



An Arab Hospitality

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It was a hot summer humid day in Dubai. The Air conditioner was at its full force. I was busy writing a report in my office. I heard some one saying “ Assalam-o-Allaikum” Mr Raj. . I raised my head and looked at the door. A smiling young Arab in a white ankle-length, loose-fitting garment, called disdasha , the national dress, was standing at the door. In the usual Arabic style I greeted him with the same words. Immediately he switched on to English and and said “ I am Ahamad Bin Mustapha. I have been instructed by the Manager Administration to report to you”. He was polite when he spoke, something very unusual for an Arab. I could feel the American accent in his speech, I welcomed him by saying “ Welcome Ahamad to Operations Department. Please come and sit down. Infact Mr Hassan called me yesterday and spoke to me about you. He said that you will be under probation, undergoing training under me. Do you have a copy of the appointment letter?”

“Oh yes “. He pulled out a letter and gave it me. I had a quick glance at it. As per the letter he is to replace me in my job as Controller Operations. I was recommended for promotion as Asst Manager by my boss. He was already promoted as Manager. I could smell the Arabic perfume from him. His cell phone rang. He took it out of his pocket and spoke in Arabic. He looked embarrassed to receive a call at that time.” I am sorry. It was my wife. She wanted to know at what time she has to come and pick me up. Her car is the garrage for service. She is using my car”

I smiled and said “ It is OK.. So this is this your first day in this Company?.

“ Oh no. I was in Training school for Orientation for two days. This is my third day” He spoke perfect English.

“ Ahamad. You have an American accent Did you study in United States?. “ I could not stop myself from asking that question.

“ Yes Mr Raj.. I was at Floriday University and did a degree in Electrical Engineering..”

“ Ahamad , please call Raj. That will be fine. Would you like to have some Tea?. “

“ Why not. “

I called the secretary and asked to get us two cups of tea. I introduced my Indian secretary to him. We continued our conversation sipping the Tea. I identified my nationality as Sri Lankan and told him that I am with the company for the last seven years. I briefed about the organizational set up. I took to the office and introduced to the staff. I told them

“ Ahamad is going to be your boss soon. He has studied in US . You all will have no problems in talking to him in English”. After the introduction, I took him and introduced to the staff in other sections. Jumaid, another local Arab was in charge of sales section. When I introduced Ahamad to him both of them started talking in Arabic as if they have known each other before. When I came out of the room I asked him” Ahamad do you know Jumaid before?”

“ Yes he lives few houses next to my house. He has his own business as well. He is originally from Iran”

“ What do you mean Iran?. He is wearing the same dress as you”

“True. My grand parents are bedouin and were born in Wadi Hatta. My grand father is related to the ruler. There are many Arabs here who have come from Iran and Baluchistan and got their citizenship. “

I did not go further ask questions about the sensitive issue the nationalities. Within few months Ahamad became very friendly with me. We had common interest, the computers and Statistics. I liked his politeness and eagerness to learn. He taught Arabic and I taught few Tamil words to greet people. Ahamad was the third in a family of six to his parents . His two elder brothers were working as Majors in the Police force. One day when they came to see him in the office he brought them to me and introduced them. They too were very polite. Like Ahamad both of them were educated in US through a government Scholarship.

One day Ahamad invited me to his house for dinner . It was his birthday. He said that he would like to introduce me to his wife, parents and other family members and relations. I could not refuse his invitation.

His house was fabulous !. with beautiful flower garden in the front a big hall with six bed rooms upstairs. His parents were living with him.. He took me around the house and showed the swimming pool and the Aquarium inside the house. The house was full with his relations. He first introduced me to his grandfather an old man in ninties and his father who was about seventy. They looked very healthy. I came to know that Ahamad’s father and grandfather were poets. They have composed many poems in Arabic praising the ruler. It reminded me of the poets during

Chera, Chola. Pandiya time. I asked Ahamad "So do you also write poems?". He brought and showed me few poems he wrote when he was fifteen. I said "It looks like is in your blood". He smiled. The ladies did not come out, except Ahamad's wife. When I saw her I was shocked. She was an English lady. She first greeted me in Arabic and spoke fluent English, and then continued her conversation in English. Since I was in England for some years, we had a common subject to talk. Ahamad met her when he was studying with her in US. It was love at first sight.

I did not feel lonely among the Arabs as I used the Arabic phrases and words I learned from Ahamad. They treated me like Ahamad's brother. I wanted Ahamad to introduce his mother. He said " Please don't ask me that. She is allways shy and will not come out see strangers. She is in the kitchen. She is a good cook. She was cooking form morning onwards. You could taste her preparations today"

Gahwa (kahwa) – Coffee, was served in a small cup. It contained cardomon and no milk. I found it difficult to drink as it was too strong. As soon I finished A tall Arab poured continued to pour coffee. I was watching how other Arabs stopped drinking and then shook the cup to indiacte that it is enough. He stopped pouring. He spoke to me in good English. "This cofee will build your apetite. It burns off all that fat". I was shocked to see him speaking that perfect English. Ahamad introduced him as Saheed bin Mohamad, the son of their family Gardner, who looks after their estate in Wadi Hatta Oasis. As Saheed was very bright student in School, he was sent to US for higher education by Ahamad' father. He got a first class in computer science and returned to Dubai. Ahamad and his brothers helped him to start his own software company business. I was shocked to hear that story. I went back to the caste system and status that existed back in my home town. These people are not much educated but know how to respect their servants. What a difference in life.

Dinner was served. All males sat in a circle and started sharing the same food that was in the center. It was a symbol of solidarity. There were six big roasted chickens and a roasted goat in the middle of the table. Every one put their hands and picked a piece. Ahamad knew that I am not used to that method of eating. Probably his wife would have prompted him. He came and ask him" Would you like to eat in a separate plate?"

I thought of the proverb " When you are in Rome do as what Romans do". I replied him with a smile " It is Ok Ahamad. You are all treating me as a member of your family. So I should sit with you all eat with your family". I got up and sat with them and started eating

Arabic food and Arab hospitality can be somewhat of an overwhelming experience to first timers. I would advise anyone invited to a good old-fashioned Arabic meal is simply to wear loose fitting clothes. For, Arabic food is flavorful, diverse, and plentiful, but above all it will be offered to you relentlessly by your hosts. Even when there are no more buttons to unbutton, the offers to eat just a bit more keep coming. Regardless of how well or how little I knew my hosts, I have never been to an Arab home where I have not been kindly coerced into eating above and beyond what I am capable of eating. Ahamad followed the custom his mother - to feed the guests before he feeds himself, and to ensure that they are fed well. He told me that his grandmother always stored food away that was to be offered to guests only. Great cooking, variety and abundance of food, and an insistence on good eating is found among the Arab. It is the Arab way of cooking and traditional hospitality.

For Arabs, hospitality lies at the heart of who they 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 when 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. Arabic meals are more often a festive, warm and casual experience than they are formal. The guests are made to feel right at home, and to sample everything offered

For the visitor who does not overeat may be seen by the host as a guest who is not showing proper appreciation. Again, this would cause the cook and/or host to feel that he or she is not fulfilling their duty. A meal is usually ended with the word *sahtayn* which means two healths to you, and this again emphasizes the importance of plentiful and healthy eating to the Arab people.

Variety of colourful Arabic food items were there on the table . I asked for their names from Saheed. He explained each of them such as **Arabic Bread (Khubz Arabi, pita)** - Flat, round bread, which can be easily split to make a sandwich, or broken apart and used as a utensil for scooping food,, **Arayess** - Deep-fried lamb sandwich , **Ataif (gatayef, kataif)** - Small pancakes stuffed with nuts or cheese and doused with syrup, **Baba Ghanoush** - Char-grilled eggplant, tahina, olive oil, lemon juice and garlic purée - served as a dip . **Bamia** - Baby okra and lamb in tomato stew, **Basboosa** - Semolina tart soaked with syrup **Bukhari Rice** - Lamb and rice stir-fried with onion, lemon, carrot and tomato paste, **Hamour** - Red Sea fish of the grouper family **Hommus** - Purée of chickpeas, tahina, lemon and garlic - served as a dip with Arabic bread **Kebab** - Skewered chunks of meat or fish cooked over charcoal . **Warak Enab (warak dawali)** - Stuffed vine leaves **Yansoon** - Hot spiced tea, used for medicinal purposes .**Zatoon** - Olives

Oh my god ! I started counting the number of dishes. I could not. He said still some more to come.! I replied him “ Saheed, tomorrow I have to go to the hospital and check my cholesterol level and I am going to walk back home after dinner.” He and his brothers laughed. “ Nothing like that will happen to you. These items are less in cholesterol. “ advised one of his brothers. By that time I tasted most of the food items I came to situation where I could not breath. I waited until every one got up. They all washed their hands in big dish of water. I followed them, but later on the excuse of going to the toilette I went and washed my hands again.

Saheed came and sat by my side and started talking about his life in US. He said that he did not like US as many girls were trying to date him. Saheed was a tall handsome person with usual Arab style beard. For his physique any girl would have fallen in love. But he respected Ahamad's family for what they did for him. I asked Ahamad whether Saheed is married. He said “not yet but the marriage is almost fixed.” I asked quietly asked him who the lucky girl is.

He smiled and answered “ it is my sister Babitha. She is last in our family. She got her degree in Economics from Alain University, but.. “ he dragged his conversation,

“ But what Ahamad.. ?” I asked him

“Well she had attack of polio when she was seven years. Her one leg got affected. All treatments failed. But Saheed knew her from her younger days. He asked my father whether he could marry her”

“So what did your father say”

“What better partner can I find for my daughter than you was his reply”

I could not believe it!. I only thought of a similar situation back at my home town in Jaffna. How the village refused to accept the marriage of a servant to the daughter of his master. Could this would have been possible.? I got hold of Saheed's hands and congratulated him and said “ You are a great man!” He grinned