect strangers exchange details about their health conditions without too much hesitation – in Sudan, serious illness is not the object of frequent discussion.

Silence falls more in the presence of serious diseases (cancer, HIV), or when you have a disabled person in the family (especially if it is a mental disability). In the periphery of the capital Khartoum, or in villages and more remote areas, disease is sometimes mixed with superstition. The seriously ill or the disabled can somehow be considered victims of wrong doing, external factors or the supernatural.

The Sudanese often link the very concept of illness to divine intervention, over which the human being has no control. Thus, the disease becomes a result of divine will (perhaps a punishment from God). This explains why the concept of medical prevention is not widespread in Sudan, an element which in the eyes of an outsider may appear to be harmful and self-injurious.

6.3 Public and Private: Morality

Like almost all countries in the world, corruption is a plague that damages the state and citizens, especially the most vulnerable sections of the population.

Sudan does not escape from this tragedy and connections between public and private interests are not always transparent. The Sudanese do not like to talk about this openly.

At all levels, morality is not an easy topic to tackle in Sudan, even amongst the poorest segment of the population (unlike Italy where the theme is rather a 'classic' topic of small talk at the bar).

6.4 The Tribe and Religion

As mentioned above, the social stratification in Sudan highlights the existence of social rankings based on family, clan, tribal and ethnic group memberships.

The Sudanese do not like to point out these differences, and on the contrary, create a unified country more hopeful than functional.

The tribal question in Sudan exists; for example, it is easily seen in marriages, where frequently spouses are chosen based on a social community (ethnic, but also socio-economic) that limit or direct the selection of a groom or bride.

Even religion does not escape the politically correct paradox, especially in communicative terms. Sudan presents itself (even constitutionally) as a country in which religious diversity co-exists peacefully. This is true: the majority of Muslims in Sudan do not hinder the practice of other faiths.

However, the proliferation of creeds and places of worship linked to religions other than Islam is not a situation that is accepted with complete passivity. In Sudan, *Sharia* regulates most of the legal and social aspects of the citizens' lives. It is to be expected, and perhaps inevitable, that belonging to a different faith can cause friction as everyday activities unfold. For example, consider the weekly Islamic days of rest (Friday and Saturday) and the Christian day of rest (Sunday), which is considered a working day in Muslim countries (our Monday, so to speak).

This is not an easy topic of conversation for the Sudanese, especially at the institutional level. They do not want it to acquire negative connotations abroad or in public opinion.

Finally, the Sudanese do not like to use irony or find humor in relation to religion, especially for the Islamic faith: it would be a lack of respect for God.

7 Religion

In all countries throughout the world, the religious dimension is relevant and present to a greater or lesser extent in the lives of human beings. The main difference resides in the degree of pervasiveness in society, if it does or does not blend with daily occurrences and, therefore, the consequent mix between spiritual and ordinary life.

In many countries, so-called 'secularism' separates religion from the social, juridical and cultural aspects of the lives of human beings. The spiritual dimension belongs intimately to the individual or a group that voluntarily meets to cultivate this dimension.

On the contrary, and as with Muslims, some religious creeds burst into daily life and, to a greater or lesser degree, affect the behaviour and actions of human beings.

In Sudan, the religious dimension accompanies a citizen's life both day and night, from dawn to dusk, marking actions, rules, openings, closures, obligations, rights and duties.

The religious dimension permeates the life of the Sudanese in all respects: in greetings and in verbal expressions, in well-wishing, in businesses, in the organisation of time and space, in relationships.

In Sudan, as mentioned above, Islamic law, *Sharia*, is enforced. We do not presume that it can be reduced to a few lines, but it seems fitting that we include a more in-depth description for the practical purposes of the reader.

Sudan is also a country of many Sufi sects.

Sufism is widespread in all social environments and, in the past decades, it has probably allowed for a softer amalgam of Islam and the African world. Sufism is considered a more esoteric and ecstatic branch of Islam. Prayers, spiritual songs and dances are favored by members of Sufi sects, and are generally practiced on Friday.

What is relevant about the presence of Sufism in Sudan is its scope of inspiring non-violence and resilience in the faithful. Sufism is practiced as 'love for God', whereas a more orthodox Islam prefers the concept 'fear of God'.

Sufism's contribution of having forged a friendly, hospitable and inclusive people is essential for Sudan.

Box *Sharia*

Sharia literally means 'path'. The term *Sharia* appears in the Holy Quran only once, "Then we have put you on the correct path; so follow it and do not follow the whims of those who do not know" (45:18). The terminological juxtaposition between 'path' and 'whims' expresses the exact intent of 'salvation and guidance' as brought by the Islamic religion through the revelation of the Holy Quran. The divine origin makes this system immutable (Holy Quran, 10:15). In Sudan, the *Sharia* was enforced in 1983 and continues to the present. The Holy Quran (word of God) is its primary source, followed by the Sunnah (teachings and sayings of the Prophet).

According to the Western point of view, *Sharia* could be defined as 'legal conduct', meaning: law. *Sharia*, especially in countries where it finds a normative application, is tantamount to saying 'law', since the Holy Quran, following the Sunnah, contains a series of principles that regulate all aspects of life (dietary norms, behavioural rules (individual and collective), family law: marriage, divorce, inheritance, succession rules, business law, tax law, criminal law, etc.).

It is precisely for these reasons that one must have some basic knowledge of *Sharia* and its principles to effectively communicate in countries where it is enforced. When you are in the company of a Sudanese (Muslim), for common courtesy, you should know that it is not advisable to invite them to play poker or discuss issues related to the private-sexual sphere (virginity, sex, homosexuality, etc.) as they are considered out of place themes and are even linked to rather binding penal codes. It is not acceptable to raise doubts about God, the Holy Quran, the Prophet, as they are unquestionable, unchangeable, revealed by God to the Prophet, through the Angel Gabriel. To cite some examples related to etiquette, "if someone yawns, they must put a hand to cover the mouth", as not doing so would be unacceptable (Sunna Al Bukhari, Sunna Al Adab Al Mufrad). It is inadvisable to "blow on food or hot drinks (Sunna Al Bukhari), or to offer food cooked with garlic because... anyone who eats garlic should not approach the Mosque" (Sunna Al Bukhari), nor drink alcohol and eat pork and other specific foods (Holy Quran, 2: 219; 4: 43; 5: 3-4-5-6-90-91). It is rude to criticise or despise food (Sunna Al Bukhari), and it is also discouraged to eat quantities beyond the necessity of sustenance as "food for two is enough for three people, and food for three is enough for four people" (Sunna Al Bukhari).

Sharia as a 'path', an ethical and behavioural moral code, accompanies the life of the Muslim, starting from when they first hear the alarm in the morning and use a particular foot to step out of bed (the right), until they sleep, referring to the fact that "when the Prophet of God went to sleep, he used to sleep on his right side" (Sunna Al Bukhari et al.).

8 Honesty and Dignity

These are values that vary from culture to culture, both in qualitative and quantitative terms. An ethnocentric attitude could lead the unwary observer to judge the levels of honesty and dignity in a social group based on personal parameters that should instead be contextualised in a foreign country.

8.1 Honesty

The Sudanese prefer to base their relationships on harmony, productive communication and friendliness. To largely generalise, this is part of its character and this is why, in most cases, foreigners feel very welcome in Sudan.

The Sudanese are honest, reliable in their word, but perhaps disorganised and less able to set up long-term strategies – something that could generate unexpected changes in plan – but generally this does not happen due to dishonesty. In negotiations, in personal and professional relationships, the Sudanese maintain high levels of both behavioural and conceptual honesty, which facilitates their relationship with diversity.

Perhaps it is more a reserved and timid nature that creates some obstacles when trying to deeply and quickly get to know the Sudanese. During initial meetings, the Sudanese do not share large amounts of personal information, nor do they provide extensive information about themselves in general or the issues that are at hand. To repeat, this is ‘being reserved’ in a framework of honesty and truthfulness regarding human relationships.

In business, or in interpersonal relationships for professional purposes, there are many testimonies from interviewees that paint an image of a reliable, sincere and honest people with whom you want to continue doing business.

8.2 Dignity

The value of dignity in the Arab world and even more in the Muslim world is particularly relevant. We try to avoid the loss of dignity, which sometimes manifests itself in the form of ‘losing face’ during a discussion or when someone is reprimanded.

Although somewhat frequent in Italy, in Sudan asking for an official apology, making someone blatantly admit a mistake, and humiliating an interlocutor by asking them to confess a possible wrongdoing should not be done.

It is much better to adopt indirect corrective measures, or tactics that somehow restore equilibrium during the confrontation while avoiding potential embarrassment.

The loss of dignity is ultimately the loss of honour in Sudan. Therefore, you risk that someone may try to obstinately defend themselves, even by repeatedly denying obvious evidence.

To provide further insight on the topic, an Italian informant from the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development told us that during the design and planning phases of a project that benefitted the poorest sections of the population (the jargon referred to them as ‘vulnerable groups’), the local authorities asked, with a certain assertiveness, that the term ‘vulnerable’ be eliminated from the title of the project.

In a way, this perhaps communicates discomfort regarding one trying to undermine a common sense of social dignity.

9 The Idea of Knowledge, of Knowing How to Do

The way that knowledge and skills are approached, or how one defines themselves as prepared, good or professional, can greatly vary in the intercultural sphere.

In Sudan, knowledge is based mainly on memorisation and factual knowledge. There is a certain standardisation that somehow makes the Sudanese approach knowledge in a less critical way. Sometimes discussions do not occur, especially when it comes to Islam. This approach may seem restrictive for a foreigner accustomed to the freedom to argue, contrast, or take an opposing position.

Despite this different approach in comparison to the perception of knowledge in Italy, in Sudan there are many brilliant minds, that are very often appreciated abroad for their ability to express themselves at high levels in many professions.

As already said several times, in their relationships with foreigners, the Sudanese people prefer harmony and courtesy.

This is certainly a merit that can also cause misunderstanding when the defense of harmony comes at the expense of effective understanding. Some Italian informants, especially in mixed Italian-Sudanese business environments, have cited a constant reoccurrence: some Sudanese employees, who were asked if they understood instructions or if they knew how to do a certain thing, always answered affirmatively with confidence. Only later it was discovered that those employees did not really know how to act, but that they had shown confidence to avoid losing face or to not contradict their boss by expressing doubts.

