

**Afghan Culture For Educators:
A Brief Glance at Afghan Cultures & Practices**
Collaborators: Madina Wardak, MSW/ASW, Wazhma Saidi, Nastaran Myers, J. Sanders

Introduction

Welcome to the amazing land known as Afghanistan! Afghanistan is a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and historically multi-religious nation. Although war has changed Afghanistan's demographics, the nation has been home to a bright tapestry of diverse peoples, and has an ancient history going back 6,000 years. To aid you in understanding your new Afghan students, this short brief will look at geography, climate, tribes, communities, religions, and cultural practices. All these facts, taken together, shape the landscape and interactions between communities. Your understanding of them will positively impact your ability to manage your classroom, connect with your new students, and help students connect to each other.

A Note on Terminology

Please note that people from Afghanistan are called Afghans. Money from Afghanistan is called Afghani. This distinction is important; please commit it to memory.

Geography

Afghanistan is a mountainous country in Central Asia, sharing borders with Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China. The Hindu Kush are breathtakingly beautiful and steep mountains, with high plateaus and lush valleys. Think of the Rocky Mountains, only 10,000 feet higher! The terrain makes transportation difficult, nearly impassable in winter months. For this reason, many villages have remained remote and difficult to access.

Tribes

Afghanistan is home to a number of different ethnic groups and communities: Pashtuns (mainly in the South and East); Tajiks and Uzbeks (in the North); and Hazaras, in the Northwestern Province of Bamiyan and in smaller groups across central Afghanistan; and Persians (in the West). Hazaras have faced historical persecution and usually belong to the Sh'ia denomination of Islam. All of these communities and their smaller, corresponding sub-tribes have loyalties and alliances that stretch back centuries, if not millennia. In Afghanistan, loyalty is first to tribe, then to subtribe and family. Although diversity is celebrated in Afghanistan, it has also been a point of contention. The concept of a nation-state is new in this part of the world, as the borders created in Asia were often imposed by European nations and not self-determined. Therefore, communities exist across borders. For instance, the Pashtun people exist across the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan; the Baloch people across the borders of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, etc. People typically identify as one of the main tribal groups. Decisions at the tribal level are decided by a Loya Jirga, or head court of elders.

Afghanistan also has Jewish, Christian, Sikh, Hindu and Zoroastrian communities, but most have fled due to foreign interference and war. However, these communities still exist, and you may have non-Muslim Afghans in your classroom. It is better to ask than to assume.

Daily Life

Life of Women

Did you know Afghanistan gave women the right to vote one year before the US? Although the Afghanistan you see today on TV portrays the nation as a deeply religious, conservative and patriarchal society, Afghanistan's former leaders, like Amanullah Khan, Zahir Shah and Daoud Khan, pushed for significant strides for the social mobility of women. 40 years of foreign intervention and conflict have devastated any of these advancements made by the Afghan people. Women have limited choices. In rural areas, women typically wear a chador; A long, loose cloak worn over other garments consisting of a semicircular piece of cloth draped over the hair and shoulders to cover the body while leaving the face uncovered or partially concealed.

Life of Men

Most Afghan men are the sole breadwinners in the family. Afghan men who have financial resources to do so may have more than one wife, which is permissible in Islam. Most men attend prayer five times a day, and they see to the religious observances of the family. Homes are generally multi-generational, with older members of the family on the ground floor, and younger generations on upper floors. Houses are surrounded by high walls, which provide privacy for the family. Life takes place within the walls and courtyard of a home.

Life of children

Afghans come from a communal culture, meaning the family unit is very valued. Afghan families are often very large, which may place more financial strain on the male breadwinner. Children are generally at home with their mother and female relatives until the boys reach school age. At school age, if the family has the financial resources, the boys go to Madrassa (religious school), which is focused upon memorization of the Quran. The education of girls has increased over the last 20 years, and a greater number of young girls and women have goals of becoming providers and leaders in their communities. Afghan children, like most children, are very bright and eager to please, so expect great things from them and praise, praise, praise!

Cultural Practices

Greetings

Do not shake hands with your students or their parents unless they first extend a hand in Western style of greeting. Instead, try a standard Afghan greeting: place the right hand across the heart (as we do when saying the Pledge of Allegiance) while saying "Salaam Alaikum," which means "peace be with you." The standard response is "Walaikum A-Salaam," which means "and peace to you also." Children may be greeted this way, as well.

Eye contact

Afghan children typically do not make eye contact with elders as a sign of respect. This may change as the child gets to know you, but male teachers should practice patience, especially with female students. Rest assured: they are eager to learn and are listening!

Classroom dynamics

In Afghanistan, most schools are segregated by gender. Boys and girls do not generally go to school together. Mixed gender classrooms could be a source of extreme concern, especially for girls, for some of the Afghan families. Ask the parents and the children for their preferences and allow them to collaborate with you on classroom placement. Allowing the children to have some sense of control in their classroom, even just for seat placement, can offer a bit of comfort in such a new setting.

Clothing

Afghan boys are traditionally dressed in peraaahan tunbaan (shirt/pants) outfit. The tunbaan is made so that the waist is adjustable, like loose-fitting pajama-style pants, and tied with a rope. The peraaahan is a long pajama-type shirt that falls to the knees. Young girls are dressed in vibrant animal print leggings and long shirts that come to the knees, older girls in more subdued prints or solids. Most girls and women will have a headscarf, which is only removed inside the home. Past the age of menses, many girls also wear a chadori over their other clothing. Shoes are generally not worn in the home.

Diet and Personal Care

The Afghan diet is generally much healthier than the typical American diet, with a wide variety of lamb and vegetable dishes, along with rice dishes and naan. Naan is a flat bread similar to thick, soft Matsoh, which is baked in a beehive-shaped oven. Desserts are often rice-based, fruits, or made with baked or fried dough and honey. Any pork products, lard, or gelatin is strictly forbidden (Haram), and any allowable meat (beef, lamb, poultry) is killed using Halal-approved methods. Generally, in Afghanistan, the meat you eat was chewing its cud or squawking only a few minutes before you buy it at the market. Processed American style chips and candies are found, as well as soft drinks, but children are probably more used to fruit juices and tea (called chai).

Afghanistan's infrastructure has changed dramatically in the last twenty years. Children may be very familiar with the bathrooms typical in the US, or it may be a newer experience. Traditionally, bathrooms were squat-style, where waste is eliminated without sitting. Western-style toilets are more prevalent than in the past, but not ubiquitous, and bidets are also used in some places. Your new students may have varying familiarity with them. Please be patient.

Holidays and the Afghan Week

In Afghanistan, Sunday is the beginning of the work week, which runs through early Thursday afternoon. The Sabbath (Jumaah) starts on Friday at sunrise, and runs through Saturday at sundown. During this time, no work is done, people are off the streets, and men go to the Mosque. Families remain at home, and no work is done, apart from women cooking meals. This

is, of course, a conflict with the American school/work week. Be patient. This is a huge cultural shift for families and children.

Major holidays include Nowruz (commonly known in America as “Persian New Year”) which is celebrated during the onset of Spring. Afghanistan has the largest Nowruz gathering in all of Central Asia. This is celebrated by painting eggs, visiting family and friends, and flying kites. Afghan children will likely be very happy if you choose to honor Nowruz, Eid e Qurbon (Adha), or Eid al Fitr, as well as important day celebrations by members of the two branches of Islam: Sunni and Shi’ia. Most Afghans are Sunni. Hazara students and those from Western Afghanistan are probably Shi’ia.

Conclusion

Your new Afghan students have likely experienced trauma in addition to full immersion into a very different culture from the one to which they are accustomed. Please be patient and seek advice from experts: members of the Afghan community, social workers, psychologists, and counselors. Teachers, parents, administrators, and students all have the same goal: to have classrooms that are successful, harmonious learning environments for all students.

Afghan people are kind and humble. If you have any questions about their culture or practices, asking them directly is the best resource.

Suggested Reading and Classroom Reading

The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma, Bessel Van Der Kolk, MD, Penguin Pub. Group (2015)

One Green Apple, Even Bunting, Illus. Ted Lewin, Clarion Books (2006)