

Missional Hospitality: Reflections from Brazilians Ministering among Arabs

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Introduction

In a mid-sized city in Southern Brazil, home to the largest concentration of Arabs and Muslims in South America, a Brazilian pastor and his wife open their home and prepare a meal for Arab guests. In the midst of this encounter, which could last for several hours (no one is keeping an eye on the clock), the couple offers a model of a Christian family and verbally communicates the Gospel while showing hospitality. After interviewing 45 Brazilian missionaries in 2009 and 2010, I found that this scenario was not an isolated one; rather, Brazilians serving around the Arab world are naturally and intentionally ministering to Arabs through this shared cultural value. More than a mere cultural value, hospitality is a biblical value that is also a requirement for church leaders in the New Testament.¹ In the context of global ministry, it is a vital element for intercultural mission work as it creates an environment for relationships, authentic evangelism and discipleship, and Christian fellowship.

In this article, I have a few modest goals. First, through surveying the relevant cultural literature, I will examine how Arabs and Brazilians regard and generally practice hospitality.² Second, based on survey responses from 45 Brazilian missionaries serving in Arab contexts, I will discuss how Brazilians perceive hospitality in the Arab world. In part, this will reveal some significant cultural proximity between Brazilians and Arabs toward the shared value of hospitality as well as show how Brazilians are using hospitality in mission to Arabs. Finally, I will conclude briefly by discussing the missiological implications for Brazilian hospitality in the Arab world.

Arab Hospitality

Hospitality (*diyafa*) is a defining characteristic of Arab culture.³ In fact, the basic Arabic greeting for “hello” (*ahhlan wa sahhlan*) literally means that there is a family and a valley of abundance. That is, with the harvest finished and the family present, it is time to sit down and spend some unhurried time together.⁴ Hence, a sense of welcoming hospitality is embedded in this daily greeting.

While Islam strongly encourages and informs Arab hospitality, this cultural value can also be traced to the Bedouin roots of Arab culture.⁵ Motivated by a desire to increase one’s reputation within the community as well as to strengthen group solidarity, Bedouins were obliged to offer protection and shelter to strangers—even fugitives.⁶ Thus, it is impossible for Arabs, including the poor, to turn away a visitor and deny him hospitality.⁷ Commenting further on the importance of Arab hospitality, one Arab woman helpfully summarized:

For Arabs, hospitality lies at the heart of who we are. How well one treats his guests is a direct measurement of what kind of a person she or he is. Hospitality is among the most highly admired of virtues. Indeed, families judge themselves and each other according to the amount of generosity they bestow upon their guests they entertain. Whether one's guests are relatives, friends, neighbors, or relative strangers, they are welcomed into the home and to the dinner table with much the same kindness and generosity.⁸

In most cases, Arabs show hospitality in the context of their home. Matheny notes that even the shortest visit includes a drink and some food.⁹ Often, unexpected visitors are invited to stay for a meal. In Tunisia, such visitors are greeted with the expression *hisaneh jiraya* ("your horse makes good time"), meaning that they showed up at just the right moment.

In most Arab contexts, the largest meal of the day is at mid-day or in the early afternoon. As evening meals can be quite late (around ten or eleven o'clock), guests will often arrive a couple of hours before the meal is served to sit, have a drink and snacks, and to talk. When the food does arrive, there is typically much more placed on the table than can possibly be consumed—an opportunity to "feast with the eyes." Guests are generously served food and are constantly urged to eat more.¹⁰ In Moroccan Arabic, the common table expression is *kul ma kliti waylo* ("Eat! You haven't eaten anything!"). As visitors express their intention to depart, the host will protest that it is too early, and the actual leaving process may include another half hour of discussion as the host walks guests to the door.

In the Arab world, there are also occasions which require special and more labor intensive hospitality. These include weddings, circumcisions, funerals, religious feasts, and the month of Ramadan.¹¹ While the home is the common place for offering hospitality, Arabs will also demonstrate this value in public places by paying for a guest at a café or restaurant.¹²

Brazilian Hospitality

Brazilians are also quite known for their hospitality. In fact, Azevedo argues that Brazilian hospitality, with its implicit kindness and tolerance, is one of the strongest attributes of the culture as a whole.¹³ Brazilian hospitality should be understood in light of the sociological paradigm of "home" and "street" proposed by Roberto DaMatta, which has been helpfully summarized by Donald Finley:

The category *street* basically denotes the world, characterized by the unknown, by work, struggle, deception, dirty tricks, and individualization . . . [Home] . . . is a place where harmony should reign, crowding out the confusion, competition and disorder that characterize the street. At home nothing can be bought, sold or exchanged. Political discussions, which reveal individual differences within the family, are banned from the table and intimate areas of the house.¹⁴

Thus, Brazilian hospitality is most immediately observed in gatherings of the extended family and friends in the home. The typical Brazilian extended family will gather at least once weekly—often on Sunday—for a traditional meal of *feijoada*.¹⁵ If a family friend should stop by during meal time, they are expected to stay unless they can offer a compelling reason for why they cannot. In some Brazilian homes, an unexpected visitor is told, "we will put more water in the beans," meaning that there is always plenty of food to go around. Outside of meals, Brazilians

also show hospitality by offering coffee, juice, and cookies.¹⁶ Also, outside of the home, Brazilians remain hospitable as one friend will pay for his invited guest's coffee, drink, or meal.¹⁷

In terms of food, Brazilians typically eat a smaller breakfast consisting of bread, fruit, and a cup of coffee. Similar to the Arabs, Brazilians eat their biggest meal of the day at mid-day; thus many businesses close for two hours at lunch time to accommodate this. Finally, Brazilians eat a lighter meal at night between seven and nine o'clock, though this may be even later in the summer. In light of the home being a place of protection and harmony, meal-time discussions are generally light in nature. More serious interactions about business or politics are saved for coffee.¹⁸

Brazilian hospitality is further observed as guests enter the home. Essentially asking permission to enter, they will say *da licença* ("with your permission") to which the reply is *fique a vontade* ("be at ease").¹⁹ As guests indicate a desire to depart, the host will also protest that it is too early and Brazilians may spend up to thirty minutes at the door saying goodbye.²⁰

Though, as noted, Brazilian hospitality is most naturally offered to family and friends, Brazilians certainly have room for new friends—those who go from the street into the home and from being a *colega* ("colleague") to an *amigo/amiga* ("friend"). Aware of this, a first time visitor to a home will bring a gift while someone invited to a party may send a bouquet of flowers ahead of his arrival.²¹

Brazilian Perspectives on Hospitality in the Arab World

From this brief survey, it seems evident that the cultural value of hospitality is quite similar between Arabs and Brazilians. In fact, this may be the area in which there is the highest degree of cultural proximity between the two affinity blocs. Of the Brazilian transcultural workers surveyed, the vast majority (77.8%) felt that that Arab hospitality was very similar (31.1%) or similar to (46.7%) hospitality in the Brazilian context.

When asked what they liked most about Arab culture, many Brazilian missionaries indicated that it was the hospitality. One worker noted, "[I like that] they [Arabs] are laid back and it is easy to spend lots of time together. They are very hospitable," while another added, "I appreciate their hospitality. It is an honorable thing here."²² Another related, "[I like that Arab] families are very welcoming—especially the Bedouin peoples in the villages," while another affirmed, "[I like that] it [my Arab context] is a welcoming and hospitable culture—especially in the poor areas." Finally, another worker shared, "They [Arabs] are very happy to welcome visitors and offer them their best."

A number of Brazilian missionaries affirmed the similarities between Arab and Brazilian hospitality. One worker said, "[For Brazilians and Arabs] food is a reason to gather" and that "we [Brazilians and Arabs] both love to receive people." Another worker asserted, "In general we are similar [in showing hospitality], especially in the rural parts of Brazil/the Arab world."

Workers from the Northeast of Brazil observed a special connection between Arab hospitality and that of their region in Brazil. One worker related, "My parents are from Northeast Brazil and the culture is so similar to Arab culture. Sometimes I feel like I am back home. [I like that] they [Arabs] like to talk and eat a lot. They are hospitable. They are open to relationships." Another added, "Arabs in the countryside are like Brazilians in Northeast Brazil. We always have an open door for visitors. If you come to the door in Brazil, you just clap your hands to let someone know you are there. Also, there is a similarity because you do not have to go to the trouble of scheduling visits; you just stop in." Finally, one woman from the Northeast affirmed,

“Personally, I grew up in a family where we always had people living with us; so I am used to opening my home.”

While no Brazilian workers felt that Arabs were inhospitable, some felt that Brazilians were more adept in this area. One worker related, “Brazilians seem more open to inviting people to their home.” Citing differences between the hospitality values in their home region in Brazil to a large Arab urban context, another worker shared, “In the Northeast of Brazil, we invite people a lot. More than in the big Arab city that we live in.”

Other Brazilian missionaries felt that, while hospitable, Arabs were actually more open to welcoming Western visitors. One Brazilian shared, “It seems that Arabs are not as interested in ‘Arab looking’ foreigners,” while another added, “Arabs receive us very well. But they receive white Westerners better.”

Some Brazilians related that sociological reasons made hospitality different in the Arab world. Commenting on the different place of women in Brazilian and Arab society, one worker noted, “One difference is that when you go into the Arab home, the women disappear. In a Brazilian home, men and women sit together more freely.” Another Brazilian missionary added, “Among Arabs though, if you are single or family without kids, you are limited [which is different from Brazil].” That is, from his point of view, Arabs prefer to extend and receive hospitality from the basis of a complete nuclear family unit (parents and kids) or from the extended family.

Finally, according to the Brazilian workers interviewed, the biggest perceived difference was that Arabs were generally more hospitable than Brazilians. “Both cultures [Brazilians and Arabs] are hospitable but Arabs are more hospitable,” shared one Brazilian worker. Another worker added:

Hospitality here [in my Arab context] is extremely important. Here more is given, spent (financially and in terms of time), [and] there are a lot of expressions of one being nice to one another. In fact, many times people spend what they don’t have. It is a social burden and the reason of much debt in the family.

Finally, the noted Brazilian pastor ministering in Southern Brazil, added, “The Arabs are superior to the Brazilians in this area. If they like you, they’ll give you anything. Sometimes, it breaks my heart to think that I was often visited more by Muslims than by Christians in the church that I pastored!”

Aside from the value of hospitality, many Brazilians shared that they liked Arab food. Certainly, the presence and influence of Arab food in Brazil has contributed to this. One worker shared, “I like the food [in my Arab context]” while another added, “They [Arabs] use lots of butter and oil but I do enjoy the food.” Finally, another shared, “I am a Brazilian of Lebanese descent [so I like Arab food].”

Some Brazilian missionaries indicated that the general taste of Arab food was similar to that of Brazilian food. One worker shared, “[Arabs have] Similar foods to what I was used to back in Brazil (i.e., rice, meat)” and another affirmed, “They [Arab and Brazilian food] are similar in the senses that we both use a lot of natural ingredients [and we both] eat lots of grains and nuts, cheese, and olive oil.” Similarly, others related, “We have the same basic food: lentils, vegetables, coffee. Also [we have] similar spices,” and “Similar foods (rice, beans, meat, and chicken) are consumed by Brazilians and Arabs.” Finally, one worker saw particular similarities

between Northeastern Brazilian food and that of his Arab context: “North African food is quite similar to that of Bahia.”

Other Brazilian workers found the food in their Arab contexts to be quite different. One worker related, “I am from Northeast Brazil. What I like to eat, I do not find here [in my Arab context].” Another shared, “In Brazilian culture, we are a mix of cultures (European, African, Indian). Here [in my Arab context] the food is more limited.” Some Brazilian workers noted that Arab food used different spices. One worker shared, “We [Brazilians] use different spices [than Arabs]” and another added, “Some spices they [Arabs] use are different and also the quantity used differs.” The fact that some Brazilians had different opinions on the taste and quality of Arab food is surely indicative of the diversity of foods within Brazil itself.

A final difference between Arab and Brazilian food is actually in the preparation process. A number of Brazilian women missionaries shared that personal hygiene and how it related to food preparation was a big difference. One woman shared, “The hardest thing for me [in my Arab context] is that food preparation is not very clean.” Another shared, “We [Brazilians] are cleaner in our food preparation.”

Implications for Mission

What are the missiological implications for Brazilians serving among Arabs regarding hospitality? Despite some noted areas in which Brazilians need to adapt to the Arab context—different tastes in food and differences in hygiene in food preparation—Brazilian missionaries seem to understand intimately the Arab values of hospitality and there appears to be significant cultural proximity between Brazilians and Arabs in this aspect of culture. As they are inclined to open their homes and show hospitality while also receiving hospitality from Arab friends, they probably relate better relationally to Arabs than North Americans and Europeans do in this regard. Thus, their hospitality is rather strategic in mission and it ought to be valued and emulated by the global mission community.

More than simply a shared cultural value that will facilitate Brazilian missions in the Arab world, hospitality is indeed a biblical value. Though a complete discussion of hospitality is beyond the scope of this essay,²³ it suffices here to note that Jesus is depicted in the Gospels ministering salvation in part by sharing meals with sinners—both as the guest (see Luke 5:27-32; 7:46-50; 19:1-10) and as the host (Luke 9:10-17).²⁴ In this, Jesus demonstrated his incarnation by indentifying with sinners in the most intimate and common way—sharing a meal. His actions were also highly counter-cultural and upsetting to the social order as he dined with sinners and other outcasts. Burrige concludes that “one of the main causes of offense which led to opposition to Jesus and to his eventual death arose from Jesus’ table fellowship of eating with tax collectors and sinners.”²⁵

While Jesus showed that hospitality is a means of reaching the lost, it is also a foundational element for Christian fellowship (*koinonia*)—the relationships that characterize the church. Brothers and sisters in the Lord—not unlike family and close friends—eat together. O’Loughlin has helpfully reminded us that the Lord’s Supper—a requirement for worshipping communities—was originally an actual meal. It was only later that the Eucharist came to be understood as a liturgical practice that occurred in a church facility.²⁶

In summary, hospitality does facilitate ministry that leads to authentic evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and Christian fellowship. While Brazilian evangelicals naturally practice hospitality among Arabs who are also hospitable, they are ultimately engaging in a biblically-based ministry. For an illustration of such missional hospitality, let us consider again

the example of the Brazilian pastor cited in the beginning of this article. Realizing that his Arab guests did not care for Brazilian food, he related simply, “Arabs prefer Arab food and we offered them Arab food when they came to our house.” Indeed, the global church and mission community has something to learn from Brazilian evangelicals practicing hospitality in mission.

¹ See 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:8; also 1 Peter 4:9.

² It should be noted that I define Brazilian as a member of an affinity bloc of the cultures that make up the country of Brazil. With some 291 ethnic or cultural groups, the Brazilian mosaic is composed of indigenous, Portuguese, African, European, and Asian peoples, as well as some cultures that have resulted from the intermarrying of these peoples. While a great deal of cultural diversity exists, a degree of cultural cohesiveness can also be observed. Similarly, I define Arab as a member of the affinity bloc of Arabic-speaking peoples that reside in the twenty-two Arab states of North Africa and the Middle East. My paradigm for regarding Brazil and the Arab world as affinity blocs is based on the thought of Patrick Johnstone. See Johnstone, “Look at the Fields: Survey of the Task,” in J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues Among Muslims* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), 14-17.

³ Patai helpfully points out that *diyafa* is the same word for generosity in Sudanese Arabic. See Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Hatherleigh Press, 1976, 2002), 93.

⁴ See Margaret Nydell, *Understanding Arabs: A Guide for Modern Times* (Boston: Intercultural Press, 1988, 2006), 56.

⁵ See Bill Musk, *Touching the Soul of Islam* (Crowborough, UK: Monarch Books, 1995), 89-90; also Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 52, 60.

⁶ See Tim Matheny, *Reaching the Arabs: A Felt Need Approach* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981), 17; also Patai, 90-93.

⁷ See Patai, 90; also Nydell, 56.

⁸ Cited in Nydell, 57.

⁹ See Matheny, 18.

¹⁰ See Nydell, 59-60.

¹¹ See Patai, 91.

¹² See Patai, 93; also Nydell, 55-56.

¹³ See Fernando De Azevedo, trans., William Rex Crawford, *Brazilian Culture: An Introduction to the Study of Culture in Brazil* (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1971), 121-23; also Hugh Tucker, *The Bible in Brazil: Colporteur Experiences* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1902), 70.

¹⁴ See Donald K. Finley, “Contextualized Training for Missionaries: A Brazilian Model,” (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2005), 119.

¹⁵ See Jon S. Vincent, *Culture and Customs of Brazil* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 83.

¹⁶ See Phyllis A. Harrison, *Behaving Brazilian: A Comparison of Brazilian and North American Social Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: Newbury House, 1983), 87-88.

¹⁷ See Harrison, 40.

¹⁸ See Harrison, 84-85; also Vincent, 84-85.

¹⁹ See Finley, 120.

²⁰ See Harrison, 88-89.

²¹ See Harrison, 45.

²² All responses are taken from interviews I collected through an electronic survey and during interviews in Brazil and two Middle Eastern countries between February, 2009 to July 2010. Complete responses can be found in Edward L. Smither, “Brazilian Evangelical Missions among Arabs: History, Culture, Practice, and Theology,” (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2011), 337-90.

²³ Some helpful theological reflections on hospitality include Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975); Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006); and Donald Wayne Riddle, “Early

Christian Hospitality: A Factor in the Gospel Transmission,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 57:2 (June 1938), 141-54.

²⁴ I am indebted to Thomas O’Loughlin’s insights on the Luke passages in O’Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 88-90.

²⁵ Richard Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 63.

²⁶ O’Loughlin, *The Didache*, 94.