

Introducing Afghanistan's Culture in Your Classroom

By Howard Faber

I am a middle school teacher who has also spent extensive time in Afghanistan, and I am the author of *A Far Away Home*, a work of juvenile fiction set in the country. The following essay is a pedagogical mosaic that introduces a variety of resources that have worked for me, which can potentially assist middle, high school, and university teachers and students to understand Afghanistan culture.

Sport, Art, and Architecture

Picture yourself sitting about halfway up the stands on the fifty-yard line at a college football game. The crowd is roaring because of the action on the field. Instead of a quarterback carrying a football, though, there is a rider on horseback carrying the carcass of a calf and trying to evade the opposing team's efforts to take it away from him. You are at a *buzkashi* game (accent on the last syllable) in the Afghan capital of Kabul (accent on the first syllable) at the great outdoor Gauzi Stadium. Typically, *buzkashi* ("buz" means "goat," but the game is played with a calf carcass) is played on a wide-open plain with no out-of-bounds markers. When the rider is cornered, it is no surprise to spectators in the stands that he jumps the low wall surrounding the track around the grassy soccer field and starts up into the bleachers. The people in the stands move right and left to avoid him. The rider gets so close that you can see his wide eyes; his sweaty horse; his knee-high, long-heeled boots; and his calloused hands.

This is no game for the faint of heart. The rules are simple: Pick up the calf from a circle, carry it around the flag at the far end of the stadium, and return it to the circle. Riders from the other team may not grab your reins. In the stadium version of *buzkashi*, teams have twelve riders. Out on the plains, there usually are no teams, and there are maybe one hundred riders. Riders are greatly honored—something like pro quarterbacks and running backs in Amreeka (accent on the first and last syllables). The riders wear a long cloak similar to the one worn by President Hamid Karzai. This sport provides a look into the spirit of the Afghans. The origins of the sport, according to the Afghan Embassy in Australia, come from either the time of Iksander (Alexander) or the era of Genghis Khan. Afghans told me the origins of the competition are from a time when men taken as captives were used as the calf is now.

Students and teachers can watch online videos of *buzkashi*. The videos, often narrated by non-Afghans, tend to emphasize dangers of the sport and often do not discuss rules. "Buzkashi in Kabul," on YouTube, is one of the best. "Buzkashi in Aqcha, Afghanistan," also on YouTube, is a slideshow of many individual photos. It shows some of the individual skills not easily identified in a video. Because it is rather lengthy, just a small selection of these photos will be sufficient to understand the sport better.

Highly trained stallions are used in the sport. Some are trained to rear and wedge their way to the calf, to push other horses out of the way, and to



Buzkashi game. Source: YouTube, 2005, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KX59WvBXI98>.

step on the calf so other riders can't pick up the carcass. Other horses are especially fast and, like American football defensive backs, stay on the outside of the melee and run down riders who have the calf. Afghans are tough and resilient.

A very different look into the Afghan spirit is evident in the art form of handwoven carpets. Some scholars think Afghans began to handweave carpets as early as 2,500 years ago. The carpets, which are made in various areas of Afghanistan, have intricate designs and are beautiful, useful, and durable. They are an expression of the traditionally peaceful side of Afghans, and the designs are memorized and passed on from generation to generation. The Mauri design, for example, often displays geometric shapes that initially seem to be just that, shapes. Upon closer examination, however, one discovers that they are really gardens with irrigation canals watering various sections of flowers, often with camel hair tan paths of sand between the flower sections. The geometric borders are likely family or clan designs, easily identifiable by people from the area.

Some of the most beautiful buildings in Afghanistan are mosques, the buildings of worship for believers in Islam. Each small tile on the wall of a mosque is part of an elaborate design—and renewing tiles on a wall can employ a family year-round. The mosque is a central feature in a town, where people will gather for rituals, classes, and sermons. Rows of bowed heads during prayers attest to a devout, serious-about-religion attitude throughout the country, where faith is interwoven into Afghan culture. The Internet has wonderful pictures of these mosques, and the sites I recommend are in the Web Resources sidebar on page 37. One site has a series of detailed photos of the Blue Mosque in Mazir-i-Sharif. Another site shows many views of the Friday Mosque in Herat. A Friday Mosque is the mosque where all male Muslims are called to pray communally on Friday for the noontime prayer in Islam and is equivalent to Jewish Sabbath prayers. More than likely, every Islamic community has a mosque for this purpose.

Food, Culture, and Customs

If you are free for a meal, you may stop at a teahouse, where you will be able to get green or black tea; an Afghan version of bread called *naan*; rice; and kabobs with skewers of lamb, pepper, tomato, and onion. If you are a guest at an Afghan home, you will experience a wonderful part of Afghan culture: having someone from the host's family offer warm water from a decorative pitcher to pour over your hands as you hold them over a bowl. A small towel hangs on the arm of the family member who is holding the pitcher and bowl. It is a humbling, welcoming way to begin a meal and a hands-on way to begin a class on Afghan culture. A simple, typical meal could easily be prepared for a class and might include warm tea, flat bread, and perhaps grapes or watermelon. More elaborate meals in Afghan homes include various rice dishes, sweet breads, and dessert. Being a guest in an Afghan home makes one feel truly honored and welcomed.

Unusual Cultural Differences: Time, Holidays, and Numbers

There are several cultural differences between the US and Afghanistan that are easy to understand, interesting to students, and simple to teach. One such difference is that the day in Afghanistan begins at sundown rather



Detail of an Afghan carpet saddle bag. Photo by Willa Davis.



The Blue Mosque, Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan. Source: <http://bit.ly/NNu4KN>.

than at midnight. It takes some practice and can lead to misunderstandings, the main one being invitations to evening dinners. For example, one may be invited to dinner on Friday evening (Afghan system), which is actually Thursday night in the West. This gets even trickier if the Afghan involved is accustomed to both systems and assumes that the Westerner will not know the differences and assumes that she or he will be having dinner with the Westerner on Friday evening!

Another difference is that the Afghan New Year begins in the spring, after winter ends. That also makes a lot of sense when compared to starting the New Year in the middle of winter. The numbering system is another dissimilarity between cultures. Afghan number symbols are easy to teach, and students find them interesting. An online search for Eastern Arabic numbers yields numerous sources for the numeric symbols, and one can't help but think that the symbols for their six and our seven got miscopied or that the two and three were copied sideways.

Today, Afghans celebrate their independence from the British on August 19, 1919, with a holiday called *Jeshun*. They celebrate annually with picnics, fireworks, and sports. A holiday I enjoyed every year was *Eid Al-Adha*, which commemorates the willingness of Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son Ismael (Ishmael) to Allah. An angel stopped him and provided a sheep for the sacrifice. Afghans who can afford it prepare a feast to provide food for their less-fortunate neighbors. Afghans visit friends and family during this time of joy and giving.

Afghan Recipes

A recipe for an eggplant dish, *borrani banjan*, is provided by the Afghan ambassador's wife on the National Public Radio (NPR) website at <http://npr/L1Rea3>. A translation for eggplant has nothing to do with eggs. It literally and descriptively is "black tomato."

Aush is a soup we have at our house that I had many times in Afghanistan. There are some recipes online, but a simpler one is one my wife learned from Afghan friends.

Aush Soup

- 1 ½ lbs. lean hamburger
- 1 pkg. frozen mixed vegetables
- 2 large cans (family style) Campbell's chicken noodle soup
- 3 cups sour cream
- Lowry's Seasoned Salt
- ¼ tsp. coriander
- ¼ tsp. cumin
- ¼ tsp. curry
- ¼ tsp. cardamom

In a large pot, brown hamburger over medium-high heat, stirring frequently. Season with the Lawry's salt and add salt and pepper to taste. Drain well.

Add mixed vegetables and chicken noodle soup.

Using a whisk, SLOWLY stir in the sour cream, a little at a time, until mixture is smooth.

Stir in spices.

Reduce heat, simmer 10 to 15 minutes, and serve.

Afghans often cook with yogurt and cilantro. Many more recipes are available on the *Afghanistan Online* website at <http://bit.ly/9AjQLY>. There is also a recipe for making fresh cheese on the site.

Stories and Novels

Stories are an entertaining and important part of Afghan culture, and one character, Mullah Nasruddin, appears in numerous myths and legends. Although he has a birthplace and tomb in Turkey, Mullah Nasruddin stories permeate Southwest Asia. He is seen as foolish but often displays great wisdom. The stories are passed down, often during the winter months, when families are sitting under blankets around a *sandalee* (a heated box with charcoal in it) with feet pointing toward the box.



Seventeenth-century miniature of Turkish Nasruddin Hodja. Source: <http://tiny.cc/2dg1gw>.

One of the stories goes like this: The children in Mullah Nasruddin's village got together to try to trick him and win some of his money. He always got the best of them, but one child came up with an idea to get the best of Mullah. They knew Mullah Nasruddin would be going to the teahouse in the morning, so they waited for him along the way. He was glad to see the group of children but was surprised when they continued to walk with him, and he was especially surprised when they asked him to make a bet with them. At first he declined, saying that they were only children and that he was a wise and intelligent adult and that he would feel badly when he took their money. However, the children insisted that they knew what they were doing, could win, and hinted that the bet was about seeing who was better at something. Mullah Nasruddin eventually agreed to a bet, but still wondered what this was all about. One of the children explained that they wanted to bet that they were better chickens than Mullah. Now, Mullah Nasruddin was a proud man, and he felt he was better at anything than children. What he didn't know was that the children had planned this carefully, with each one coming that morning with an egg in her or his pocket. When the bet was accepted, the children crouched down, flapping their arms, clucking like hens, and scratching the ground. Then, the children sat down, secretly took eggs out of their pockets, and placed them underneath them. With huge smiles, the children then said that being able to lay an egg would prove that they were better chickens and stood up, revealing the eggs. Mullah Nasruddin scratched his head, thought a minute, and started to crouch down himself, scratching the ground, flapping his arms, and crowing like a rooster. When he stopped, he asked the children who was the greater chicken, the rooster or the hen. He looked at all the crestfallen faces and held out his hand while the children came past and dropped their coins into it.

There are other stories that need to be told, and two are works of juvenile fiction. In the December 2011 edition of *The Chronicle Review*, Dr. Sophia McClennen, director of the Center for Global Studies and of the Graduate Program in Comparative Literature at Pennsylvania State University, wrote about using *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini.¹ The book is a well-known work of juvenile fiction read by many high school and middle school students. Professor McClennen, an Afghan-American, uses the book in her classes with the hope that her students "would, through reading it, acquire some sense of connection to the Afghan fathers, mothers, and children who still live in a state of fear and war."

About two years ago, I sat down to tell another story. I teach fifth- and sixth-graders, and in our class, stories are honored. I find stories to be the

greatest illustrator and the greatest interest builder. The Afghanistan we Americans hear about is far from the Afghanistan where I lived. There were no wars, no bombs, and no children with missing limbs. Instead, it was a time of hope, a time of learning, a time of peace. In my story, *A Far Away Home*, I introduce readers to Ali (pronounced ah-lee, with the accent on the last syllable), his family, and his life.² I actually met Ali, who was born with one leg bent, and many other parts of the story are true. I try to convey a feeling of hope in my story. This is what a book or a story can do to connect outsiders. In the Dari language, the variety of Persian spoken in Afghanistan, the translation of the word for foreigners is literally “outsiders.”

Although *A Far Away Home* is fiction, it is historical fiction. It connects the time of peace when Zahir Shah was king to the coming of the Russians and eventually the Taliban through the eyes of a young boy from central Afghanistan. The book can serve to begin an interesting study of the relationship of the Afghans with neighboring Iranians, Pakistanis, and Russians, realizing, of course, that although Russia is now geographically not adjacent to Afghanistan, when the Soviet Union existed, this was the case because of the “stans”—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The Russians built a tunnel that made the passage from the north to Kabul easier and used it well when they invaded and when they left.

Another area of study could be an introduction to the topic of the relationship and support of Pakistan for the Taliban, which continues today. This has been a great problem for the Afghans. Why would Pakistan continue this support? Will the Afghans be able to, on their own, keep the Taliban from again taking control of their country?

Still another area of study is Iran’s relationship to Afghanistan. Iran was a friend to the Afghans, particularly to the Hazara people, the people of Ali in *A Far Away Home*. Iran and the Hazara are predominantly Shiite Muslims. This supportive relationship is featured in the book when Ali goes to Iran for safety. The Farsi of Iran and the Dari of Afghanistan are similar, so the language is a natural bond for Afghans and Iranians. Why does Iran have a different interest in Afghanistan than Pakistan? What role will Iran play in Afghanistan?

In my book, a group of American soldiers arrives in Sharidure, Ali’s village. What should be the role of Americans in Afghanistan? Should they stay? School also plays a role in the novel. Ali and his sister, Shireen, become teachers. Separate schools for boys and girls are common in Afghanistan. Is the idea of separate schools, even for primary children, positive for those children? It is a part of their culture. Should it be a part of their future?

Bamiyan, the capital city of the Hazarajat, is the home of the giant Buddhas that were destroyed by the Taliban. Ali saw them when they towered over Bamiyan and flew over them after they had been destroyed. There have been some attempts and several ideas about how to proceed with restoration. There are also people who believe they should not be restored. What should be done with the Buddhas of Bamiyan?

In *A Far Away Home*, Sharidure is the fictional name given to a real town in central Afghanistan. Clues are given to help identify it by naming towns in the area, particularly when Ali is leaving for Iran. The famous lakes, collectively called Bondi Amir, are also a nearby landmark. A map study of Afghanistan might reveal the true identity of Sharidure.

We have invested a lot in the people of Afghanistan, largely without knowing much about them. A brief exploration of Afghan culture afforded by this essay and the story of Ali will help you and your students learn more. ■

Editor’s Note: *A Far Away Home* is reviewed on page 69 of this issue.

NOTES

1. Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004). For a review of this excellent book, visit <http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/personal/reading/hosseini-kite.html>.
2. Howard Faber, *A Far Away Home* (Omaha: WriteLife, 2012).

HOWARD FABER grew up on an Iowa farm, went to college, and then joined the Peace Corps, which sent him to Afghanistan. After serving in the Army, he worked at a hospital in Okinawa and later received a master’s degree from Columbia University. Faber returned to teach in Kabul, but eventually settled in Omaha, Nebraska, where he returned to school and received an EdD from the University of Nebraska, Omaha. He teaches mostly sixth-graders at Dodge Elementary School in Omaha.

Web Resources

Carpets

The Majid Collection discusses the history of Afghan carpets at <http://www.majidcarpets.com/education/afghan-rugs>.

See “Carpets and Rugs of Afghanistan,” *Afghanistan Online* for examples of Afghan carpets and an illustrated catalog published by the Export Promotion Department, Ministry of Commerce, Democratic Republic of Afghanistan <http://bit.ly/PNYgmL>.

Buzkashi

The origins of the sport, according to the Afghan Embassy in Australia, come from either the time of Iksander (Alexander) or the era of Genghis Khan (<http://www.afghanembassy.net/buz.php>).

“Buzkashi: The National Game of Afghans,” Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan—Canberra Australia, <http://tiny.cc/80jwhw>.

Buzkashi in Aqcha, Afghanistan is a series of slides depicting the sport, <http://tiny.cc/h3jwhw>.

Buzkashi Match. This undated 43-second YouTube video depicts the vast “playing field,” <http://bit.ly/PhnT1j>.

Mosques

The Internet has wonderful pictures of these mosques, and one site I recommend has a series of detailed photos of the Blue Mosque in Mazir-i-Sharif. “Blue Mosque in Mazar el Sharif, Afghanistan,” *Islamic Art and Architecture*, February 28, 2012, <http://bit.ly/NNu4KN>.

Read about the Friday Mosque of Herat, built during the Timurid Empire, at Wikipedia, <http://tiny.cc/ywdxgw>, or at The Asia Society’s *Homeland Afghanistan*, <http://bit.ly/NzDlyB>.

Stories and Novels

Mulla Nasruddin Folktales, <http://bit.ly/Atnodk>, and Mulla Nasruddin, *Athenaeum Library of Philosophy*, <http://bit.ly/McM3c4>, are two of several websites with tales of the folk character.