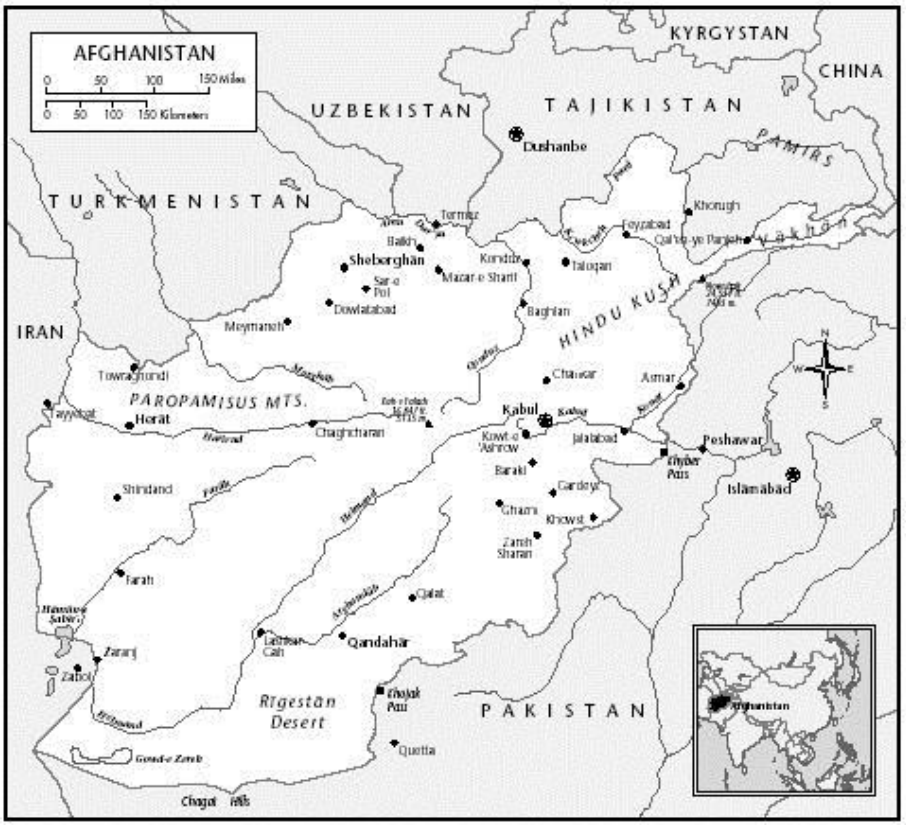
Afghani Cultural Overview

(taken from http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Afghanistan.html ; accessed 7/19/13)

Identification. The word "Afghan" historically has been used to designate the members of an ethnic group also called the Pashtuns, but Afghanistan is multicultural and multiethnic. The state was formed by the political expansion of Pashtun tribes in the middle of the eighteenth century but was not unified until the end of the nineteenth century. Persian-speaking (Tajiks, Hazaras, and Aymaqs) and Turkic-speaking (Uzbeks and Turkmens) populations have been incorporated in the state. Since the Communist coup of 1978 and the ensuing civil war, those groups have sought for greater political recognition, but the existence of the state has not been seriously questioned. The experience of exile shared by millions of refugees may have given rise to a new national feeling.



Location and Geography. Afghanistan is a land-locked Asian country of 251,825 square miles (652,225 square kilometers) bordered by Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. The topography is a mix of central highlands and peripheral foothills and plains. The country has an arid continental climate. Summers are dry and hot, while winters are cold with heavy snowfall in the highlands. Precipitation is low, although some areas in the east are affected by the monsoon. Most of the country is covered by steppes, with desert areas and some patches of cultivated land. Pastoral nomadism, subsistence mountain agriculture, and irrigation are practiced. At the end of the eighteenth century, Kabul

became the capital. It is located in a wide basin on the road linking India with Central Asia.

Demography. There are no reliable census figures, but in 1997, the population was estimated to be 23,738,000. The great majority of people are rural (80 percent). The population of Kabul peaked at more than one million in the 1980s but dropped after the fall of the Communist regime in 1992. Mazar-e Sharif, Herat, and Kandahar (Qandahar) are the major cities, with populations of about 200,000 each. Important towns include Jalalabad, Kunduz, Baghlan, and Ghazni.

The demographic importance of the Pashtuns has decreased since 1978, because they have formed the majority of the refugee population in Pakistan. It is estimated that Pashtuns represent 38 percent of the population, principally in the southeast, south, and west, with some pockets in the north; they are divided between the Durrani and Ghilzay confederacies and among many tribes along the Pakistani border. The Tajiks (25 percent) live primarily in the northeast, the northwest, and the urban centers. The Hazaras (19 percent) are found in the center, Kabul, and Mazar-e Sharif. The Uzbeks (6 percent) occupy the north. The remaining 12 percent of the population is made up of Aymaks (Sunni Persian-speaking groups in the northwest), Turkmens (along the border with Turkmenistan), Baluchis (in the southwest), and Nuristanis and Pashays (northeast of Kabul).

Except for a few Hindu, Sikh, and Jewish minorities that have left the country, all the inhabitants are Muslims, divided between Sunnis (estimated at 84 percent), and Shiites (15 percent, most of whom are Hazaras); there are Ismaeli pockets in the east of Hazarajat and in Badakhshan. There has been a huge refugee population outside the country since 1978, numbering over six million in 1990—it constituted the largest refugee population in the world. Although many returned after the fall of the Communist regime in April 1992, several million Afghan refugees are still in Pakistan, Iran, and the Arabian Peninsula. Some middle-class persons and intellectuals have settled in the West.

Linguistic Affiliation. Many inhabitants are bilingual or trilingual, and all the major languages are spoken in the neighboring countries. The official languages are Persian (officially called Dari) and Pashto; both belong to the Iranian group of the Indo-European linguistic family. The Persian spoken by the Tajiks, Hazaras, and Aymaks is not very different from the Persian of Iran. Pashto, which is divided into two major dialects, is also spoken in large areas of Pakistan. Despite government initiatives to promote Pashto, Persian is the preferred means of expression among educated and urban people. The Iranian group is also represented by Baluchi and some residual languages. The Nuristani languages are intermediate between Iranian and Indian groups, while Pashay is a conservative Indian language. Turkic languages, represented by Uzbek, Turkmen, and Kirghiz, are spoken widely in the north. Moghol and Arabic enclaves are disappearing.

Symbolism. Afghanistan has never had a strongly unified national culture, and war has led to further fragmentation. The old flag of green, white, and black horizontal strips has been abandoned, and there is no national anthem. The national currency (the Afghani) is printed in two separate locations, with a locally varying exchange rate.

History and Ethnic Relations

Emergence of the Nation. The territory of modern Afghanistan was the center of several empires, including Greco-Buddhist kingdoms and the Kushans (third century B.C.E. to the second century C.E.) and the Muslim Ghaznavid and Ghurid dynasties (tenth to the twelfth centuries). It was a base of action for many rulers of India, notably the Mughals.

The modern nation emerged during the eighteenth century by Pashtun tribes in reaction to the decline of the Persian and Indian empires. During the nineteenth century, Afghanistan struggled successfully against the colonial powers and served as a buffer state between Russia and British India. The three Anglo-Afghan wars (1839–1842; 1878–1880; 1919) could have forged a national feeling, but the country's history has been dominated by internal conflicts. The first half of the nineteenth century was marked by a feud between two branches of the Durrani Pashtuns, with the

Mohammadzay eventually succeeding and ruling until 1978. Abdur Rahman (Abdorrahman Khan, r. 1880–1901) extended his authority over the whole country by overcoming resistance from his fellow tribesmen and defeating the Ghilzay Pashtuns, the Hazaras, and the Kafirs (Nuristanis). Although political unity was forged during his reign, his harsh tactics created enmities between Sunnis and Shiites, between Pashtuns and other ethnic groups, and among Pashtuns, as well as between rural and urban people.

King Amanullah (Amanollah Khan, r. 1919–1929) tried to implement various reforms which failed. An attempt to set up a parliamentary government after 1963 resulted in serious social troubles—leading to the seizure of power by the Communists in 1978, many of whom were young, recently urbanized, detribalized people seeking social advancement. Within a few months the country was rebelling, and in 1979 the Soviet Union intervened militarily. A bitter guerrilla war ensued over the next ten years between the Red Army and the Afghan resistance fighters *(mujâhedin)*, during which about 1.5 million Afghans died and millions left the country. The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the fall of the Communist regime in 1992 led to an explosion of tensions and dissatisfactions. In response to this situation, the Taliban (religious students from refugee camps in Pakistan), seized the south in the winter of 1994–1995 and restored security. Since that time they have conquered most of the country, but have been unable to incorporate other groups or obtain international recognition.

National Identity. Until 1978, Afghanistan avoided fragmentation through a shared religion and the relative autonomy of local communities even though the government favored Pashtun culture and folklore. Most inhabitants felt they belonged primarily to a local community and secondarily to the supranational Islamic community. National identity was weak, but the state was not considered disruptive. This fragile equilibrium was destroyed after the coup of 1978. The symbols on which the legitimacy of the government was based (political independence, historical continuity, and respect of Islam) vanished.

Ethnic Relations. Before 1978, ethnic relations were competitive and tense. The pro-Soviet government attempted to promote the rights, culture, and languages of non-

Pashtun groups. Although this endeavor failed, it led to an erosion of the Pashtun political hegemony. In the 1990s, political claims evolved progressively from an Islamic to an ethnic discourse. Islam-inspired resistance to the Soviets failed to provide a common ground for building peace and uniting people. Since 1992, the civil war has been marked by ethnic claims that have led to polarization between Pashtuns (who dominate the Taliban movement) and the other ethnic groups (who form the bulk of the opposing Northern Alliance).

Urbanism, Architecture, and the Use of Space

There are several historical cities, such as Balkh, Ghazni, and Herat, but after twenty years of war, the preservation of historical monuments is not a priority. The Kabul Museum was looted repeatedly, nothing is left of the covered bazaar of Tashqurghan (Tash Kurghan) in the north, and the Buddha statues of Bamyan (Bamian) have been damaged. Most cities and towns are in ruins, and little reconstruction is occurring.

In the south and the center, the most common form of housing is the multi-story fortified farm with high walls built from a mixture of mud and straw. They are scattered in the fields, sometimes forming loose hamlets. In the north and the west, smaller compounds with vaulted houses of mud brick are prevalent. In the eastern highlands, settlements are grouped; stone and timber are common building materials. In both urban and rural settings, bazaars are not residential areas.

Domestic architecture is based on the separation between the public and private parts of the house so that women do not interact with strangers. Furnishings are generally rudimentary. Many families sleep in one room on mattresses that are unfolded for the night, and no places are assigned. In the morning, the room is tidied, with the mattresses and quilts piled in a corner. Rich families may have a separate guest house, but Afghans do not like to sleep alone and generally do not provide guests with separate rooms.

There is a large semi-nomadic and nomadic population. Two types of tents are used: the Middle Eastern black goat's hair tent and the round Central Asian yurt. Temporary shelters range from reed and straw huts to caves.

Food and Economy

Food in Daily Life. Everyday food consists of flat bread cooked on an iron plate in the fire or on the inner wall of a clay oven. Bread often is dipped in a light meat stock. Yogurt and other dairy products (butter, cream, and dried buttermilk) are an important element of the diet, as are onions, peas and beans, dried fruits, and nuts. Rice is eaten in some areas and in urban settlements. Scrambled eggs prepared with tomatoes and onions is a common meal. Food is cooked with various types of oils, including the fat of a sheep's tail. Tea is drunk all day. Sugar is used in the first cup of the day, and then sweets are eaten and kept in the mouth while sipping tea. Other common beverages are water and buttermilk. Afghans use the right hand to eat from a common bowl on the floor. At home, when there are no guests, men and women share meals. Along the roads and in the bazaars, there are many small restaurants that also function as teahouses and inns.

The common Islamic food prohibitions are respected in Afghanistan. For example, meat is only eaten from animals that are slaughtered according to Islamic law; alcohol, pork, and wild boar are not consumed, although some people secretly make wine for consumption at home. The Shiites avoid rabbit and hare.

Food Customs at Ceremonial Occasions. On special occasions, pilau rice is served with meat, carrots, raisin, pistachios, or peas. The preferred meat is mutton, but chicken, beef, and camel also are consumed. Kebabs, fried crepes filled with leeks, ravioli, and noodle soup also are prepared. Vegetables include spinach, zucchini, turnip, eggplant, peas and beans, cucumber, and tomatoes. Fresh fruits are eaten during the day or as a dessert. In formal gatherings, men and women are separated. Dinners start by drinking tea and nibbling on pistachios or chickpeas; food is served late in the evening on dishes that are placed on a cloth on the floor. Eating abundantly demonstrates one's enjoyment.

Basic Economy. The traditional economy combines cultivation and animal husbandry. Irrigated agriculture dominates, but the products of pluvial agriculture are considered to be of better quality. Wheat is the principal crop, followed by rice, barley, and corn. The main cash crops are almonds and fruits. Cotton was a major export until the civil war. Today, large zones of agricultural land have been converted to poppy cultivation for the heroin trade. Stock breeding is practiced by both nomadic and sedentary peoples. Nomads spend the summer in the highlands and the winter in the lowlands. Many of them, especially in the east, also trade.

Virtually all manufactured goods are imported; they are financed by remittances from refugees and emigrants.

Land Tenure and Property. Most grazing land is held communally, but agricultural land is privately owned. Irrigation canals are shared, following a pre-established schedule. The bulk of the population consists of small landholders who supplement their income by sending a family member to work in the city or abroad. Poor farmers who do not own land often become tenants or hire themselves out on a daily base. Often in debt, they are economically and politically dependent on local headmen and landlords.

Commercial Activities. Afghanistan produces few commercial goods. The Taliban have opened commercial routes between Pakistan and Turkmenistan, but no official trade can develop until the government is recognized by the international community.

Trade. Hides, wool, dried and fresh fruits, and pistachios are exported, but narcotics account for the bulk of export receipts. The country imports tax-free goods through Pakistan, including cars, air conditioners, refrigerators, televisions, radios, and stereo equipment. These consumer products are then smuggled to neighboring countries.

Major Industries. After more than twenty years of war, there is no industrial activity.

Division of Labor. Most of the Afghan workers present in Iran and the Gulf countries are young, unmarried males. In Afghanistan, people work as long as they are fit.

Social Stratification

Classes and Castes. Some groups are egalitarian, but others have a hierarchical social organization. There are great differences in wealth and social status. Society also is stratified along religious and ethnic lines. During most of the twentieth century, members of the king's family played a major role in politics as ministers and ambassadors. Most civil servants and technocrats were Persian-speaking urban residents. Ismaelis and Shiites (especially the Hazaras) had the lowest status. In the provinces, most administrative posts were held by Pashtuns who had no connection to the population. Local communities were dominated by the richest landlords, assisted by village headmen. The Sayyeds, supposed to be the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima, played an important role as mediators, relying on prestige rather than personal wealth. Family elders were consulted on local matters, and many disputes were settled by local assemblies. Although Communist land reform was rejected by the population, important changes have occurred. Traditional leaders have lost their preeminence to military commanders and young religious militants. Some smugglers have become immensely rich.

Symbols of Social Stratification. Social stratification is expressed primarily through marriage patterns. The general tendency is for lower social groups to give their daughters in marriage to higher social groups. The lavishness of a wedding is an indicator of status and wealth. Following Taliban decree, men must wear a hat or turban and be bearded. Western dress and fashion, which once distinguished urban from rural people, have almost disappeared.

Political Life

Government. The Taliban control most of the country. Their government is recognized only by Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. The Taliban rule without a constitution, relying on the Koran. There is an informal assembly around their leader in Kandahar. Ministries exist in Kabul, and lower-level civil servants have often remained in place, but there is no real administration. At the local level, the military commanders rule groups of villages, a situation the Taliban have tried to end.

Leadership and Political Officials. Afghanistan does not have a unified government. Political parties linked to the resistance, including Sunni and Shiite, and Islamic fundamentalist, have developed during the war, but now they have imperfectly merged in the two remaining factions—the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. Military commanders have the real leadership.

Social Problems and Control. In their drive to "purify" society, the Taliban emphasize moral values. No distinction is made between religious and civil laws, and the religious police are omnipotent. Judges apply a tribal-based conception of Islam. Those who commit adultery and consume drugs and alcohol are severely punished. Beatings, amputations, and public executions (beheading, stoning, and shooting) are commonly practiced. Tens of thousands of persons are jailed without trial by the various factions.

Military Activity. The Taliban are backed by Pakistan, while the Northern Alliance is supported by Iran and the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Military activity is intense, particularly in the spring and summer.

Social Welfare and Change Programs

No political leader has attempted to develop welfare programs.

Nongovernmental Organizations and Other Associations

United Nations agencies and the Red Cross are active, but fighting often interrupts their projects. Hundreds of local and foreign nongovernmental organizations have programs for land mine removal, education, health care, road building, irrigation, and agriculture. Their role is often ambiguous, and they have contributed to social stratification because their actions often are limited to major urban centers and areas near the Pakistani border. By providing nearly all welfare programs, they have made it easier for political leaders to ignore social issues.

Gender Roles and Statuses

Division of Labor by Gender. Male and female roles are strongly differentiated. The public sphere is the domain of men, and the domestic one is the realm of women. Women take care of young children, cook for the household, and clean the house. They may have a small garden and a few chickens. They weave and sew and in some areas make rugs and felt. Among nomads, women make tents and have more freedom of movement. In a peasant family, men look after the sheep and goats, and plow, harvest, thresh, and winnow the crops. Among both rural and urban people, a man must not stay at home during the day. During war, women take over many male duties; men who work abroad must learn to cook, sew, and do laundry.

The Relative Status of Women and Men. Between 1919 and 1929, King Amanullah tried to promote female empowerment. Under the Communist government, many women were able to study in universities. This trend was reversed by the Taliban. Women now must be completely covered by a long veil and accompanied by a male relative when they leave the house. Women face overwhelming obstacles if they seek to work or study or obtain access to basic health care. However, the Taliban have improved security in many rural areas, allowing women to carry out their everyday duties.

Women have never participated publicly in decision making processes. They are admonished to be modest and obey the orders of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. Nevertheless, as guardians of family honor, women have more power. Nomadic and peasant women play an important role in the domestic economy and are not secluded in the same way as many urban women. Shiite leaders stress the right of a woman to participate in the political process, engage in independent economic activity, and freely choose a husband.

Marriage, Family, and Kinship

Marriage. Marriage is considered an obligation, and divorce is rare and stigmatized. Polygamy is allowed if all the wives are treated equally. However, it is uncommon and occurs primarily when a man feels obligated to marry the widow of his dead brother. The general pattern is to marry kin, although families try to diversify their social assets through marriage. The incidence of unions between cousins is high.

The first contacts often are made discreetly by women in order to avoid a public refusal. Then the two families negotiate the financial aspects of the union and decide on the trousseau, the brideprice, and the dowry. The next step is the official engagement, during which female relatives of the groom bring gifts to the home of the bride and sweets are consumed. The wedding is a three-day party paid for by the groom's family during which the marriage contract is signed and the couple is brought together. The bride is then brought to her new home in a lavish procession.

Domestic Unit. Traditionally, the basic household consists of a man, his wife, his sons with their spouses and children, and his unmarried daughters. When he dies, the sons can decide to stay united or divide the family assets. Authority among brothers is based on ability, economic skill, and personal prestige more than age. Sometimes a brother asks for his share of the family wealth and leaves the domestic group while the father is still alive. Residential unity does not imply shared domestic expenses. Domestic units are larger among tribal people than among urban dwellers.

Inheritance. In theory all brothers are equal, but to avoid splitting up family property, brothers may decide to own it jointly or to be compensated financially. Contrary to Islamic law, women do not inherit land, real estate, or livestock.

Kin Groups. All groups trace descent through the male line. Each tribal group claims a common male ancestor and is divided into subtribes, clans, lineages, and families. Genealogy establishes inheritance, mutual obligations, and a feeling of solidarity. Disputes over women, land, and money may result in blood feuds. The tribal system is particularly developed among the Pashtuns. The main values of their tribal code are hospitality and revenge. Many inhabitants of Afghanistan do not belong to a tribe or have only a loose affiliation. Neighborhood and other social links, often reinforced by marriage, can be stronger than extended kinship.

Socialization

Infant Care. Babies are bound tightly in wooden cradles with a drain for urine or carried by the mother in a shawl. They may be breast-fed for more than two years, but weaning is very sudden. Children are cared for by a large group of female relatives.

Although surrounded by affection, children learn early that no one will intervene when they cry or are hurt. Adults do not interfere with children's games, which can be tough. Physical punishment is administered, although parents tend to be indulgent with young children. Children move freely from the female part of the house to the public one and learn to live in a group setting.

Child Rearing and Education. Respect and obedience to elderly persons are important values, but independence, individual initiative, and self-confidence also are praised. The most important rite of passage for a boy is circumcision, usually at age seven. Boys learn early the duties of hospitality and caring for guests as well as looking after the livestock or a shop, while girls begin helping their mothers as soon as they can stand. Both are taught the values of honor and shame and must learn when to show pride and when to remain modest.

Higher Education. Literacy is extremely low, and in 1980, 88 percent of the adult population had no formal schooling. Only 5 percent of children get a primary education, with a huge discrepancy between males and females. People from Afghanistan must travel abroad to further their education. Although education is valued, there is no professional future for educated people other than working for an international agency or a nongovernmental organization.

Etiquette

Young people address elders not by name but by a title. A husband will not call his wife by her name but will call her "mother of my son." Family surnames are unusual, but nicknames are very common. Kinship terms often are used to express friendship or respect. Hospitality is a strong cultural value. When food is served, the host waits until the guests have started eating. As soon as the dishes are cleared, guests ask permission to leave unless they are spending the night.

When meeting, two men shake hands and then place the right hand on the heart. Direct physical contact is avoided between men and women. If they have not seen each other

for a long time, friends and relatives hug, kiss, and speak polite phrases. When someone enters a room, people stand and greet him at length. When they sit down, more greetings are exchanged. It is considered rude to ask a factual question or inquire about anything specific early in the conversation. To express affection, it is customary to complain, sometimes bitterly, about not having received any news.

Religion

Religious Beliefs. Despite their different affiliations, Sunnis and Shiites recognize the authority of the Koran and respect the five pillars of Islam. Nevertheless, relationships between members of different religious sects are distant and tense. Sufism is an important expression of religiosity. It represents the mystical trend of Islam and stresses emotion and personal commitment over a codified conception of faith. It is viewed with suspicion by some Islamic scholars. An extreme form of Sufism is represented by wandering beggars. Supernatural creatures such as angels, genies, ghosts, and spirits, are believed to exist. Exorcism and magic protect people from the evil eye. Although condemned by orthodox religious authorities, these practices may be reinforced by the village mullah.

Religious Practitioners. There are two kinds of religious practitioners: scholars, whose power is based on knowledge, and saints, whose authority comes from their ability to transmit God's blessing. Among Sunnis, there is no formal clergy, while Shiites have a religious hierarchy. Village mullahs receive a religious education that allows them to teach children and lead the Friday prayers. Many saints and Sufi leaders claim descent from the Prophet. Their followers visit them to ask for advice and blessing. During the war, a new kind of religious leader emerged: the young Islamic militant who challenges the authority of traditional practitioners and proposes a more political conception of religion.

Rituals and Holy Places. Throughout the year, people gather at noon on Fridays in the mosque. Most villages have a place to pray, which also is used to accommodate travelers. The tombs of famous religious guides often become shrines visited by local

people. They play an important role in the social life of village community and the local identity. Pilgrimages allow women to get out of the home in groups to chat and socialize.

There are two main religious festivals. The Id al-Kabir or Id-e Qorban (the Great Feast or Feast of the Victim) commemorates the sacrifice of Abraham at the end of the annual period of pilgrimage to Mecca. Most families slay a sheep and distribute some of the meat to the poor. The Id al-Fitr or Id-e Ramazan (the Small Feast or Feast of the Ramazan) marks the end of the fasting month and is a period of cheer during which relatives and friends visit each other. The fasting month of Ramadan is an important religious and social event. During Muharram (the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar), Shiites commemorate the death of the grandson of Muhammad. It is a period of mourning and sorrow. People gather to listen to an account of the martyrdom, weeping and hitting their breasts. The anniversary of the death of Husain is the climax. Processions are organized, and some young men wound themselves with chains or sharp knives. Other important social ceremonies with a religious dimension include births, weddings, funerals, circumcisions of young boys, and charity meals offered by wealthy people.

Death and the Afterlife. The dead are buried rapidly in a shroud. In the countryside, most graves are simple heaps of stones without a name. Wealthier persons may erect a tombstone with a written prayer. For three days, the close relatives of the deceased open their house to receive condolences. Forty days after the death, relatives and close friends meet again, visit the grave, and pray. After one year, a ceremony takes place to mark the end of the mourning period. Many people believe that if a funeral is not carried out properly, the ghost of the dead will return to torment the living.

Medicine and Health Care

Since modern medical facilities are limited, people rely on traditional practices that employ herbs and animal products. Every physical ailment is classified as warm or cold, and its cure depends on restoring the body's equilibrium by ingesting foods with the opposite properties. Another way to cure disease is to undertake a pilgrimage to a shrine. Sometimes, pilgrims put a pinch of sand collected from the holy place into their

tea or keep a scrap from the banners on a tomb. Certain springs are considered holy, and their water is believed to have a curative effect. Talismans (Koranic verse in a cloth folder) are sewed onto clothing or hats to protect against the evil eye or treat an illness.

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