

Arab Culture Through Literature and Film / A Five Unit High School Curriculum

Unit 3: Language and Ethnicity

Though the Arab world is broadly defined by a shared Arab ethnicity, there are actually a variety of ethnic groups in the region, many of whom are indigenous to the land. Each of these ethnic groups, including the Amazigh, the Bedouin, the Nubians, and the Kurds, has a unique history and culture and often their own language as well. Since the early years of Arab expansion, these indigenous groups have negotiated their acceptance and integration into the dominant Arab culture, at times adopting elements of the culture and at other times, rejecting it. Similarly, some elements of these indigenous cultures have been incorporated into the mainstream while others have been strongly dismissed. As a result, the Moroccan dialect of Arabic is infused with Amazigh words and phrases (acceptance) and Kurdish music and dance can be seen throughout Iraq (acceptance); so too, Bedouins in Jordan rarely maintain their nomadic lifestyles (dismissal) and often minority languages such as Amazigh and Kurdish are looked at as undesirable (dismissal).

This unit introduces students to ethnic groups in the Arab world and guides them through an understanding of their lived experience as minorities in the region. Students will consider the challenges that face specific ethnicities and explore how these groups negotiate their collective identity and membership in the region. Students will study the activity of Amazigh activists, read Kurdish poetry, and watch a documentary about the Nubians. They'll end the unit by conducting independent research on an ethnic minority of their choosing.

Enduring Understandings:

- Peoples of the Arab world have diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, each with a distinctive character and identity.
- Ethnic minorities negotiate their personal and collective identities in various ways to both accept and contest the dominant culture.
- There is a strong connection between language and identity which creates unique challenges for linguistic minorities.

Curriculum Framing Questions:

- What are the characteristics of ethnic minorities in the Arab world?
- What challenges do ethnic minorities face and how are they overcome?
- What is the role of language in creating and accessing power for ethnic minorities in the Arab world?
- What can we learn about the experiences of ethnic groups from the film and literature they produce?

Overview:

Lesson 1: Ethnic Minorities in the Arab World

Students consider the ways in which select ethnic minorities are included and excluded from the region based on ethnicity, language, religion, and geography.

Lesson 2: Asserting Linguistic Identity in the Arab World

Students learn about the Imazighen people, also known as the Berbers, and their struggle to maintain their identity through assertion of the Amazigh language.

Lesson 3: Oppression and Persecution of Ethnic Minorities as seen through Kurdish Poetry

Students read two Kurdish poems to understand the persecution experienced by Kurds in the Arab world.

Lesson 4: Memories of Utopia: Tradition and Change

This lesson introduces students to the contributions and struggles of the Nubians, an ethnic minority from Southern Egypt and northern Sudan.

Lesson 5: Ethnic Minorities in the Arab World: Independent Research

Students conduct independent research on an ethnic minority of the choosing.