CULTURE GUIDE

Palestine
Series 1
Secondary (7–12)
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Why Study Cultures? .................................................. 2

Traditions
   Family and Friendship ........................................ 3

Folklore & Language
   Euphemisms and Proverbs .................................... 7

Food
   Etiquette at Meals ........................................... 10

Cross-cultural Contributions
   Arabic Language and Calligraphy ......................... 13

Reference Material
   Facts about Palestine ......................................... 16
   History and Holidays ....................................... 17
   Additional Resources ....................................... 21
   Visuals ....................................................... 23
**FOLKLORE & LANGUAGE**

**EUPHEMISMS AND PROVERBS**

Different styles of communication exist in every culture. In order to understand Palestinian proverbs, it is important to learn about Palestinian culture. In Palestine, some topics are considered inappropriate for conversation in social situations. Many Arabic proverbs contain information regarding Arabic feelings about life and sentiments not otherwise addressed.

**Starting Points**

1. Look at the following examples of an American proverb and an Arabic proverb:

   **American**
   
   Don’t cry over spilled milk.

   **Arabic**
   
   The knife of the family does not cut.

   What do you think the proverbs mean (see Folklore & Language Visual 1)?

   The American proverb means that when you can’t do anything about what went wrong, don’t worry about it, whereas the Arabic proverb means that you should not be hurt by offensive things that relatives may say. These figures of speech are called proverbs and are a large part of Arabic conversation.

2. What kind of power does language hold? Do you think you can make something good or bad happen just by talking about it? In Palestine, they believe that what they talk about can literally bless or curse them. Because of this, words are taken very seriously in Palestine.

3. What is a euphemism? What is a proverb? Why do we use euphemisms and proverbs in conversation? Have you ever thought about how these sayings are part of culture? Many interesting aspects of Palestinian culture are expressed through proverbs, euphemisms, and poetry.

**Information**

**Arabic Conversation**

Arabs view weaving words into conversation as an art form. They also believe that the words they speak can have an effect for good in their lives. Arabs pepper their conversations with hundreds of proverbs and euphemisms that reflect the Arabic attitude toward life, such as *Inshaallah* [in-shah-lah], which means, “If God wills.”

Just as Palestinians believe that religious phrases can bring literal blessings and power, they believe that talk of destructive forces can bring harm and danger. Americans might consider Palestinians to be superstitious because of their belief that references to certain topics can bring physical, financial, or emotional disaster to both them and their families. Arabs use euphemisms in conversation to discuss death, illness, or
events that would make them uncomfortable if spoken of directly. Frequent references to misfortunes in life are believed to be catalysts for more misfortunes to come. Topics that could bring embarrassment or dishonor to a family’s reputation are avoided so that the embarrassment or dishonor will not be intensified. Because Palestinians believe words have great power, swearing and cursing are considered extremely offensive. Palestinians fear that curses bring misfortune just by being uttered.

One way to know whether a subject is sensitive is if an Arab avoids answering direct questions about it. When this is the case, it is best to change the subject. For example, political topics are highly sensitive; if someone does not make it to work one day because of road blocks due to political conflicts, an explanation such as “I was tired” could possibly be given. This excuse could have also been used as an explanation for being sick, hurt, or afflicted with a number of other maladies. Words like “cancer” are avoided; a person with cancer might be described as having “it.”

The Evil Eye

Palestinians fear envy because they believe it causes misfortune. It is referred to as “the evil eye.” Envy is considered to be a destructive force in society that is able to physically harm another individual. If someone were to admire the home of a Palestinian and in the near future a disaster or accident brought damage to the home, the Palestinian would believe that the admirer’s envy of the house brought bad luck to the home. Although traditionally the friendship would be ruined, this is not necessarily the case today.

The open and verbal admiration of small, portable objects should be avoided because Arabs will feel compelled to give an admirer the object, even if they do not want to, in order to safeguard themselves and their family against the consequences of envy. Consequently, Arabs are quick to offer blessings upon another or give an object to an admirer in order to avoid the evil eye and cursing. Americans should be very careful about complimenting or openly admiring an Arab’s possessions; the generosity of Arabs can easily be exploited.

The Art of Words

The tradition of honoring the eloquent has existed for centuries. In ancient Arabia, word usage was so important that warring tribes would declare a sort of cease-fire throughout the Arabian Peninsula. During this time, fighting would be banned at sacred locations called *harams*. Warriors and other members of kinship groups would gather to participate in poetry and storytelling contests. The winners of these contests brought great honor to their clans. Once the contests were over, war would often reconvene.

The use of words in Palestine continues to be a significant aspect of society. Arabs avoid family disagreements and disputes within the sight of others. This is done to preserve family honor. A person’s knowledge and ability to appropriately use proverbs enhances his or her image as wise and insightful. By studying the poetry and proverbs of the Middle East, a foreigner can gain a more intimate perspective on Arabic philosophies (see Additional Resources).
Activities

1. Read some Arabic proverbs and discuss their meanings as a class (see Folklore & Language Visual 1).

2. In teams of two, compete to complete the American/Arabic Proverbs worksheet (see Folklore & Language Visual 2).

3. Write your own proverb or story based on an Arabic proverb.

4. In groups of four or five, write and perform skits on how personal information can be used to enhance or damage a family’s honor.

5. Complete the word search on Arabic proverbs (see Folklore & Language Visual 3). As a class, discuss what each of the words have to do with Arabic proverbs.

6. Create proverbs based on your culture, family, and community. Share your proverbs with the class. Discuss which proverb best fits the intended meaning.

Discussion Questions

1. How does using proper language help preserve a Palestinian family’s honor?

2. How does Arabic conversation reflect Palestinian culture? Does what we say reflect our culture and beliefs?

3. Is it appropriate to discuss illness and death in American culture? What euphemisms are sometimes used in discussions about these topics?

4. If it were not appropriate to tell family or friends about a certain illness, how would you address questions from them if you were sick with that illness?

5. Does American culture have any superstitions similar to the concept of “the evil eye”? Do you think that envy is detrimental to society? Why or why not?

6. Why is language important in Palestinian culture? How do Americans value poetry and eloquence compared to Palestinians?
**Facts about Palestine**

**Official Name:** Filistine (Palestine)

**Capital:** Al-Quds (Jerusalem)

**Government Type:** democratic (the Palestinian Authority was created by agreement of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel as a temporary instrument of self-rule for Palestinians living on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip)

**Area:** historic Palestine: 26,323 sq km (10,162 sq miles); current Palestinian territories: 6,220 sq km (Gaza Strip 360 sq km, West Bank 5,860 sq km)

**Land Boundaries:** Gaza Strip: 62 km (Egypt 11 km, Israel 51 km); West Bank: 404 km (Israel 307 km, Jordan 97 km)

**Climate:** Temperate, mild winters, dry and warm to hot summers

**Lowest Point:** Dead Sea -408 m

**Highest Point:** Tal A’sur 1,022 m (West Bank)

**Natural Resources:** arable land, natural gas

**Natural Hazards:** droughts

**Population:** Palestinians: 3,761,904 (West Bank 2,385,615, Gaza Strip 1,376,289); Israeli settlers: more than 5,000 in Gaza Strip; about 187,000 in West Bank (July 2005)

**Ethnic Groups:** Gaza Strip: Palestinian Arab and other 99.4%, Jewish 0.6%; West Bank: Palestinian Arab and other 83%, Jewish 17%

**Religions:** Gaza Strip: Muslim (predominantly Sunni) 98.7%, Christian 0.7%, Jewish 0.6%; West Bank: Muslim 75% (predominantly Sunni), Jewish 17%, Christian and other 8%

**Languages:** Arabic (official language), Hebrew (spoken by Israeli settlers and Palestinians), English (widely understood)

**GDP:** Gaza Strip: $768 million (East Jerusalem not included, 2003); West Bank: 1.8 billion (2003 est.)

**GDP Per Capita:** Gaza Strip: $600; West Bank: 1,100 (2003 est.)

**GDP Composition By Sector:** agriculture 9%, industry 28%, services 63%

**Labor Force:** Gaza Strip: 278,000; West Bank: 614,000 (2005)

**Unemployment Rate:** Gaza Strip and West Bank: 31% (January–September 2005 avg.)

**Industries:** generally small family businesses that produce cement, textiles, soap, olive-wood carvings, and mother-of-pearl souvenirs; the Israelis have established some small-scale modern industries in an industrial center

**Agricultural Products:** olives, citrus, vegetables, beef, dairy products

**Exports:** olives, fruit, vegetables, flowers, limestone

**Imports:** food, consumer goods, construction materials

**Trade Partners:** Israel, Jordan, Gaza Strip

**Currency:** new Israeli shekel (ILS) and Jordanian dinar (JOD)

**Exchange Rate:** 4.4877 ILS = $1 U.S. (2005 est.)
Common Arabic Proverbs

1. Support your brother, whether he is a tyrant or the tyrannized. (The most important relationships are those with your family.)

2. One hand alone does not clasp. (Cooperation is essential.)

3. Older than you by a day, wiser than you by a year. (Respect older people and their advice.)

4. The eye cannot rise above the eyebrow. (Be satisfied with your station in life.)

5. The dogs bark, but the caravans move on. (A person should rise above petty criticism)

6. The slave does the thinking, and the Lord carries it out. (Man proposes and God disposes.)

7. The monkey in the eyes of her mother is a gazelle. (There is nothing quite like a mother’s love.)

8. Like a deaf man at a wedding. (Said about someone who is unaware of what is going on.)

9. An hour for your heart and an hour for your Lord. (There’s a time for fun and a time for religious duty.)

10. It’s all with God. (God will reward. Said when others do not show gratitude.)

11. Enter houses from their doors. (Do things in a proper way.)

12. May your house be destroyed. (Used both as a curse and to express amazement or surprise.)

13. Every year and you are fine. (Greeting for Christian and Muslim holidays.)

14. If God wills. (Said in place of or with the response “yes” to show that ultimately God is in control.)

15. We are all the children of nine. (We are all born after nine months; ultimately, we are all the same.)

16. The hungry man dreams of the bread market. (Our ambitions are determined by our life situation.)

17. I ate his brain. (I fooled him.)

18. The Lord of here is the Lord of there. (One place is as good as another.)
**It’s Water Under the Bridge and other proverbs...**

Below is a list of American sayings on the left with corresponding Arabic sayings on the right. Read each Arabic saying and find the phrase that best matches an American saying. Once you find a pair, write the letter on the line of the corresponding phrase. As a class, discuss the meaning of each phrase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Like father, like son.</td>
<td>a. My house is your house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Every good thing must have an end.</td>
<td>b. I ate bread and salt with him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Jack of all trades.</td>
<td>c. Everything is hard at first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Make yourself at home.</td>
<td>d. We are all in the air together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, again.</td>
<td>e. Every sun has to set.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) It’s water under the bridge.</td>
<td>f. Look to your work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Mind your own business.</td>
<td>g. Seven trades, but no luck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) We’re tight.</td>
<td>h. The young goose is a good swimmer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) We are all in the same boat.</td>
<td>i. That which passed, died.</td>
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**American**

- 1) Like father, like son.
- 2) Every good thing must have an end.
- 3) Jack of all trades.
- 4) Make yourself at home.
- 5) If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, again.
- 6) It’s water under the bridge.
- 7) Mind your own business.
- 8) We’re tight.
- 9) We are all in the same boat.

**Arabic**

- a. My house is your house.
- b. I ate bread and salt with him.
- c. Everything is hard at first.
- d. We are all in the air together.
- e. Every sun has to set.
- f. Look to your work.
- g. Seven trades, but no luck.
- h. The young goose is a good swimmer.
- i. That which passed, died.
PROVERBIAL WORD SEARCH

Find the fifteen words about Arabic proverbs in the word search below.

COMMUNICATION
CONVERSATION
DISASTER
ENVI
EUPHEMISM
EVIL EYE
HARAM
HONOR
INSHAALLAH
POWER
PROVERB
SLANG
SUPERSTITIONS
TABOO
WORDS

Name: ________________________________
Proverbial Word Search Key

Find the fifteen words about Arabic proverbs in the word search below.

E + + + + + + H + + + + + + + + + + + + +
+ U + + + + A + + + + + + I + + + C +
+ + P + + R + + T + + N + + + + O +
+ + + H A + P D + A S + + + P + N +
+ + + M E O + + I H B + + + R + V +
+ + + + W M + + A S + O + + O + E E
+ + + E + + I A + + A + O + V + R V
+ + R + + + L S + S + S + E + S I
E N V Y + L + + M + L + T + R + A L
+ + + + A + + + + + + + + A + E B + T E
+ + + H + + + + + + + + + + N + R + I Y
S + + + + R O N O H + + + G + + O E
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Communication Evil Eye Proverb
Conversation Haram Slang
Disaster Honor Superstitions
Envy Inshaallah Taboo
Euphemism Power Words