



Central Asia

HISTORY

Exploring Central Asia

In 1898 army officer O. Olufsen was commissioned by Denmark's parliament to explore areas of Central Asia that were largely unknown to Europeans. One of the places Olufsen visited is now the nation of Tajikistan. Here he describes child raising and other customs of the Tajiks.

The natives are very fond of children, who are much spoiled, especially by the father, and are considered as a gift from God—the more children they get the greater their bliss. A childless marriage is looked upon as a punishment from God. Boys are especially desired; and when a boy is born in the kislak [village] all the neighbours rush to the house to congratulate the parents; there is feasting, with music or guitar and tambourine, whilst volleys [gunshots into the air] are fired outside the house. . . . But if the child is a girl there is no banquet, nor are volleys fired. . . .

The little children are the only members of the family who sleep in a kind of bed (“gahvarra”); all the others sleep in their clothes on skins, rugs, straw, or hay. The children’s bed is . . . a small wooden box on four legs. A kind of awning is made with some wooden hoops, covered with cloth, to keep the sun and wind off the child when it stands outside the house. . . . The bedclothes are rags and pieces of cloth and skin. . . .

During their youth the children do odd jobs of a small kind about the house—tend to the cattle and so on; and, if possible, they attend a kind of school, which is generally only temporary, kept by a wandering Mullah [a teacher]. In the larger kislaks there are also professional teachers who can read and write. . . . In these schools the children learn to read the language of the country, sometimes also a little writing and arithmetic, and the recital of some Mahometan [Islamic] prayers by rote [memorization through repetition]. The language the children learn to read is Shughnan (the Tadjik). Many children, however, get no other instruction than what their parents can give them. . . . In some houses little wooden slates hang on the walls with the Persian alphabet for the instruction of the children, and as a useful memorandum for the adults. If there be a school in the kislak or in its neighbourhood, both girls and boys are sent there at the age of seven or eight. If a man does not send his children to school or the wandering Mullah, the elders of the town remonstrate with [scold] him in the matter; but he is quite independent, and can do as he likes in this respect. The poor people often send their boys into the service of the rich, but never the girls. . . .

The children and young people are remarkable for the great modesty of their conduct towards their parents and elders . . . and when the grown up people go to their meals the children always keep at a respectful distance. When a son receives an order from his father he always bows to him. It may be said that implicit [unspoken] obedience and respect is

common in both the family and the community. Great respect is always paid to old people, and each old white-beard is called Bâbâ (grandfather).

The ordinary salutation [greeting] of the natives to their superiors consists in crossing the hands over the breast and bowing, after which both hands are drawn down past the face, one after the other. If they want to show an exceptional respect they kneel down on the ground. [They] salute their superiors by placing both hands on the forehead and bowing.

They salute their equals by pressing both hands together, and kissing their fingers to them; and when saluting a very dear friend they touch him under his chin with one hand and then kiss the hand that has touched him—sometimes they kiss both his hands.

If a man of quality comes to a kislak, whether he be a foreigner or a native, he is always received outside the kislak by a deputation [committee] of the men of the town . . . who welcome him with a Salam Aleikum. They also bring him gifts consisting of bread, and fruit, and eggs, and the like. Whether he be foreigner or Mussulman [Muslim], he is entertained free for three or four days, but if he remains longer he has to pay or work for his food.

From *Through the Unknown Pamirs* by O. Olufsen, originally published in 1904 by William Heinemann; reprinted by Greenwood Press, 1969.

Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What similarities and differences existed in the Tajiks' attitudes and practices regarding sons and daughters?

2. In what ways do Tajik children show respect for adults?

Activity

With a partner, use the descriptions provided in the reading to carry out one of the traditional Tajik greetings.