Cultural Blending

CASE STUDY: The Safavid Empire

MAIN IDEA
Many world cultures incorporate influences from various peoples and traditions.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW
Modern Iran, which plays a key role in global politics, is descended from the culturally diverse Safavid Empire.

SETTING THE STAGE
The Ottoman Empire provides a striking example of how interaction among peoples can produce a blending of cultures. This mixture often combines the best of contributing cultures in new and exciting ways.

Patterns of Cultural Blending
As the 17th-century British poet John Donne observed, “No man is an island.” But no group of people, or culture, is an island, either. Throughout history, peoples have mingled and interacted, giving rise to new cultural blends.

Causes of Cultural Blending
Cultural blending usually occurs in places where two or more cultures interact. This interaction most often is prompted by one or a combination of the following four activities: migration, trade, conquest, and pursuit of religious converts or religious freedom. Societies that are able to benefit from cultural blending are open to new ways and willing to adapt and change.

The blending that contributed to the culture of the Ottomans, for example, depended on all of these activities except migration. Surrounded by the peoples of Christian Byzantium, the Turks were motivated to win both territory for their empire and converts to their Muslim religion. Suleiman’s interest in learning and culture prompted him to bring the best foreign artists and scholars to his court.

Cultural Blending Through History
Similar patterns of blending have occurred throughout the world and across the ages. A few examples are shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Interacting Cultures</th>
<th>Reason for Interaction</th>
<th>Some Results of Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India—1000 B.C.</td>
<td>Aryan and Dravidian Indian</td>
<td>Migration</td>
<td>Vedic culture, forerunner of Hinduism</td>
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<tr>
<td>East Africa—A.D. 700</td>
<td>Arab, African, Indian, Islamic, Christian</td>
<td>Trade, religious converts</td>
<td>New trade language, Swahili</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia—A.D. 1000</td>
<td>Christian and Slavic</td>
<td>Religious converts</td>
<td>Eastern Christianity, Russian identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico—A.D. 1500</td>
<td>Spanish and Aztec Indian</td>
<td>Conquest</td>
<td>Mestizo culture, Mexican Catholicism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States—A.D. 1900</td>
<td>European, Asian, Caribbean</td>
<td>Migration, religious freedom</td>
<td>Cultural diversity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts
1. What aspects of culture, such as language and religion, did these cultural blendings affect?
2. What evidence of cultural blending do you see in the United States today?
The Safavids Build a Shi’a Empire

Conquest and ongoing cultural interaction also fueled the development of another empire—the Safavids. Originally, the Safavids were members of an Islamic religious brotherhood. They were named after their founder, Safi al-Din, who died in 1334. Although the Safavids were of Iranian origin, they claimed that they were descended from the prophet Muhammad. In the 15th century, the Safavids aligned themselves with the Shi’a branch of Islam.

The Shi’a Safavids were persecuted on religious grounds by the Ottoman Sunni Muslims. This treatment was a departure from the Sunni’s traditional religious tolerance. The Safavids were also squeezed geographically between the Ottomans and Uzbek tribespeople. (See the map on page 450.) 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. They wore unique red headgear with 12 folds, and so became known as the “redheads.” In 1499, the leader of the redheads was a 14-year-old named Isma’il (is•MAH•eel). Despite his youth, he was a brilliant warrior. Within two years, he had seized most of what is now Iran. To celebrate his achievement, he took the ancient Persian title of shah, or king. He also established Shi’a Islam as the state religion:

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

[Isma’il] is loved and revered by his people as a god, and especially by his soldiers, many of whom enter into battle without armour, expecting their master . . . to watch over them in the fight. . . . The name of God is forgotten throughout Persia and only that of Isma’il is remembered.

A 16TH-CENTURY VENETIAN TRAVELER, quoted in Encyclopedia of Islam

Despite the reverence of his people, however, 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 faceoff was at the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514. But the confrontation between the cultures did not end then. In fact, it still continues today.

Isma’il’s son Tahmasp took up the struggle. He expanded the Safavid Empire up to the Caucasus Mountains northeast of Turkey and brought Christians under Safavid rule. In adding this territory to the empire, Tahmasp laid the groundwork for the golden age of the Safavids.

Cultural Blending During the Reign of Shah Abbas

This golden age came under Shah Abbas, or Abbas the Great. He took the throne in 1587. During his reign, he helped create a Safavid culture that drew from the best of the Ottoman, Persian, and Arab worlds.

Shah Abbas reformed both military and civilian aspects of life. He limited the power of the military redheads. He then created two new armies that would be loyal to him alone. One of these was an army of Persians. The other was a force like the Ottoman janissaries, which Abbas recruited from the Christian north. 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.

Shah Abbas established relations with Europe. As a result, industry and art flourished. He also brought Chinese artisans to the

HISTORY MAKERS

Shah Abbas

1571–1629

Shah Abbas had a rocky road to the Safavid throne. When Abbas was only two, Uzbek tribespeople killed his mother and brother, and Abbas was taken into hiding. He reclaimed his kingdom at age 14. As shah, he was committed to his nation’s welfare. Legends say that he disguised himself and mingled with the common people to learn about and serve them better. Abbas’s greatest legacy, however, was probably his capital city, Isfahan. Its broad boulevards, extensive gardens, and magnificent buildings prompted a popular Persian saying of the time, “Isfahan is half the world.”
2. TAKING NOTES
Using a cause-and-effect diagram like the one below, indicate the events that enabled the Safavids to build a powerful empire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Effect</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Powerful Safavid Empire</td>
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Safavid Empire. This collaboration gave rise to gorgeous artwork. These decorations beautified the many mosques, palaces, and marketplaces of Abbas’s rebuilt capital city of Isfahan.

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.

The Dynasty Declines Quickly Shah Abbas unfortunately made the same mistake the Ottoman monarch Suleiman made. He killed or blinded his ablest sons. Abbas was succeeded by his incompetent grandson, Safi. This pampered young prince led the Safavids down the same road to decline that the Ottomans had taken, only more quickly.

By 1722, tribal armies from Afghanistan were taking over the eastern portions of the Safavid realm. Ottoman forces were attacking from the west. Some historians claim that these attacks marked the downfall of the Safavids.

In 1736, however, a ruler from a Sunni family—Nadir Shah Afshar—took command. He conquered all the way to India and created a new Persian empire. But Nadir Shah was a cruel man as well as an inspired military leader. One of his own troops assassinated him. With Nadir Shah’s death in 1747, his empire also fell apart.

The Safavid Legacy Although the Safavid Empire died out as a political power, the culture that it produced endured. In this culture, the worldly and artistic features of Persian civilization mingled with the religious elements of Shi’ism. The Safavids also borrowed many ways from their enemies, the Ottomans. They based their government on the Ottoman model, welcomed foreigners into their empire, and created a slave army similar to the janissaries.

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.