

# Cultural Tools Activity Cards

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[HTTPS://BYRDLAB.WORDPRESS.NCSU.EDU/CULTURE-ACTIVITY](https://byrdlab.wordpress.ncsu.edu/culture-activity)



# For each cultural tool, answer:

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What is it?

What is it used for?

Why do people in this culture consider it valuable or important?

# United States - 2018

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# United States - 2018

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# United States - 2018

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# About the Nacirema

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The descriptions of the Nacirema are taken from [Miner \(1956\)](#)

Nacirema culture is dominated by rituals pertaining to the body. The primary belief of this culture is that the body is ugly and has a natural tendency toward debility and disease. Thus, daily rituals are used to maintain and improve the body. Most of these take place in a household shrine that Miner describes.

# Nacirema - 1956

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“The focal point of the [household] shrine is a box or chest which is built into the wall. In this chest are kept many charms and magical potions without which no native believes he could live. These preparations are secured from a variety of specialized practitioners. ... The charm is not disposed of after it has served its purpose, but is placed in the charm-box of the household shrine. As these magical materials are specific for certain ills, and the real or imagined maladies of the people are many, the charm-box is usually full to overflowing. The magical packets are so numerous that people forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again.”

# Nacirema - 1956

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“The Nacirema have an almost pathological horror of and fascination with the mouth, the condition of which is believed to have a supernatural influence on all social relationships. Were it not for the rituals of the mouth, they believe that their teeth would fall out, their gums bleed, their jaws shrink, their friends desert them, and their lovers reject them. [...] The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that these people are so punctilious about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures.”



# Nacirema - 1956

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“If this [certain amount of sadism] can be established, a very interesting pattern emerges, for most of the population shows definite masochistic tendencies. It was to these that Professor Linton referred in discussing a distinctive part of the daily body ritual which is performed only by men. This part of the rite involves scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument. Special women’s rites are performed only four times during each lunar month, but what the lack in frequency is made up in barbarity. As part of this ceremony, women bake their heads in small ovens for about an hour.”

# About the Maya

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From [History.com](https://www.history.com):

“The Maya Empire reached the peak of its power and influence around the sixth century A.D. The Maya excelled at agriculture, pottery, hieroglyph writing, calendar-making and mathematics, and left behind an astonishing amount of impressive architecture and symbolic artwork. Most of the great stone cities of the Maya were abandoned by A.D. 900.”

# Maya - 725

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A carving depicting Lady K'ab'al Xook, wife of king Shield Jaguar II, drawing a barbed wire through her tongue.

The Maya kings and queens would often have to conduct blood-letting rituals in order to gain the favor of the gods and their ancestors," says Stemp, who is the author of a study recently published in the *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*. "In a world where everything is controlled by the supernatural, the Maya believed that their abilities to contact the supernatural ... was the main way in which they could kind of control what was happening to them. [...] Among the more common [body parts] would be earlobes, nostrils, lips and tongues. For the males, we know that they also bloodlet from the penis," says Stemp. After piercing or slicing into themselves, they would let the blood—which was believed to contained life force—drip onto cotton or another material which they would then burn. "As the smoke comes through the air, the Maya gods or ancestors will appear to the Maya and give them the information they need to be successful in whatever they want," Stemp said.

[Source](#)

# Maya - 591

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## Ballcourt goal marker

The Mesoamerican ballgame was a sport with ritual associations played since 1400 BC by the pre-Columbian people of Ancient Mesoamerica. The sport had different versions in different places during the millennia. The rules of the game are not known, but judging from its descendant, ulama, they were probably similar to racquetball where the aim is to keep the ball in play. The stone ballcourt goals are a late addition to the game.

In the most common theory of the game, the players struck the ball with their hips, although some versions allowed the use of forearms, rackets, bats, or handstones. The ball was made of solid rubber and weighed as much as 4 kg (9 lbs), and sizes differed greatly over time or according to the version played.

Little is known about the game's symbolic contents. Some scholarly guesses include symbolism related to astronomy, war, or fertility.

[Source](#)

# Maya – date unknown

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Mayans practiced many forms of body modification, including deforming a baby's skull to create a pleasingly elongated shape, fostering crossed eyes, filing teeth, inlaying jade into a tooth, piercing and tattooing. The Mayans did this to be pleasing to the gods, for social status and for personal beauty. Both Mayan men and women got tattoos, although men put off tattoos until they were married. Mayan women preferred delicate tattoos on their upper bodies although not on their breasts. Men got tattoos on their arms, legs, backs, hands and face.

Getting a tattoo was painful. The tattooist would first paint the design on the body, then cut the design into the skin. The resulting scar and paint created the tattoo. The process often led to illness and infection. Mayans who got tattoos were honored for their bravery during the process, as it meant they had the fortitude to deal with the pain and suffering.

Mayan tattoos depicted symbols of the gods, power animals and spiritual symbols to express harmony and balance or the power of night or day. Powerful animals such as serpents, eagles or jaguars were favorites of nobles and warriors. Feathered serpents, a symbol of the powerful god Kukulcan, represented spirituality and wisdom. Eagles symbolized foresight and flight. Jaguars embodied bravery, stealth and power.

[Source](#)