

# Nascent Worlds

Dr. Francine Barone | [francine.barone@yale.edu](mailto:francine.barone@yale.edu)  
Human Relations Area Files at Yale University

## Description

**Nascent Worlds** is a build-your-own-culture learning activity. Designed with introductory socio-cultural anthropology classes in mind, it incorporates all four fields of anthropology (physical anthropology, linguistic anthropology, cultural anthropology, and archaeology) and can be adapted to include theoretical or ethnographic content for more advanced classes.

The idea behind Nascent Worlds is for students of anthropology to imagine themselves as ethnographers encountering an entirely distant culture for the first time. What would they discover at this moment of first contact? Over time, by exploring the different areas of life in that society, the alien anthropologist must file a report with an intergalactic board of ethnographers. Who are these beings, and what has been learned about their culture?

## Format

This activity works best for students working in small groups. They may work together on all features of the culture creation or divide up the various social, economic, political, and religious aspects and combine their efforts into a whole. Students should present a narrative of the distant culture, describing all features in as much nuance as possible. The presentation can be a combination of text, video, a PowerPoint presentation, original graphics, artwork, or performance. Presentations should dedicate at least one slide per facet of culture. Additional activities might include dressing as members of the culture and enacting an aspect of daily life or a ritual. Virtual classrooms can create digital cultural materials to display online, or members of the team can dress as representatives of the society and answer questions from the class about their culture.

## Assignment

Imagine that you have encountered a distant culture for the first time and are invited to live among them as an ethnographer. Write a “culture summary” or overview of the society. What do they look like? How do they live? Name and describe the culture and its facets, including the “rules” governing society along with an origin story, mythology, or explanatory secular cosmology. A sample list of cultural traits to include in the summary can be found in the accompanying PowerPoint.

Your society does not have to outwardly appear humanoid or reside in hospitable environments as they exist on planet Earth. Perhaps they are invertebrates, merfolk, or silicone-based lifeforms. However, they must have a set of cultural traits and a history that can be detailed through (imagined) participant-observation.

The social and cultural features “observed” by intrepid student ethnographers must make internal sense from an anthropological perspective. That is, the practices, dwellings,

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cosmologies, laws, norms, symbols, and rituals should all align within the established logic of the invented society. For instance, when it comes to describing how *merfolk* (sea-dwellers) came to exist, you might describe what pervasive power and importance that water may hold in such a society.

Refer to Murdock's concept of **human universals**, such as love, marriage, food taboos, religion, or music, for ideas of how certain themes connect throughout human thought and behavior.

### Universals of Culture by George P. Murdock

American Anthropologist, 1945 compendium

From: Consilience, E.O. Wilson, 1998. p.147

- age-grading
- athletic sports
- bodily adornment
- calendar
- cleanliness
- training
- community organization
- cooking
- cooperative labor
- cosmology
- courtship
- dancing
- decorative art
- divination
- division of labor
- dream interpretation
- education
- eschatology
- ethics
- ethnobotany
- etiquette
- faith healing
- family feasting
- fire making
- folklore
- food taboos
- funeral rites
- games
- gestures
- gift giving
- government
- greetings
- hair styles
- hospitality
- housing
- hygiene
- incest taboos
- inheritance rules
- joking
- kin groups
- kinship nomenclature
- language
- law
- luck superstitions
- magic
- marriage
- mealtimes
- medicine
- obstetrics
- penal sanctions
- personal names
- population policy
- postnatal care
- pregnancy usages
- property rights
- propitiation of supernatural beings
- puberty customs
- religious ritual
- residence rules
- sexual restrictions
- soul concepts
- status differentiation
- surgery
- tool making
- trade
- visiting
- weaving
- weather control

(Source: <http://www.unc.edu>)

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### Changing Worlds

Societies are continually changing. Your cultural stories should address the past as well as the present, and future trajectories of the society. For instance, you might wish to describe prehistoric artifacts uncovered by your team's archaeologist. What significance does the artifact have for the society? With regard to the future, examples include: how will the culture respond to a global catastrophe that may threaten the ecosystem if action is not taken? Will new scientific discoveries or technological advancements threaten to efface long-held traditions?

Past	Present	Future
Cultural histories can incorporate archaeological evidence including artifacts or material culture along with the foundations of a belief system or origin story. Are there any sacred relics that are meaningful? What do they tell us about the history and prehistory of the society?	How does this culture live today? How do they dress? What are their homes and families like? What foods do they produce and enjoy eating? What jobs do they do? What do they believe, what are their motivations, and how do they interact with each other?	Based on the past and present, address cultural change and cultural diffusion over time, or envision a future cataclysmic event. What do you think will happen to this culture? Can you find comparisons with current or past human societies that have changed?

### Culture Summaries in eHRAF

eHRAF World Cultures contains a wealth of ethnographic data about hundreds of societies around the world. To build a comprehensive list of cultural traits, students should use **Culture Summaries** in eHRAF as a model for their assignment.

eHRAF Culture Summaries describe various aspects of the cultures that are in eHRAF, including where a culture is from, the geographic and environmental conditions, historical background, and how people live: their political and economic systems, kinship and descent, belief systems, etc. A general outline and headings are the same for each summary so that they can be easily compared. The headers can be used by students as the building blocks for creating their own summaries.

Use **Browse Cultures** to explore cultures. Click on the name of the culture to access the Culture Profile and read the Culture Summary.

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The screenshot displays the eHRAP World Cultures database interface. At the top, there are navigation tabs for 'BASIC Search', 'ADVANCED Search', 'Browse CULTURES', 'Browse SUBJECTS', and 'Browse DOCUMENTS'. Below these are filters for 'A-Z Index', 'by Region', 'by Country', and 'by Map'. The main content area is titled 'Browse Cultures A-Z Index' and features a 'Filter Index' search bar with the text 'tiv' entered. Below the search bar is a 'Browse' section with a grid of letters from A to Z. The letter 'T' is highlighted, leading to the 'Tiv' culture entry. The entry includes a 'Cite' button, the author 'Paul Bohannon and Ian Skoggard', and sections for 'ETHNONYMS', 'ORIENTATION', and 'IDENTIFICATION AND LOCATION'. The 'ETHNONYMS' section lists 'Munchi, Munshi, Tivi.' with a sub-label 'Identification'. The 'IDENTIFICATION AND LOCATION' section contains a paragraph: 'The Tiv (sing., Or-Tiv) are a group of about a million people who live on both sides of the Benue River, 220 kilometers from its confluence with the Niger, in Nigeria. "Tiv" is the name of the common ancestor from whom all are descended. In Hausa they are called "Munshi" or "Munchi." The heartland of Tivland stretches from' followed by a sub-label 'Identification'. To the right of this paragraph are sub-labels for 'Location', 'Topography and geology', and 'Flora'.

Once their basic outline of the culture is complete, students may wish to search the database to find more specific comparative examples using subjects and keywords of their choice.

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## Sample Topics

Below is an example list of cultural facets with questions that may be addressed when building the cultural description for the assignment. Students should endeavor to include additional topics. The slideshow version is supplemented with snippets from culture summaries in eHRAF World Cultures.

### Identity

How do they dress and/or decorate their bodies?  
What are beauty standards and self-expression like?  
Are there gender identities?  
What other determinants of identity are there?

### Consumption & Subsistence

What do they eat?  
How is food acquired or produced?  
Are there any special ceremonial meals?  
What are some food-related practices?  
Is there illness or disease?

### Communication

How do they communicate?  
Is there written language?  
How do they categorize and classify the world around them?  
What colors or objects are symbolic?  
Are there creative arts (dance, music, graphics)?

### Homes & Families

Where do they live?  
Is there co-habitation?  
What are homes and dwellings like?  
What gender roles and familial relationships exist?  
What are the patterns of descent or inheritance?

### Beliefs

Is there a religion or are there secular myths or legends?  
What is believed about the origins?  
What things are taboo and why?  
What rites and rituals (religious or secular) are observed?  
Are there sacred items or totems?

### Economics

What kinds of jobs do they do?  
Is there a form of currency?  
Are there markets?  
Do they give and receive gifts?  
What other types of exchange are there?

### Morality & Law

How are “right” and “wrong” determined?  
How are interpersonal conflicts mediated?  
Are there laws, crimes and punishments?  
What moral values are there and how are they codified?

### Politics

Are there leaders?  
How are they chosen?  
How are decisions made?  
Who holds power in the society?  
Are collectivism or individualism valued?