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Open Sesame! Using Middle Eastern Folk and Fairy Tales To Open Doors to Understanding

One of the best ways to learn about different cultures is to study their literature and stories. This limited collection of Middle Eastern folktales and materials provides students with a small sampling of literature from old Persia, Turkey, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern cultures. It is intended for use in junior high school classes and emphasizes the differences and similarities of the beliefs and cultures of the Middle Eastern countries. This area has been a political, economic and diplomatic hotspot for decades. Since September 11, 2001, students on many campuses have labeled all the peoples of the Middle East as terrorists and/or terrorist supporters. Few are aware of the vast cultural heritage that comes from this area, where ancient ruins and modern cities exist cheek-to-cheek. While the Jewish culture and folktales are vivid and rich, this project focuses on Arabic and Muslim folktales. It is my fervent hope that in learning stories by and about these very exotic and often misunderstood peoples students in my school will begin to open doors to communication and understanding that seem locked now. Once they open the doors to discovery they will begin a journey toward understanding. Students may find it more difficult to “demonize” all inhabitants of the Middle East once are they more familiar with the heroes, jokes, riddles and sayings of some of the Arabic, Turkish and other Middle Eastern cultures.

I began looking for Arabic, Islamic and Turkish stories in *The Storyteller's Sourcebook*, 2nd edition, by Margaret Read MacDonald. I also consulted *The Index to Fairy Tales*, 1949-1972 by Norma Olin Ireland. Once I located the stories listed in those sources, I began searching for others in the Tom Green County Library, the Angelo State University Library and the University of North Texas Libraries. The Internet also has many sources of Arabic folktales.

Folktales

***Arabian Nights; Tales from a Thousand and One Nights.* Translated with preface and notes by Richard Francis Burton. Introduction by A. S. Byatt. (2001) New York, NY: Modern Library.**

Description:

This collection of tales is probably the best-known collection of Middle Eastern folklore and has been re-printed many times. The stories told by Shahrazade over a period of time range from humorous, to racy to romantic adventures. This collection includes the stories of Aladdin, Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves and Sindbad. This is a reprint of the 1932 Modern Library Edition compiled by Bennet Cerf containing the most popular stories. Burton's original works are a multi-volume set. Some of these tales are very familiar, while others have not been retold as many times. It is useful for comparing the original translations of the stories to the retold versions. The formal flowery language offers the readers glimpses of an intricately layered world with very different customs and traditions.

Bushnaq, Inea. trans. and ed. (1986) *Arab Folktales*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Description

Bushnaq translated and edited the stories collected here and included a great deal of background about the different cultures to explain the stories. Tales are grouped by type and by region. Each section contains introductory information to help readers and tellers understand culture references and significances. The introduction to the collection and the glossary are invaluable sources of cultural information that helped explain some of the nuances of the stories. Anyone interested in learning more about Arabic cultures and traditions will find this collection extremely helpful and entertaining.

Cohen, Barbara and Bahia Lovejoy. (1982) *Seven Sons & Seven Daughters*. New York, NY: Atheneum.

Story Synopsis

In Ancient Baghdad, sons are considered more important than daughters. Buran is one of the seven daughters of a poor man whose wealthy brother has seven sons. The wealthy brother brags continually about his wonderful sons and how rich they are becoming, while pretending to help his less fortunate brother. Buran decides that girls are also wonderful and decides to make life better for her impoverished family. She leaves Baghdad secretly, disguises herself as a man, travels by camel caravan to the far away city of Tyre and becomes a successful merchant. She begins sending her family money and is happy until she meets Mahud, the son of the Wali of Tyre and friendship becomes love. Buran must leave her shop and return home before her secret identity is revealed. This story will appeal to junior high school girls.

Hazeltine, Alice I. (1961) "Zal the White-Haired" from *Hero Tales of Many Lands*. Illustrated by Gordon Laite. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Story Synopsis

A warrior of the Shah, Sahm is well respected, but he fears for his reputation when his son is born with snow-white hair. Thinking that others may fear the child as a demon, Sahm leaves the child to die on the slopes of a mountain. A huge golden bird called Simurgh finds the baby and takes him to her nest where she raises him. After grieving for years for his lost child, Sahm journeys to the mountain where his son now called Zal (the aged) is restored to him. Zal helps his father defeat the Shah's enemies and inherits a

kingdom. Hearing of Rudabah, the beautiful daughter of King Mihrab of Cabul, Zal travels to the enemy's land to meet her. The two fall in love instantly and manage to overcome tremendous obstacles in order to marry. After a few years of happiness, Rudabah becomes gravely ill and Zal burns one of Simurgh's golden feathers as a signal that he needs his foster mother's help. The magical bird brings a cure for dying girl and all live happily.

Kimmel, Eric A. (1994) *The Three Princes; A Tale from the Middle East*. Illustrated by Leonard Everett Fisher. New York, NY: Holiday House.

Story Synopsis

A beautiful young princess must choose among three handsome cousins to marry. Wisely, she gives them all instructions to journey out into the world and return in one year with the most wonderful rare thing they encounter. She promises to marry the one who returns with the greatest wonder. The three cousins go their separate ways and return to compare their wonders. Prince Muhammed finds a crystal ball that allows him to see what is happening anywhere in the world. Prince Fahad has a magic carpet that will rapidly take him anywhere he wishes to go. Prince Mohsen brings an orange that will cure any illness. As they compare notes, they use the crystal ball to discover the princess is dying. They leap on the magic carpet, rush to her side where the orange restores her health. The princess decides to marry Prince Mohsen who has given his only treasure, the orange, to save her. It is significant that the princess is never named. The pictures in this book make it appropriate for all age levels.

Kimmel, Eric A. (1996) *The Tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves; A Story from the Arabian Nights*. Illustrated by Will Hillenbrand. New York, NY: Holiday House.

Story Synopsis

There are two brothers living in Baghdad; Quasim is wealthy, but Ali Baba is a poor woodcutter who works hard to support his family. While in the woods, Ali Baba discovers a group of thieves hiding their loot in a cave and hears the sheik conceal the opening with the magic phrases, "Open, Sesame" and "Close, Sesame". Ali Baba slips into the cave, gathers all he can carry and hurries home. Quasim finds out about his brother's wealth and greedily decides to get some treasure. He forgets the magic words and is captured and killed by the thieves. Ali Baba finds his brother's body in several pieces, and brings it back to town to have it sewn together and decently buried. Quasim's servant girl, Marghana, helps Ali Baba. When the thieves discover who rifled their loot, she helps Ali Baba defeat them by pouring hot oil into the jars where the thieves are hiding. This retelling of the very gory story that appears first in the Arabian Nights collection has been written for children, but the illustrations keep it appealing for older students also.

Nye, Naomi Shihab, Comp. (1998) *The Space Between Our Footsteps; Poems and Paintings from the Middle East*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Description

Nye's selection of materials for this powerful collection of poetry from Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Turkish poets as well as full-color artwork from the Middle Eastern countries gives the reader an insight into the cultures of the area. Notes on the contributors give information about the life of each poet and artist. The artwork is vivid and mixes both the traditional and contemporary art forms. Four poems in their original languages of Turkish, Farsi, Hebrew and Arabic appear on the endpapers giving young readers an opportunity to experience the very different types of scripts used in these languages. These scripts help highlight the differences in the languages and cultures in the area. This is a wonderfully evocative collection of materials that depicts some of the richness of the cultures. The poetry is often powerful and beautiful; sometimes it is simply poignant. All students can relate to the feelings portrayed so vividly in this slim volume.

Walker, Barbara K. (1988) *A Treasury of Turkish Folktales for Children*. Hamden, CT: Linnet Books.

Description

This collection of thirty-four folktales includes stories about the "wise fool" Nasreddin Hoca, a well-known character in Turkish folktales. Some of the tales are very similar to tales told in other countries, such as "The Courage of Kazan" which is very much like the "Brave Little Tailor" who slew so many enemies with one strike. There are Turkish riddles scattered though out the text that in addition to providing a giggle or two also provide readers an opportunity to understand some of the culture of the area.

Zeman, Ludmila. (1999). *Sindbad; From the Tales of the Thousand and One Nights*. Retold and illustrated by the author. Plattsburgh, New York: Tundra Books.

Story Synopsis

Sindbad the Sailor has many adventures as he sails around through the known and unknown waters of the Ancient Middle East. In this lavishly illustrated, abbreviated version of some of his voyages, Sindbad and his companions find a small beautiful island where they disembark only to find that the island is really the back of a giant whale floating peacefully on the ocean. When the whale destroys the ship and his companions, Sindbad is left alone floating on a wooden barrel in the middle of the ocean. When he finally makes landfall, he finds he has arrived in the land of the Roc, huge predatory birds. Sindbad uses his turban to tie himself to the Roc's leg in an effort to return to the lands inhabited by men. However, the Roc flies into a valley full of huge serpents that are guarding vast diamond fields. Sindbad fills his pockets with diamonds and is eventually rescued by some merchants who help him return to Baghdad. This greatly abbreviated version of the story is lavishly illustrated in the Old Persian style and contains many elements of the traditional artwork and calligraphy.

Website

Arab Culture and Identity

http://www.suite101.com/articles.cfm/arab_culture_and_identity/1-20

Last accessed November 29, 2002

Created by Aida Hasan, an American-born Palestinian this site has links to 47 different articles pertaining to the culture and customs of the Middle East. The storytelling link includes stories from Oman, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This site includes art, calligraphy, recipes, music and book reviews, and articles on problems facing Arab Americans and Muslims. This is not a scholarly site, but is designed to act as an introduction to some of the Middle Eastern cultures. The most recent article was added in June 2002. This exploration of a culture is useful for junior high school students who are interested in learning more about the peoples and culture of the Middle East.

Analysis

Structural Component: Introduction

Comparing collections of stories, fables and folktales to individual folktales is awkward. One method of analysis is by comparing structural components. Many American stories begin with the time-honored phrase “Once upon a time...” There are other phrases that Middle Eastern storytellers use to introduce the stories.

It is interesting to compare three common introductory phrases used in many Middle Eastern stories. The individual stories retold by Eric Kimmel in this collection demonstrate two phrases used by storytellers in Arabia. In *The Three Princes* the story begins with the words “There was and there was not...” This is a traditional opening for many of the Turkish stories, as well as some from Egypt. The storyteller does not want to tell a lie, a complete falsehood, so she leaves it up to the audience to determine whether or not the story is true. Telling an untruth could attract evil spirits or violate a religious belief, but storytellers embellish stories and stretch facts. By using this type of introduction the storyteller lets the listeners know that what they hear may not be true, while allowing the teller to take advantage of literary license. A variant of this phrase “Neither here nor there...” appears in several stories that come from Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Egypt. This indistinct location makes it possible for the storyteller to embellish the story without exactly telling an untruth. Another traditional opening is “In the name of Allah...” This opening commonly appeared in stories that were identified as coming from countries like Morocco, Syria, Iran and Lebanon and other countries that a predominately Muslim. These stories often had a moral dilemma that the characters faced. For example, in Kimmel’s version of *The Tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* the poor woodcutter took gold from a group of thieves and ultimately was saved by his quick-witted servant girl. At the end of the story, both Ali Baba and Marghanna both lived prosperous happy lives, “by the Grace of Allah”. Many of the stories begin and end with such exclamations of faith. It was very interesting to note that later editions of some of the many translations of *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* began with “In the name of Allah...”

Cultural Analysis

While these stories differ in detail from country to country they have striking similarities. In each of the four collections of stories, there are tales about a “wise fool” who seems to

be almost a simpleton and yet finds the perfect answer to a problem. The character Nasreddin Hoca, in Turkish stories appears in every collection of Middle Eastern folklore that I found. In one story, he wonders why a great huge watermelon grows on a tiny little vine, while a huge oak tree's fruit is a tiny walnut. He stops wondering and thanks Allah for His wisdom when a walnut fell on his head as he was napping under a tree. His counterpart, Djuha, appears in stories from Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Morocco. Another similarity is the role females play in stories from all the Middle Eastern countries. At first they seem to be powerless and unimportant, but often they emerge as hidden allies. Shahrazade (there are many spellings of her name), Burin and Marghana all are women who manage to effect some changes in their lives, but they all three wind up married to the handsome prince of their dreams in the end. Boy children are regarded as blessings from Allah, while girl children are usually portrayed as fragile creatures to be protected. The history of Arabia is full of exploration and great journeys. As a character, Sindbad explores the known and unknown world. In most of the Islamic collections, there are stories that tell of the dangers and adventures that the faithful experience in their hajj, their journey to Mecca. In the desert countries, the importance of water, gardens and growing things appears in every story. Cultural similarities are prominent in *The Spaces Between Our Footsteps* as poets throughout modern Middle Eastern countries write about their concerns for their own past and future as well as for the futures of their homelands.

The differences between the familiar American or Hispanic cultures that are prominent in Southwest Texas and the different cultures of the stories in this collection are vast. It is interesting to look at the changes in the stories of the *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* in the Burton translations and in the pop culture translations and retellings. Kimmel's retelling of two stories is minimal. The stories were much longer and more involved in the original version. These stories were intended for adult audiences, not just for children. The original language is flowery, evocative and occasionally gory, while the original plot is much more involved and intricate. The more popular stories that have been retold many times, including Disney's version of Aladdin, give some small hint of the richness of the original version, but they fail to really give the audience much information about the culture from which they evolved. Sometimes the act of making the story more familiar diminishes the differences that make it so fascinating and puzzling in the first place.

Holistic Analysis

This collection is an eclectic one, combining folktales, poetry, art, calligraphy and even recipes into a framework designed to appeal to a teenager's sense of exploration. None of the materials really explore the subject in depth; rather they provide an introduction to a vast amount of materials. Three of the items are collections of folktales, from the well-known *Arabian Nights* to the lesser-known stories in *Arab Folktales* and *The Treasury of Turkish Tales*. The collection of poetry and art in *The Space Between Our Footsteps* doesn't include folktales but touches on the concerns and dreams of all peoples in Middle Eastern countries from Morocco to Iran. The picture books are intended to be used as introductions to this exploration of a new culture. They can also be compared to the

original stories found in the collections of folktales. The students can then begin to explore the story collections in earnest to find stories that will thrill them with magic genies, great adventures and passionate love stories. The novel *Seven Daughters and Seven Sons* is a love story and an adventure novel that should appeal to most thirteen-year-old girls. The website also functions as a welcome mat in front of the door of discovery. It takes the reader through a quick introduction to Middle Eastern art, food, music and stories. The website creator added articles about the problems faced by the Arabs, Turks, Lebanese, Syrians, Egyptians and Palestinians of today. The stories and poems stand alone, but as a unit, they are designed to function as a lure that will tempt students to step further into a foreign space where they will meet new peoples, new cultures and new ideas.

Summary

This research project has been an unexpectedly colorful journey. I had thought that I would use more picture books with this project, but as I began looking for material I soon realized that there were more stories available than I knew. Starting the search for materials in *Storyteller's Sourcebook*, I found many stories in many different collections. At first, the stories were a little difficult to locate. There is a definite prejudice toward Western European cultures in most of the folktale collections that are available to me locally. While I found one or two stories from the Middle East in most international story collections, there were many, many stories originating in England, Germany, France, Italy, Belgium and the Scandinavian countries. Before long, with the help of the UNT librarians, I began to find more stories with roots in the Middle East. In the end, I looked at the pile of collected materials carefully, only to discover that I had more than 60 individual items tagged with post-it notes, bookmarks, folded Kleenex and almost anything else that could be placed between pages of a book in addition to the various photocopies of stories. Some of the stories were almost x-rated for violence or for sexual innuendo. Even though those would really appeal to the teenage boys that are part of my audience, I decided that I wouldn't be sharing those anytime soon. Language and translations became a problem. At one point, I thought I should start comparing the spellings of names like Sindbad, Sinbad, Sinhdbad, and Sindbahd and that is an example of the differences in just a two-syllable name! Very often what were at first very different stories turned out to be very similar versions of the same story told in different countries with different titles.

I learned much more about the history of the countries in the Middle East in order to understand a little bit about the progression of the stories. Persia no longer exists on a map, but many of the people of Iran and Iraq are Persians. Turkey is on the northern edge of the maps of the Middle East and has some cultural ties with some of the other nations, but still has some very different oral traditions according to my limited research. I kept looking for an alternative term to Middle Eastern, but each term I found seemed to limit the scope of the collection. Semitic wasn't right; neither was Arabic. Islamic or Muslim are inaccurate terms also. The list of cultures and people is rather lengthy and quickly became cumbersome. Just as finding the right terms to define the collection was difficult,

the final composition of the collection is an uneasy compromise. There were 12 items I really wanted to include so I have added a supplement at the end of the paper for those who are interested. Before I really understand some of the stories, I will need to learn more about Islam and the Koran. Religion and religious symbolism play a tremendous part in the folklore of the lands of the minarets.

If I were doing more research in Middle Eastern folklore, I would really like to explore the symbolism of birds in their cultures. There are hundreds of references to birds of all types; many stories have references to several different kinds of birds. Of course, that will require more extensive knowledge of the culture of the people. Foreigners to our shores may find it difficult to understand our references to eagles as opposed to turkeys or buzzards in the United States. In the light of 20/20 hindsight, I should have limited my research to only one of the many cultural groups in the Middle East. While there are many similarities in the various cultures, there are many differences also and there are certainly enough stories and tales to allow for a more focused study of folklore from individual countries.

While I was familiar with some of the most common retellings of the better-known stories, such as Aladdin and Ali Baba, I found that I had never truly considered the stories as reflections of other cultures. Many of the nuances of these familiar tales now carry more meaning for me. This journey of discovery has led me to explore further into the history, religions, cultures and politics of people that seem much less foreign now. Storytelling can indeed open doors to new lands and cultures.

Step into a new world through Storytelling



Opening picture © Rachis Maim. Used with permission of the artist.
Closing picture from http://bloom.mit.edu/agakhan/aka_fm_links.html

BONUS MATERIALS

Mami, Cheb. (1999) *Meli Meli* title song. [CD] Sherman Oaks, CA: Ark21.

Algerian recording artist, Cheb Mami combines traditional Algerian musical styles with rap and other influences. Mami is considered one of the leaders of the “Rai” or “opinion” musical movement that was sometimes used to criticize the government of Algeria. He has performed with Sting and other Western recording artists. The title song of the CD has an infectious rhythm. According to the liner notes, this song is called “What is happening to me?” Mami wrote most of the music on this CD with its Western influence that creates a bridge for the junior high students into true Arabic music styles. The tracks of the CD are available at <http://www.musicoflebanon.com/cmami-2.htm>. This is one of the CDs I play in the library at school regularly. I will use it as part of the introduction and background before the storytelling begins.

Middle Eastern Folklore on the Goggle Directories page

http://directory.google.com/Top/Society/Folklore/Literature/Tales/Fairy_Tales/World_Tales/Middle_Eastern/

This collection of sites dealing with Middle Eastern folklore includes links to Turkish, Palestinian, Armenian and Arabic folktales. Storytellers maintain some of the sites on this page, but educational institutions posted some of the other sites. While it is not an exhaustive list, it is one that is both useful and instructive. There are links for children’s stories as well as for stories for a more adult audience.