  
*Exploring Tangible and Intangible Culture*

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| **Introduction** | |
| A bell in the form of a human head, with a handle at the top and an opening at the bottom, curving around the sides of the head and the chin. The head is wide and rounded at the bottom, then tapers upward to the top, wearing a cylindrical, tapering hat or headdress.  The handle at the top of the bell suggests that it was designed to be worn or attached to another material. Studies from other similar bells in Mesoamerica suggest that metalworkers cast metal objects using lost-wax techniques to create this type of object. While the round face and puffy cheeks and eyelids recall the Maya fat god, it is no possible to determine the deity represented nor that it was made by a Maya craftsman. The bell is said to have been found in the mountains of Honduras, just outside of the Maya area, but metal objects were traded over a wide territory and cast objects and copper ingots were imported into the Maya area from both present-day Honduras and Mexico.  This type of bell is also called rattle or *cascabel* , and was manufactured by trained craftsmen who developed skills in working of bronze, silver, and gold. Research indicates that metalworking began among pre-Hispanic cultures in what is contemporarily considered the territory of Peru and gradually made its way through the north of the continent through Panama and Costa Rica. The main metals used were gold, silver and copper and the techniques used for working the metals were hammering, smelting, soldering, welding, repousse, gold plating, silver plating, and lost wax casting. Employing these techniques, metalsmiths created necklaces, bracelets, pectorals, brooches, axes, celts, fishhooks, needles, awls, pincers, and other things.  Bells were an important element in pre-Hispanic cultures utilized for religious, ceremonial and personal adornment, indicating social status. Bells might have been considered a luxury item as specialized knowledge was required to make them and the metals used, and the motifs portrayed might have communicated the wearer’s social status and the bell’s ceremonial purpose. | |
| **Indiana Standards Connections:**  S.2.1 – Define culture and identify the material and non-material components of culture.  E.S.2.1 Students investigate the origins of various ethnic and racial groups, examining the historical influence of cultural, socio-political, and socio-economic contexts on those groups.  5.1.1 Identify and describe early cultures and settlements that existed in North America prior to contact with Europeans.  6.1.1 Summarize the rise, decline, and cultural achievements of ancient civilizations in Europe and Mesoamerica.  6.3.4 Describe and compare major cultural characteristics of regions in Europe and the Western Hemisphere.  GHW.1.1 Use maps, timelines, and other geographic representations to identify and describe the location, distribution and main events in the development of culture hearths in Asia, Mesoamerica, and North Africa. | **Compelling Question(s):**  How is the Fat God represented in ancient Maya culture? What are its associations?  How might the ancient Maya have used this bell?  What are the differences between tangible and intangible aspects of culture?  How do tangible objects like the Fat God bell communicate both tangible and intangible elements of Maya culture? |
| **Lesson Objectives:**  Students will learn about culture's tangible and intangible aspects by examining the Fat God, a deity in Maya ancient culture and its associated cultural practices, particularly around feasting and metalworking. They will gain a deeper understanding of the role of deities in Maya society and the connection between religious figures and social practices. Students will distinguish between physical objects (tangible culture) and the non-physical beliefs, customs, and traditions (intangible culture) of the Maya civilization. They will learn how material objects like the human-head bell represent cultural values and how food-related practices are key in Maya ceremonies and social life. The lesson also encourages students to compare these aspects in Maya culture with other world cultures. | |
| **Materials** | |
| Articles and resources for background information   * [Pre-Columbian Bell W2W Website](https://w2w.indiana.edu/explore-collections/pre-columbian-bell.html) * [Sun God Pendant W2W Website](https://w2w.indiana.edu/explore-collections/sun-god-pendant.html) * [The Ancient Secret of Pre-Hispanic Jewelry](https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/home/ancient-secret-of-pre-hispanic-jewellery) * [Ancient Scholar- The Fat God in Maya Culture: Mythology, Iconography, and Society](https://ancientscholar.org/the-fat-god-in-maya-culture-mythology-iconography-and-society/) * [Horne, John H. Bells: Cascabeles & Tintinnabulum. Eastern Arizona College Museum of Anthropology Thatcher, Arizona. Publication No. 2.](https://eacalumni.org/file/mills-collection-and-eac-museum/Bells-John-Horne.pdf) * [Digital Maps of the Ancient World- The History of the Maya](https://digitalmapsoftheancientworld.com/ancient-history/the-history-of-the-maya/?theme=pub/assembler)   Other museum collections with similar objects   * [Dumbarton Oaks- Fat God Maskette](https://www.doaks.org/resources/olmec-art/catalogue/33-fat-god-maskette) * [The Met- Bell with Face (Tlaloc)](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310692) | |
| **Learning Plan** | |
| **Activities**   1. Introduce students to the Maya culture and religion using the resources provided above. Ask students to describe the features of both the bell and the deity. Discuss what these objects might represent and why they were important in Maya culture. 2. Introduce key vocabulary terms: **tangible culture** and **intangible culture**. Provide simple definitions:  * **Tangible culture:** refers to physical objects and artifacts (things you can touch or see). * **Intangible culture:** beliefs, customs, traditions, and practices (things you can’t physically touch but are embedded in a culture’s way of life)   Explain that through the lesson, students will explore how tangible and intangible aspects of culture are connected and work together to shape a society.   1. Divide the class into two groups and ask each group to brainstorm what might be tangible and what might be intangible aspects of Maya culture using the bell as their primary source. 2. Ask students to make a list separating the tangible elements of the bell from the intangible culture:   Example of the table:  Tangible   * Human-head bell * Fat god representation * Pottery, plates, food vessels * Jewelry made from gold and copper   Intangible   * Beliefs about food and fertility * Religious ceremonies and rituals involving feasting * Maya myths and stories surrounding the Fat god * Social hierarchy and the role of feasts in demonstrating power  1. Discuss how both tangible and intangible elements of culture are essential to understanding a society. The fat god bell is a tangible object but its significance as a symbol of fertility and abundance is an intangible cultural concept.      |  |  | | --- | --- | | Fat God in Maya Culture | | | Tangible cultural elements | Intangible cultural elements | | 1. Made from copper (casted by metalworkers) | 1. Copper and other metals were associated with cultural symbolisms. | | 1. Fat god is represented with a round face and puffy cheeks and eyelids | 2. This representation suggests that the Fat God was a deity important to the Mayas and represented gluttony, abundance. This god was venerated in feasting rituals and the agricultural cycle. | | 1. Found in Honduras but this deity representation is also found across the American continent. | 3. Similar representations of this divinity in other materials have also been found in the Americas. This might suggest its veneration in other pre-Hispanic cultures. Additionally, this indicates that these cultures were involved in trading relationships | | 1. It is a bell representing a god. | 4. its representation as a bell indicates the object’s use in dances and other ritual celebrations. | | 1. Intricate details such as the facial features and the handle at the top. | 5. Mastery of metalwork among ancient Mayas who developed the lost wax technique. The practical details suggest the bell was designed to be attached to another piece. | | |
| **Assessment Suggestions**   Ask the students to hand in the table and assess their participation in class discussions, group brainstorming, and reflections.  Allow time during class to compare the students' responses in groups. You can divide them into two large groups, one will answer the tangible cultural elements column while the other group will complete the intangible cultural elements column. | |
| **Extensions**  Students can research other deities associated with feasting practices in different cultures. Make a graph comparing them to learn how each culture represented them (e.g. Dionysus in Greek mythology). | |