



A Brief Afghan Culture Orientation for Host Nations 9.2.21.2

Also see the blog post on Folk Islam 09.03.21

(The following information is edited and compiled by Anna Hampton and was obtained from a wide variety of people who wish to not be named specifically. Additional content is used with permission and comes from Enjoy Afghanistan, Interlit Foundation, Peshawar, Pakistan, 2013; and also from a 2013 Language and Orientation Audio Lecture series in the editor's possession).

Introduction:

Dari and Pashto are the official languages of Afghanistan. There are six more official languages: Uzbeki, Turkmen, Baluchi, Pashai, Nuristani, and Pamiri. Dari, also called Farsi, is Afghan Persian and is used as the language of education in Afghanistan for the past several decades. Pashto is the language of the Pashtuns. It is estimated that one third of the Pashtuns live in Afghanistan and the remaining two-thirds in Pakistan. Most Afghan Pashtuns live in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Ethnicity

Afghans tend to identify themselves by their tribe or ethnicity, not as "Afghan. There are Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Nuristanis, Baluchis, and Pashai and more.

Disclaimer

As such, the following culture orientation for the host cultures receiving Afghan refugees in 2021 is meant to be a guide, **not** hard and fixed rules, as Afghan culture varies from group to group, how educated or uneducated, village vs. city, high status or low status, etc. The material is written to show the host nationalities receiving Afghan refugees insight into how the Afghan refugee may be viewing culture, and hopefully will provide empathy when there is

misunderstanding and/or miscommunication as Afghans learn the new culture in which they find themselves in the fall of 2021. Obviously, this guide cannot answer all the questions that may arise. If you are unsure how to handle something, ask the older Afghan what you should do, but also ask someone who has more experience with shame/honor cultures as they may be able to offer some awareness as well.

There are all sorts of ways Afghans will not know how to behave in a host culture, and all sorts of ways the host culture will not understand the Afghan refugee. For example:

Western politeness is...

Asking a guest if he would like a cup of tea;

Asking about the health of a friend's wife;

Complimenting a woman on the beauty of her child;

Asking someone to pass the salt.

Afghan politeness is...

Serving your guest a pot of tea;

Asking about the welfare of a friend's house;

Prefacing a compliment for a child with nAm-e-khudA (in the name of God);

Reaching and getting the salt for oneself.

When in doubt, ask, and be quick to laugh at yourself if you make a mistake. Understand that in general, Afghans come from a region of the world that sees relationships and culture through the lens of honor and shame, and many of them are now refugees in cultures that are more oriented to truth/guilt.

POLITENESS IN AFGHAN CULTURE

Politeness has a different place in Afghan culture than in a Western society, for example. There is status within culture; levels among educated and they are very conscious of these levels. Hosts are wise to show respect at every level of society. You can destroy a relationship in a single bad conversation. Anger, and overt anger reflects badly on you; only rarely is it appropriate.

1. Appearances are very important

- Give the appearance of warmth and respect; be glad to see someone; welcome them warmly; a guest that shows up unexpectedly becomes the priority.
- All interactions should be sandwiched: pleasantries expressed before and after difficult topics.
- Express a willingness to help. “I will try” is better than “I can’t” as this likely will be interpreted as “I won’t.”
- No short words and abrupt actions.
- Forgiveness is complex and navigated differently in Afghan culture, so try not to offend rather than offend and come back to try to fix it.

2. Show Respect

Age – Older members of Afghan society are highly respected and often the head of their extended family. Treat every older person with respect, regardless of their social or economic status. Older ones should be seated furthest from the door.

Professional Status - culture has definite positions – education is the ladder that moves you up, as well as power. Afghans tend to use titles for positions such as teachers, doctors, engineers, etc.

Guests – guests are shown respect by seating them first according to age and then to professional status.

Publicly - Don’t draw unnecessary attention to yourself; don’t go into a group of people and mimic the lowest common denominator in Afghan culture, but learn from those who are more elegant;

Communicating bad news: Share bad news gently over time. Afghans are gentle in giving bad news.

Decline an invitation to tea – use “thank you” to decline repeatedly, rather than a direct “no.”

Do not point the bottom of your foot towards someone, such as when a host crosses his/her leg across the knee.

If pointing at something, use your whole hand, not your finger.

When you compliment someone on their jewelry or something in their home, they may think that you want it and give it to you. The reverse is also true.

Pregnancy is not discussed in mixed company.

3. Correcting Mistakes

- The co-worker who has made a mistake – how to correct them? Don't correct in a group and make the mistake obvious to everyone; take them on their own, and gently show them.
- Missing Items with no clear culprit: The theft with no clear culprit – don't call someone a thief if you don't have 100% proof. If something goes missing – try to find it, ask for help to find it. You are highlighting the fact that it is missing and giving your Afghan friend the opportunity to help you “find it.”

4. The Geography of a Room

- Farther into the room is the place of the honor – farther from the door, usually is the head of the room.
- Don't go straight to that place in an Afghan's living room. There's no geography to our rooms - but there is in Afghan culture. It looks a bit prideful to them if we go sit the furthest inside their living room without being invited. Let them invite you further into their room.

5. Greetings:

- Men – (how they greet) they talk the greetings over each other; then after a pause, “How are you really?”
- Men - Extending two hands is very warm; Cheek to cheek kiss – Afghan men hold hands as a complement of friendship;
- Men – use the term “brother” with one another
- Host man to Afghan woman
 - o don't extend hand (she may refuse it); Allow the Afghan woman to be the one to extend her hand
 - o Prolonged eye contact can give a bad impression
 - o Host men should not photograph Afghan women.
- Host women to Afghan man
 - o In a professional situation eye contact is fine;
 - o Host women can extend hand if she wishes to an Afghan man, but doesn't have to.
- Women to women – similar man to man – hugs, kissing is more common, multiple kisses
- Adult to children
 - o show kindness to children
 - o In Afghan culture, children are thought to not sin until they are seven, so they don't get disciplined;
 - o Respond to rowdy children with graciousness, even if you are annoyed
- Try not to lose your temper, deal with children in a firm controlled way;

6. **Don't call a baby beautiful!**

- Don't make comments about how beautiful the child is because it is not appreciated.
- Don't single the child out; An Afghan may assume that you have just brought the evil spirits out. They will say "Nam-e-khuda" (name of God)– they use it to ward off evil spirits.
- Show kindness by playing with the child or asking to hold the child.

7. **Learn the art of vagueness.**

- You may get asked a lot of specific questions that are inappropriate in the host culture.
- Afghans don't answer questions about money, intimate relationships, etc. and you shouldn't feel that you need to either. Instead, give a vague reply and give the same answer a few times (they will get the hint).
- If you're a woman being asked difficult questions, just back out of the conversation.

8. **Time**

- Time is precious to Afghans – if you give them time, you are showing value; listen to their ideas and then present your own.
- In the West, we tend to value expedience, so we want to get to the point quickly. Not so for the Afghan - Often things are given in a sandwich, so look for the thin slice in the middle; leave yourself room for negotiation, don't come to the meeting with a fixed idea.
- For Afghans, time is oriented around the natural progression of the day and the time of prayer.
- Afghans tend to believe that the future cannot be planned with any certainty, because it is formed by the will of god, which is unknowable. This is seen in the use of the word, "enshAllA" (God willing).

9. **Clothing**

- Afghans dress to convey honor and respect to others.
- They value being clean and tidy.
- If visiting Afghans, better choices for hostessing women is to wear loser fitting clothing – show no cleavage, better to wear shirts or dresses with sleeves, and skirts that are knee-length or longer is best. Please no leggings!
- For hosting men, again, trousers (not shorts), and shirts with sleeves.

10. **Business Etiquette**

- Business cards – carry a sense of importance and prestige. If you are given one, take it respectfully and consider it.
- Afghans communicate more indirectly. You may need to read between the lines rather than receiving an explicit answer.

- Honor and shame are very important. Express yourself in a way that is not confrontational or that blames someone.
- Meetings which involve negotiation – generally – they give their 5-10 minutes speech of all their ideas; then you give your side, and slowly you move on together.

GENDER NORMS

- Men and women will often sit separately at social functions, men on one side and women on the other.
- How the Afghan woman behaves and dresses preserves the family honor. Modesty is essential for this.
- Host women – be restrained in your behavior to male colleagues. Over familiarity can be interpreted as having a bad character.
- Host women – avoid being alone in a room with an Afghan man.
- Host women – if an Afghan man asks an inappropriate question, you do not have to answer it.
- Host men – don't ask about the Afghan man's wife or daughters. Ask about his family.
- Host men – avoid taking pictures of Afghan women
- Host men – avoid being alone with an Afghan woman, as her reputation is at stake. Avoid touching/hugging.
- **Appropriateness from teen boys towards women** - Teen Afghan boys know they shouldn't be overly warm with young women – Seek the help of an older Afghan if teens are hassling you
- **Take care when housing refugees – men and boys unrelated sleeping together is not a good idea.** Younger boys (12 and younger) should be placed with the women for their safety.
- Take care to not leave a host teen boy in the home with an Afghan girl – her reputation is at stake.

HOSPITALITY & ETIQUETTE

There are two Afghan idioms that sum up hospitality:

A Guest is a friend of God

and

The man who doesn't welcome guests is the enemy of God

Hospitality is the strongest expression of interpersonal ties and relationships. It is such a strong code of honor that it is culturally required to be equally reciprocal when you have been the guest of another. Be sensitive, as Afghan refugees coming to your country likely cannot meet this code at the present moment. When you eat or drink with Afghans in their home, you are “sharing salt” which means the relationship is being established. Guests are so important – most of the time in the West, we meet at a restaurant, but Afghans invite into the home.

If the visit is for business purposes, it is not polite to begin too hastily on the matter of business. The ideal is to make every business encounter first a social one.

- There is a rule, though not always followed, that an invitation is offered three times before it is accepted. You may also need to invite more than once. If Afghans want you to come, they will urge you and give a specific time and date.
- Invitations are usually given verbally and at short notice.
- The invite to drink tea is polite speech. Wait until it is offered three times before accepting.
- Lunch is usually noon to 2pm, late afternoon tea is 5-7pm, and dinner between dusk and 10pm (or later).
- Don't ask an Afghan guest in your home if they want something to eat. It will embarrass them. Just put the tea/fruit/nuts out.
- To give condolences or visit at a celebration, a 30-minute visit is enough. Try to avoid visits at the Muslim time of prayer if they are devout.
- Indicators of a good meal is that the food is plentiful.
- When finished, leave a small portion of food on your plate to show you have had enough to satisfy.

Ways to get to know Afghans:

1. Visit and introduce yourself when they are new to your neighborhood. Take a cake.
2. Visit during Afghan celebrations – Eid-e-Ramazan and Eid-e-Qurban. Also invite them over for your nation's celebrations.
3. Give gifts when you visit the 1st time – sweets, nuts, fruit.
4. If an Afghan friend sends you a plate of food, don't send it back empty!

5. Go to Afghan weddings and funerals if invited. Funerals are more important than weddings.
 6. Offer to help with taking them to medical care
 7. Offer English/computer lessons.
 8. But don't always be the giver. Ask for help too (ask for language of culture coaching, to get a cup of sugar, to borrow a screwdriver...)
 4. coaching, to get a cup of sugar, to borrow a screwdriver...)
 9. Play sports with them
 10. Bake or cook together to learn each other's culture.
 11. Allow children to play together, but use wisdom and caution (no unsupervised play).
 12. Share vegetables from your garden.
- When we have guests come to our house, we always sit with them give them tea, meals, we stop whatever we do and sit with them;
 - If you stop at an Afghan home at meal time, you must stay for the meal. It's shameful for them if you leave without eating. The times of day you go to an Afghan home is important.
 - Guests are served first, then the women and children are served. It's sacrificial hospitality.
 - Hospitality is an art form – lavish and sharing; The most important thing for Afghans is that the guests are happy. There's a lot of shame and honor involved.
 - If you are invited to an Afghan home: always take off your shoes in their home; they will give you the seat of honor, which is in the furthest place from the door. Sit near to the door and let them insist you move to the inside; be humble; Greet everyone in the room, even if they don't know the language and you don't as well. Greet everyone who is there; If someone comes into the room, a man should stand and greet him; take cues from Afghan women around you if you as woman should stand up. Men usually dine in a different room from the women; More educated families do mix in eating; poor people don't mix;
 - Don't ever point the bottom of your soles at anyone.
 - When you get ready to leave, ask permission to leave; you are expected to visit a little while longer, than ask again for permission. Afghans will usually indicate they will leave a party about half-an-hour before they actually intend you to go. It's important to say good-bye to everyone. They will set your shoes either right inside and walk you to your car door. It's nice if you give this gesture back to them.
 - Eat /greet/give and take most often with your right hand, not left (it's okay to use eating utensils with your left hand).
 - Eat as much as you can, leave some on the side of your plate to let them know you can't eat anymore; they tend to not talk as much during the meal, but talk after; take a gift if you are going to the house for the first time – fruit, little nuts or something; wrapped candies; bring coke.
 - If you serve a meal, pay attention to not serving haram (prohibited) foods:
 - o Alcoholic drinks and intoxicants (try to use imitation vanilla for baking)
 - o Non-Halal Animal Fat

- o Lard
- o Non-Halal Animal Shortening
- o Pork, Bacon / Ham and anything from pigs
- o Unspecified Meat Broth
- o Stock* (a blend of mix species broth or meat stock)
- o Carnivorous animals, birds of prey and certain other animals
- o Foods contaminated with any of the above products

Gift Giving

- In Afghan culture, gifts are generally given discreetly and acknowledged quietly. Gifts are not unwrapped in the presence of the giver but usually put aside to open later.
- Gratitude is expressed by the person when they use or wear what they have been given.
- When giving and receiving gifts, use the right hand, or better still, both hands.
- Gifts are usually give during the two main annual Celebrations (Eids). A small cash gift is given to children on Eid days (equivalent to \$1 USD or less).

SUGGESTED READING: (available on Amazon)

Hiebert, Paul, Eloise Hiebert Meneses. *Incarnational Ministry*.

Hiebert, Paul, Daniel Shaw. *Understanding Folk Religion*

Parshall, Phill, *Bridges to Islam: A Christian Perspective on Folk Islam*.

Love, Rick. *Muslims, Magic, and the Kingdom of God*.

Emadi, Hafizullah. *Culture and Customs of Afghanistan*, 2005. Greenwood Press, USA.

Encyclopedia Iranica. www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afghanistan. A resource for historical and (high) culture issues. The coverage and quality of the articles is excellent.

Lowen, Arley, and Josette McMichael. *Images of Afghanistan: Exploring Afghan Culture through Art and Literature*.

Wilson, J. Christy. *One Hundred Afghan Persian Proverbs*. Interlit Foundation, Peshawar, Pakistan, 2002.

Lowen, Arley. *Real Men Keep Their Word: Tales from Kabul, Afghanistan*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

Enevoldsen, Jens. *Sounds the Bells, O Moon, Rise and Shine! A Collection of Pashto Proverbs and Tappas*. Interlit Foundation, Peshawar Pakistan.

Lewis, Melinda. *In the Warlord's Garden: An American family's Afghan adventure, 2019*.