ELEMENTS OF CULTURE (GRADE 6)

ACTIVITY OVERVIEW

STANDARDS
- MDSE Social Studies, Grade 6, 2.0 Content Standard: Peoples of the Nations and World
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.9 : Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.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
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9: Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic

OVERVIEW
Students will observe photographs of museum objects related to the early Japanese cultural practice of Ohaguro (tooth blackening), complete a related reading, then consider and discuss elements of culture and cultural diffusion in early world history using both primary and secondary sources.

MATERIALS INCLUDED
- Reading Resource
- Photograph of Japanese Art Print (Yamauba blackening Her teeth and Kintoki, Utamaro, 1795)
- Photograph of sculpture (Japanese Woman with Blackened Teeth)
- Photographs (2) of dentures (sets of artificial teeth) from Japanese Edo Period
- Reflection Worksheet

ACTIVITY
Individually or as a class, students should study the Reading Resource and object photographs to learn about the early Japanese cultural practice of Ohaguro (tooth blackening). Using the Reading Resource and photographs, students may then (individually, in groups, or as a class) complete the Reflection Worksheet.
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PHOTOGRAPHED OBJECTS
- 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.)
- Bust of Japanese Woman with Blackened Teeth (Ohaguro). 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.)

REFERENCES
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 married women. *Ohaguro* was based in cultural beliefs that blackened teeth were beautiful, as well as an appropriate cultural sign of adulthood and maturity. Further, *Ohaguro* was supported by cultural knowledge that the dyes, made from iron and *sake* (fermented Japanese rice) or Japanese tea made from local plants, 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 American President—wore false teeth made of wood. This is a popular American myth, but it is not true! Though Washington did indeed wear dentures (false teeth), 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 even among individuals who had lost their teeth.

During the Edo period, Japanese officials largely 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, primarily, 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, and Japanese people began to mimic beauty standards of the West. *Ohaguro* fell out of fashion and 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.
Yamauba blackening Her teeth and Kintoki (1795)
Kitagawa Utamaro (Japanese, 1753-1806)

Original artwork from collection at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Digital image under Creative Commons license.
Item from collection at Dr. Samuel D. Harris National Museum of Dentistry (SDHNMD), Baltimore. Digital image provided for use with Elements of Culture program by SDHNMD.
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Wooden Dentures from the Japanese Edo Period

Items from collection at Dr. Samuel D. Harris National Museum of Dentistry (SDHNMD), Baltimore. Digital image provided for use with Elements of Culture program by SDHNMD.

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REFLECTION WORKSHEET

Name: _________________________ Date: _________________________

Consider what you read and observed in the Elements of Culture 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. **Observe: 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. What does this print suggest to us about who practiced Ohaguro during the Japanese Edo period? Based on your observation of Yamauba, describe 1-2 reasons why do you think she practices Ohaguro.

4. **Observe: Bust of Japanese Woman with Blackened Teeth.** This bust (sculpture) of a Japanese woman with blackened teeth was created in the twentieth century for display at the National Museum of Dentistry. Our goal in displaying this object is to help our visitors better understand the Japanese practice of Ohaguro. How does it compare with the ink print of Yamauba? What ideas can you draw from observing both objects together?
5. Based on your reading, describe 2-3 ways that location and/or environment influenced the cultural practice of *Ohaguro* during the Japanese Edo period.

6. **Observe: Wooden Dentures from Japanese Edo Period.** Many pairs of wooden dentures from the Edo period survive today. Of those, several pairs of Japanese dentures mimic teeth blackened through *Ohaguro*. What does this suggest to us about why *Ohaguro* was practiced, even among people who had lost their natural teeth?

7. Based on your reading, describe interactions between Japanese peoples and European explorers and traders which promoted or failed to promote relationships between civilizations.

8. Define *cultural diffusion*. How does cultural diffusion influence the development of cultures? What role has cultural diffusion played in the history of Japanese *Ohaguro*?

9. 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?

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