

Between Languages and Cultures.

Intercultural Communication between the Italians and Sudanese

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Communicative Events

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Summary 1 Professional Relationships within Italian Institutions. – 2 Telephone Conversations. – 3 Professional Encounters and Meetings. – 4 Parties and Celebrations. – 5 Courtship. – 6 Relationships Between Teachers and Italian Language Students. – 7 At Dinner, a Restaurant or Café. – 8 Medical Visits. – 9 Business Negotiations.

As highlighted by Balboni and Caon (2015, 110), “communication takes place during communicative events: a conference, a dinner, a cocktail party, a meeting or a project involving group work; these are all typical activities in which people find themselves interacting with others that work in companies, universities, and international institutions”. Every situation is governed by social and cultural rules. We believe that it is important to specify that the events described below will be addressed from an intercultural and not an anthropological or relational point of view.

In the following paragraphs, we will present some communicative events that emerged while conducting field interviews with informants to try and describe some features of the Italian-Sudanese context. As already stated in the second chapter of this volume dedicated to the research methodology, the objective is not to generalise values or verbal and nonverbal behaviours applicable to all communicative situations between Italy and Sudan, but to present some data that emerged from the case study in question.



1 Professional Relationships within Italian Institutions

The first event that we wanted to investigate is how professional relationships are structured within the context of an Italian institution located in Sudan, such as the offices of the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development (AICS) in Khartoum. In particular, how the work of the Italians is evaluated by the Sudanese and what values are attributed to certain internal working rules. For example, we wondered if the collaborative relationship established over time was considered one of submission, dependency or autonomy.

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In this regard, some local informants told us that professional relationships with the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development were evaluated in a positive way, and that within the Sudanese government there is an awareness of the importance of international cooperation as it establishes a genuine and true dynamic of interdependence.

Among the various positive testimonies, below is an excerpt from an interview that seems particularly significant:

In my opinion the agency is perceived positively, seen as a means to improve the living conditions of the population. The agency acts as a bridge between certain problematic issues and the local context. The Sudanese do not experience this as submission. There is not a sense of beneficiary – donor dualism. At an institutional level, there is a lot of collaboration to reach certain objectives, many of which originate with local input.

The interventions that benefit the local population have always been recognised. The partners that have shown their support have become friends of Sudan and the Sudanese. A great deal of gratitude is always shown toward them.

Furthermore, we consider it essential to highlight the relationship of trust that has been established between the Agency and the Sudanese ministries in a very sensitive field that deals with specific cultural values and reference points, like the social services and healthcare sector. To quote another informant:

Certainly the most difficult aspect for cooperation is dependent on the field of intervention. For me, the priority is the social services sector, where it is difficult to establish trust with your counterpart. Working in this sector is complex due to the sensitive nature of the issues that we work with, which are unconventional and at times far removed from Sudanese culture. As an example, the medical field could be considered 'a cultural invasion'. There must be a base of mutual trust established to achieve good results in terms of cooperation.

2 Telephone Conversations

As for telephone conversations between the Italians and Sudanese, some informants told us that the beginning of a conversation is characterised by a customary greeting like "hello", "good morning", "*as-salam 'alekum*", followed by the name or title of the recipient of the call, as if to confirm his identity (for example, "Mr. Ambassador?"). Next, we see that some small talk takes place before the central theme of the discourse is addressed:

In general, the conversation structure is reminiscent of a British framework:

- say hello;
- ask about family and work;
- talk about the purpose of the call;
- say goodbye with reciprocal well-wishes.

3 Professional Encounters and Meetings

Professional encounters and meetings can lead to some intercultural problems, for example when stabilising and expressing hierarchies and social roles, which also translate into communicative roles: who starts, who concludes, etc.

Contrary to telephone conversations, during in person meetings all interviewees agreed that professional meetings are organised in different settings, from office rooms where ordinary activities are held to places or rooms dedicated to more particular exchanges.

Some local informants that we interviewed told us that official meetings meant for the public are characterized by an exchange of greeting rituals. They are also held in a specific setting that introduces the meeting ("you sit in a room in throne-like chairs of a rectangular formation, then go to a room where the meeting begins") and include formalities related to religious customs "like a short prayer".

As for nonverbal codes, water, coffee, tea or something refreshing like juice, as well as dates, peanuts, roasted nuts or fresh fruit are usually served.

A moment for a break, or specifically a coffee break, is very important, as one interviewee says in the following excerpt: "it is always good to prepare for a coffee break. It would be rude to not foresee such a moment".

Whether there is a short break or a buffet prepared for more important meetings, there never fails to be a moment dedicated to socialisation.

This social invitation can also be found in more formal celebrations where cocktails, buffets and free-seating are preferred to formal placements at the table. Therefore, there is a certain informality, even on very formal occasions.

Regarding the structure of a business meeting, the duration varies. But, taking into consideration what was said in the chapter dedicated to time-related values, it would be unlikely that one attends a quick meeting.

Unlike Italians who appear to be more flexible, especially in terms of taking turns when speaking and interrupting, in Sudan one can ask questions but may not interrupt the interlocutor as this communicative move would usually be perceived as aggressive. However, one's contribution is welcomed if it respects turn taking as we can see in this interview excerpt: "in group work there is a hierarchy with a leader who manages, you can in-

tervene by raising your hand during a moment for questions and answers, otherwise, we do not talk too much. There is respect for the other's time".

Regarding an agenda and sticking to the scheduled topics of discussion during meetings, in Sudan the interviewees told us that often there is a "generic agenda", not to be considered a dogma. The structure of an extended professional meeting, such as a reception for a visiting foreign delegation, can ultimately be as follows:

- a short prayer or an auspicious phrase (which could be translated to "in the name of God the benevolent and merciful");
- initial greetings;
- topics to be discussed;
- informal conclusion.

In meetings it is also possible to wear casual clothes. However, in institutions, especially if there are high-ranking officials, there is a standardisation of clothing and the use of a jacket and dress shirt for men (often with a tie) and an elegant tunic for older women. Younger female officials wear long skirts and long-sleeved shirts, to which often a light sweater or jacket is added to preserve modesty.

4 Parties and Celebrations

As for the Sudanese context, the interviewed informants explained that parties must be considered separately from marriages. Marriage receptions are more frequent and are real moments of celebration; sometimes in the suburbs, they can last more than a day. Musicians are invited and meals are prepared for many people. There is no dancing (in the true sense of the term) during weddings, but the participants gather in a circle and follow the rhythm of live music, swaying, as the following interviewee explains:

the Sudanese are very fond of parties. Rooms are rented, approximately from 12:00 pm to 12:00 am. As for music, you do not dance at weddings but there is live music and people stand in front of the singer, following the rhythm by snapping one's fingers. It is a way of honouring the singer, the lyrics and the type of music.

The colour characteristic of marriage is red, the colour of celebration. Before getting married, women must undergo a ritual performed with henna. The hands and feet of the bride are decorated to give her protection and wish her a good future.

Celebrations that are not for marriages are given less importance. It is unusual that a Sudanese person would celebrate a birthday or an an-

niversary with the same enthusiasm as a wedding. Yet another category would be religious celebrations, like *eid al-Fitr* in Arabic, which marks the end of the month-long fast during Ramadan.

Parties are organised at home, or for those who can afford a great expense, in rented structures or even farms along the Nile. Music, especially live music, is always present as well as food in abundance. Eating together, harmonising with music in a circle, and having fun are all classic elements of being together and enjoying oneself in Sudan.

A recent change is happening among youth in the capital, especially those coming from wealthy families, for whom it is more and more popular to celebrate in the Western fashion by having dinner at a restaurant and socialising with groups of friends at home.

Box *Iftar* (or breaking the fast)

Iftar, an evening meal eaten by Muslims when the sunset prayer approaches, takes place during the month of Ramadan, a time dedicated to coming closer to God. Ramadan is a 30-day prayer period when the faithful refrain from drinking, eating and having sexual relations from dawn to dusk. Fasting at Ramadan is considered one of the pillars of Islam and represents a moment of physical and spiritual purification through the act of fasting.

Iftar is a moment of true celebration during which one can eat and drink.

According to the Holy Quran, the believer needs to recite a prayer before eating, seeking God's compassion and asking God to evaluate their effort during the fast.

According to tradition, the Prophet Muhammad broke the fast by eating some dates. Consequently, to celebrate *Iftar*, it is best to break the fast by eating an odd number of dates.

To go into further detail, we observed two ways of doing this: The first, more classical way is to break the fast by eating a few dates and drinking water, followed by the prayer at sunset, then consuming a meal. The second, less formal way is to start consuming the meal as soon as the sun goes down.

During this period people usually eat together, at home or outside, to celebrate the importance of the event, a joyful time that inspires feelings of inclusivity and solidarity. In fact, it is believed that offering a meal to someone during *Iftar* is a charitable and loving gesture, particularly toward those who are less well-off.

Iftar is an important social event that involves entire families, friends and communities. It is also a moment of great closeness between the Sudanese and foreigners, who are very often invited to the event and to share moments of joy around the table.

5 Courtship

Men and women cannot touch each other in public. Looks of interest act as a substitute and let a man know that a woman is interested. However, it is worth remembering that women will never make open declarations of love. It is in this way that one's modesty and dignity is maintained, as we can see in the testimonies of various informants:

Girls flirt in this way: they try to be noticed by boys. Girls will never explicitly express themselves as they would be considered without dignity and would even 'scare' the boy off.

A girl begins to give explicit signs of interest to a boy in order to make him understand that if he ever asks her out, she would be willing to accept.

6 Relationships Between Teachers and Italian Language Students

One of the most significant samples in our survey on Italian-Sudanese communication was a large group made up of students in Italian courses. To date, the largest class was led by an Italian female teacher.

In order to investigate the student perspective, we asked them the following question: "How is your relationship with the teacher? Formal or informal? Do you speak with her using *tu* (informal) or *lei* (formal)?"

In response, the students in the Italian course told us that the instructor prefers a relationship among peers where *tu* (informal) is used rather than *lei* (formal). Despite this request, the students explained that they prefer to use a formal title, although they still maintain a less formal relationship with this teacher than with local instructors (for example at school or university).

In line with this greater informality in the Italian-Sudanese context, students feel more free to communicate (although perhaps only partially) what they think.

Regarding the structure of the lesson, the students explain that unlike other disciplines, they are allowed to ask questions. The requests are always preceded by a moment of silence where, probably, the students are evaluating if and how to ask a question.

Moreover, the teacher tells us that "students get involved and begin activities, but that several times, the activity has not yet been understood. Instead of asking for another explanation, there is a moment of silence in the classroom".

As was said in the chapter dedicated to values and the concept of dignity, sometimes Sudanese students prefer not to openly show a lack of understanding. They are even less inclined to show that they did not understand an explanation.

In terms of the teaching methodology to adopt in the classroom, the teacher pointed out some differences in comparison with the Italian system. In Sudan, students are accustomed to a more translational and mnemonic method of learning while the Italian approach (at least in recent decades) is more communicative. This methodological difference can

lead to some discomfort when trying out alternative teaching methods, as reported in the following interview excerpt: “Our impression is that Sudanese students understand the need to go beyond a purely mnemonic-grammatical approach to language learning, but find it difficult to break away from their study habits, especially when taking into consideration the teaching methods to which they are accustomed”.

One of the interviewees explains that a traditional lesson at university is as follows: “you listen in silence, you take notes, you do not ask questions”.

It is not uncommon to find school classes, primary school especially, that are very crowded. This happens often in suburban areas where education professionals are scarce.

Meetings with teachers are planned in advance and, unlike Italy, they are normally not interactive in the sense that the teacher explains the child to the family, and parents are not used to asking questions.

7 At Dinner, a Restaurant or Café

Dinners take place at home, or in the city, in trendy establishments. The places where you can drink beverages like juices and order foods like sandwiches or more elaborate dishes are quite expensive in Khartoum and therefore not accessible to all youth.

Pork, as well as alcohol, is forbidden, in line with what the Muslim religion dictates. A particularly lavish dinner consists of both fish and meat dishes, especially lamb or mutton, which can be grilled in the form of meatballs, like *kofta*, on skewers or as a filet.

If you are invited to a meal, you do not need to eat and finish everything: it is enough to say that you are full, and it will not be considered rude. Many dishes are consumed by directly using your hands. Often people eat together, taking from the same plate.

Indicative of how culture is variable and how strategies can be found to avoid bad impressions, an informant said that “finishing everything means that the quantity was not enough, and not finishing everything means that it was not good. In both situations, the important thing is to compliment the meal”.

Traditionally, there are generally three meals:

In the morning tea, dates and other light things are eaten. The important meal is called *futuur*, which is usually consumed between 10:00 am and 11:00 am and consists of blended chickpeas, a piece of cheese, eggs, some bread and fruit. Then, the third meal or dinner is consumed around 6:00 pm.

There are people who, influenced by more international customs, have lunch around 1:00 pm or have dinner at 7:00 pm or 8:00 pm.

As mentioned, Western menus are increasingly popular within the capital, and the most welcomed dishes are Italian classics, like pasta and pizza.

Drinks generally have a fruit juice base, such as tamarind, baobab, mango, or a base of hibiscus or mint. As previously stated, alcohol is strictly forbidden.

Friends often meet up at restaurants, while birthdays and other types of celebrations usually take place in private homes.

Western cafés, as we mentioned, are multiplying in the capital, Khartoum. The prices charged are accessible only to young people who come from more affluent families.

In the previous chapters that touch upon the concept of space, we mentioned improvised areas – often along the sides of the street – where the Sudanese of all ages come together to drink tea or coffee.

8 Medical Visits

There are public and private medical facilities within the country. Some interviewees say that there is still no systematic health education, nor a real culture of prevention.

Like in Italy, it is possible to wait for hours to be visited in public hospitals.

Some Italian informants who had first-hand experience with Sudanese public healthcare facilities described feeling as if they were in a fairly chaotic space, where communication, shifts, speaking with the doctor, and even the visit itself had complex components that could bring about intercultural misunderstandings.

There is a tendency to self-medicate both with methods related to traditional medicine (plants, herbs, flowers, etc.) and through the use of drugs recommended by a trusted pharmacist, but perhaps not always etiologically associated with the problem. In line with the aforementioned observations, the culture of prevention is not very diffuse and it is possible that a patient arrives at the hospital with an advanced stage of illness.

Prescription therapies are not always closely followed, and there does not seem to be much care given to following a treatment consistently, even after having undergone an operation.

In the previous pages, we attributed this occurrence to the possible fatalistic approach that the Sudanese have regarding illness, seen as something controlled from above, and to be accepted with resilience. This attitude could be incomprehensible for an Italian who instead tends to quickly or immediately consult a doctor about signs of illness (as well as prevention and maintaining a healthy lifestyle).

This observation of an informant-physician is interesting as it reveals how important religion can be in people's daily lives: "To explain the days and times when it is necessary to follow treatment, especially in the suburbs, some doctors resort to the daily prayer schedule. In this way, the patient is given a possible frame of reference on which to organise their therapy".

The discourse changes for younger generations, among which, as observed by an informant, the practice of self-treatment is spreading with the purchase of generic, over-the-counter drugs.

Finally, women want to be visited by doctors of the same sex, particularly regarding more intimate visits, like gynecological ones.

9 Business Negotiations

In Sudan, it is essential that a relationship of trust is established with the counterpart. The Sudanese prefer friendly relationships, built over time rather than with the conclusion of a quick, impersonal agreement.

This could confuse an Italian manager who prefers time management, which saves both time and money, through Skype meetings and sending documents by e-mail (one must take into consideration the cost that a company sustains when sending employees abroad). There are very few brief, in-person meetings, and perhaps only at the moment when the final contract is signed.

An informant working in the field said: “The Sudanese want to see you, meet you and then talk about work. The Italian company finds it challenging in Sudan. Here, one day is not enough; more visits and days of negotiations are needed because the Sudanese must trust and understand. In addition, they are not used to adopting time management strategies. The attitude toward the unexpected is that it takes place by divine will, so of course more time is necessary than when making business deals in the West or in Italy”.

