

Perspectives on Iranian Culture

Enduring Understandings:

- Culture influences the food one eats, the clothing one wears, the environment one lives in, and even how one greets other people.
- One country may have wide variations in the economic status of its people.
- For many countries, tradition and modernization exist side by side.

Essential Questions:

- What are traditions and values depicted in the film *Children of Heaven*? What do these traditions symbolize?
- Do equivalent traditions exist in my own culture?
- How does a traditional culture survive and experience change?

Notes to the Teacher:

The lesson gives the students the opportunity to explore some of the cultural customs and economic differences they may have noticed while watching the film. The individual handouts cover food, housing, greetings, gender roles, clothing and economics. You may wish to have the DVD or video available for students to use as a resource during their research, as well as print resources and access to the Internet.

You will need to divide the class into six groups for this lesson. Each group will “wear a different hat,” that is, look at the subject from the perspective of a different career.

Be sure to make enough photocopies of each handout so that each student in the group has a copy of the appropriate one.

N.B. Since this lesson includes information about the head coverings worn by Muslim women, be sure to be sensitive to students in your class and others who wear religious or ethnic clothing. You may wish to discuss the lesson with them in advance.

DURATION OF LESSON:

Two-three periods

ASSESSMENT:

A research-based presentation to the class on one aspect of Iranian culture.



GEOGRAPHY STANDARDS

Indicators addressed by this lesson:

STANDARD 10. Understands the nature and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics

LEVEL III (GRADES 6-8)

2. Knows ways in which communities reflect the cultural background of their inhabitants (e.g., distinctive building styles, billboards in Spanish, foreign-language advertisements in newspapers)

STANDARD 11. Understands the patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth's surface

LEVEL III (GRADES 6-8)

2. Understands issues related to the spatial distribution of economic activities (e.g., the impact of economic activities in a community on the surrounding areas, the effects of the gradual disappearance of small-scale retail facilities such as corner general stores and gas stations, the economic and social impacts on a community when a large factory or other economic activity leaves and moves to another place)

STANDARD 12. Understands the patterns of human settlement and their causes

LEVEL III (GRADES 6-8)

1. Knows the causes and consequences of urbanization (e.g., industrial development; cultural activities such as entertainment, religious facilities, higher education; economic attractions such as business and entrepreneurial opportunities; access to information and other resources)

2. Knows the similarities and differences in various settlement patterns of the world (e.g., agricultural settlement types such as plantations, subsistence farming, truck-farming communities; urban settlement types such as port cities, governmental centers, single-industry cities, planned cities)

3. Knows ways in which both the landscape and society change as a consequence of shifting from a dispersed to a concentrated settlement form (e.g., a larger marketplace, the need for an agricultural surplus to provide for the urban population, the loss of some rural workers as people decide to move into the city, changes in the transportation system)

4. Knows the factors involved in the development of cities (e.g., geographic factors for location such as transportation and food supply; the need for a marketplace, religious needs, or for military protection)

5. Knows the internal spatial structures of cities (e.g., the concentric zone model and the sector model of cities; the impact of different transportation systems on the spatial arrangement of business, industry, and residence in a city)

STANDARD 14. Understands how human actions modify the physical environment

LEVEL III (GRADES 6-8)

3. Understands the ways in which technology influences the human capacity to modify the physical environment (e.g., effects of the introduction of fire, steam power, diesel machinery, electricity, work animals, explosives, chemical fertilizers and pesticides, hybridization of crops)



Materials needed:

HANDOUTS 1-6 on various aspects of Iranian life and culture.

Procedure:

1. Explain to the class that films can often help us to learn about other cultures. Ask students to brainstorm things that they learned about how people lived in Tehran as a result of watching *Children of Heaven*.
2. Tell students that there are many different careers which give people the opportunity to study aspects of other cultures. Explain the concept of “wearing a different hat,” i.e., imagining themselves in a possible future career field.
3. Have students briefly describe what someone in each of the following careers might want to know about Iran: chef, city planner, travel agent, teacher, clothing designer, economist
4. Divide the class in six groups. Give each student in Group 1 a copy of **HANDOUT 1**; give each student in Group 2 a copy of **HANDOUT 2**, etc.
5. Give students time to read the handout and answer the questions as best they can from their recollection of the film.
6. Give students time to research the topic they are investigating. This may be by Internet or using print materials, either at home or in the classroom or school library.
7. Have each group do a five-minute presentation to the class on what they have discovered. Optional: You might require that they use at least one audio-visual aid if you give them sufficient time to prepare the presentation.
8. Conclusion: Ask students which of the cultural aspects they have observed are a result of tradition? Which reflect modernization? What happens to traditions when a country tries to modernize?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

1. Have students investigate a career field of their choice to see how global education could be useful to their futures.
2. A number of states and universities have Iranian cultural heritage societies. See if there is one in your area and invite a speaker to come to talk about Iranian traditional culture. The website at <http://www.farsinet.com/ipco/> provides a partial listing of Iranian organizations.
3. If you are interested in a student service learning project, a Maryland organization called Children of Persia has been providing food, medical care, clothing and education assistance to Iran. Their website is at <http://www.childrenofpersia.org/> and has a number of photos of children in school. UNICEF also works in Iran; you can read about their projects there at <http://www.unicef.org/emerg/iran/>.
4. Consider setting aside a few days or a week for your students to wear very conservative clothing, resembling the traditional Middle Eastern style. Girls should wear



head scarves, long skirts, and long sleeves. Boys should wear button-down shirts buttoned to the top, long sleeves, and long pants. Have them keep a journal about the experience – how they feel, how people react to them, how they feel walking down the street, how this clothing changes the way they move, etc.

ADDITIONAL INTERNET RESOURCES:

<http://tehran.stanford.edu/>

A website on culture, including cuisine, from Stanford University's Iranian Cultural and Information Center.

<http://www.cultureofiran.com/index.php>

A website to preserve Iranian culture for emigrants. Covers a wide variety of topics, including food, tea drinking, and the segregation of women.

<http://tehran.stanford.edu/imagemap/tehran.html>

Provides information about the city of Tehran, "a modern city in the heart of ancient Iran."

<http://www.tehran24.com/#>

An ongoing daily collection of photos from Iran.

HANDOUT 1 ▶ TOPIC ONE: Food

DIRECTIONS: Imagine that you and the members of your group are chefs who are touring in Iran to learn about Iranian food in preparation for opening a new Middle Eastern restaurant. Try to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of foods and beverages did you notice in the film?
2. How did breads and the bread-baking method differ from typical breads and baking methods in North America?
3. Does your family drink the same beverage at each meal and throughout the day?
4. Do we have a “national” drink that is consumed by almost all North Americans at every meal?

Now use the Internet to research Iranian foods and eating customs and prepare a report to give to your class. Here is some information to get you started:

Iranians use a variety of breads, mostly flat, many of which are baked in special ovens that are partially buried under the ground. The bakers sit cross-legged at the mouth of the oven, prepare the dough into rectangular pieces and attach each piece to the walls of the oven with long metal sticks. In Iran bread is baked throughout the day at small bakeries scattered throughout each neighborhood, sometimes one for each type of bread. It is bought fresh every day, a tradition that still exists, although not so much as in the past as fewer people go home for lunch. Most Iranians use utensils when eating, although in more traditional families the use of bread to scoop up other food is very commonplace.

Some of the most typical breads eaten in Iran are:

Lavash – a round thin flat bread that is baked in an underground oven.

Sangak – a two-foot-long bread that is baked over hot stones in an oven similar to wood-burning ovens used by some restaurants in North America.

Barbari – a thicker flat bread, usually round or oval in shape, typically eaten at breakfast.

Iranians typically drink tea with each meal and serve the beverage at all special occasions as well. It is served with sugar cut into cubes at home from larger blocks, as this is less expensive than buying the already cubed kind. Tea is grown in Iran and is also imported from other countries.

**HANDOUT 2 ▶ TOPIC TWO: Housing/Environment**

DIRECTIONS: Imagine that you and the members of your group are city planners who are touring in Iran to learn about traditional and modern Iranian housing in preparation for renovating a housing development in Tehran. Try to answer the following questions:

1. How is Ali's home different from or similar to your home and typical homes in North America?
2. How does the family use the space?
3. Where do they eat and sleep?
4. Describe the gutter system that ran through the town in the film. What was it used for?

Now use the Internet to research Iranian housing and the environment in Iran and prepare a report to give to your class. Here is some information to get you started:

Housing in Iran is very expensive. Many families cannot afford to rent more than one or two rooms with a shared yard, kitchen and bathroom. A pool in the middle is used for most washing. It is quite common for the entire family to live, eat and sleep together in the same room. There is little space for bulky furniture, and many items serve more than one purpose. For example: bed sheets and blankets folded neatly and placed against the wall serve as a cushion to rest against during the daytime hours. Also, poor families avoid accumulating too many household items as they are forced to move often due to economic hardship.

The kind of home seen in the film may have belonged to a larger, extended family in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During that period, parents and their married children shared the yard and other common spaces for group festivities, but each separate room functioned as a one-room apartment for different family members. Iranians pride themselves in sharing what they have with others, especially when family is involved.

A labyrinth of small gutters runs through Ali and Zahra's neighborhood, as well as a larger one where Zahra accidentally drops one shoe. The small gutters are part of the 'jub' water system that was used a long time ago when Tehran lacked plumbing for running water. At that time, the 'jub' system served as a means for distributing water. Once the modern convenience of indoor plumbing was developed, 'jubs' lost their utility but remain a fixture throughout the country.

HANDOUT 3 ▶ TOPIC THREE: Greetings

DIRECTIONS: Imagine that you and the members of your group are travel agents who are writing a book about the many ways that people greet each other around the world. Now you are touring in Iran. Try to answer the following questions:

1. What was the most common greeting used in the film?
2. Did you observe any specific way that children addressed or spoke to adults (parents and teachers)?
3. Think about any non-verbal greetings or behaviors demonstrated in the film. How are they similar to or different from the way typical North American teens greet adults? What might these differences or similarities represent?

Now use the Internet to research Iranian social customs and prepare a report to give to your class. Here is some information to get you started:

The word ‘Salaam’ was heard many times during the film. ‘Salaam’ means ‘peace’ and is used throughout the Middle Eastern region; it’s similar to ‘Shalom’ in Hebrew. This word is used as to greet everyone including children and adults, from all economic levels, as ‘Hello’ is in North America. A handshake is the customary greeting in Iran; however, a man does not shake a woman’s hand unless she offers it first. Iranians of the same sex will often kiss each other on the cheek as a sign of affection. Asking about the family and the health of the other is considered proper etiquette as well.

Showing respect and using reverential language with others, specifically authority figures and elders, is very important in Persian culture. Children are taught to stand up when someone older enters the room, and to listen to and to follow all rules made by parents. Ali often lifts his finger up to his cheek when posing a question to a person of authority, using the words, “With permission, sir?” at the same time. This is a typical gesture used by children when addressing an elder. Persian children are taught to ask permission in a variety of circumstances such as before asking a question, taking food, leaving the room and turning on the television. Raising your hand and asking permission to speak in school is also the norm.



HANDOUT 4 ► TOPIC FOUR: Gender Roles

DIRECTIONS: Imagine that you and the members of your group are teachers who are studying about girls' lives in the Middle East. Now you are touring in Iran. Try to answer the following questions:

1. What did you notice about the different worlds of boys and girls in the film?
2. How does the typical school day in Iran differ from your typical school day?
3. Did the parents have different expectations for their children based on gender? Does this occur in North America? Does this occur in your family?

Now use the Internet to research the Iranian education system and prepare a report to give to your class. Here is some information to get you started:

Since the 1979 Revolution, schools have been segregated for two reasons: 1) the desire of the government to impose Islamic values on the general population; and 2) the shortage of schools caused by population growth in bigger cities. So many children and not enough schools have resulted in splitting the school day into two shifts. As part of the institutionalization of Islamic values, male teachers teach only boys and female teachers teach only girls. Mixed classrooms in lower grades still exist in one-room village schools as there are not enough teachers to separate young children by sex. Throughout the country, students are required to do more homework at home and some subjects such as art have been eliminated in public schools.

The family unit is strong in Iran and provides its members with identity, security and social organization. The father is the undisputed head of household. Large families with many children, especially boys, are preferred. Children in poor families are expected to assist with chores as all family members are responsible for the welfare of the greater family. In the film, the mother is ill, which puts an additional burden on the children to pitch in. In Iranian culture, the division of chores is very much determined by the sex of the child. At eight years of age, Zahra was expected to care for her infant sibling while also helping to cook and serving tea to her father. Ali was assigned chores more typical of men such as assisting his father at the mosque and cleaning the carpets.

HANDOUT 5 ► TOPIC FIVE: **Clothing**

DIRECTIONS: Imagine that you and the members of your group are clothing designers who are studying local dress in many countries of the world. Now you are touring in Iran. Try to answer the following questions:

1. How did Ali's and Zahra's clothes differ? Did both wear a school uniform?
2. What did all female characters have in common?
3. Do you think that wearing a school uniform every day is a good idea? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

Now use the Internet to research how people in Iran dress and prepare a report to give to your class. Here is some information to get you started:

Iranians dress formally and conservatively in public. By law, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, women must be covered from head to foot in public starting at age nine. The traditional black head covering, while still worn, is being replaced by more colorful scarves. Younger women may even let a little hair show on the forehead, and some women are also using make-up. A school uniform for girls is mandatory, and wearing a scarf or veil is part of it. Male students do not wear school uniforms, but some guidelines are followed such as no short sleeves or short pants. Men and boys are not required to cover their heads; however, some older men may chose to wear a small cap as part of their traditional village dress.

HANDOUT 6 ▶ TOPIC SIX: **Economics**

DIRECTIONS: Imagine that you and the members of your group are economists who are studying the distribution of wealth in several countries. Now you are touring in Iran. Try to answer the following questions:

1. What are the differences between Ali's home in the city and the little boy's home in the suburbs?
2. Do you see such contrasts in your city or elsewhere in your country?
3. How do these differences affect the kind of life the boys live and how they interact with the world around them?
4. What are the benefits and disadvantages of each of these family economic situations?

Now use the Internet to research issues of wealth and poverty in Iran and prepare a report to give to your class. Here is some information to get you started:

Iran is often called "the land of contrast," and in the film we see the comparisons between the rich and poor, modern ways and old-fashioned traditions, etc. In Tehran, the country's capital city, this contrast is much more vivid than other parts of Iran. The majority of the inhabitants in the northern part of town are wealthy, and the majority of the inhabitants in the southern part of town are poor. Very little interaction occurs between these two socio-economic groups with the exception of paid laborers or household help who travel from southern Tehran to the northern neighborhoods. Think about the scene when Ali and his father travel from their neighborhood via the modern highway on an old bicycle. The economic and political system in Iran helps perpetuate these contrasts. Ali's family survives with less material wealth, and they support each other in ways that can not be measured with money, while the little boy in northern Tehran has everything material but misses human contact.