



ELEMENTS OF CULTURE | MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL

In this classroom lesson, students analyze primary and secondary sources related to a historical Japanese cultural practice. Students then draw upon their observations to complete a worksheet activity exploring concepts of culture and cultural diffusion.

Instructions

This exercise may be completed individually, in groups, or as a class. Students should study the Reading Resource and object photographs in the Resource Packet to learn about the early Japanese cultural practice of *ohaguro*. Drawing on these resources, students can then complete the Reflection Worksheet. Suggested responses are included in an instructor's copy.

Standards

MDSE Social Studies Frameworks

- 2.0: Peoples of the Nations and World
- 5.0: History
- 6.0: Skills and Processes

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY

- WHST.6-8.9: Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.
- RH.6-8.9: Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

Materials Included

- Reading Resource
- Photographs:
 - Japanese Art Print: Yamauba blackening Her teeth and Kintoki, Utamaro, 1795
 - Model of Japanese Woman with Blackened Teeth
 - Dentures from Japanese Edo Period
- Reflection Worksheet

References

- Model of Japanese Woman. Dr. Samuel D. Harris National Museum of Dentistry, Baltimore, MD (Digital image provided for use with Elements of Culture program by SDHNMD.)
- Dentures from Japanese Edo Period. 1603-1868, Dr. Samuel D. Harris National Museum of Dentistry, Baltimore, MD (Digital image provided for use with Elements of Culture program by SDHNMD.)
- Kyo, Cho and Kyoko Selden. "Selections from 'The Search for the Beautiful Woman: A Cultural History of Japanese and Chinese Beauty.'" *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* 27 (2015), 184-190.
- Roberts, Luke S. "Shipwrecks and Flotsam: The Foreign World in Edo-Period Tosa." *Monumenta Nipponica* 70:1 (2015), 83-122.
- Utamaro, Kitagawa. *Yamauba blackening Her teeth and Kintoki*. 1795, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. (Original in the public domain; digital image under Creative Commons license.)
- Venugopal, A. and A. Marya. "Return of the ogahuro." *British Dental Journal* 231:69 (2021).

ELEMENTS OF CULTURE | RESOURCE PACKET

Source 1: Reading Resource

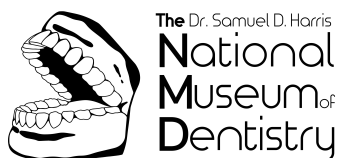
Historians study cultural elements of peoples from the past in order to group them into cultures we can understand today. Cultural elements a historian might study could include art or music made by past peoples; fashions they created to clothe and ornament their bodies; foodways (eating and cooking habits) they used to sustain themselves; their systems of religion, government, and social organization; and any other beliefs or customs they may have developed to support their understandings of themselves and the world. Elements of a given culture (past or present) may be motivated by location and environment as well as underlying cultural beliefs and values.

During the Edo period of Japan (1603–1868), some Japanese people applied dyes to their teeth to turn them black. This custom, called *ohaguro*, was especially popular among adult women. Ohaguro was based in cultural beliefs that blackened teeth were beautiful as well as an appropriate cultural sign of maturity. Further, ohaguro was supported by cultural knowledge that the dyes, made from iron and plant material, protected the teeth from disease and decay. Men, including samurai, sometimes practiced ohaguro as well.

The Japanese Edo period coincided with major historical events in North America, including the American Revolution and founding of the United States. You may have heard that George Washington, Commander in Chief of the Continental Army and first President of the United States, wore false teeth made of wood. This is a popular American myth, but it is not true! Though Washington did indeed wear false teeth (called dentures), they were made of other materials, including ivory, animal teeth, and teeth from other people. However, because Japan is covered in rich, dense forests and wood was a high-quality natural resource available to Japanese people during the Edo period, wooden dentures were in use in Japan during Washington's lifetime. Many pairs of wooden dentures from the Edo period survive today. Of those, several pairs of Japanese dentures mimic teeth blackened through ohaguro, demonstrating that ohaguro was practiced for fashion and beauty even among individuals who had lost their natural teeth.

During the Edo period, Japanese officials restricted trade and other contact between Japanese people and the Western world. Toward the end of the Edo period, however, Japanese government officials began to experience military and other pressure from Western nations (including the United States) to open Japan's borders to trade and increased contact with Western nations. In the 1850s, Japanese officials opened Japan's borders to Western trade. Cultural diffusion—the spread of cultural beliefs and practices—occurred as a result. Soon, Japanese people began to mimic beauty standards of the West. Ohaguro fell out of fashion. Ultimately, in 1870, was banned by the Japanese government.

Though ohaguro is no longer widely practiced in Japan, it can still be observed today among some Japanese women, including female entertainers called geisha who adorn themselves in Edo-style clothing, hairstyles, and makeup. The geisha are a surviving remnant of the Edo period and help historians and tourists alike in their understanding of Japanese Edo culture.



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Source 2: Yamauba blackening Her teeth and Kintoki

In this ink print, created by Japanese artist Kitagawa Utamaro in 1795, a Japanese woman named Yamauba blackens her teeth while her child Kintoki watches.

Date: 1795

Artist: Kitagawa Utamaro (Japanese, 1753-1806)

Medium: ink print



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Source 3: Model of Japanese Woman with Blackened Teeth

This model of a Japanese woman with blackened teeth was created in the twentieth century for display at the National Museum of Dentistry. The museum's goal in displaying this object is to help visitors better understand the Japanese practice of ohaguro.



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Source 4: Wooden dentures from the Japanese Edo Period

Many wooden dentures from the Edo period survive today. The collection at the National Museum of Dentistry contains over eighty. Several of these dentures, including the ones pictured below, mimic natural teeth blackened through ohaguro.



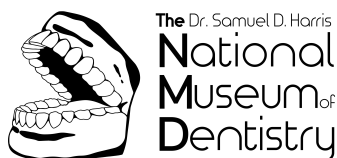
ELEMENTS OF CULTURE | RESOURCE PACKET

Reflection Worksheet

Name: _____ Date: _____

Consider what you read and observed in the Resource Packet when responding to the following questions.

1. Describe characteristics that historians use to organize people into cultures.
2. Based on your reading, identify 2-3 cultural beliefs or values that motivated the practice of Ohaguro during the Japanese Edo period.
3. Based on your reading, describe 1-2 ways that location and/or environment influenced the cultural practice of ohaguro during the Japanese Edo period.
4. In this activity, you engaged with both primary sources (immediate, first-hand accounts of, or artifacts created or present during a historical event or phenomenon) and secondary sources (information created after an event or phenomenon occurred, by someone who did not experience the event or phenomenon firsthand). Which sources in this activity were primary? Which sources were secondary?
5. Describe the relationship between primary and secondary sources on the same topic.



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Reflection Worksheet

6. Observe: Yamauba blackening Her teeth and Kintoki.

What does this print suggest to us about who practiced ohaguro during the Japanese Edo period?

7. Observe: Bust of Japanese Woman with Blackened Teeth.

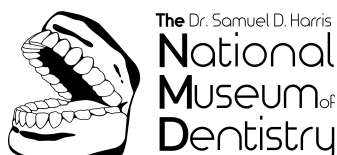
How does this model compare with the ink print of Yamauba? Does it provide the same information about ohaguro? Describe the relationship between these two sources, including ways they are similar and ways they are different.

8. Observe: Wooden Dentures from Japanese Edo Period.

What do these dentures suggest to us about why ohaguro was practiced, even among people who had lost their natural teeth?

9. Define cultural diffusion. How has cultural diffusion influenced peoples and cultures of the past?

10. Based on your reading, describe interactions between Japanese peoples and European explorers and traders. How did these interactions influence the Japanese practice of ohaguro?



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Reflection Worksheet: Instructor's Copy

Name: _____ Date: _____

Consider what you read and observed in the Resource Packet when responding to the following questions.

1. Describe characteristics that historians use to organize people into cultures.

Art, music, fashion, foodways, systems of religion, systems of government, social organization, and/or any other belief or custom widely held among a population

2. Based on your reading, identify 2-3 cultural beliefs or values that motivated the practice of Ohaguro during the Japanese Edo period.

- Value of beauty/belief that blackened teeth were beautiful
- Value of maturity/belief that blackened teeth were an appropriate sign of adulthood
- Value of health/belief that dyes protected teeth from decay

3. Based on your reading, describe 1-2 ways that location and/or environment influenced the cultural practice of ohaguro during the Japanese Edo period.

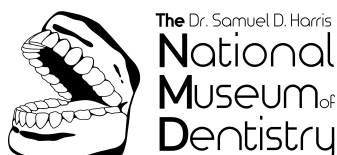
- People who lost their natural teeth continued to incorporate *ohaguro* into their appearance using blackened wooden dentures made from Japan's dense forests.
- *Ohaguro* developed as a cultural practice far away from Western cultural influence. When Japan's borders opened to trade with Western nations, increased proximity to Western peoples caused Japanese people to gradually let it die out.

4. In this activity, you engaged with both primary sources (immediate, first-hand accounts of, or artifacts created or present during a historical event or phenomenon) and secondary sources (information created after an event or phenomenon occurred, by someone who did not experience the event or phenomenon firsthand). Which sources in this activity were primary? Which sources were secondary?

- PRIMARY: *Yamauba blackening Her teeth and Kintoki*, wooden dentures
- SECONDARY: Model of Japanese Woman, Reading Resource

5. Describe the relationship between primary and secondary sources on the same topic.

Primary and secondary sources are both useful in helping us understand historical events and phenomena. However, they represent different perspectives. Whereas primary sources act as firsthand "eyewitness" accounts of historical events or phenomena, secondary sources are analyses or interpretations of historical events and phenomena created by people who did not witness them firsthand. Secondary sources are often created by those who study the past to help others learn more about it.



ELEMENTS OF CULTURE | RESOURCE PACKET

Reflection Worksheet: Instructor's Copy

6. **Observe: Yamauba blackening Her teeth and Kintoki.**

What does this print suggest to us about who practiced ohaguro during the Japanese Edo period?

The print suggests that adult women practiced ohaguro.

Since Yamauba is pictured with her child, we might also guess that ohaguro was practiced by mothers. Further, since Yamauba appears to be wearing fancy, fashionable clothing, we might also guess that ohaguro was practiced as a form of fashion and/or by upper classes of society.

7. **Observe: Bust of Japanese Woman with Blackened Teeth.**

How does this model compare with the ink print of Yamauba? Does it provide the same information about ohaguro? Describe the relationship between these two sources, including ways they are similar and ways they are different.

Both objects show women practicing ohaguro. However, they represent different perspectives. The print of Yamauba shows us a glimpse of ohaguro from the point of view of a person living in her culture (the artist Kitagawa Utamaro). The model, on the other hand, is a modern object created long after ohaguro had died out. Without primary sources like Utamaro's art, the experts who made the model could not have had a firm understanding of what ohaguro looked like and might not have even known about ohaguro at all.

Utamaro's art also shows us context that the model does not, including more details about who practiced ohaguro (upper-class women, especially married women including mothers) and the setting in which they did so (at home, where children could freely observe).

8. **Observe: Wooden Dentures from Japanese Edo Period.**

What do these dentures suggest to us about why Ohaguro was practiced, even among people who had lost their natural teeth?

One cultural motivation for practicing ohaguro was the belief that it prevented tooth decay. However, because the dentures tell us that people mimicked ohaguro even on false teeth, we can guess that ohaguro was practiced for purposes of fashion and beauty.

9. Define cultural diffusion. How has cultural diffusion influenced peoples and cultures of the past?

Cultural diffusion is the spread of cultural beliefs and practices. Cultural diffusion creates change in cultures as peoples of the world learn and adopt the beliefs and practices of others.

10. Based on your reading, describe interactions between Japanese peoples and European explorers and traders. How did these interactions influence the Japanese practice of ohaguro?

During the Edo period, Japanese officials restricted trade and other contact between Japanese people and the Western world which prevented strong relationships between the two cultures. In the 1850s, Japanese officials opened Japan's borders to Western trade which strengthened cultural relationships. As a result of this strengthening, however, ohaguro fell out of fashion.

