



Early Peoples Activity Sheet:
The Polynesians

The Polynesian expansion across the Pacific (c.700-1756)

1. Origin and spread of Polynesians

a) Which group of people are Polynesians descendants of?

The Polynesians are descendants of the Lapita people who lived on the Solomon Islands in the western Pacific Ocean.

b) Who are the Austronesians?

Austronesians are a people that are thought to have first lived on the island of Taiwan and then settled on the Philippine Islands, then spread through the islands of Southeast Asia and beyond.

c) How was the Lapita Culture formed?

The Austronesians mixed with earlier settlers from New Guinea and combined to form a new culture called Lapita Culture.

d) Approximately how long ago did the Lapita people start exploring other islands?

About 3,500 years ago, the Lapita people took a great step into the unknown, sailing east in search of new islands in the vast Pacific Ocean.

e) Where did the Lapita people settle?

The Lapita people settled in Fiji, New Caledonia, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu.

f) The settlers on which islands were the ancestors to all Polynesians?

The Lapita people who settled on Fiji, Samoa and Tonga were the ancestors to all Polynesians. The Polynesian culture and language developed on those islands from 500 B.C. to 300 B.C.

g) Which peoples are no longer considered to be part of Polynesia and why?

Fiji is not now considered to be part of Polynesia because the Polynesians who lived there were later joined by other peoples.

h) Look at the map on page 10. From which islands did Polynesians spread from?

Polynesians from Tonga discovered and settled, what is now Tahiti in the Society Islands. These islands became the base from which the Polynesians spread to other islands.

i) When were the Hawaiian Islands discovered and settled upon?

Sometime around A.D. 400, Polynesians from the Marquesas Islands discovered and began to settle the Hawaiian Islands.

j) According to legend, how did the Polynesians discover New Zealand?

According to legend, about 1000 years ago, a fisherman named Kupe discovered the islands of New Zealand by accident when chasing a giant octopus that had stolen his bait.

k) Why did Polynesians risk death to explore and settle other islands?

Most of the Polynesian islands are small and soon would have become overcrowded. This forced people to look for new places to live. In addition, the Polynesians were a warlike people. Chiefs often fought one another for power.

2. Life in the Pacific

a) How were Polynesians able to settle and survive on the islands with so little native food plants?

The Polynesians were able to settle on the islands only because they brought crops and farm animals with them.

b) Name the two types of islands in Polynesia.

- i) High islands which are mostly volcanic and are created by volcanoes erupting from the sea floor. Samoa, Tonga and Hawaii are volcanic islands.
- ii) Low islands are often coral reefs, which are formed by the skeletons of millions of tiny sea animals called coral. These islands form on the tops of ancient extinct volcanoes.

c) Which type of island has the best environment?

Volcanic islands have the best environments because of more rain and highly fertile soil.

d) Why did the environment in New Zealand force the settlers to develop a different way of life to other Polynesians?

Despite good rainfall and fertile soil, most of the Polynesian crops needed warm, tropical climate to grow so New Zealand's Maori developed a way of life different from that of other Polynesians.

e) How was Polynesian society divided?

Polynesian society was divided into clans and chiefdoms. The basic unit was the clan, which was based on family ties. All members of a clan were related by birth or by marriage. Clan members were ranked according to how closely they were related to the clan's common ancestor.

f) Who was eligible to become Chief?

Only the sons of a Chief could become Chief. Daughters had a lower status than sons. In Hawaii, Tahiti, and Tonga, women could become chiefs if there were no eligible men.

g) How were clans ranked?

Clans were ranked according to how closely related they were to the most powerful chief and his clan.

h) List, in order, the social classes on larger islands.

Chiefs, experts (priests and craftspeople), commoners.

i) What is mana?

Mana is what Chiefs were believed to possess. It is a sacred power, which came from the gods. Chiefs had to use their mana to benefit their people.

j) What evidence exists of how chiefs displayed their power?

The cape of Hawaiian Chief Kiwala'o is made of thousands of feathers. The cape was a sign of the chief's mana.

k) Health and Medicine:

What was the general state of health of Polynesians?

Polynesians generally enjoyed good health. They did not suffer from many infectious diseases partly because they were so isolated from other peoples. Polynesians also had strict rules for cleanliness, and they washed every day. They plucked any hair from their faces and underarms.

What was the most important of all medicinal plants and what was it used to treat?

The noni tree was the most important of all medicinal plants to the Polynesians. Various parts of the tree were used to cure boils, sores, coughs, diarrhoea, eye infections, fevers, nausea, sore throats, and worms. The juice was used to kill head lice. Mixed with kava root, it was used to treat tuberculosis.

3. Culture

a) Why did Polynesians tattoo their bodies?

They believed that tattoos displayed their mana and some designs were signs of social rank. Tattoos also had protective qualities.

b) Describe the different tattoo styles found on different islands.

Different islands had different tattoo styles and designs. In Samoa, designs were based on straight lines and right angles. On other islands, curved shapes were used. No two people had exactly the same design.

c) Did women have tattoos?

Both men and women had tattoos. Tattooing often formed part of adult ceremonies and no one had tattoos until he or she had stopped growing.

d) Why did Polynesians dance?

Polynesian dances were a way to honour the gods and to praise chiefs and visitors in an exciting and enjoyable way. While dancing, they chanted long poems telling stories about gods, myths, and heroes.

e) What movements were considered the most important in Polynesian dancing?

Movements of the eyes, hands, and arms were considered to be the most important Polynesian dance. Dancers kept time with leg movements.

f) What type of instruments did Polynesians play?

Polynesians played a variety of musical instruments, such as large drums made of hollowed-out coconut trees, small drums attached to the legs of dancers and rattles made by placing pebbles in hollowed-out gourd. Trumpets were made out of large seashells and flutes were made of bamboo.

g) Give some examples of Polynesian sports?

Surfing, canoe racing, wrestling, spear throwing, and kite flying.

4. Warfare

a) Why did chiefdoms and clans go to war?

Wars were fought mainly to capture victims for human sacrifice and seize farmland from neighbouring chiefdoms. Victory in war also increased a chief's status by killing his enemies, he could take their mana.

b) How many soldiers did James Cook witness leaving Tahiti to raid Moorea?

British explorer James Cook watched the war fleet of Tahiti set out to raid Moorea and counted 330 canoes carrying about 8,000 warriors.

c) Why did many of Hawaiian Chief Keoua's supporters change sides when one-third of his army was lost in a volcanic eruption?

Many people believed that losing a third of his army was a sign that the volcano goddess Pele supported Keoua's enemy, Kamehameha. Having the support of the gods in wartime was very important.

d) How did warriors defend themselves in battle?

Before a battle, warriors rubbed their skin with vegetable oil. This made their skin slippery so that enemy warriors could not grab hold of them. Warriors had no protection in battle, such as armour or shields.

e) What were taboos?

Taboos regulated the conduct of warfare. For instance, a raiding party would halt before attacking a village and issue a formal challenge to its inhabitants to come out and fight.

f) How were prisoners of war treated?

Prisoners of war were not treated well. The lucky ones were enslaved. Most were tortured and sacrificed to the gods. Sometimes parts of a dead enemy warrior were eaten as a final insult or to take the warrior's mana.

g) What type of weapons did Polynesians use?

Polynesian weapons would have shark's teeth fastened to the ends to give a saw-like edge that could inflict deadly wounds. Hawaiian warriors threw axes with blades linked with shark's teeth at their enemies' legs.

5. Beliefs

a) What was the most important Polynesian religious belief?

Mana was the most important Polynesian religious belief. Mana is a supernatural force possessed by people, and such special objects as canoes and tools. It was not shared equally among people.

b) Who did the gods give more mana to?

The gods gave more mana to chiefs than to commoners.

c) How could a chief increase his mana?

A chief could increase his mana by sacrificing defeated enemies to the gods or by owning remarkable objects, such as a feather cloak.

d) How did people protect their mana?

Mana was protected by purification ceremonies. Warriors preparing for war and sailors preparing for a dangerous voyage purified themselves by living apart from other people for a time. They avoided women and ate only special foods.

e) What were taboos?

Taboos were ritual restrictions that forbade some activities because they were considered unclean or unsafe. People who broke a taboo were thought to be cursed.

f) To protect the chief's mana, what taboos surrounded them?

It was taboo for commoners to talk to a chief or touch his head because this would make him impure and unworthy to receive mana.

g) What would happen if people broke these taboos?

They could be executed.

h) Who could enter temples and sacred places?

Only people with strong mana, such as chiefs and priests, could enter without risking harm to themselves.

i) How did Polynesians use taboo to conserve resources?

Polynesians used taboo to conserve resources by making it taboo to walk in the forest, pick fruit, or go fishing at certain times of the year.

j) In Hawaii, what could those who broke taboo do to rectify themselves?

Taboo breakers could escape to a place of refuge. Refuges were built near the shore and home of chiefs. The refuge was usually only accessible by swimming as they risked being killed by the chief and his warriors if they tried to enter by land. Once there, a priest performed ceremonies to purify taboo breakers so they could re-enter society.

k) Who did Polynesians believe created the world?

Many Polynesians believed that the god Tangaroa created the world by separating the earth from the sky.

l) In what ways did Polynesians worship their gods?

The Samoans and Tongans worshipped their gods in wooden temples. Other Polynesians worshiped in the open air in walled courtyards called marae. Worshipers chanted and prayed to the gods and performed rituals, often with music and dancing. They also sacrificed food and sometimes, people.

m) What did Polynesians believe happened to the dead?

Polynesians believed when people died, their souls returned to Hawaiki (a mythical land where they believe their ancestors came from). Wrongdoers suffered punishment in Hawaiki, but people who obeyed the taboos enjoyed a happy afterlife. Souls that did not reach Hawaiki became wandering ghosts that could be frightening.

n) Why were festivals held?

Festivals were meant to honour the gods, and they were a chance for chiefs to show off their wealth and rank.

o) What was the Makahiki festival?

The Makahiki festival celebrated the Hawaiian New Year, which came at the end of the harvest season in October or November.

p) Identify the three stages of Mahakiki festival?

- 1) Time of purification. Crops, pigs, chickens, dried fish, cloths, mats and feathers were collected and offered to Lono, the god of farming, in local temples.
- 2) Feasting, singing, dancing, and sports contests.
- 3) Canoe loaded with offerings was set adrift on the ocean as a gift for Lono. The festival closed with the chief and warriors taking part in a ritual fight to prove the chief was still strong enough to rule for another year.

q) Explain what happened at funerals?

Wild behaviour was expected at funerals, which included loud wailing, feasting, and dancing.

r) Why was it important to conduct proper funeral rituals?

It was important to conduct proper funeral rituals to help dead souls reach Hawaiki, the land of the dead.

6. Canoes

a) How did Polynesians use canoes?

Polynesians used canoes for fishing and for journeys to nearby islands.

b) What is an outrigger and what does it do?

An outrigger is a float attached to a canoe, running parallel to the boat. The outrigger helps to balance the canoe and prevent it from turning over in strong winds and rough seas.

c) What features did voyaging canoes have?

Voyaging canoes were much larger than regular canoes. They included a cabin to shelter passengers from the rain and sun. They had a hearth so voyagers could light cooking fires while traveling.

d) How long were voyaging canoes and how many people could they carry?

Voyaging canoes were from 15-30 metres long. They had room for more than 100 people and enough supplies to stay at sea for six weeks.

e) How were the canoes powered?

Both types of canoes could be paddled and had one or two masts and sails.

f) What did Polynesians use to make sails?

Mats made of coconut palm leaves were sewn together to make the sails. Different shaped sails were used on different islands.

g) How did Polynesians make sure their canoes were watertight?

Coconut fibre soaked in sticky plant gum was hammered into the cracks between the planks to make the boat watertight.

h) How did Polynesians navigate across the seas?

Polynesian sailors relied mainly on the movement of the sun and stars. They learned the positions of the sun and the brightest stars and constellations in the sky at different seasons of the year. They also learned wave patterns, weather conditions, and wildlife also helped them. Natural characteristics also indicated land and water depth.

i) How did Polynesians chart the waves?

Polynesians used sticks to chart the waves.

7. Family life

a) What was considered the normal family unit throughout Polynesia?

The extended family was the normal family unit throughout Polynesia. Several generations— grandparents, parents, children, uncles, aunts, and cousins – all lived together, often under one roof.

b) Who was the head of the household?

The oldest man was the head of the household.

c) What kind of parents were Polynesians?

Polynesian parents were affectionate parents, but they expected their children to be obedient. Parents allowed teenagers plenty of freedom, but young adults had to follow rules and behave responsibly.

d) Who looked after the children in the family?

Both parents needed to work, so young children were mainly looked after their older brothers and sisters and by their grandparents.

e) Why would Polynesians adopt children?

Adoption was common in Polynesia, and children were given to adoptive parents for various reasons. For example, parents might give a child to another couple who had no children or had no male children. Adoption created strong bonds between families.

f) What type of education did children receive?

Children did not receive a full-time education unless they were training to be priests. Most children learned the skills they would need as adults by working with their parents. Those who wanted to learn a craft became apprentices to experienced craftspeople.

g) What did an adult ceremony involve?

Many adulthood ceremonies involved getting a painful tattoo. Another was “fattening”.

h) What was ‘fattening’?

Young girls, in particular, were kept out of the sun, fed large amounts of food, and prevented from taking exercise to make them fatter and paler. Polynesians believed that this made them more attractive and improved their chances of a good marriage.

i) How old were men and women when they married?

Men and women married as soon as they became adults, usually between the ages of 15 and 20.

j) What taboos were there relating to marriage?

Taboos forbade marriage to close relations and to people of a different class.

k) In the case of a divorce, how would the family be structured?

If a marriage ended in a divorce, the property and children were divided. The older boys went with their father, the girls and infants stayed with the mother.

8. Making a living

a) What jobs would men perform?

Men were responsible for fishing, building houses and canoes, and making tools.

b) What jobs would women perform?

Women prepared food for cooking or preservation, gathered shellfish, wove baskets, and made cloth.

c) How did Polynesians make a living?

Most Polynesians made a living by fishing or growing crops.

d) Who were the “experts”?

Experts were the men who worked full time in one craft e.g. canoe builders, house builders, tattooists, spear makers, wooden-bowl makers, sail makers, stone-toolmakers.

e) How was wealth measured in Polynesian culture?

Polynesians measured their wealth by ownership of such items as tapa, woven mats, canoes, weapons, large house, and pigs and chickens. Seashells and shark teeth were sometimes used as a form of money but most people simply traded when they needed to buy something.

9. Houses

a) Describe a family home in Polynesia.

Each family had its own one-room house. Everyone slept on mats on the floor, with their head toward the middle of the house. The most important family members slept near the door, and children slept farthest away.

b) Why did men and women eat separately?

It was taboo for men and women to eat together because it was believed that men's mana was vulnerable when eating and that women might damage or steal a man's mana if they ate with them.

c) What other buildings were found in a village?

Eating houses for men and women, weaving house, fishing house, teaching house, canoe houses, storehouses, a guesthouse, and an outdoor cooking area.

d) What materials were used to construct shelters in Polynesia?

The main building materials were wood, dried grass, and woven mats. Stone was used in the foundations of important buildings. Framework was made from timber and the roof was thatched dried grass.

10. Clothing

a) What type of clothing did men and women wear?

Due to the tropical climate, Polynesians of all ranks wore only simple, light clothing and walked barefoot.

b) What were clothes made from?

Polynesians made clothes from tapa, a cloth made from the bark of young paper mulberry trees, and from mats of woven vegetable fibres. Clothes were made from single sheets of cloth and were wrapped around the body in many ways and different styles.

c) What was the most common type of clothing in Tonga, Samoa and Hawaii?

The lava-lava, worn by both men and women, was the most common type of clothing. It was a single rectangular piece of cloth that was wrapped around the waist to make a skirt.

d) Name some of the accessories people wore in Polynesia?

Men and women wore simple jewellery made of bone, shell, wood and human hair. Headdresses, necklaces, hairpins and arm and waist belts were most common.

11. Food

a) What types of foods did Polynesians eat?

Polynesians ate a healthful diet rich in vegetables, fruits, and fish, along with small amounts of meat. Examples are, breadfruit, taro, bananas, coconuts, pandanus fruit, sweet potato, sugar cane. They ate skipjack tuna, yellowfin tuna, mahimahi, and woohoo fish as well as octopus and shellfish. They also ate pork and chicken and also dogs and rats.

b) What were the two most important foods in a Polynesian's diet?

Taro and breadfruit were the two most important foods.

c) How did Polynesians prepare their food?

Polynesians roasted their food or cooked it slowly in simple ovens. The oven was a hole dug in the ground with stones placed at the bottom. A fire heated the stones overnight and food was then placed in the hole. Fruits and vegetables, then a whole pig, then fish were placed in the hole. It was then covered with banana leaves and left to cook all day.

d) What foods were taboo to women in Hawaii?

It was taboo for women to eat pork, chicken, turtle or coconut because these foods were offered as sacrifices to male gods.

12. Easter Island

a) When did Polynesians discover and settle on Easter Island?

Polynesians discovered and settled Easter Island between 1,100 and 800 years ago.

b) What are moai?

Moai are enormous carved statues that have long sloping noses, deeply sunken eyes and big chins. They are found on Easter Island.

c) Why were the moai made?

The statues represent ancient chieftains who were believed to have come from gods. The statues linked living chiefs to their ancestors and gave them mana.

d) How many people is it thought were needed to construct one moai?

Experiments by modern scientists have shown that it would take a team of 20 carvers a year to make a moai and about 40 people to move it.

e) Explain how society on Easter Island was divided.

Easter Island had two social classes, the fat people and the thin people. The fat people were the powerful chiefs and their families. They got the best food and did not have to work hard. The thin people were the commoners. They had to work for the chiefs and give them part of their food.

f) What happened to the population that lived on Easter Island?

The population used up all the resources and by the 1600's, no trees remained on Easter Island. Without tree roots the soil began to wash away and rain was not stored in the soil for slow release into stream and springs dried up. Crops

died and people starved. Without trees, islanders could not build new boats to look for a new home. Wars broke out and people starved to death. Cannibalism was common. The population had greatly reduced by the time European settlers arrived.