

## **Problems in Intercultural Communication Related to the Nonverbal Dimension**

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**Summary** 1 Gestures. – 2 Greetings. – 3 Head and Expressions. – 4 Arms and Hands. – 5 Legs and Body. – 6 Odours and Noises. – 7 Interpersonal Distance. – 8 Clothing. – 9 Status Symbols. – 10 Gifts.

The nonverbal dimension is particularly interesting in intercultural communication. On one hand, it very often influences the meaning of the verbal message (it can add information or nuances, stress or even contradict what is being said verbally), while on the other, it is contingent on culture. This means that gestures may not be understood in other cultures or that they are misunderstood and can cause embarrassment or conflict due to incorrect interpretation.

The nonverbal dimension is divided into four categories: gestures (and movements); proxemics (distance between people); clothing (its symbolic value, especially in some formal occasions); objects (items that take on a specific value in people's lives, such as an engagement ring or wedding band).

### **1 Gestures**

The Sudanese, like Italians, often use their arms and hands to communicate.

As for Sudanese gestures, it is important to cite the 'little bag' hand gesture (four fingers joined at the thumb to form the shape of a bag) as it can be misinterpreted by Italians. In Italy, this gesture means 'what do you want?' or 'what are you doing?'. In Sudan, it generally communicates a request to 'wait' or 'go slower', but may have different usages. For example, as some informants noticed, if done in the middle of traffic it can mean 'wait, I'm going', but when done by a father to his son it can signify a threat like 'wait, or else I'll slap you'.

## 2 Greetings

Like Italy, in Sudan a greeting with kisses and hugs is a practice that generally takes place between friends and relatives. An embrace is common in situations where there is greater familiarity, while a handshake can be appropriate in both formal and informal contexts.

It is common for two men to greet each other with a handshake or a pat on the back; two women shake hands and there may also be a kiss. Instead, between men and women, a handshake or even a verbal greeting is preferred to a kiss (which is very intimate and therefore risky if there is not a great deal of familiarity beforehand). With more religiously observant women, it is inadvisable for a man to initiate a handshake as it could be considered offensive. So, in cases where you do not know the woman well, it is best for a man to bring his hand close to his heart and greet without any physical contact.

In Sudan, a hug during a greeting often lasts a very long time: in fact, it is a moment when conversation occurs (for example, we are informed if all loved ones are doing well).

On some occasions, bows can be practiced: they are signs of respect during meetings with high-level figures of the state or religion (for example, bows are used in some Sufi rituals).

## 3 Head and Expressions

Head movements to deny or express consent do not differ from those used in Italy. However, it is also possible to communicate dissent by clicking the tongue.

In general, a smile expresses agreement and sincerity, its meaning is therefore associated with positivity, not irony.

In formal situations where there is a lack of familiarity or the roles are asymmetrical, the Sudanese tend to avoid eye contact out of shyness or as a sign of respect.

## 4 Arms and Hands

Regarding the use and placement of the hands, keeping them in your pockets is considered acceptable, but not in formal contexts.

As for the handshake, remember that between women it is always permitted, while – as we have already said – in the male/female relationship it is not always expected, especially by the most religiously observant individuals, who prefer to avoid it.

## 5 Legs and Body

In Sudan, unlike other Arab countries, crossing the legs and showing the soles of one's shoes is socially acceptable and has no particularly offensive meaning.

There is a lot of reservation regarding nudity: even in places where it is normal for Italians to be naked, for example, in the men's locker room at a gym, in Sudan it would be unthinkable. In the gym or at the swimming pool (where there are different hours of operation for men and women), you tend to shower with underwear, a bathing suit or a towel.

## 6 Odours and Noises

The Sudanese seem to be very tolerant of the various noises and smells of the body. Blowing your nose, as well as letting off other noises, is not considered a serious problem.

It is customary to wear intense fragrances.

## 7 Interpersonal Distance

There is no strict distance to maintain during interpersonal contact. You can stand very close to one another, but physical contact is only allowed if you are a relative or an intimate friend. Physical proximity is common in greetings between people of the same sex. Walking arm in arm is unanimously considered infrequent by our informants.

Intimate physical contact is allowed only after marriage (for example, two people who are dating cannot kiss each other in public). Even after marriage, physical contact is an act reserved for intimate, domestic environments. Therefore, one will not see a husband and wife kissing or being affectionate in the street and it is not advisable for a foreigner to have such behaviours in public.

## 8 Clothing

In Sudan it is common for men to wear the *jallabia* (a tunic), while married women wear the *thob* (a long tunic) that exists in various types. Young girls can wear conservative, casual clothes as long as they do not leave their breasts, legs and ankles exposed.

In public institutions, as well as at school, you may be asked to wear a uniform. If women have to wear uniforms, they are generally white, regardless of the work they do. According to some informants, male Su-

danese clothing could be summarised in the following three types:

- Western-style: trousers, jacket, tie;
- the uniform used in public offices or in ministries: short-sleeved shirt with pockets on both the left and right breast, and trousers of the same color, usually beige, light green, petrol green, or blue;
- *jallabia*: a tunic, with a shirt and trousers underneath, and a typical turban of various shapes. There is no precise rule regarding the turban: people wear it according to the occasion.

For this reason, you can see a person in a jacket and trousers in the morning, and then in the evening in *jallabia*.

Some people use leopard print leather slippers that symbolically identify them as very powerful individuals in their clan. Usually shoes are white slippers, without laces, which are worn under the *jallabia*.

Religion significantly influences clothing. Religious leaders are dressed in white and have their heads covered with a kind of turban. As Sudan is a predominantly religious country, women often wear a veil (*hijab*, which covers the hair, ears and neck), but not the *niqab* (the full veil that leaves only the eyes uncovered).

On special occasions, such as a wedding, traditional clothes are worn. The female dresses in yellow and red: on the first day she wears a veil, while on the second day she wears something golden around her head. The man dresses in white and carries gold with a red rope.

## **9 Status Symbols**

Social status can be demonstrated with different objects, such as, mobile phones, jewellery (like rings with precious stones), footwear and clothing (high quality fabrics and craftsmanship). Giving importance to brands can be a sign of high social status. For some informants, status can occasionally be shown by the use of a cane, although it is a somewhat outdated trend, derived from certain ethnic groups of the East.

## **10 Gifts**

In Sudan, gifts are not a widespread custom. Of course, the choice to give or not give a gift also depends on the situation and the relationship that exists between parties. Celebrating a birthday is a fairly recent habit and gifts are usually brought for children. In the event of a marriage, relatives generally give money and gold. If you are invited to someone's home, it might be appropriate to bring a dessert (even if you do not bring something, it is not considered an offense). When receiving gifts, you do not

need to show surprise, but it is appropriate to express gratitude. Usually they are not immediately opened (but regarding this practice there is not total agreement between informants, which shows how culture is also personal and not all practices are shared).

Commemorative plaques are frequently given for the participation in an event.

