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I. Introduction

This Cultural Awareness Guide is a culmination of resources that represent our culturally and linguistically diverse groups within Buffalo. As the residents of our city are constantly changing this will be a living document that is updated to reflect the diversity of our city.

The purpose of the Buffalo City School District (BSCD) Cultural Awareness Guide is to provide all staff who serve English Language Learners with a knowledge base that will allow them to serve ELLs and their families in a culturally responsive manner. At present, English Language Learners are the fastest growing subgroup of the Buffalo Public Schools. The Buffalo Public School District serves approximately 5,000 ELLs at various levels of English proficiency. So who are they and where do they come from? The BPS serves students from the following countries or regions: Bangladesh, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, the Middle East, Myanmar, Nepal and Somalia.

The informational portion of this document contains facts about cultural practices and norms, holidays, and traditions. It is organized according to language, and then within that language a specific geographical location that is representative of the language group.

Additionally, it contains information as to where the country or region is geographically, the population, the country’s educational system, different dialects spoken, the economy, and any information unique to the cultural group. The population of and where the cultural groups reside in the City of Buffalo have also been included.

Please note we realize that all individuals who associate themselves with one of the aforementioned cultural groups may not necessarily fit themselves to a tee. If you find a major discrepancy please email ellservices@buffaloschools.org
II. Language Groups

A. Arabic

Region/Map or Originating Country:
Approximately twenty-six to twenty seven different countries have their official or co-official language as Arabic.

Alphabet
The Arabic alphabet or āl-ḥuroof al-arabiyyah. The language is written from right to left, in a cursive style. There are 28 letters. Some sounds are not part of the Arabic language, such as v and p.

Cultural Practices and Norms:

- Many first and second generation families have stay at home moms and self-employed dads.
- Some women will refuse handshakes from men.
- Normally have large families. It is common for multiple related families to live together in doubles or duplexes, and have extended family live with them, like grandparents, aunts and uncles.
- Depending on the family, men and women (and their children) tend to avoid looking into the eyes of the person they are speaking to, especially if the person has a position of authority. This is considered a form of respect.
• First generation Middle Eastern families are dependent on their children to give them guidance on schooling issues, as well as make appointments for them, and translating for parents.
• Teachers are held in high regards by parents and are considered the second parent of their child.
• Visitors entering a home must remove their shoes because prayer is done on the floor, sometimes without a prayer rug.
• Many children usually move out of their families’ homes if they are getting married or moving out of state to study.
• The scarf-like materials used to cover a woman’s head is called a “hijab”. Hijabs are worn by most adolescent and adult women.
• The most common religion amongst this language group is Islam. People who practice Islam are called Muslims.
• When women see each other, they kiss each other on the cheek. Men shake hands.
• Many Arabs in the Middle East are Muslims. The Quran is the holy book that Islamic comes from.

Educational History/System
• Education varies greatly depending upon if students are coming from city or village life. Village living generally does not provide formalized schooling and in city areas formal schooling is available. Generally girls have less schooling than boys.

Holidays/Traditions Celebrated (dates, meaning, practice)
• Religious practices and perspectives vary from family to family.
- Muslim holidays: Ramadan – 9th month of the Islamic calendar, which goes back 11 days on the Gregorian calendar yearly. Holidays (Eid) days are Eidul Fitr, after Ramadan fasting, and Eid Ul Adha, ~ 70 days from Eidul Fitr. On both holidays, there is giving to charity, family gatherings, monetary and gift exchanges. Students will be off from school. Some girls will have henna designs on hands, arms and some on the feet. Families often visit other families to wish them a blessed Eid. Eid celebration begins the last day of Ramadan because Islamic days begin from evening to evening. A yemeni staple made for Eid Al--Fitr is a pastry called “sabaya”. It is a 30 layered pastry that has butter in between each layer and is baked. It is eaten with homemade “chai” tea and honey.
- Muslims may fast on non-obligatory days outside of Ramadan to show their gratitude towards God. These days can be significant times in history, such as the day before and day of the Exodus of Moses and his people from slavery.
- Children may fast though it is not required of them, as early as 7 years old in Ramadan. They wish to feel to be a part of the family’s activities and tradition.

Other Important Information
There are two main subgroups of the Islamic faith, Shiites who make up about 80% and Sunni Muslims who make up approximately 15% percent.

Names of Children

- As with most Arab families; the most common names are of important people in history: Muhammed, Ahmed, Ali, Aisha, Arwa, Bilqees, Umar, Saleh.
- Names are significant as the character of the person they are being named after is believed to impact that child’s behavior.
- Other names commemorate a character trait a parent would want their child to have, such as Amina, which means “one who is trustworthy.”
- The middle names of both males and females is their father’s name.
- When a child has the same 1st and last name (ie: Mohamed Mohaded) they are usually named after the father or grandfather.
- In the Islamic religion, when a woman marries, she keeps her maiden name.
B. Language Group: Bangla

Region/Map or Originating Country: Bangladesh is a country of about 55 thousand square miles located in the south eastern part of the great Indian Sub-Continent, also known as South Asia. On it’s west, north and east (large part) lies India. Burma or Myanmar is on the east (partly) and The Bay of Bengal lies in the south.

Official language: Bangla or Bengali and English

The Bengali language is called Bangla or Bengali. It is spoken in Bangladesh and India, This language was first written in the 11th century. The system of writing that is used is called Brahmi and Bengali alphabets. Their language is read from left to right.

Cultural Practices and Norms

Educational History/System

Education system in Bangladesh is established by the British in the early 19th century in the following order.

K to 5th grades--Primary School
6th to 8th grades--Junior High School
9th & 10th grades--High School
11th & 12th grades--Intermediate College
2 years Bachelor's and 2 years Masters

Holidays/Traditions Celebrated
Celebration of Bangla New Year's Day

**Bangla Language Day** (International Language Day, declared by The UNESCO)

**Bangladesh Victory Day**, December 16, the day the people of Bangladesh won the War of Independence in 1971

**Independence Day** (Falls on March 26, the day of the Declaration of Independence in 1971)

**Eid-al-Adha and Eid-al-Fitr** (both Muslim celebrations).

**Other Important Information**

- Bangladesh constitution is framed on four principles--democracy, socialism, nationalism, and secularism. The economy is mixed, primarily based on modern capitalism though a lot of industries are also owned by government.

**Economy**

- Bangladesh has made good progress in economic development since independence though it's still one of the world's poor countries. It's mainly agro based though Bangladesh has made a name in garment manufacturing and shipbuilding.

**Names of Children**

- Traditionally, Muslims have found the source of their children's name in Arabic and Persian though there's trend in using Bangla in recent times. Other groups have traditionally used indigenous sources, and in some cases the Christian communities have used European sources.

**C. Language Group: Burmese**
Region/Map or Originating Country:
Located in the continent of Asia, Burma covers 653,508 square kilometers of land and 23,070 square kilometers of water, making it the 40th largest nation in the world with a total area of 676,578 square kilometers.

Official language: Burmese

- Burma has 135 ethnic groups with their own language
- In this language a single sign or letter represents a full syllable with the inherent vowel a
- Official language of Burma is Burmese – only the people that are under government rule speak Burmese

Cultural Practices and Norms
- In general, Burmese people are very polite and modest
- Elders are treated with respect. When in close proximity of an elder, younger individuals will slightly lower their heads as a sign of respect
- It is disrespectful to point one's feet toward an elder
- Stepping on a person or an object is considered to be disrespectful
- Individuals are not to be touched on the head as it considered the spiritually highest part of the body
- Public displays of affection are frowned upon (including married couples)
- Women are not to touched on any part of their body
- Burmese people lower their heads and do not make eye contact when speaking to persons in authority
- Shoes must be removed before entering religious building and private homes
- Burmese society is known for holding women in a high status
• In cases of divorce, goods are divided equally and the wife retains her dowry and anything she has personally earned
• Children live with their parents until they marry
• Husbands are the head of the household. However, wives have a considerable amount of authority
• Burmese do not have family (last) names
• First names are chosen by using a naming convention that uses letters that are assigned to a certain days of the week

Educational History/System
• One of the main reasons for the poor state of education in Burma is political
• Education has been negatively impacted under military rule
• Schools are:
  • few
  • overcrowded
  • poorly equipped
  • closed by the government for periods of time
  • teacher salaries are low
  • private school costs are high
  • curriculum at the university level must be approved by the military

Holidays/Traditions Celebrated
• Independence Day – January 4th
• Union Day – February
• Peasant’s Day – March 2nd
• Armed Forces Day (Fascist Revolutionary Day) – March 27th
• Thingyan Water Festival Day – April 13th – 16th
• Burmese New Year – April 17th
• May Day (Labor Day) – May 1st
• Martyrs’ Day – July 19th
• Christmas Day – December 25th
Other Important Information

- January 4, 1948 Burma gained their independence for the United Kingdom
- Name Change Burma to Myanmar
- September 18, 1988 the second coup in Burmese history took place
- A military government calling itself the "State Peace and Development Council assumes control of the nation"
- The SPDC changed Burma's name to Myanmar
- Name change to Myanmar is not recognized by most Burmese people and the following countries: Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States
- Burma has one of the longest running civil wars in world history (1948 – today)
- There are approximately 140,000 refugees still living in 9 refugee camps in Thailand and Malaysia

E. Language Group: Karen

Region/Map or Originating Country: Southern part of Burma (also known as Myanmar)

Official language:
Karen (Sgaw, Zpwo- both dialects have differences in spoken languages and scripts)

Cultural Practices and Norms

- No eye contact with people in position of authority
- To show respect younger people look down and fold their arms
- Typically mom stays home
- Father is the head of the household
- Frequently school age girls use a mixture of tamarind tree bark and water to apply as make-up or a cooling agent during the warmer month
- No patting on the head
- Young adults tend to marry at the age of 18. After marriage the newly married couple lives with the husband’s family if there is space in the household. They are expected to obey the rules of the male’s family. Community leaders and the
elders of the group encourage young adults to wait until they have finished high school or college before they marry.

- Elderly parents usually live and depend on their son/daughter

**Educational History/System**

- There are three different types of schools in the Karen culture.
- School age children under government rule go to Burmese schools.
- School age children that grow up in refugee camps receive education at the refugee camps from United Kingdom, United States, Australia and Canada (non-governmental organizations).
- Children that live in remote areas might not ever go to school.
- Enrollment in school is not mandatory for children in refugee camps.
- Teachers are viewed in high esteem, they are considered like the second parents.
- Parental involvement in schools is not expected and discouraged - when students are in school they are the sole responsibility of the teacher.
- When students are at home they are the sole responsibility of their parents.

**Holidays/Traditions Celebrated**

- **Wrist Tying** – is a holiday to celebrate unity. It is considered a Buddhist holiday, but is accepted by some Christians. This holiday falls on the second date of full moon. It usually takes place during the third week of August. A ceremony takes place where youngsters are blessed by the elders. People from different villages travel to the place where the celebration will take place. It is a celebration of community, games, and food. In Buffalo it is celebrated in different locations depending on availability, and is usually outdoors.

- **Karen New Year** – depends on the lunar calendar. However, it typically falls in early January. The political leader addresses the Karen people both nationally and internationally (arrangements are made to facilitate the viewing of this address from the leader on the same day.) Typically the message is to remain unified and preserve the Karen culture. It is celebrated with food, the wearing of typical Karen costumes, celebrities are invited to sing, usually is
celebrated during the weekend because they don’t want to interrupt school or work schedules.

Other Important Information

- The two leading religions of the Karen people are Buddhist and Christian.
- **KNU- Karen National Union** – is an organization that is against the Burmese government.
- The Karen people go to refugee camps to get away from the government oppression. The first settlement of Karen refugees arrived in Buffalo in 2006.
- Burma was previously under British rule. After the change in rule, the Burmese changed the name to Myanmar. Most people do not like the name Myanmar.
- Transportation system – walking
- Border is separated by a river, people walk to the border and then they use small boats to cross the river to Thailand
- It is important for organizations that service the Karen people to understand that they lived or came from the same geographical area that is known as Burma. However, they prefer **not to be called Burmese**.
- The main resource is teakwood. It is usually circulated locally, but when exported it is usually with Thailand.

Naming of Children

- Common Karen names are Say, Paw, Hser and Htoo
- In the Karen culture last names are not given
- Karen people living in the U.S. have a last name because it is required by law
- Some siblings in a Karen family may have the same first and last name (i.e. Say Ktray Paw and Say Kpru Paw).
- They are called by their middle name at home in order to differentiate the child.

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**F. Language Group: Nepali**

**Region/Map or Originating Country:** Bhutan/Nepal

**Official language:** Dzongkha/Nepali

The Nepali language is the official language of Nepal and is the mother tongue for most of its
This language is written from left to right. Fourteen letters in this language are vowels and thirty-three are consonants.

**Cultural Practices and Norms**

- The normal greetings is to put their hands together in front of the chest to greet each other. Youngster must bow down to their hands/feet to greet elderly family members based on the level of cultural practices.
- Is acceptable to kiss younger child to greet them, but as they grow up this practice stops. Physical touch is not common practice even among married couples in public places.

**Educational History/System**

- Many parents are illiterate even in their own language.
- At the refugee camps children attend school from 7:30am-3:00 pm. Most children attend school at the refugee camps. Children attend school from age 6, starting from prekindergarten to 10th grade.
- Corporal punishment is permitted at home and at school.
- Learning is a full responsibility of the school. Parents promote education, but give full authority and responsibility to the teachers.
- There’s a language barrier among the families. The parents speak their native language and the children speak only English.
- Refugee Camps teach English, offer health care, education, vocational training.

**Holidays/Traditions Celebrated**

- Elderly grandparents/parents will rule the rest of the family. It’s been changing because of the lack of language from the parents. Young ladies usually get married between 20-28 and move in with the husband’s family. Traditionally the
wife takes the husband’s last name back in their country. Here, usually the woman keep their own name, so if they get divorced they don’t have the financial burden to change their names.

- The majority of the weddings take place at home, but some of them are celebrated in rental space or temples so they can accommodate everyone. During marriages, parents give their blessings and then arranged marriages may happen. To get married the parents give their blessings, arranged marriages may happened.
- First, middle and last name are the norm for children.
- When girls menstruate they are not allowed to attend religious services and they are not allowed to cook or clean for 5 days. This usually happens in Hindu families.
- Depending on their financial situation, both parents work.
- Bhutanese, Nepali ethnic people, leave their country in order to maintain their religious and cultural beliefs and traditions and also maintain their language.
- The current monarchy tries to impose their language, cultural and religious beliefs on the Bhutanese people
- Namaste – means “the divine in me respects the divine in you” which is a customary greeting.

Other Important Information

- Wear tika (blessings from the elders) or tilak (everyday) on their forehead, it can be in different colors and shapes. You might see children with the tika or tilak. It is made out of refined oil and sandalwood purchased in grocery stores.
- Most of the students that we served in the BPS were born in Refugee Camps.
- Refugee camps in Nepal are more organized because they are provided with a better education and a peaceful, strong emotional attachment.
- Rice, lentils, chutney, goat meat and cow’s milk are all common foods.
H. Language Group: Somali and Somali-Bantu

Background

- Somalia is a country that has been divided by civil war since the late 1980s. It began due to resistance to the regime of former President, Mohamed Siad Barre. Once he was overthrown in 1991 and this led to violence. Peace efforts from multi-national groups, neighboring countries, and the United Nations have been attempted, but violence continues and has forced many to flee the country for safety.

Region/Map or Originating Country: Somalia

Population

- Somalia is one of the most homogenous countries in Africa. Approximately 85% of the country’s population are ethnic Somalis and practice the Sunni Muslim religion, while the remaining 15% are made up of various ethnic groups. The largest of these is the Somali Bantus a pastoral clan descended from slaves brought into Somalia from southeastern African countries. Some Bantu have held onto their cultural heritage, while others have been integrated into the Somali culture. Bantus face varying degrees of discrimination and persecution due to their ethnic background.

Official language: Somali

The Somali Latin alphabet uses all letters of the English Latin alphabet except p, v and z, and has 21 consonants and 5 vowels. It was developed in the 1970’s

The languages spoken by Somali refugees varies based on region of Somalia that they lived. These languages include:

- Somali (most prevalent, includes two major dialects)
● Arabic
● English and/or Italian (among those who have received formal education)
● Swahili

Cultural Practices and Norms

- The predominant religion practiced throughout the country of Somalia is Islam. Sunni Islam is the most common religious tradition among Somalis. The Islamic tradition prohibits the consumption of alcohol, although it is not uncommon for individuals to partake. Specific rituals for meat slaughtering are prescribed in the Quran. Many Somali individuals prefer to purchase meat from halal butchers who understand and follow these traditions.
- As for Somali Bantus, their ancestors were animist. However, slavery has changed the Bantus’ religious traditions. Because of Islamic laws forbidding Muslims to own Muslim slaves, many Bantu slaves converted to Islam in order to escape slavery. Most Bantu people had converted to Islam by the early 1900s.
- Among both Somali and Somali-Bantu groups, family plays an important role. Both cultures tend to be patriarchal, with men acting as head of household. In Somalia it is common for children to freely play and explore the neighborhood, with the expectation that the village is safe and neighbors will look out for the children. Upon moving to America, Somali mothers may expect the same safety and security from the community, and must be advised of the potential dangers here.

Somali

- Marriages may be either arranged or personal choice. Many Somali individuals live with extended family. Children are an important part of the family, and women’s status and influence increases based on the number of children she bears. Although women do work, the preferred arrangement is for the man to work and for the woman to stay at home with the children

Somali Bantu
• Tribal identity is an important part of the Bantu Culture. These identities are derived from their ancestral country of origin. In addition, most identify themselves by their place of residence within Somalia, which typically corresponds with their kin grouping.

**Educational History/System:**

**Somali**

• The Somali written language was not developed until the 1970s. Prior to this, employment opportunities were limited to the privileged elite that had been taught the colonial languages of English and/or Italian. More recently, English education has begun to flourish in Somalia.

**Somali Bantu**

• Swahili is a primary language of the Bantu ethnic and May May dialect of Somali. However, the Bantu come from a predominantly oral society with little knowledge of written language, and the agricultural focus of the Bantu culture has led to little need for, and therefore limited access to, formal education in Somalia.

**Holidays/Traditions Celebrated**

• Ramadan, a month-long Islamic holiday, is a time for fasting from daybreak to sunset. It oftentimes involves prayer and meditation and is considered the holiest month of the Islamic year.
• Hajj is another annual Islamic Pilgrimage to Mecca and a mandatory religious duty for Muslims that must be carried out at least once in their life by all adult Muslims who are physically and financially capable of undertaking that journey.
• At the conclusion of both these events are marked with special celebration called “EID” For Ramadan, it is called “Eid-Al Fitr” and for the Hajj, it is called “Eid Al-Adha”.
Other Important Information

Economy

Somali
- Generally speaking, women take care of the finances and the children. However, women are increasingly working outside the home due to financial hardship. Indeed, there is a stronger support network and more flexibility for women working outside the home in Somalia than in the United States. Somalis who have immigrated to the United States and found work will often send back money to family, friends, and even neighbors.

Somali Bantu
- In Somalia, it is difficult to gain employment. Employment opportunities are in the urban areas and typically require affiliation (through friends or family) with an organization in order to obtain employment. For Bantus, who predominantly lived in rural settings, had little to no formal education, and experience discrimination in the cities, employment was nearly impossible to obtain.

Names of Children:
- Both for Somali and Somali Bantu, names of children are usually given from the Koran, the Holy Book of the Muslim people. However, there are many occasions when children’s names are directly tied to other ethnic traditional names. Often times, the first name is the given name of child. The child’s middle name is the father’s first name and the last name is the paternal grandfather’s first name.

D. Language Group: Spanish

1. Spanish

Region/Map or Originating Country: There are 22 Spanish speaking countries in the world.

Official language: Spanish
The Spanish alphabet contains between 27-29 letters and 30 different sounds. It includes the ch (che), the LL (elle), the single vibration R and the multiple vibration RR. The language is read from left to right.

### Cultural Practices and Norms

- Politeness is a very important aspect of social interaction.
- Personal appearance is important.
- Older and more prominent people may be addressed as Don (for men) or Doña (for women).
- Personal space is limited, touching is normal, and crowding, particularly on public transportation, is common.
- Animated and often make gestures and use body language.
- Hospitable, very friendly, and warm toward family, friends, and strangers.
- If invited to dinner bring a gift such as chocolates or pastries. Avoid gifts that are black or purple. They are considered mourning colors. Gifts are opened when received.
- Although punctuality is considered a good thing, guests are not expected to arrive on time for social occasions. Arriving between 15 and 30 minutes later than the stipulated time is considered on time.
- Wait for the host or hostess to tell you where to sit. Guests are served first. The host says "buen provecho" ("enjoy" or "have a good meal") as an invitation to start eating.

### Educational History/System:

#### Primary Education

Free and compulsory education is basic by western standards whether provided by private or state schools.

#### Middle Education
A significant proportion of primary school children go on to study for 2 more years at secondary school which functions as a bridge to further education. Subjects are academic. This becomes a disadvantage for children from poorer areas who are ill-prepared.

### Holidays/Traditions Celebrated

- **Día de los Reyes (Epiphany/Three Kings Day), January 6**
- **Day of the Lady of Altagracia** (January 21): La Virgen de la Altagracia is considered by Catholics as the Protector and Spiritual Mother of the Dominican Republic. Her feast day is January 21, a holiday on which many faithful followers flock to the temple in Higüey to worship the Virgin.
- **Carnival** - Carnival is celebrated in all regions of the country, where costumes and masks with different meanings are used.
- **Corpus Christi, May 26**: A Catholic festival celebrated on the second Thursday after Whitsun. Corpus Christi means the Body of Christ and refers to the elements of the Eucharist also called the Holy Communion, Last Supper or Lord's Supper.
- **Quinceañeros** - Families mark the transition of fifteen year-old girls from childhood to womanhood with a celebration that may include a ceremony at church and a formal dress party.
III. Additional Resources

The Partnership for the Public Good has contributed a great amount of time and dedication to spreading awareness and acceptance for cultural diversity. Please visit their website for additional information about the various cultural groups served in the Buffalo Public Schools.

https://mail.buffaloschools.org/owa/redir.aspx?C=h8wod-gq3kaT_lINBcNwqx0cvtkstMIrq0GHRXr0qglt8fD56tXpSfj9PnT0gACUDk6Edo4.&URL=http%3a%2f%2farchives.pgbuffalo.org%2fpublications%2fimmigrants-refugees-and-language-access%2findex.html