

Lebanese Culture & Spoken Lebanese Language

5.1. Lebanon & the Lebanese Culture

Section I

5.1.1. Lebanon

Origins of the word "Lebanon": Different theories

1) Loubnan derives from the Phoenician for "**white mountain**" and denotes Lebanon's mountains, some parts of which remain snow-covered all year. [http://www.everyculture.com/Ja-Ma/Lebanon.html]

2) The name *Lebanon* comes from the root *LBN* (لبن), meaning "**white**", likely a reference to the snow-capped Mount Lebanon.

Occurrences of the name have been found in different texts from the library of Ebla, which date to the third millennium BC, nearly 70 times in the Hebrew Bible, and three of the twelve tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh (perhaps as early as 2100 BC). [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebanon]

3) Some say it is derived from Aramaic word "lbn" which means "**white**". It is believed that it is because of the snow covered Mount Lebanon (in Arabic Jabal Lubnan) which extends across the country. Its highest peak is Qurnat as Sawda' (3,088 m).

The second theory sees the origin of the word Lebanon in Syriac which is a dialect of Middle Aramaic language. In Syriac the word Lebanon could be translated as "**the heart of God**" ("leb" is heart, (a)non is God).

[http://traditionscustoms.com/people/lebanese-traditions]

The Lebanese Flag

Lebanon could have no more fitting symbol of its tumultuous history than its national flag: emblazoned with a green cedar tree against a white background, framed between two red bands, an official account states the **white** represents peace, the **red**, the blood that has been spilled in the name of liberation and the **tree**, survival.

[http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/10/world/meast/lebanon-country-profile]

The cedar in the center of the Lebanese flag is the symbol of six thousand years of history: the cedar was Lebanon's chief export in ancient times. The location of the cedar tree in the middle of the flag touching the upper and lower red stripes is also a reminder of Lebanon's constant troubles because the red stripes represent the blood spilt by the Lebanese throughout their history.[<http://www.everyculture.com/Ja-Ma/Lebanon.html#ixzz2RY8I37oJ>]

Beirut...

Once known as the "Paris of the East" because of its cosmopolitan nature, Beirut proudly boasted that it was the only city in the world where you could swim in the Mediterranean in the morning and then drive to the mountains to go skiing in the afternoon. Others compared it with Switzerland as its reputation grew as a financial center in the 1960s.

[<http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/10/world/meast/lebanon-country-profile>]

History of Ancient Lebanon

Evidence of an early settlement in Lebanon was found in [Byblos](#), which is considered to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, and date back to earlier than 5000 BC. Archaeologists discovered remnants of prehistoric huts with crushed limestone floors, primitive weapons, and burial jars left by the [Neolithic](#) and [Chalcolithic](#) fishing communities who lived on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea over 7,000 years ago.

Lebanon was a part of northern Canaan, and consequently became the homeland of Canaanite descendants – the [Phoenicians](#), a seafaring people that spread across the Mediterranean before the rise of [Cyrus the Great](#). Their most famous colonies were [Carthage](#) in today's Tunisia and [Cadiz](#) in today's Spain. The [Phoenicians](#) are best known as the inventors of the [alphabet](#), among many other things. After two centuries of Persian rule, [Macedonian](#) ruler [Alexander the Great](#) attacked and burned [Tyre](#), the most prominent Phoenician city. Throughout the subsequent centuries leading up to recent times, the country became part of numerous succeeding empires, among them [Egyptian Empire](#), [Persian](#), [Assyrian](#), [Hellenistic](#), [Roman](#), [Eastern Roman](#), [Arab \(Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid\)](#), [Seljuk](#), [Mamluk](#), the [Crusader's](#) state of [County of Tripoli](#) founded by [Raymond IV of Toulouse](#) that encompassed most of present day Lebanon, and the [Ottoman Empire](#).

[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebanon>]

The Lebanese Diaspora

Currently around 52% of Lebanon are Muslim and around 41% are Christian [65/35% would be more accurate, nowadays]. The Lebanese diaspora identifies large numbers of both Muslims and Christians. Recent investigations show that should the diaspora return to Lebanon, it would be the only majority Christian country in the Middle East, as the **diaspora population is over 70% Christian**.
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebanese_diaspora]

>> This information taken from Wikipedia does not seem to be accurate or current (2009), but it does give you an idea. The picture below might be more accurate, but still, I do not know how reliable its source is.

Over the past 60 years, there has been a steady decline in the ratio of Christians to Muslims, due to higher emigration rates of Christians, and a higher birth rate in the Muslim population. When the last census was held in 1932, Christians made up 53% of Lebanon's population. In 1956 it was estimated that the population was 54% Christian and 44% Muslim.

A demographic study conducted by the research firm [Statistics Lebanon](#) found that approximately **27% of the population was Sunni, 27% Shi'a, 21% Maronite, 8% Greek Orthodox, 5% Druze, and 5% Greek Catholic**, with the remaining 7% mostly belonging to smaller Christian denominations.
[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebanon>]

According to CNN (Aug. 2012): The country had an estimated **4,125,247 people** in July 2010, according to figures from the CIA Factbook, although no official census has been taken since 1932 because of the sensitive political balance between Lebanon's various religious groups... The Lebanese diaspora is thought to be around **14 million**, according to the [British Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\)](#), with the majority in Brazil and the United States.

[<http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/10/world/meast/lebanon-country-profile>]

Are the Lebanese Arab?

Identifying all Lebanese as ethnically Arab is a widely employed example of pan ethnicity since in reality, the Lebanese “are descended from many different peoples who have occupied, invaded, or settled this corner of the world,” making **Lebanon, “a mosaic of closely interrelated cultures”**. While at first glance, this ethnic, linguistic, religious and denominational diversity might seem to cause civil and political unrest, “for much of Lebanon’s history, this multitudinous diversity of religious communities has coexisted with little conflict”.

[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebanon>]

Many Christian Lebanese do not identify themselves as Arab but rather as descendants of the ancient Canaanites and prefer to be called Phoenician. [<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/lebanon.html>]

5.1.2. Lebanese Culture

The culture of Lebanon is the cross culture of various civilizations over thousands of years. Originally home to the Phoenicians, and then subsequently conquered and occupied by the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Crusaders, the Ottoman Turks and most recently the French, Lebanese culture has over the millennia evolved by borrowing from all of these groups. Lebanon's diverse population, composed of different ethnic and religious groups, has further contributed to the country's festivals, musical styles and literature as well as cuisine.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Lebanon]

Lebanese society: It is very modern and similar to certain cultures of Mediterranean Europe as the country is "linked ideologically and culturally to Europe through France, and its uniquely diverse ethnic and religious composition [create] a rare environment that [is] at once Arab and European. It is often considered as Europe's gateway to Western Asia as well as Asia's gateway to the Western World.

By comparison to most other Arab capitals, Beirut is more westernized and more socially liberal. Compared to Damascus, Cairo, and Baghdad, and especially in contrast to such cities as Riyadh, Beirut is more tolerant with regard to relations between men and women.

Notwithstanding the persistence of traditional attitudes regarding the role of women, Lebanese women enjoy equal civil rights and attend institutions of higher education in large numbers (for example, women constituted 41 percent of the student body at the American University of Beirut in 1983). Although women in Lebanon have their own organizations, most exist as subordinate branches of the political parties.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebanese_society]

Lebanese Customs and Etiquette:

The Lebanese are very gregarious. The souks (markets) are always crowded; shopping downtown is very popular, as is strolling with friends along the busy streets. Lebanese people usually sit close together and interact vivaciously.

Manners are important and are highly influenced by French etiquette, especially in matters of dress, address, and eating. Strangers as well as acquaintances

greet each other respectfully, usually using French terms, such as bonjour, bonsoir, and pardon.

Hospitality is very important. Travelers to Lebanon are received genially. [<http://www.everyculture.com/Ja-Ma/Lebanon.html#ixzz2RYBPt7gh>]

***** When you are visiting someone at home, they usually offer you coffee, chocolate, candy (bonbons, in French)... beware, people tend to insist that you take at least one piece, so it is the custom that they offer it 3 times for fear that you should refuse out of shyness... so, you do not really have to take any if you do not want to; they will not be offended (as long as you accept at least one or two things they have offered you during your visit... use your common sense)-- Nada.**

Greeting people

- Greetings in Lebanon are an interesting mix of both the French and Muslim/Arab cultures.
- A warm and welcoming smile accompanied by a handshake while saying “Marhaba” is a greeting that can be given without causing offense.
- You will see the greeting close friends with three kisses on the cheek, alternating cheeks in the French style.
- Take time when greeting a person and be sure to ask about their family, health, etc.
- If man is greeting Muslim women you may find that some wish not to shake hands; it is best to see if a hand is extended or not first.

Gift Giving Etiquette

- Gifts are part and parcel of the culture and are not only for birthdays and special occasions.
- Gifts may be given to someone who has provided a favour, to someone returning from a trip overseas, or simply out of want.
- The cost of the gift is not nearly as important as what it represents – friendship.
- If you are invited to a Lebanese home, it is customary to bring flowers. If invited for a meal, you may bring sweets or pastries.
- If visiting a Muslim family, it is a good idea to say that the gift is for the host rather than the hostess.
- Gifts of alcohol are welcome in many circles. Muslims though generally do not drink alcohol.
- A small gift such a sweet for the children is always a nice touch.
- Gifts may be given with the right hand or both hands. It is best not to offer a gift with the left hand.

Dining Etiquette

If you are invited to a Lebanese house for dinner:

- Dress well.
- Avoid sensitive topics of conversation such as politics, religion or the civil war unless you know the hosts are comfortable talking about it.
- Greet elders first.
- Lebanese table manners are relatively formal.
- Wait to be told where to sit.
- Table manners are Continental, i.e. the fork is held in the left hand and the knife in the right while eating.
- You will be expected to try all foods at the table.
- Expect to be urged to take second or even third helpings. It is best to eat less on your first helping so that a second helping is possible. This shows your host you are enjoying the food and are being taken care of.

Meeting and Greeting (Business)

- Lebanese can be somewhat formal in their business dealings. At the same time, they will strive to be hospitable and will go out of their way to be generous and gracious hosts.
- Greetings should not be rushed. It is important to take time to exchange social pleasantries during the greeting process.
- The most common greeting in business is the handshake with direct eye contact.
- The handshake may be more prolonged than in Western countries.
- Very religious Muslims may not shake hands across genders. In such cases, the foreign business people should simply nod their heads as a way of acknowledging them.
- If someone is introduced with a title, use that title when greeting them. If the title is given in Arabic, it is appended to the first name. If the title is in English or French, it will be added to the surname.
- Business cards are given without formal ritual.
- Having one side of your card translated into French or Arabic is a nice touch but not essential.
- Present and receive business cards with two hands or the right hand.

Communication Style (I)

The Lebanese are very “touchy-feely”. Direct eye contact with a lot of physical contact is the cornerstone of Lebanese communication. If you are from a culture where eye contact is less direct and physical contact not so prevalent, this may feel uncomfortable. Try not to break the eye contact as this conveys trust,

sincerity and honesty. However, interestingly, the situation is reversed when dealing with elders where prolonged direct eye contact is considered rude and challenging.

Lebanese have an indirect and non-confrontational communication style, which relates to the need to maintain personal honour. They rely heavily on the context to explain the underlying meaning of their words. The listener is expected to know what they are trying to say or imply. Non-verbal cues and body language are crucial to learn so you can more fully understand the responses you are given.

For the most part, Lebanese try not to lose their tempers publicly since such behavior demonstrates a weakness of character. They strive to be courteous and expect similar behavior from others. However, if they think that their honor has been impugned or that their personal honor has been challenged, they will raise their voice and employ sweeping hand gestures in their vociferous attempt to restore their honor.

[<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/lebanon.html>]

Communication Style (II)

- The communication style usually depends how well people know each other, but in general people tend to be more indirect than direct.
- It is common to see displays of anger in public, especially on the street and in traffic.
- People will often speak in loud voices. This is not always because of anger; it may be just showing another emotion.
- Family is a very important aspect of the culture and asking about one's family is usually greatly appreciated.
- In the current political situation it is better to steer clear of talking or inquiring about political/religious subjects.
 - [http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=8&CID=115]

Personal Space & Touching

- The amount of personal space that one is given depends greatly on the situation but it is usually quite close, less than arm's length. This space may be a bit greater in business/formal situations and between genders as well.
- It is common for good friends of the same sex to hold hands or interlock arms while walking and talking together. This is a way of expressing their friendship.
- Touching is common during conversations, especially between members of the same gender.
- Between genders, touching during conversations may be considered inappropriate. However, it usually depends on the sub culture (Muslims tend to be more traditional, Christians tend to be more open).

[http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=8&CID=115]

View of Time

- Time is not usually considered a valued commodity. Being late is a common practice; it may even be a sign of being fashionable when coming late to parties and social events.
- In business, it is common practice to make appointments or deadlines that are rarely followed.
[http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=8&CID=115]

Gestures

- Some of the most common facial expressions are used to say 'no' or negate something. This can be done by raising the eyebrows and nodding the head up slightly or by making a 'tch' sound by pulling the tongue off the roof of one's mouth, or to really emphasize the point, combine both of these actions.
- Shaking the head side to side usually mean you don't understand rather than "no".
- Most people point with a single finger, just not the middle one.
- To beckon someone, you wave with the palm down, clapping your fingers into your palm in a scratching motion.
- In most Islamic societies its best to avoid showing the sole of your foot or using the foot to move anything. This includes pointing the toe or heel or any part of the foot at any person.
 - [http://www.culturecrossing.net/basics_business_student_details.php?Id=8&CID=115]

Bargaining

It is not as widespread in Lebanon as it is in other countries. If it does exist, it is not regulated by the government, and is limited to certain shops and situations. For example, while you may bargain with a taxi driver for the fare, you should bargain your way for a lower bill at a restaurant.

[http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Middle_East/Lebanon/Local_Customs-Lebanon-MISC-BR-1.html]

Driving

If you must...then you'd have to have an international driving license to do so.. Also, make sure that you always drive on the RIGHT side of the road. Now, I wish I could actually give you hints and tricks as to HOW the Lebanese really drive - cause I believe, we've managed to create a whole set of roles on our own.

Actually, each and every one of us has his/her set of rules :o) yes, YES! We are very creative! So, do enjoy the ride!

[http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Middle_East/Lebanon/Local_Customs-Lebanon-MISC-BR-1.html]

Money

In Lebanon you can use both US dollars and Lebanese lira (pounds) which are held at the exchange rate of 1500LL to 1 USD. It sounds complicated right? Well, at first you may get a little confused but eventually it becomes second nature to work out...

Try and work out your change before you get it, so if they give you LL or USD, you know how much you should be getting; what will really get you though is when they give you a mixture of the two!

Many of the Prices and Bills for restaurants will come with both LL and USD on them, so you can pay in either without having to work it out.

[http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Middle_East/Lebanon/Local_Customs-Lebanon-MISC-BR-1.html]

Tipping

You usually tip waiters, hotel staff, guides etc. The average rate in restaurants is 10-15%, whereas with other people who offer you a certain service, you can offer them any amount between 1,000LBP and 10,000LBP - it really all depends on the service provided.

[http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Middle_East/Lebanon/Local_Customs-Lebanon-MISC-BR-1.html]

Miscellanies

People in Lebanon drink a lot of coffee ("ahweh"). Some locals say that those who do not drink coffee are going to lose nationality. Coffee drunk in Lebanon is mainly Arabic (Turkish) style. It is strong and often flavored with cardamom. Some people also add a few drops of orange blossom water.

There is also a "white coffee". For the Lebanese it is actually a herbal tea prepared with orange blossom water. White coffee is originally from Beirut. It is usually served after meals with some candied rose petals.

In Lebanon and elsewhere in the Middle East people often drink a beverage called "Jallab". Jallab is made from dates, grape molasses and rose water. It is often served with crushed ice, pine nuts and raisins which float on its surface.

Let's now visit a Lebanese vineyard. The most popular grape varieties in Lebanon are of French origin like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Rhone varieties. Some indigenous grapes like for example Musar white exist too.

All the biggest Lebanese vineyards are located in the south of Beqaa Valley. Three most important wine producers in Lebanon are Chateau Ksara, Chateau Kefraya and Chateau Musar. Chateau Ksara started producing wine in 1857. Today it produces 70% of all wine in Lebanon.

Imagine now that it is mid-September. It is time for grape picking. People of Lebanon use grapes to make Arak (Araq), wine, vinegar, or grape molasses.

Arak is an alcoholic beverage made through distillation and is flavored with anise seeds. Arak, in its pure form, is colorless. But it is rarely drunk as such, straight. People drink it mixed with water - about 1/3 arak and 2/3 water. Some ice is also added.

Glass of Arak: When mixed, Arak gets a milky-white color. Why? Well, it is because anise in Arak includes an essential oil called Anethole which is soluble in alcohol but not in water.

Derbake drum: Traditional music is performed. Musicians use musical instruments like "derbake" (a small drum made of clay with goat skin on its top), "nay" (long bamboo flute) and "mijwiz" (short double barreled flute). They perform traditional "daloonah" (dal3ouna) tune. Daloonah also includes improvised singing.

Some men and women hold hands and start to dance. Their traditional dance is called "dabke" (dabkeh). Other people present join them by clapping their hands.

There is a legend about how the dabke was created. In the past flat roofs of Lebanese houses were covered with branches and mud. In time the top mud layer started to crack. The owner of the house put a new layer. But he needed help to finish the job. So, he invited his neighbours to come on the roof. There they formed a line and started stomping their feet while walking. The mud layer was fixed and a new dance was created. First it was known as "Al Awneh". Later it changed its name into "Daloonah" or a form of improvised singing and dancing the dabke dance.

The most famous Lebanese singer is Fairuz (1935-). Her real name is Nouhad Wadi Haddad. She is known as an "Ambassador to the Stars" and a "Neighbor to the Moon". The Lebanese especially love her songs "Behhbak Ya Lebnan" ("I love you Lebanon") and "Ya Hawa Beirut".

Lebanon has something what is called Al Zajal. Al Zajal is a form of improvised poetry. Special Al Zajal parties are organized. Zajal is usually performed by a

singer who makes up the songs right at the party. They are professionals. In the past people used to invite them to sing at weddings.

Lebanese literature represents an interesting combination of French and Arab influences. The most famous Lebanese writers are Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), Emily Nasrallah (1931-) and Karim El-Koussa (1971-).

One of folk sports of Lebanon is "kbeich". Kbeich is two men arm-wrestling. The winner becomes quite famous in local community for his strength. Popular fictional character that appears in many Lebanese jokes is Abu Abed (his full name is Abu Abed El Beyrouthy). He is usually described as a guy with big moustache wearing red fez (felt hat) on his head. His best friend is Abu Steif. They spend most of their days in the Kahwat El Ejeez which is a famous coffee shop in Beirut.

Let's finish with the Sahsauh (sa7sou7). What is it? It is a rather strange tradition. It is performed on the head of the man who has just visited his hairdresser. Other people hit the back side of his head with the palm of a hand. While doing this they shout "Naeeman". Before the strike sometimes people present a special Sahsauh tune or jingle. Everyone knows it and that way has enough time to get ready for the Sahsauh.