



Context:

Southeast Asians & other newcomers in California's classrooms
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Context is published six times during the academic year as a way to provide staff with information and ideas concerning their newcomer students and parents. While the focus is on Southeast Asians, most articles and resources apply to other newcomer groups as well. District staff with LEP students receive a free subscription (contact Nguyet Tham at the Transitional English office). Compliance file clerks should place a copy in CON24.

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The two articles here—one about a girl in India and the other about a girl in Africa—provide material for group discussion of the social age for marriage. A group discussion, with an emphasis on research and withholding of judgement, could be especially interesting for school staffs who have encountered and are troubled by occasions of marriage of fourteen- and fifteen-year old Hmong girls.

What are the cultural variations in the "right" age for a girl to marry? Are there cultural patterns in which "early" marriage makes sense? What are the advantages and disadvantages of delaying the social age for marriage within the Hmong culture in America?

Social Age for Marriage

Should Nalini get married at the age of 14?

Nalini set out the curry, rice and chapatis for her father and her older brother, Gautam, in the cramped family dress shop. Then she went to the back to brew their sweet tea and wipe the gritty dust from her feet. The monsoon rains couldn't come too early in north-west India; all the vegetable gardens of her village were parched, shriveled as she had never seen them before. Rajiv, her future husband, whom she had met along the road with one of his sisters, said he was worried about his crops. He had frowned all the way through their brief meeting; it made him look ugly.

Not that he was ever handsome like her brother Gautam... She was trying to like Rajiv, but it was hard. Even though he and his sister had been in his new truck, he hadn't offered to take her to her father's shop despite the awful heat. Also, Rajiv was 29, more than twice Nalini's age, and when he talked to her—which, of course, he could never do before their marriage unless members of his family or hers were present—spoke as if she were a child. But she did have to admit that his eyes were very fine, even beautiful—and that they lit up when he saw her.

She joined her father and Gautam. A new shipment of saris had arrived: the silks, cottons and synthetic fabrics lay on the counter helter-skelter. "I bumped into Rajiv and his sister on the way," she told them.

"A good man," said Gautam. "He will take good care of you. He will treat you like a princess—like the princess you are."

Her father nodded in agreement, pushing aside his plate. Nalini loved Gautam even more than she loved their father. She loved the encouragement he gave her, even though he sometimes behaved as if she were still a baby. Her mother had told her that all older brothers were like that—even long after their younger sisters had become mothers five times over. But Nalini felt that despite the huge difference in their ages, Rajiv should treat her as her father treated her mother—with respect. She might never be as wise as her mother, but if Rajiv felt that her thoughts were worth hearing—as her parents and Gautam often did—she might come up with some ideas that he might like. "Oh, Gautam," she sighed, "if only Rajiv were more like you and Pappa..."

"Nalini, you know Pappa doesn't like that attitude. You can't really know Rajiv yet," said her brother. "When you enter his home as his bride three

months from now—”

“He’ll shut me up in that house, he and his mother!” she heard herself saying, to her own surprise. Normally, she would never say such a thing to either of her parents—certainly not her father. A hush fell over the shop. She took advantage of the astonished silence her statement had caused. “They’ll shut me up and never let me out. They’ll make me start having babies the day after the wedding. And if those babies aren’t boys, his mother will make my life a misery. A total misery ...”

“Nonsense,” said Gautam. “She’s a lovely lady. She still gives me sweets from time to time—when I bring her orders to her house.”

“You’re not a girl,” replied Nalini. “She hardly ever even smiles at me—or even her own daughters.”

“Come now,” said their father, smiling slightly. “Just because neither Rajiv nor his mother is a chatterbox like the two of you ...”

Nalini felt that it was now or never to ask the question that had come to haunt her during the last few months. “Pappa, do I have to get married now?”

She dropped her eyes before her father’s hard stare. Rajiv was the richest farmer in their village. His asking for her hand in marriage was an honour for her family and herself. And her father and Gautam and their older brothers who were living in Bombay with families of their own—they were all working hard to save for her dowry, the money as well as clothes and sheets and other household goods that every girl in India brings to her bridegroom when she marries. “Pappa, if my marriage were postponed, you wouldn’t all have to work so hard to pay my dowry. You would have much more time ...”

Her father reached out and stroked her hand as he shook his head.

“If Rajiv really wants me,” Nalini went on recklessly, “he’ll wait.” Going to the counter, she began sorting the new saris by their colours and patterns. Then she hung a few next to others already displayed on the wall hooks so that they looked like a rainbow. Finally, she reached into the packages of bangles, selected a few carefully and pinned them to the gossamer fabrics that set them off best. No one stopped her. When she turned around, she found Gautam’s eyes wide with wonder. Their father also seemed im-

pressed; with a display like this, many of his customers would at the very least be tempted to buy more than they had planned. She probably could also show the women what would suit them best—sometimes the cheaper, but sometimes the more expensive cloth. She had her mother’s gift for knowing what brought out a woman’s best features.

“You see, Pappa,” she said, “you really need me much more than Rajiv does. And I can do accounts just as well as Gautam—because he taught me.”

“Oh?” asked their father.

“Yes,” confessed Gautam. “I though Nalini would be a better wife if she could help with the household accounts.”

“Well,” said their father, after a long silence, “I’ll talk with Rajiv. Maybe he’ll agree to postponing the marriage a bit, but I’m not making any promises, Nalini.” Even a year or two, he thought. Fourteen was young; her own mother had been sixteen at their wedding. If someone other than Rajiv had asked for Nalini’s hand, he probably would have said that the child was too young for marriage, especially in these new modern times when some girls, city girls, even chose their husbands. And now that Nalini had shown these skills—she might increase the volume of the shop’s business a good deal. That in itself would reduce the burden of the dowry—that, plus the additional time...

Gautam’s thoughts were somewhat different. In four years, Nalini would be eighteen, like himself. A true woman who could be a true companion to her husband. And if Rajiv didn’t want her then, she would probably have met smarter—even richer—men from Bombay who would want a woman like her to help them in their business. That might be dowry enough. And perhaps she would really like one of them ...

For further discussion:

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines the end of childhood as the age of 18.

- How would you feel about getting married at the age of 14 or 16 or even 17 or 18? In many countries, unicef is trying to persuade Governments to make 18 the minimum age of marriage for girls.

- Is there a minimum age for boys in your country—or any other that you know of? How would you find out?
- Does the custom of dowry still exist in your country? What form does it take? Whose family pays for a wedding? What is bride price? Do you think it is a better or worse custom than dowry?
- Are your parents matchmakers? Do they do anything to see that you meet the kind of person they'd want you to marry?
- Why does Nalini fear that her life will be miserable if she has daughters rather than sons? Which would you want (if you care at all) as your first child—a girl or a boy? Why?

Why has Wanjiku dropped out of school?

As Nyambura lowered her pail into the sun-dappled stream from which she fetched her family's water each morning, she heard a pure, high voice singing the old song about the maize flowers blooming all over Kenya.

It was Wanjiku; the voice was unmistakable—and much missed in class now that her parents had pulled her out of school to help her mother at home after the birth of her latest brother. Nyambura didn't quite understand why they had done that; her own mother had just as much work as Wanjiku's. And it made her uncomfortable that she was still in school when Wanjiku wasn't. She set her pail down and ran up the path to greet her former classmate; she didn't want Wanjiku to feel that they weren't close friends just because they no longer saw each other daily.

"We got a new goat to go with my new brother," said Wanjiku as Nyambura took her hand.

"Which one is more trouble?" asked Nyambura, smiling.

"It's hard to tell. The goat, I guess. Yesterday it ate the sleeve of my red blouse."

They laughed together and, at the stream's edge, kicked off their sandals to cool their feet in the water.

"It's my little sister who's exciting," said Wanjiku. "She's beginning to talk. She still stumbles when she

walks, but she chatters away. Just like me at her age, Mamma says."

Nyambura wondered if Wanjiku's baby sister would ever go to school. She tried to remember the proverb her mother had learned at the dress-making centre where she had also learned to read a few years before. All the eight-year-old girl could recall, though, was that when she had asked if she should stay at home like Wanjiku, to help with the younger children and the other household chores, her mother had pulled her ears gently and said, "Not you, honeypot. With that head of yours, you're going to write the kind of books that taught me how to read."

"And your father thinks the same," his voice had boomed suddenly in the doorway, "so don't go asking him such foolish things." He had entered the house, smiling, and threatened to tickle her to death if she raised the question again. That had closed the matter—for her at least... The problem, thought Nyambura, as she looked at her friend's rippled reflection in the water, was that Wanjiku's head was just as good as hers—different, but every bit as good. One of the reasons that she missed Wanjiku so much in class was that her friend's answers to their teacher's questions often set off new thoughts in her own head. Had each made the other's head better?

And now Wanjiku was asking just the question Nyambura had been dreading: "What's going on at school?"

"We're learning division," she replied. "It's easy," she added, remembering how good Wanjiku had been at math. "I could teach it to you if you like." Suddenly she realized that she'd said something wrong.

"Of course it's easy," Wanjiku retorted. "Just the opposite of the times tables we were doing when I left. If five times two is ten, then two goes into ten five times." She stood up and filled her pail. "You know," she said, "I bet I can get my older brother to teach me everything he's learned in school. I don't really need to go myself."

Nyambura wondered, but said nothing. That brother wasn't very interested in school—and he never seemed to have time for anyone but his friends. Then her mother's proverb came back to her: "Educate a boy and you educate one person; educate a girl and you educate a nation."

Human Themes

Make a large chart and put the following questions down the left side. Find out what cultural groups are represented in your school, and put the se across the top. In each cell of the chart, fill in the answers to the questions. Look for similarities and differences. Try to decipher the "human theme" that underlies the variations in how cultures regard marriage and the role of the female in society.

	Hmong from Laos	_____	White American
Preferred age for females to marry? For males?	Females: 14-16. Males: 18-22.		
What skills should a female have before marriage?	The wife moves into the husband's household, and the mother-in-law helps "finish" the girl's training.		Each should be capable of living successfully as an individual.
Is there "bride price"? Is there "groom price"?	Bride price seals the contract between families.		Groom price (bride's family pays for the wedding).
What is the reason for marriage?	Alliances between families and clans. Having and raising children.		Personal fulfillment. Having and raising children.
Are there choices of mates that are forbidden or undesirable?	Marriage to someone with the same clan name is forbidden.		
Are there choices that are preferred?	Wives from families of the mother, grandmother, or other relative with a different clan name.		
What is the role of the mother-in-law?	The bride becomes like a daughter to the mother-in-law, whose own daughter goes with her husband's family.		
Who raises the children?	The grandparents provide primary child care, especially for the first children. Parents learn "on the job."		Parents are expected to know how to raise their children when they begin a family.

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Arab World and Islamic Resources, Berkeley, California is a non-profit dedicated to the awareness of Arab and Islamic culture. We work primarily with schools, making a range of informative material available so that both the curious and proud have an exciting means of connecting to the heritage.

The Arab Americans

Alix Naff, Chelsea House, 1988.

This volume begins with the late 19th century Syrians who first left Ottoman—ruled Syria/Lebanon to make their fortune in the New World. They were fully assimilated when a second wave of Arab immigrants—educated professionals from Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Syria—who arrived after World War II.

Arab Folktales

Inea Bushnaq, Pantheon Books, New York, 1986.

Here are 131 oral Arab folktales from palaces, villages, bazaars and the desert. Many are as short as one page. Visuals drawn from women's weavings and needlework break up the text and add to the readability of these wonderful stories. 7th-12th, social studies/humanities, \$16.00

**The Arab World Notebook:
For the Secondary School Level**

Audrey Shabbas and Ayad Al-Quazzaz, editors, Najda, 1990.

Loose-leaf binder of some 460 pages of duplicating masters. There are lesson plans that relate the Arab World to students' lives. There are extensive lists of other available resources. These materials have the power to exorcise stereotypes and replace them with understandings. The quality is high—very high—and so is the interest level. 7th-12th, and undergraduate college courses, social studies/across the curriculum. \$39.95.

Arabian Cuisine

Anne Marie Weiss-Armush, illustrated by J. Berry.

This book presents in recipes, notes and fantastic line drawings, well known dishes, foods with cultural significance—marking the end of the Ramadan fast or the birth of a child—as well as simple family dishes that have served a rugged people for centuries. Sprinkled throughout the work are numerous Arabian proverbs that relate to food and eating. 6th-adult, 402 pp. \$21.95.

The Arabs: Activities for the Elementary School Level

Audrey Shabbas, Carol El-Shaieb and Ahlam Nabulsi, AWAIR, 1991.

Here are the things that make for peace—activities that put a human face on the peoples of the Arab World. At the same time, students, through these 25 hands-on projects, can develop new skills and understanding as they cook, weave, macrame, sing, dance, recycle, make soap, play games, tell stories and much more. K-7th across curriculum, 60 pp. spiralbound \$16.00. ADOPTED: San Francisco Unified. MODEL: for all of Oakland Unified's multi-cultural curriculum.

As the Arabs Say...Volume II.

Arabic Proverbs, recalled and interpreted by Isa Sabbagh, 1985.

A marvelous collection of proverbs reflecting the nuances of color, poetry and wit of this culture. Points out the often different interpretations of basic moral values and behavioral attitudes among divergent peoples. Here is beautifully interpreted Arabic calligraphy, along with translation, historical explanation and anecdotes. 128 pp. \$11.00

Fabled Cities, Princes and Jinn: From Arab Myths and Legends

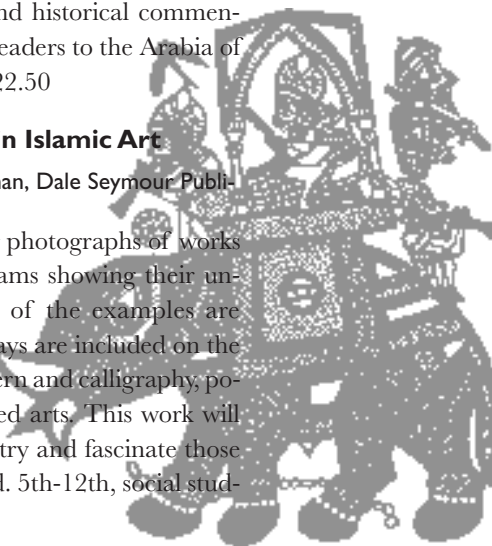
Retold by Khairat Al-Saleh, illustrated by Rashad N. Salim. Peter Bedrick Books.

This collection tells 40 tales from Arabia beginning with the ancient myths of pre-Islamic times up to the folktales of the Golden Age of the Arab Muslim culture. Featuring 18 full-color illustrations, 38 line drawings and historical commentary, this book will carry readers to the Arabia of old. 5th-adult, 132 pp. \$22.50

Geometric Concepts in Islamic Art

Issam El-Said and Ayse Parman, Dale Seymour Publications, 1976.

This book combines clear photographs of works of Islamic art with diagrams showing their underlying structure. Most of the examples are from architecture, but essays are included on the relationship between pattern and calligraphy, poetry, music and the applied arts. This work will awaken interest in geometry and fascinate those who are already interested. 5th-12th, social studies/math, 154 pp. \$13.95



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The Southeast Asia Community Resource Center provided funding for the development of the manuscript and the printing of the bilingual edition. The funds have been collected from the sales of the various handbooks for teachers (see the back page), and proceeds will replenish this development fund.

English only edition:

Roger Warner, 171 Argilla Road, Ipswich MA 01938, warner@shore.net.

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