

*Island of the Blue Dolphins*, Chapter 9  
**Cultural Taboos**

**Grade Level**

Upper Elementary: Third Grade through Fifth Grade

**Subject**

Literacy and Language Arts, Social Studies

**Common Core Standards**

4.SL.1, 4.RL.1

**Background Information**

Every culture has its own rules, taboos, and superstitions. In Karana's culture, women are forbidden from making and using weapons, and according to custom, if a woman uses a weapon, terrible things will happen. In chapter 9, however, Karana decides that it is riskier to be unarmed than for her to make and use weapons.

A Socratic Seminar is a formal debate or discussion format that emphasizes respect. It encourages students to learn from one another by engaging critically a text, listening carefully to peers, and asking questions for clarification or to challenge another student's claim. For example, a student might ask another student, "What do you mean by x?" Typically, students review the text that is up for discussion before the seminar begins, desks are arranged in a circle, and the teacher serves as the discussion leader.

**Materials**

- Copy of question list for teacher (provided)
- Class set of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*

**Procedure**

1. Have students reread or review chapter 9 and make notes about anything they find interesting.
2. Arrange the desks to form a circle.
3. Collaborate with students to determine ground rules for the discussion. For example, if a particular class has trouble with students talking over one another, it might be a good idea to have a talking stick or similar object to clearly identify the speaker.
4. Begin the discussion by asking the first question and then opening the floor to students. Encourage students to talk to one another, not to the teacher. After asking the question, the teacher should only enter the conversation if the students seem to be stuck or if the present topic has been exhausted.
5. Once students have had the chance to engage in the first question, move on to the second question.
6. Repeat steps 4–5 until all questions have been discussed.
7. To shorten this activity: Choose a discussion question(s) to skip or set a time limit for the discussion of each question.

8. To lengthen this activity: Have students write a list of questions that they would like to discuss before beginning the seminar. The teacher can use these questions to supplement the discussion as necessary. AND/OR ask students to reflect on what went well and what could be improved during future seminars.

### **Enrichment Activities**

1. Writing prompt: How does Karana feel when she digs up the chest from the Russians? What is she looking for in the chest? What does she find, and what does she decide to do with it? Why do you think she makes the decision she does?
2. Research prompt: *Island of the Blue Dolphins* was written in the late 1950s and published in 1960. Many taboos related to gender that existed then do not exist today. Interview a senior citizen and/or research using books or the Internet to find out how the lives of American women were different in the 1950s and 60s than they are today. What gender taboos existed then that don't exist now? Write at least two paragraphs about what you learn. The first paragraph should be about gender taboos in the 1950s and 60s, and the second paragraph should be about how things have changed.

*Island of the Blue Dolphins*, Chapter 9  
**Cultural Taboos Question List**

1. What does it mean for something to be taboo? If needed, begin the discussion by defining this term for students.
2. What taboos exist in our culture? Examples: Swearing or calling teachers by their first names at most schools.
3. What do you think would happen if you broke one of the taboos we just discussed?
4. What taboo is Karana afraid to break, and what does she think will happen if she does?
5. Why does Karana decide to make weapons even though there is a taboo against it?
6. Do you think you would ever break one of the taboos that we discussed? Why or why not?