Cultural Blending

CASE STUDY: The Safavid Empire

**Setting the Stage** Throughout the course of world history, cultures have interacted with each other. Often such interaction has resulted in the mixing of different cultures in new and exciting ways. This process is referred to as cultural blending. The Safavid Empire, a Shi’ite Muslim dynasty that ruled in Persia between the 16th and 18th centuries, provides a striking example of how interaction among peoples can produce a blending of cultures. This culturally diverse empire drew from the traditions of Persians, Ottomans, and Arabs.

**Patterns of Cultural Blending**
Each time a culture interacts with another, it is exposed to ideas, technologies, foods, and ways of life not exactly like its own. Continental crossroads, trade routes, ports, and the borders of countries are places where cultural blending commonly begins. Societies that are able to benefit from cultural blending are those that are open to new ways and are willing to adapt and change. The blended ideas spread throughout the culture and produce a new pattern of behavior. Cultural blending has several basic causes.

**Causes of Cultural Blending** Cultural change is most often prompted by one or more of the following four activities:
- migration
- pursuit of religious freedom or conversion
- trade
- conquest

The blending that contributed to the culture of the Ottomans, which you just read about in Section 1, depended on some of these activities. Surrounded by the peoples of Byzantium, the Turks were motivated to win territory for their empire. The Ottoman Empire’s location on a major trading route created many opportunities for contact with different cultures. Suleyman’s interest in learning and culture prompted him to bring the best foreign artists and scholars to his court. They brought new ideas about art, literature, and learning to the empire.

**Results of Cultural Blending** Cultural blending may lead to changes in language, religion, styles of government, the use of technology, and military tactics.
These changes often reflect unique aspects of several cultures. For example:

- **Language** Sometimes the written characters of one language are used in another, as in the case of written Chinese characters used in the Japanese language. In the Safavid Empire, the language spoken was Persian. But after the area converted to Islam, a significant number of Arabic words appeared in the Persian language.

- **Religion and ethical systems** Buddhism spread throughout Asia. Yet the Buddhism practiced by Tibetans is different from Japanese Zen Buddhism.

- **Styles of government** The concept of a democratic government spread to many areas of the globe. Although the basic principles are similar, it is not practiced exactly the same way in each country.

- **Racial or ethnic blending** One example is the mestizo, people of mixed European and Indian ancestry who live in Mexico.

- **Arts and architecture** Cultural styles may be incorporated or adapted into art or architecture. For example, Chinese artistic elements are found in Safavid Empire tiles and carpets as well as in European paintings.

The chart above shows other examples of cultural blending that have occurred over time in various areas of the world.

**SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts**
1. **Determining Main Ideas** What are the reasons for interaction in the Americas?
2. **Hypothesizing** What are some aspects of cultural diversity?

**CASE STUDY: The Safavid Empire**

**The Safavids Build an Empire**

Conquest and ongoing cultural interaction fueled the development of the Safavid Empire. Originally, the Safavids were members of an Islamic religious brotherhood named after their founder, Safi al-Din. In the 15th century, the Safavids aligned themselves with the Shi’a branch of Islam.

The Safavids were also squeezed geographically between the Ottomans and Uzbek tribespeople and the Mughal Empire. (See the map on page 514.) To protect themselves from these potential enemies, the Safavids concentrated on building a powerful army.

**Isma’il Conquers Persia** The Safavid military became a force to reckon with. In 1499, a 12-year-old named Isma’il (ihs•MAH•eel) began to seize most of what is now Iran. Two years later he completed the task.
To celebrate his achievement, he took the ancient Persian title of **shah**, or king. He also established Shi’a Islam as the state religion. Isma’il became a religious tyrant. Any citizen who did not convert to Shi’ism was put to death. Isma’il destroyed the Sunni population of Baghdad in his confrontation with the Ottomans. Their leader, Selim the Grim, later ordered the execution of all Shi’a in the Ottoman Empire. As many as 40,000 died. Their final face-off took place at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. Using artillery, the Ottomans pounded the Safavids into defeat. Another outcome of the battle was to set the border between the two empires. It remains the border today between Iran and Iraq.

Isma’il’s son Tahmasp learned from the Safavids’ defeat at Chaldiran. He adopted the use of artillery with his military forces. He expanded the Safavid Empire up to the Caucasus Mountains, northeast of Turkey, and brought Christians under Safavid rule. Tahmasp laid the groundwork for the golden age of the Safavids.

**A Safavid Golden Age**

**Shah Abbas**, or Abbas the Great, took the throne in 1587. He helped create a Safavid culture and golden age that drew from the best of the Ottoman, Persian, and Arab worlds.

**Reforms** Shah Abbas reformed aspects of both military and civilian life. He limited the power of the military and created two new armies that would be loyal to him alone. One of these was an army of Persians. The other was a force that Abbas recruited from the Christian north and modeled after the Ottoman janissaries. He equipped both of these armies with modern artillery.

Abbas also reformed his government. He punished corruption severely and promoted only officials who proved their competence and loyalty. He hired foreigners from neighboring countries to fill positions in the government.

To convince European merchants that his empire was tolerant of other religions, Abbas brought members of Christian religious orders into the empire. As a result, Europeans moved into the land. Then industry, trade, and art exchanges grew between the empire and European nations.

**A New Capital** The Shah built a new capital at **Esfahan**. With a design that covered four and a half miles, the city was considered one of the most beautiful in the world. It was a showplace for the many artisans, both foreign and Safavid, who worked on the buildings and the objects in them. For example, 300 Chinese potters produced...
glazed building tiles for the buildings in the city, and Armenians wove carpets.

**Art Works** Shah Abbas brought hundreds of Chinese artisans to Esfahan. Working with Safavid artists, they produced intricate metalwork, miniature paintings, calligraphy, glasswork, tile work, and pottery. This collaboration gave rise to artwork that blended Chinese and Persian ideas. These decorations beautified the many mosques, palaces, and marketplaces.

**Carpets** The most important result of Western influence on the Safavids, however, may have been the demand for Persian carpets. This demand helped change carpet weaving from a local craft to a national industry. In the beginning, the carpets reflected traditional Persian themes. As the empire became more culturally blended, the designs incorporated new themes. In the 16th century, Shah Abbas sent artists to Italy to study under the Renaissance artist Raphael. Rugs then began to reflect European designs.

### The Dynasty Declines Quickly

In finding a successor, Shah Abbas made the same mistake the Ottoman monarch Suleyman made. He killed or blinded his ablest sons. His incompetent grandson, Safi, succeeded Abbas. This pampered young prince led the Safavids down the same road to decline that the Ottomans had taken, only more quickly.

In 1736, however, Nadir Shah Afsar conquered land all the way to India and created an expanded empire. But Nadir Shah was so cruel that one of his own troops assassinated him. With Nadir Shah’s death in 1747, the Safavid Empire fell apart.

At the same time that the Safavids flourished, cultural blending and conquest led to the growth of a new empire in India, as you will learn in Section 3.
Report on Persia, Persians, and Abbas I (about 1604)

by Father Simon, a Catholic missionary from Europe

...The Persians were formerly very superstitious and abhorred [hated] Christians, as if [they] were a foul race: thus they would not eat with them, nor from the vessels from which a Christian had eaten, nor did they allow them to tread [walk] on their carpets, nor to touch them: if a Christian were to touch the garment of one, the man would take it off and have it washed.

Nowadays, because the Shah shows great regard for Christians, passes his time with them and [hosts] them at his table, and [the Persians] have abandoned all this and act towards [Christians] as they do towards their own people: only in some distant districts and among the common folk is it still kept up.

...The king, Shah Abbas...is 34 years old ... of medium height, rather thin than fat, his face round and small, tanned by the sun, with hardly any beard: very vivacious [having a lively personality] and alert, so that he is always doing something or other. He is sturdy and healthy, accustomed to much exercise and toil: many times he goes about on foot, and recently he had been forty days on pilgrimage [to Mecca], which he made on foot the whole time. He has extraordinary strength, and with his scimitar [a curved sword], can cut a man in two and a sheep with its wool on at a single blow and the Persian sheep are of large size.

He has done many other feats and has found no one to [match] him in them. In his food he is frugal [plain; money-saving], as also in his dress, and this to set an example to his subjects; and so in public he eats little else than rice, and that cooked in water only. His usual dress is of linen, and very plain; similarly the nobles and others in his realm [kingdom], following suit, whereas formerly they used to go out dressed in brocade [a silk fabric] with jewels and other [fancy garments] and if he see anyone who is over-dressed, he takes him to task [scolds him], especially if it be a soldier. But in private he eats what he likes.

He is sagacious [wise] in mind, likes fame and to be esteemed: he is courteous in dealing with everyone and at the same time very serious. For he will go through the public streets, eat from what they are selling there and other things, speak at ease freely with the lower classes, cause his subjects to remain sitting while he himself is standing, or will sit down beside this man and that. He says that is how to be a king, and that the king of Spain and other Christians do not get any pleasure out of ruling, because they are obliged to [conduct] themselves with so much pomp [fanciness] and majesty as they do.

...So the more he demonstrates kindliness to his subjects and the more familiarly he talks with them, they tremble before him, even the greatest among them, for, while joking, he will have their heads cut off. He is very strict in executing justice and pays no regard to his own favorites in this respect; but rather is the stricter with them in order to set an example for others... From this it comes about that in his country there are so very few murderers and robbers. In all the time I was at Isfahan (4 months), there was never a case of homicide. ...

He is very valiant [brave] and has a great liking for warfare and weapons of war, which he has constantly in his hands: we have been eyewitnesses of this because, whenever we were with him, he was adjusting scimitars, testing [small cannon] etc...to make him a present that will give him pleasure is to give him some good [weapons]...

[He has] great experience which he has obtained in warfare over so many years...and from the first it has made him a fine soldier and very skilled, and his men so [able] that they are little behind our men in Europe...
Answer questions on an 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper with your name, period, and HW # on it.

1. Identify:
   a. Safavid
   b. Isma'il
   c. Shah Abbas
   d. Esfahan

2. What are the four causes of cultural blending?
3. How did the location of the Safavid Empire contribute to the cultural blending in the empire?
4. What reforms took place in the Safavid Empire under Shah Abbas?
5. Why might Isma'il have become so intolerant of Sunni Muslims?
6. Why did the Safavid Empire decline so quickly?
7. Which of the results of cultural blending do you think has the most lasting effect on a country? Explain your answer.

From: Report on Persia, Persians, and Abbas I by Father Simon

1. When and why did Persians drop their suspicions regarding Christians?
2. What are Shah Abbas's most prominent physical features, according to Father Simon?
3. Why does the shah dress and eat plainly when he is among his subjects?
4. How is Shah Abbas different from European monarchs, according to Father Simon?
5. Even when the shah is being kind and courteous to commoners, why are they afraid of him?
6. What was the result of the Shah's code of conduct and justice, according to Father Simon?
7. What sort of present does the Shah like to receive?
8. In what ways is Shah Abbas similar to Suleyman the Magnificent?
9. In what ways is Shah Abbas different from Suleyman the Magnificent?
10. Which leader would be looked on more favorably by European monarchs? Why? Explain your answer.