

**Elucidating the Region of the “Middle East”:
Overcoming Myths and Bias to Discover the True Diversity of the Region**

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INTRODUCTION

Attempting to tackle teaching the “Middle East” is always a daunting proposition. However, I am hoping that by choosing stimulating topics with which to introduce the region, I will induce the students to continue to study the rich possibilities that are waiting to be explored. The importance of the region is apparent in the number of news stories and obvious importance in foreign affairs. Students need an opportunity to explore the region on their own and find some of the facts that they may not have heard on the nightly news or from the political rhetoric of the day. This unit is designed to have students go beyond the headline or stereotype and discover the region for themselves.

An inner city high school in Houston, Texas will be the location for the implementation of the unit. Most of the students enrolled have learned or are in the process of learning English as an additional language. The student population also provides a diverse group in terms of countries of origin or heritage. This diversity will add to the complexity of discussions and hopefully enhance the last lesson of the unit by allowing students an opportunity to speak to these issues from a native’s perspective rather than simply as a researcher. The unit is designed to introduce the “Middle East” and provide the necessary tools for interpreting information about the region and from news sources in general. The unit is also fluid and could be adapted to incorporate more contemporary events as a means of introduction. It may also be necessary to break up the component parts of the unit and introduce them as stand-alone lessons at different times during the curriculum cycle. The lessons are designed to be completed over four weeks with one week per lesson. Classes meet three times per week. Monday’s classes are 50 minutes and would be best for Gallery Walks. The remaining two days are 95 minutes per class and would be best for research and presentations.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives for this unit are based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for 10th grade World History. (See Appendix A for complete explanation and appropriate numeration).

Content

Students will gain information about the region of the “Middle East.” Students will have a basic understanding of the Five Pillars of Islam and the basic tenets of the religion and its practices throughout the area. Students will gain an understanding of the roles of women in both the “Middle East” and in countries around the world.

Research

Students will research information throughout this unit concerning Islam and countries throughout the region and world. Students will research two countries with respect to religions and the roles of women. One country will be Islamic, and the differences with respect to

practices and holidays will be researched. The other country will be non-Islamic. Women's roles, opportunities, and expectations will be researched in both countries. This information will be used to formulate presentations of the information with visual aids (poster, PowerPoint presentation, etc.).

Analysis of Information

Students will analyze different source of information for varying points of view, accuracy and potential biases. Students will analyze reports of a major news event to compile the facts of the event then analyze the reports for specific language that may indicate a diversity of points of view or biases.

RATIONALE

“The Middle East” has been a vital region throughout the history of mankind, and any opportunity to learn more about this area and its many layers of complexity is always welcomed and exciting. There are stories in the “news” everyday referencing the region and events occurring there. We are exposed to stories and perceptions about the region that inform and form our opinions and understanding of the people and conflicts. There is information regarding news events and cultural concerns such as religion and the role of women. A lot of these stories explore the differences that are numerous between the West and the region. There appears to be an effort at homogenization of the region into one stereotype that is easier to digest for the western appetite. The reality is that the region is as diverse as it is large in its influence. This unit will be an attempt to expose students to some of the diversity of the region as well as introduce them to the differences in perspectives and how that influences what is perceived.

I find it difficult to narrow my focus to one area, as the more I learn the more questions I have and different avenues of exploration open before me. As I began this seminar I had three major questions about the region and the people that live there; this unit will be my attempt to incorporate all of these questions into one cohesive exploration of the region. The topics of study will be focused on the media, Islam, and the role of women in the region.

We will begin with an exploration of perspectives and how the same image or event can reveal different experiences and realities. Students will be exposed to different sources with an emphasis on the different retellings of the same event. We will focus on how the same set of facts can be told with different emphases and different points of view. Next, we will explore the diversity of Islam across the region. A foundation of the basic elements of Islam will be discussed and from there we will begin to explore how the religion is practiced with great diversity of conformity and adherence to different traditions. The differences in adherences to Muslim traditions and the diverse expressions of faith along with varying interpretations of the Q'uran and Sharia manifested throughout the region will provide the basis for our last exploration of women and the roles of women in the region. It is after being exposed to some of the diversity of the region and differing perspectives that will allow for a new interpretation of the roles of women in the region.

Although I will try to cover the three main aspects of these questions or topics, the realities of the scope of the region will necessitate that this unit be more of an introduction to the area. It is apparent from the beginning that any one of these topics would provide enough material for a semester's worth of exploration and it will be difficult to resist the urge to branch out and follow the different paths as they present themselves. However, time constraints will dictate that we make this more of a sampler rather than an in depth study of the region. One of the main goals of this unit is to reinforce the idea of diversity of the region and to help students be more aware of the differing perspectives in media and how those differences influence the audience. I am

hopeful that this unit will explore these aspects as well as entice the students to pursue further exploration and discovery of the region, perhaps in college or through self-edification.

UNIT BACKGROUND

Different Perspectives of the Media

We will begin by looking at media accounts of a specific event from sources of differing perspectives. I have chosen to use the 1998 Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Before introducing the topic, we will explore different perspectives and how different people can look at the same image and see different things. This will be accomplished through the use of various optical illusions and other resources that can produce a variety of results in its audiences. After the students are comfortable with the idea of more than one correct way to perceive information, we will begin to explore the bombings and the reporting of the event. We will utilize a variety of media to discover the facts and determine what the facts of the event were. Once there is a consensus about what facts we can determine, then we will begin to look at opinions and possible bias in the reporting.

Orientalism will be introduced as a Western philosophy. Edward Said will be introduced as will his thesis with a short 10 minute video that gives a brief synopsis of his argument and contains an interview with Mr. Said. After discussing Edward Said and his theory of Orientalism, we will return to the news accounts and look for signs that either demonstrate Said's thesis or refute it. Are traces of the philosophy still found in current accounts from Western journalists and "experts"? We will also explore if there is a corresponding unifying philosophy about the "West" espoused by the media in the region.

The main focus of this introduction is to broaden students' awareness that they must be a discerning audience when absorbing the media's accounts of events in the region and abroad. The current state of media and media companies has been one of shrinking resources and conglomerations of opinions through monopolies of the news companies. As fewer companies retain and obtain control over print, radio and TV stations, the number of varying opinions and ideas appears to be shrinking. The destruction of the print media is alarming, and the need to analyze the sources and motivations behind the reporting is more important than in previous times. At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be aware of the need for further discrimination when absorbing the news accounts. The students are now armed with the knowledge that many different perspectives can influence the reporting and absorption of those reports. The students will be able to discern certain biases and opinions, while being able to distinguish them from facts.

A Closer Look at Islam

The next focus will be to explore the importance of Islam and the diversity of its practice within the region. We will explore the basic tenets of Islam to have a better and deeper understanding of the religion and how it relates to daily life and governments in the region. We will also explore the different sects of Islam and how they affect the different areas of the region with attention paid to similarities and differences in dogma, observances, and practices. The focus will be to explore the diversity of the religion and the people that practice it. The objective is to explore Islam and its relationship to public and private practices throughout the region, with attention to anthropological concerns rather than theological.

At this time we will explore the differences between Islam and Muslim. The Islamic state is different from leading a Muslim life. How do these differences explain the differences in practices and adherence to certain practices and traditions? Is there any relationship between the different nations that have Islamic societies and the perceptions of those nations in the West?

How do Turkey and its embracing of secularism compare and contrast with a countries like Saudi Arabia or Iran, which operate as theocracies?

We will explore the differences in levels of practice and expectations that can be found by traveling just a few hundred miles in almost any direction. How do Islam and the expectations of daily practice in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia differ from the expectations found in Egypt? The call to prayer can be heard in both countries, and yet the expectations are very different, as are the observations and resulting actions. In Cairo, you will probably be able to continue to shop and finish your transaction before the shopkeeper will heed the call, if at all. However, in KSA there is a much different response to the call to prayer. The stores shut down. There is usually a gentle warning a few minutes prior to this happening, but if you ignore it you are out of luck. Does this difference tell us anything about the diversity of the region? Does it tell us anything about how different citizens of the countries of the region react to events from differing perspectives and have vastly different expectations? Or is it simply just different approaches and adherence to religious doctrines and theories?

What other differences can be found in the region for certain holidays? Christian nations almost all celebrate Christmas, and yet the traditions and adherence to religious festivities are as varied and diverse as the number of countries that celebrate it. Is there a similar phenomenon throughout the Muslim world during Ramadan or other important religious holidays? Exploring the differing celebrations across the Muslim world of an important holiday juxtaposed against the variety of Christmas traditions will illustrate the diversity of the religion, the region, and the people that practice their faith. Having a deeper understanding of this influential and important religion would help us understand the region better.

Women and Islam

Finally, I would like to conclude the exploration of the region by investigating the diverse roles of women within the region. The students have now been exposed to the bias and stereotypes that have filtered the realities of the region and will be better able to discern the realities of the situations on their own. Their heightened awareness of the diversity of Islam and the differences in practice will also allow them to sift through the information to discover their own conclusions.

It is in this atmosphere that I would like to introduce the study of women in the region and discuss their issues, goals, and obstacles. Are the struggles of the women in the region very different from women in other areas of the world? Does not being able to drive equate with being dominated? Does the veil or hajib define the women of the region? Do the roles of the past continue to dominate the expectations of women in the present and future? What do the women have to say about all of this?

Many of these questions are universal for women with only the details differing depending on the region you are studying. Does the Western woman really possess the freedom she professes to have obtained? Are there similarities in the struggle women have faced in both the East and the West? If the answer to that question is yes, then it would rule out Islam as the source for the oppression of women in the East. That would leave as one possible answer the patriarchal system as a possible source for man's dominion over women in society. Globally speaking, this is certainly a system that women are very familiar with and have developed counter measures to gain power and varying degrees of independence within it.

At this point we will do a quick study of the role of women in a variety of cultures ranging from the East and the West. The emphasis will be placed on the varying degrees of independence that women enjoy and their abilities to be productive in all aspects of society. What similarities can be found among the differing roles of women? What role does religion play in either

liberating or oppressing women? Is there any correlation to be found among the cultures that offer women the most choices and the economic situations of the women and those cultures? Does any of this alter your views of women in the “Middle East” or does it just reinforce your earlier impressions?

An introduction of patriarchy and what it means to societies and civilization will be discussed. The over arching purpose of patriarchy is to ensure the rights of inheritance and the continuation of the bloodline. Societies began to form around the dominant males and women’s roles became more subservient and supporting. As civilizations expanded and matured it became necessary for many civilizations to implement more strident rules and to codify laws mandating “man’s superiority to women.” Religions played major roles in solidifying these views and doctrines. Eve became the blame for man’s fall from grace, Mary Magdalene was transformed into a prostitute, and women were banned from any significant or powerful roles in the new dominant enduring religions. The once powerful oracles had been overthrown, and the Pope had become the conduit between divinity and earth for many believers. Women’s roles had always been precarious, but with the rise of the dominant three religions, women began to take on more passive roles, and the subjugation became more oppressive. Women were the property of the fathers and later husbands. Religious doctrines of all sorts were employed to illustrate the divinity of the rule of men.

With these ideas in mind, do we still view the roles of women in Muslim countries as the religion determining the rules, or is there an alternative possibility? Are women marginalized in the Middle East because of Islam or because of the patriarchy of the region? Are there similarities with women in different parts of the world living under similar situations but practicing different religions? If the answer is yes, then how does one explain these similarities? Are there alternative possibilities to explain the similarities?

I do not expect to find answers to every question, but I hope to spark a lively debate and hopefully ignite an awakening that just like everything else we have discovered about the region, the more you learn the more you expose a new level to explore.

Conclusion

This unit offers a lot of flexibility. This is one of the perks of covering such a diverse area and people: the choices of topics are numerous, and each offers its own unique issues and elements to teach. The lesson on the media and its coverage is meant to expose the students to the different voices within journalism and how different people can view and report on the same event in very different styles. While I chose the US Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, any event or group of events with ties to the region could easily be substituted. The purpose is to have a variety of news sources and perspectives about the event. This lesson could also work with other topics outside the region to show bias or point of view.

The purpose of this unit is to introduce the region of the “Middle East” and expose the diversity of the people living in there. The final lesson is designed to show students the similarities and differences between countries from around the world with countries from the “Middle East” region. Through exposing students to a variety of daily life throughout the region by examining different aspects of the different societies, the students will begin to understand that they must go beyond the stereotypes and delve deeper into the people and their stories to see the full picture. Students will have a better understanding of Islam and the many different people and ways of practicing their religion that are present in the “Middle East.” Students will also gain an understanding of the need for critical analysis of news reports and the ability to delve deeper into the story to find the alternative views and analysis of the events. This critical skill is one of increasing importance with the shrinking of news outlets and limited varying points of view due to emerging media monopolies.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One: Introduction to Absorbing Information from News Sources Using a Critical Eye – Focus on US Embassy Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania 1998

Objectives

The student will be expected to meet the following objectives for 10th Grade World History (see Appendix A): 19b, 25b, 25d, 25e, 25f and 25g.

Materials and Resources

The teacher will need a collection of optical illusions that have multiple images, for example the image of the Old Woman and the Young Woman within the same picture. Computer with media capabilities (LCD, speakers and Internet access) needed to project optical illusions and 10-minute video of the interview with Edward Said (see works cited). Collection of news sources related to the US Embassy Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Teacher generated worksheets for students to collect information and critical evaluations of the news pieces.

Procedures and Activities

Begin the class by projecting the images of the optical illusions or pass out copies of the images. Have students write down what they see. It would be best if you could project them and show them fairly quickly the first time around. You do not want to give the students a chance to dwell on any particular image for too long. Once you have completed the series (at least 3 – 5 images), go over each image one by one and discuss what the students wrote down about what they saw. Take the time to point out each image so that the majority of the class can see both images. (It is possible that some students may only be able to discern one image, even after explanation.) The main point to stress is how different people can see very different things in the same image and both are correct about what they are seeing, while failing to see the other side without further instruction and patient explanation.

Now that students understand that there can be multiple valid ways to view and interpret information, we will apply that to news accounts of a particular event. The students will read a variety of news accounts about the US Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. The students will read and annotate different news accounts of the event. (*Note: the sources should come from a variety of international sources reflecting differing points of view and possible biases.*) Students will distill the information from these sources, gathering the pertinent facts about the incident while also noting any differences in styles or language used to describe the common elements of the news story.

Next, introduce the concept of Orientalism and Edward Said. Show the 10-minute interview at the web link or through purchase of the video. Reexamine the news articles. Does Said's theory reveal supporting evidence in the accounts analyzed? Have the students changed any opinions or noticed anything new with respect to the language used? Did they see anything that they may have missed the first time examining the stories?

Assessment

Students will record their data about the event into a teacher-generated table.

Students will evaluate the news articles based on specific criteria. Examples may include accuracy of facts, levels of bias from none to obvious, and the level of support for Said's theory. A possible extension would be to have students write about their experiences with being exposed to hidden layers or missed information upon first observation. How does this effect the way they will interact with news stories in the future? Will they be more skeptical or will they continue to watch and read the news in the same manner as before?

Lesson Plan Two: Islam Across the Region

Objectives

The student will be expected to meet the following Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills objectives for 10th Grade World History (see Appendix A): 19a, 19b, 23b, 26c and 26d.

Material and Resources

Teacher will need access to a library with the necessary research capabilities or teacher-generated facts sheets about Muslim countries. Teacher-generated brief information sheets about the history of Islam, Five Pillars, major holidays, important calendar events, and different sects within Islam. Teacher-generated gallery walks materials about the Five Pillars and major holidays and related important calendar days. Teacher-generated questions about the Five Pillars. Teacher-generated table about major holidays and important calendar days. Teacher-generated table of holidays, important calendar days, and different religious observances. Teacher-generated worksheet about different Christmas practices and to which country the custom belongs.

Procedures and Activities

Begin with Christmas customs worksheet. Give the students a chance to match the different custom to the correct country. Next give a brief explanation of each custom and the correct country in which it is practiced. Explain that although Christmas is a Christian holiday, it is celebrated in a variety of ways with different customs in different countries.

Students will take notes about the history of Islam. This will consist of a brief history of the origins of Islam and the beginnings of the religion through the Shi'ia and Sunni split. The students will then be paired with a partner for the remainder of the unit. The pairs will learn about the Five Pillars by participating in a gallery walk. Students will answer questions about the Five Pillars as a pair. Students will get confirmation of a correct answer from the teacher before proceeding to the next station. Once the Five Pillars walk is complete, students will complete another gallery walk with the focus on holidays and important calendar days. The pair will complete the table about the different holidays and important days.

Students will research a Muslim country as a pair. The focus of the research will be to discover the religious practices and holidays observed. How does this country expect its citizens to act with respect to observance of the Five Pillars and daily observances of religious doctrines? What holidays and important calendar dates are celebrated? How are these celebrations carried out? Are there any specific customs or traditions that are unique or special to this country? What percentage of the country is Muslim and what are religions are represented in the country? How are other religions treated by the government and the general public? The pairs will produce a poster or another form of presentation explaining the religious customs of their country. The poster should include information about a variety of topics that may include daily practices, important customs, holidays, and other religions present in the country. The students will present the information to the class and the data will be utilized to fill in a table to compare the differing countries presented.

Assessment

Posters will be graded on a rubric along with the presentation of information to the class.

Completed tables and information about the Five Pillars and religious holidays will be assessed for accuracy and completion.

Lesson Plan Three: Women and Islam – Different Roles, Different Expectations

Objectives

The student will be expected to meet the following Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills objectives for 10th Grade World History (see Appendix A): 19b, 21a, 21b, 25b, 26c and 26d.

Materials and Resources

Teacher will need access to a library with the necessary research capabilities or teacher-generated facts sheets about women in Muslim countries. Teacher-generated brief information sheets about the role of women in the region and women's role in Islam. Teacher-generated gallery walks materials about the differences in women's rights and religious practices with respect to women. Teacher-generated questions about the rights and roles of women from the region.

Procedures and Activities

The same pairs from the previous lesson will learn about women in the region by participating in a gallery walk. Students will answer questions about women as a pair. Students will get confirmation of a correct answer from the teacher before proceeding to the next station.

Students will research the roles of women in the Muslim country previously studied as a pair. The focus of the research will be to discover the roles of women in society, family, and religious contexts. How does this country expect its citizens to act with respect to women and daily observances of religious doctrines? What laws pertain to women and how they are allowed to function in everyday life? Are there restrictions or expectation of dress and clothing? Are women free to seek education and pursue any career or are their choices limited? Is society segregated or integrated with respect to women?

The pairs will produce a poster or another form of presentation explaining the roles of women in their country. The poster should include information about a variety of topics that may include education, jobs, roles in family, roles in society, freedoms or limitations, and religious rules. The students will present the information to the class and the data will be utilized to fill in a table to compare the differing countries presented.

Assessment

Posters will be graded on a rubric along with the presentation of information to the class.

Lesson Plan Four: Women's Roles around the World – Religion or Patriarchy?

Objectives

The student will be expected to meet the following Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills objectives for 10th Grade World History (see Appendix A): 19b, 21a, 21b, 25b, 26c and 26d.

Materials and Resources

Teacher will need access to a library with the necessary research capabilities or teacher-generated facts sheets about a variety of countries outside of the "Middle East." The countries should be from a variety of cultures, religions and varying views of women and women's roles. The tables from Lesson Two about different religious customs and holiday observances will be used as a reference during this lesson.

Procedures and Activities

Students will research the roles of women in a country to be chosen by the student or from a teacher-generated list. (You may want to continue to have students work in pairs or have students work independently.) The focus of the research will be to discover the roles of women in society, family, and religious contexts. How does this country expect its citizens to act with respect to

women and daily observances of religious doctrines? What laws pertain to women and how they are allowed to function in everyday life? Are there restrictions or expectation of dress and clothing? Are women free to seek education and pursue any career or are their choices limited? Is society segregated or integrated with respect to men and women? What is the majority religion of the country? What holidays and important calendar dates are celebrated? How are these celebrations carried out? Are there any specific customs or traditions that are unique or special to this country? What other religions are represented in the country? How are minority religions treated by the government and the general public?

The pairs will produce a poster or another form of presentation explaining the roles of women in their country. The poster should include information about a variety of topics that may include education, jobs, roles in family, roles in society, freedoms or limitations, and religious rules. How does this country compare to the country they studied during lessons two and three? The students will present the information to the class and the data will be utilized to fill in a table to compare the differing countries presented. What similarities and differences are there for women in the “Middle East” and in other countries around the world? Is religion a driving force in these attitudes toward women? What role does patriarchy play in the attitudes and opportunities for women around the world?

Assessment

Posters will be graded on a rubric along with the presentation of information to the class.

Appendix A

Unit Objectives

From the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for 10th grade World History (“Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for World History Studies”)

(19) Culture. The student understands the history and relevance of major religious and philosophical traditions. The student is expected to:

(A) compare the historical origins, central ideas, and the spread of major religious and philosophical traditions including Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism; and

(B) identify examples of religious influence in historic and contemporary world events.

(21) Culture. The student understands the roles of women, children, and families in different historical cultures. The student is expected to:

(A) analyze the specific roles of women, children, and families in different historical cultures; and

(B) describe the political, economic, and cultural influence of women in different historical cultures.

(23) Science, technology, and society. The student understands how major scientific and mathematical discoveries and technological innovations have affected societies throughout history. The student is expected to:

(B) identify new ideas in mathematics, science, and technology that occurred during the Greco-Roman, Indian, Islamic, and Chinese civilizations and trace the spread of these ideas to other civilizations.

(25) Social studies skills. The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of sources including electronic technology. The student is expected to:

- (B) locate and use primary and secondary sources such as computer software, databases, media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts to acquire information;
- (D) explain and apply different methods that historians use to interpret the past, including the use of primary and secondary sources, points of view, frames of reference, and historical context;
- (E) use the process of historical inquiry to research, interpret, and use multiple sources of evidence;
- (F) evaluate the validity of a source based on language, corroboration with other sources, and information about the author;
- (G) identify bias in written, oral, and visual material; and
- (H) support a point of view on a social studies issue or event.

(26) Social studies skills. The student communicates in written, oral, and visual forms. The student is expected to:

- (A) use social studies terminology correctly;
- (B) use standard grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation;
- (C) interpret and create databases, research outlines, bibliographies, and visuals including graphs, charts, timelines, and maps; and
- (D) transfer information from one medium to another, including written to visual and statistical to written or visual, using computer software as appropriate.

Content

The student is expected to:

- 19a - compare the historical origins, central ideas, and the spread of major religious and philosophical traditions including Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism;
- 19b - identify examples of religious influence in historic and contemporary world events;
- 21a - analyze the specific roles of women, children, and families in different historical cultures;
- 21b - describe the political, economic, and cultural influence of women in different historical cultures; and
- 23b - identify new ideas in mathematics, science, and technology that occurred during the Greco-Roman, Indian, Islamic, and Chinese civilizations and trace the spread of these ideas to other civilizations.

Research

The student is expected to:

- 25b - locate and use primary and secondary sources such as computer software, databases, media and news services, biographies, interviews, and artifacts to acquire information;
- 25d - explain and apply different methods that historians use to interpret the past, including the use of primary and secondary sources, points of view, frames of reference, and historical context; and
- 25e - use the process of historical inquiry to research, interpret, and use multiple sources of evidence.

Analysis of Information

The student is expected to:

- 25f – evaluate the validity of a source based on language, corroboration with other sources, and information about the author;
- 25g – identify bias in written, oral, and visual material; and
- 25h - support a point of view on a social studies issue or event.

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