



LESSON 2: AFGHAN CULTURE

Lesson Overview: In this lesson, students will brainstorm the various aspects of culture, and then read about specific cultural beliefs, customs and traditions among the people of Afghanistan. Students will compare their own culture to Afghan culture, identifying similarities as well as differences, while also exploring the meaning of ethnocentrism. Finally, students will undertake an activity where they will look critically at their own culture through the lens of an outsider.

Time: One 45-minute class period

Vocabulary: Culture, Ethnocentrism

Materials/Resources:

- 3-5 copies of each of the descriptions of Afghan culture (depending on number of students per group) available at the links below:
 - Group 1: Family Life <http://www.cal.org/co/afghan/afam.html>
 - Group 2: Festivities/Holidays <http://www.cal.org/co/afghan/afest.html>
 - Group 3: Weddings <http://www.culturalorientation.net/afghan/afest.html>
 - Group 4: Food and Drink <http://www.cal.org/co/afghan/afood.html>
 - Group 5: Dress <http://www.cal.org/co/afghan/adress.html>
- Copies of handout [*Similarities and Differences between Afghan and American Culture*](#) (one per student).
- [*Teacher's key of Similarities and Differences between Afghan and American Culture.*](#)
- [Homework assignment.](#)
- Board

Procedure:

- Begin class by reminding students that yesterday they had a brief introduction to the country of Afghanistan and its people, culture and history. Address some of the questions that students wrote on their exit cards from yesterday.
- Warm-Up activity: Ask students what they think when they hear the word *culture*. As a class, brainstorm some of the aspects of culture. Have volunteers record the responses on the board. (Potential responses might include: clothing, music, dance, food, art/literature, religion, sports, celebrations, holidays, concept of beauty, gender roles, gestures, greetings, concept of time, values, beliefs, attitudes towards elders, importance of the individual vs. the group, etc.)
- Explain to students that today they will be looking at Afghan culture. Divide the class into 5 groups. Assign each group a specific topic from the list below.
 - Group 1: Family Life
 - Group 2: Festivities/ Holidays
 - Group 3: Weddings
 - Group 4: Food and Drink
 - Group 5: Dress



- Give each group copies of the brief descriptions of their topic (one per student). Descriptions can be downloaded above. Each group should read the description of its topic and identify as *many similarities and differences* between Afghan culture and American culture as possible.
- After students have discussed in groups, each group should present its similarities and differences. As each group presents, have a member of the group list the similarities and differences in a chart on the board. To facilitate student note-taking during this activity, distribute a copy of the student handout #3, *Similarities and Differences between Afghan and American Culture*, to each student. Refer to the teacher's key for sample responses.
- Once each group has presented and the chart on the board is complete, point out the similarities. Ask students if they are surprised by any of them. Lead a brief discussion on how much we as Americans have in common with Afghans.
- Next, ask students what strikes them about the differences. Ask whether any of these customs/practices seem strange to them and why. Get them to note important cultural differences. Allow them to make judgments about Afghan culture at this time. Then, use this as an opportunity to introduce the concept of **ethnocentrism**. Ask students if they know what this word means, get them to try and define it.
- Once students have attempted a definition, provide them with one. Below are several samples:

"Ethnocentrism is the practice of looking at the world as if your own culture's viewpoint is the most valid and perceptive, and therefore that other cultures are less sophisticated and somehow inferior in the way they view the world and in things they do" (www.abc.net).

"Conviction of own cultural superiority" (www.dictionary.msn.com).

"Attitude that one's own group is superior" (Merriam-Webster)

"The feeling that one's group has a mode of living, values, and patterns of adaptation that are superior to those of other groups. It is coupled with a generalized contempt for members of other groups. Ethnocentrism may manifest itself in attitudes of superiority or sometimes hostility. (www.encyclopedia.com).

- Provide some simple examples of ethnocentrism to illustrate its meaning. For example: We often talk about British drivers driving "on the wrong side" of the road. Why not just say the "opposite side" or even "left hand side"? We talk about written Hebrew as reading "backward." Why not just say "from right to left" or "in the opposite direction from English."¹
- Ask students if they can think of any times in their own lives when they have engaged in ethnocentric behavior, or have experienced or witnessed ethnocentrism. The teacher may want to provide an example from his/her own experience to serve as a model.
- Reflection: Conclude by asking students to look once again at the differences between Afghan and American culture and recall their earlier comments about whether certain Afghan customs seem strange. Being careful not to be judgmental of the students, ask them whether they were being

1 Examples taken from <http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/ethno.htm>



ethnocentric when they made these comments. When we characterize Afghan culture (or any culture) as strange, whose standards are we using when we do so? What are we implicitly saying about our own culture?

Assessment/Homework: Students demonstrate their ability to look at their own culture through the eyes of another by writing a 2-3 page reflection on a particular aspect of American culture *from the perspective of an Afghan man or woman*. Students may choose any aspect of American culture they wish (music, dress, clothing, food, television, etc.), but they **MUST** describe the topic as if they are from Afghanistan and viewing American culture for the very first time.² Below are some questions to guide the reflection:

- How would you describe this aspect of American culture (or cultural practice) to your friends and family back in Afghanistan? *Remember: they probably know nothing about this part of American culture so you must describe it with this in mind.*
- How does this particular aspect of American culture differ from what you are accustomed to as an Afghan? How do you, as an Afghan teenager, interpret this aspect of American culture? Do you like or dislike it? Do you approve or disapprove of it? Explain why.
- What does this particular aspect of American culture tell you about Americans?
- What does it say about American values, beliefs, priorities and daily lives?
- Be as specific as possible in your essays – use examples. Be creative!

[Download a print-ready version of the assignment \(student handout #4\).](#)

Extension Activities:

- Model the homework assignment above by asking the class to identify one aspect of American culture that you, as an entire class, will examine together. Possible examples might include the senior prom, ipods or a uniquely American sport such as football. Once a topic has been chosen, walk the class through the ways that you might observe this topic if you were from another culture. Have fun with this activity, open the students' eyes to different ways of looking at every day things they take for granted within their own culture.
- Divide students into groups and ask them to come up with examples of ethnocentric behavior they themselves have engaged in or that they have witnessed or experienced in their own lives. Once groups have discussed, ask each group to present their best example to the whole class.
- Introduce the concept of *cultural relativism* (the principle that an individual's beliefs and activities make sense within the context of his or her own culture) and compare/contrast with ethnocentrism. Have students come up with examples of each, or have students write an essay describing examples of each.

² Assignment adapted from Christopher Williams, Global Studies Teacher, Bishop McNamara High School, Forestville, Maryland



- Invite a guest speaker with firsthand experience in Afghanistan: an Afghan-American, a returned Peace Corps Volunteer, or other member of the local community who has traveled to Afghanistan. If the speaker is an Afghan/Afghan-American, ask him/her to point out what seemed most strange about American culture upon arriving in the U.S. If the speaker is an American who has traveled to Afghanistan, ask him/her to talk about any cultural *faux-pas* that, while acceptable in the U.S., would create stares overseas.

Additional Resources:

The Afghans: Their History and Culture

This website, published by the Center for Applied Linguistics, provides extensive information on Afghan culture and history, as well as a bibliography that includes books, articles and online resources.

<http://www.cal.org/co/publications/cultures/afghans.html>