



ETIQUETTE AND TABOOS AROUND THE WORLD

A Geographic Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Customs

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EAST AFRICA (KENYA, TANZANIA, UGANDA)

Because of their shared histories and colonial experience, the cultural practices of the eastern African countries of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda can be examined together. The three countries occupy more than 1.7 million square miles, a little larger than the combined area of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Spain. The combined population of the three countries is more than 138 million originating from more than 200 different ethnic groups. The ethnic groups differ markedly in culture, social organization, and language. Despite the ethnic diversity in the region however, the peoples of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda tend to share cultural norms, etiquette, and, taboos.

In East Africa, a right-hand handshake is the most common form of greeting. Handshakes are typically exchanged at first encounter and also when parting. "Jambo?" (How are you?) is the most common verbal greeting in Swahili, a language spoken mostly in Kenya and Tanzania and some parts of Uganda. East Africans lower their eyes when greeting someone of a higher status or an older person. As a matter of fact, prolonged eye contact during handshakes can be interpreted as intimidating. Depending on their familiarity, the handshake may be followed by a hug among men or a hug and kiss on the cheek among women. Handshakes between men may comprise a solid, firm grip (Uganda and Kenya especially) while handshakes between men and women are more careful and light. In many rural areas, greetings between men and women are mostly verbal unless the woman offers her hand first. It is also common to see people holding the right forearm with the left hand while shaking hands as a show of respect to a superior. Most Muslim communities will hold a hand across their chest as a show of respect. Adults typically greet children verbally and, in some instances, an elder may place their right palm on a child's head. In many African cultures, status is often closely linked to age, socioeconomic class, and sometimes gender. This hierarchy sometimes determines the form of greeting. For example, among the coastal communities of Kenya and Tanzania, young children greet older people using the Swahili term "Shikamoo." The response is always "Marahaba." In some parts of Uganda, it is common to see women and children kneel upon arrival of guests as a cultural sign of respect.

Greetings among people with a personal relationship are more elaborate than many other cultures and may involve a longer conversation than just "How are you?" East Africans use the greeting opportunity to inquire about the other person's general well-being, family, and business in general—to the extent that an encounter between two people can constitute "small talk" that may last a few minutes. During the small talk, it is common to hear questions like "Habari ya jamii?" (How

is your family?) and “Habari ya nyumbani?” (How is your home?). Rushing greetings or interrupting the questions can be considered impolite or rude.

During introductions, it is regarded as a sign of respect to refer to people by their last name and use appropriate titles that reference marriage status, academic achievements, or professional positions such as Dr., Mr., Mrs., Ms., Captain, Engineer, *Mwalimu* (Teacher/Professor), and so on. Only when a certain level of familiarity has been established can one refer to people by their first names. Because of the cultural diversity in the region, it is always wise to avoid topics on ethnicity, religion, politics, and gender. East Africans generally avoid overly critical and argumentative people. As a general rule, greeting everyone in a group is an expectation among adults.

The concept of time (meaning punctuality) as observed in business settings especially in big cities and formal institutions is similar to that in Western societies. Everyone is expected to arrive on time to scheduled formal events such as meetings. However, in many social settings such as weddings, merry-go-round meetings (informal fundraising events that revolve within group members), women's groups, and birthday parties, the concept of time is rather flexible and can frustrate outsiders. Among rural communities, for example, where attending a meeting can sometimes involve an hour's walk, it is unrealistic to frown at people who show up 30 minutes after the scheduled meeting time. Furthermore, informal social functions have no scheduled end time. It is not a surprise that informal meetings generally start 15 to 30 minutes after the scheduled meeting time.

East Africans tend to dress quite modestly and conservatively. While men wear trousers and a shirt or T-shirt, women will wear skirts or dresses and tops that generously cover the shoulders, back, and upper arms. In more urbanized areas, however, it is common to see women wearing shorts and trousers. When women wear shorts and trousers within the household, they may add a *kanga*, a cloth wrapped around the waist or shoulders. As a general rule, wearing torn or revealing clothing, especially among women, is frowned upon in most parts of East Africa. In fact, women in Muslim communities wear a *buibui*, a head-to-toe black veiled gown designed to prevent male scrutiny of their physical beauty. In business settings, a dark-colored coat and tie and well-shined shoes is an expectation for men, while trousers, a knee-length skirt, or a dress suit with low heels are expected for women. In more urbanized areas especially, dress and appearance among young adults and teenagers has been heavily influenced by hip-hop culture.

Hospitality is an important element of African cultures and is expressed in various forms. It is common to see women visiting other women in their homes or men meeting other men at public places. When invited to a home, a small gift, while not required, is always an expression of gratitude and friendship. While the occasion may dictate what kind of gift to bring, bread or snacks for children, fruits, and various forms of sweets are acceptable. Because gifts are opened in private or after guests have left, it is better to wrap or deliver gifts in a covered bag. Except among educated and more urbanized families, many African communities generally associate flowers with condolences and therefore they are not a preferred gift item. Helping the needy is an integral aspect of African hospitality that stems from the

traditional communal (rather than individual) approach to life. Help comes in many forms such as hosting an event, building a house, tilling land, carrying luggage for women or older persons, or simply helping an older person push a bicycle uphill. Africans show great respect for the elderly and also pregnant or nursing women and will go out of their way to help accommodate their needs.

Although dining patterns vary from place to place, table manners in most African settings are similar. Aware of prevailing cultural differences, many hosts will typically explain dining procedures, but guests are also expected to watch and follow the lead of their host when in doubt. Except in business settings, there is usually no dining seating plan in most households. However, there may be a special place for the most honored guest and the head of the family. Guests are usually served first, followed by the head of the household, men, children, and then women, with slight variations. In some places, especially in reserved villages, children are not allowed to eat in the same room with highly regarded guests for the fear that they may display unacceptable behaviors. Because eating many East African dishes involves the use of hands, people always wash hands at the table before and after meals. As the kitchen is out of bounds for visitors and grown men, an empty washing basin is brought to the table. People at the table will hold their hands over the basin while someone pours warm water over. In most Christian households across East Africa, the host may lead a short prayer before a meal and say "Karibu mezani," Swahili for "Welcome to the table," meaning "You may eat." It is better to wait for the eldest man and guests to start eating before everyone else can begin to eat. If buffet is the serving style, people are expected to serve a small portion the first time and return for a second helping. While not mandatory, it is polite to finish all the food on one's plate. East Africans generally do not serve beverages with meals as many cultures consider it impolite to eat and drink at the same time. Beverages will be served at the end of the meal. On rare occasions where everyone eats from the same big plate or food tray (such as in Tanzania and Kenya), people are expected to eat food on their side of the plate. It is instilled to children from an early age not to use the left hand to eat. Smelling food in many African cultures is perceived to indicate that the food is bad—and can be seen as an insult to the cook or host and therefore is unacceptable. Whether prepared food is served at home, events, institutions, or restaurants, it is highly valued and wasting it can be frowned upon.

Sharing is a big part of African culture. It is common to see families share meager family resources with extended families and sometimes even with strangers. Despite the prevailing poverty in the region, East Africans still honor their guests with elaborate dishes that may involve a good deal of preparation, time, and money. It is therefore considered disrespectful for guests to turn down a meal offer, although a promise to eat the next time may be an acceptable excuse. Likewise, not to offer food to a guest can be seen as a disgraceful act. When it is time for guests to leave, the host and sometimes the entire family may escort guests out to the gate, car, or to the bus stop as a show of respect and appreciation.

Touching is common in East Africa, but there may be restrictions tied to social settings, religion, and sometimes personal relationships. It is common for men to

shake hands or hug, and women to embrace and sometimes kiss on the cheek or hug, but excessive public show of affection is generally unwelcome. This restriction is more extreme for members of the same sex and can sometimes draw public outrage. Many East African communities observe the “left hand rule” with varying degrees. In some cultures, the left hand was traditionally considered unclean. It is therefore generally considered impolite to eat, take, or pass things with the left hand. Similarly, pointing at people with a finger may sometimes be interpreted as confrontational and therefore is avoided.

Most East Africans prefer nonconfrontational and polite communication styles. Conversations will revolve around people’s general well-being and are accompanied by questions like “How is your family?”, “How is your work?”, “How is your home/place/town?”, and so on. While these questions may appear repetitive and invasive to a non-African, they are actually a show of interest in another person’s well-being. Most people will preserve peace at any cost. In fact, losing one’s temper, acting angry, or shouting in public are considered rude. Sometimes people may remain polite even when frustrated.

For various reasons, personal space, as perceived in most Western settings, is almost a nonissue in Africa. First, there are too many crowded public spaces where expectations for personal space can be unrealistic—including *matatus* (in Kenya), *taxis* (in Uganda), and *dalla-dallas* in Tanzania. These are public buses and minibuses for fare-paying passengers that can at times ferry more people above their capacity. Second, public schools, through which most people have received education, are crowded themselves. Other crowded public spaces may include churches, banks, post offices, hospitals, bus stops, markets, and so on. In fact, being overly concerned about personal space may be interpreted as an unnecessary show of pride or snobbish. In such crowded places, young people are expected to volunteer their seats to the elderly and nursing or pregnant women as a show of respect.

With decreasing cost of communication technologies, there is a culture emerging in East Africa around the use of electronic media and devices. The mobile phone has become the most common form of electronic communication. Because it is cheaper to send a text message than to call, texting is more often utilized to send short informational items and photos, but occasionally a long conversation may be carried out using texting for cost purposes. For convenience, especially with busy professionals or more serious family matters, texting may be used to inquire about availability for a phone conversation. While mobile phone credit vendors may be found virtually everywhere in East Africa, most people cannot always afford it. The system of “flashing” is used where a caller without phone credit will make a call and let it ring once and then disconnect. When the receiver sees a missed call, they are expected to return the call or sometimes send phone credit to the caller, a method called *sambaza* in Swahili. As most people carry their mobile phones all the time, it is generally considered disrespectful to not respond to text messages. Social media and e-mail are also common forms of communication and social interaction either between individuals or groups. However, written letters, cards, and notes are still the preferred forms of conveying “very important information” such as wedding, fundraising, and other formal and informal invitations.

Regardless of the purpose for interaction through electronic media, politeness is expected, a factor that reinforces the nonconfrontational behavioral expectations across the region.

Taboos as traditionally observed in many African societies served many functions, including protecting the individual or group and sometimes protecting resources. In some cases, observing taboos created cohesion in a group, a sense of identity and belonging. Food customs in traditional Africa varied according to ethnic group and religious beliefs, and so were food taboos that dictated what may not be eaten. In the face of modernization and Westernization, some food taboos have lost meaning among educated and urbanized populations and may only be observed among rural communities. For example, among the Banyankole, Ankole, Baganda, Iteso, and Kigezi of Uganda, women above the age of six (with variations) were traditionally forbidden from consuming chicken, eggs, pork, and sometimes fish. It would be unrealistic to observe such taboos considering the nutritional value of fish, eggs, and chicken especially. The Baganda also believed that salt and hot food could burn an unborn child in the mother's womb and therefore were forbidden for pregnant women. Interestingly, many food taboos across East Africa affected mostly women and children.

Marriage taboos are common across East Africa but also vary from one ethnic group to another. Among groups organized in clans (blood relations such as cousins) such as the Kamba, Kikuyu, and Luo of Kenya and the Sukuma and Chagga of Tanzania to name a few, marrying within the clan is considered inbreeding and therefore strictly forbidden. Also across the East African region, a mother-in-law is especially revered among married men. Things that could cause a mother-in-law embarrassment or anger are greatly avoided. For example, among the Kamba of Kenya, it is considered a disgrace for a married man to see or be seen by a mother-in-law undressed. For that reason, married men prefer not to sleep in the same house as the mother-in-law to avoid that possibility altogether. Across the entire region, marriage is considered an association between one man and one or more women (with variations). Consequently, same-sex marriage is not tolerated.

There are many taboos related to death, but the most common one across the region is sexual abstinence during the mourning period. Death in Africa is seen as a misfortune to a family. When a person has died, members of the immediate family may not engage in sex during the mourning period, typically until the body has been buried. As sex is directly associated with procreation, it is believed that engaging in such an activity while somebody is dead within the family would cause another misfortune. Among many communities, it is believed that children under a certain age may be traumatized by the sight of a dead body—and therefore are prohibited from body viewing at funerals.

In keeping with respectful and polite nature of conversations in East Africa, potentially embarrassing utterances especially within the household are frowned upon. For example, calling out certain body parts such as reproductive organs is prohibited. Similarly, no matter how upset children get, they may not hurl insults at parents as it is believed to cause them misfortunes in adulthood. The Kambas of Kenya, for example, believe that a person who fights their parent will be fought by

their own child in old age. Whistling at night is forbidden among many communities as it is believed to invite reptiles. This taboo is especially common among communities that inhabit the open savanna grasslands where snakes roam freely.

This covers only a very small part of etiquette and taboos in East Africa. The account has been kept general enough to accommodate the cultural diversity in the region. Most of the attributes discussed, though not exhaustive, are also applicable to many other parts of the African continent.

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Further Reading

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ECUADOR

Ecuador is a culturally and geographically diverse nation located on the Pacific coast of South America along the Equator, from which the country receives its name. Ecuador is populated by at least 12 indigenous nationalities that speak different languages, white-mestizos (mixed-race or mixed-culture population), and Afro-Ecuadorians. Having been colonized by Spain in the sixteenth century, Ecuador's official language is Spanish. Native languages are used in the areas inhabited by indigenous peoples. Given this marked cultural diversity, this entry will make reference to urban and rural culture when describing etiquette and taboos.

In urban Ecuador men typically shake hands or tap each other on the back when meeting, while the typical greeting between two women (or between a man and a woman) is a kiss on the cheek. It is customary to ask, "How are you? How have you been doing? How are the kids?" when greeting a relative, friend, or acquaintance. The extended family is important. Therefore, it is considered polite to ask about the family when approaching an individual, starting a phone call, or sending an e-mail. In rural Ecuador, it is polite to say "Good morning" or "Good afternoon" to passersby, even if the visitor is a stranger. "Imanalla" (How are you?)