



## **Oral Culture Amidst the Diversity of Modern American Society**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**This paper examines that as of today oral cultures are found throughout the United States of America, but the majority of Americans have little knowledge about it. Oral cultural beliefs, values and norms need to be part of American multicultural education to increase our capacity to help diverse students in all American schools and to better appreciate relevant cultural differences. It provides an overview of how oral culture can be included in multicultural education amidst the diversity of American society. This paper also highlight the specifically cultural perspective of indigenous and Mong-American cultures. Oral culture carries deeply authentic cultural values that are necessary for a complete education in this multicultural American society. Mong-Americans retain a strong connection to their oral cultural values and many Americans unaware of this important fact.**

**Keywords:** Oral Culture, Multicultural Education, Diversity and Minority

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the course of our history some people have worked hard to preserve their traditional and cultural values while others have attempted to adopt new values. Therefore, many competing cultural values may exist in the complex Modern American society that can cause people to be unable to keep their culture. The major cultural concern people have in the United States seems to be to maintain privilege and superiority. Freire (1993) would call this concern “critical consciousness.” It is an action approach that people make contrary to their own important cultural norms, values, and beliefs. Multicultural education has been the main focus to address social justice education in the American schools curricula for over five decades to level up the playing field for cultural representations. Some educators are wondering what kinds of contents and subjects should be included in the field of multicultural education. Most cases of multicultural education in the United States deal with culture constructs such as gender, social class, disabilities, and racial differences.

Many cultures are being marginalized because they were labeled for one of the above categories in American schools. According to Banks and Banks (1993) multicultural education grew out from the civil rights movement in the 1960s with a notion to eliminate discrimination in education. In the early 1970s the development of multicultural education had become an important field. Banks and Banks (1993) stated, “A major goal of multicultural education is to help students to develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to function within their own microcultures, the U.S. macroculture, other microcultures, and within the global community” (p. 24). If oral culture becomes part of the goal for multicultural education then this will include all American communities. The perspective gained by recognizing oral cultures has relevant application to today’s multicultural education. If we integrate knowledge and practice of oral culture into school curricula then we allow invisible cultural representatives like the Mong-American to have an authentic identity connection in the process of adaptation to Western/American culture. Therefore, it is hoped, readers will find

oral culture to be interesting perspective on indigenous cultures as a contribution to American schools.

### **Oral Culture Disapora In America**

*Culturally determined norms guide our language, behavior, emotions, and thinking in different situations; they are the do's and don'ts of appropriate behavior within our culture (Gollnick and Chinn, 2002, p. 6).*

The rich culture of America came from all around the world. Everyone in America has a *culture* (Gollnick and Chinn, 2002; 2006). Some Americans still have strong ties to oral cultural values, but others are completely disconnected. Native Americans and other indigenous groups and most people who came from countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Argentina, Chile, etc. still celebrate their oral cultural tradition in America. Cajete (1994) points out that Native American ceremony is a form of indigenous education. In addition, Mong-Americans (Note: Throughout this article the term *Mong* will be used instead of *Hmong*. There are two languages spoken in the Mong society, the Mong Leng or blue Mong or Hmong Der or white Hmong. Mong-American refer to the Mong living in the United States) are another group that places a deep value on their oral cultural tradition. Even though their children are going to school to study the printed word and print culture values, at home oral culture practices still remain strong. Thao (2006) notes that oral tradition has been a part of Mong cultural for thousands of years. This is a deeply significant tradition to the Mong people. They have been carried by their oral cultural values to every resettlement context. The Mong have a deep social reliance on oral culture to educate and pass knowledge on to the younger generation (Thao, 2006). Cajete (1994) notes that similar values are passed down by Native American Indians. One deep cause of Native American Indians alienation from the American educational system because is the denial of any recognition of their culture. The lessons of a familiarity with oral culture study need to be made available for students early education so they can identify their own authentic cultural knowledge as an educationally valued part of development and a respected tool for learning life lessons while adapting to the dominant culture. This will also help multicultural education meet the criterion from Banks and Banks' definition of multicultural education, which it is a "reform movement that is trying to change the schools and other educational institutions so that students from all social-class, gender, racial, and cultural groups will have an equal opportunity to learn" (p. 4).

The daily language people used through stories, folktales, legends, plays, songs, chants, oratory and other forms of non-verbal communication are aspects of oral culture. Nowadays, Americans are so adapted to the print culture values and how the print culture operates that they have forgotten the important values of oral culture. There are many values that carried over from the oral culture. Communication through social-media is one example from both the oral culture and print culture. Our communication using technological equipment like Webcam, Smartphome and other types of social-media without producing text messages is a form of oral culture communication. To make my point short, we use oral communication on a regular basis without knowing that it is passed down from the oral culture. Ong (1980) called it "Secondary Orality." Media allows people to speak and to address one another with no text required. The technological revolution of today has the capacity for people to communicate orally with not only one way but several-ways. For examples, softwares like Skype, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, etc. are the interconnection between the print culture and oral culture.

In modern American diverse society, print culture values make people unaware and become used to the low-context culture rather than a high-context culture. People who are most

associated with oral culture operate in a high context of culture. Hall (1981) defines context of culture as the many ways in which people look into things. People who rise in the low-context culture are in positions of authority whereas the people who rise in the high-context culture are not. The context of cultures creates a system for that culture. According to this information the high-context culture system allows people to build a stronger relationship between one another, involves more collective thinking, maintains a harmonious relationship with the environment and have communal supports whereas the low-context culture encourages individualism and put more emphasis on profit making. In the American schools are places where high-context culture and low-context culture intersect. Trumbull, E. & et al. (2001) elaborates that low-contact culture represent individualism and high-contact culture represent collectivism. U.S. schools tend to promote the norms of individualism and students from collectivistic societies find themselves to have huge cultural conflict.

The author came from an oral culture. He did not attend school until he was at the age of ten. During his childhood period he learned things through oral teaching, story telling and accessed information face to face with another human being. He had a big family, extended families and retains strong ties with his kinship system. From his oral culture experience, things do not come in packages, have no copyright permission label and no form of currency. Oral culture is not a linear operation. It is completely non-linear. Oral culture does not buy or sell things. It is a culture of trading. The author is from the Mong culture. The Mong-American continues to pass down this cultural values. They are openness, humble and courageous people. The Mong-American culture will have a great benefit to the modern American diverse society if American schools are willing to integrate oral values. Thao (2012) points that the absent of Mong culture from his schooling experience in the junior high and high school perpetuates the culture capital of white middle class European-American.

There are so many elements to the oral culture religion. Religion has an important role to all cultures. Some people are willing to die for their religion than lose their religion. The oral culture religion that the Mong-American, Native American and indigenous groups believe must be understood by the print culture society. It may be difficult for some people to explain oral culture religion because nothing comes in text. Often print culture people did not take time to do research to understand how oral culture works. This topic was ignored. Therefore, oral culture people's religions are not clearly being identified in this modern American diverse society. Oral culture religion associates with spiritual entities. It emphasizes harmonizing with places, plants, animals, people and other physical features. It is not like other types of religions. It requires oral culture sacred knowledge in order to understand the religion. For example, the Mong believe that everything existing on earth has a soul. To become a spiritual healer one must be chosen by the spirits. The spirits gave power for a spiritual healer to cure for members of Mong illness that evil spirit caused. Pickford (2012) states that Mong believe if one " become ill, experience bad luck, or suffer any kind of loss or hardship, it is because your soul has either wandered away from your body or been kidnapped by the *dab* ("da"), spirits that can be either good or bad depending on the circumstances" (pg. 109). The Native American and other indigenous groups have similar beliefs. In order to have a completed pedagogical discussion about religion for multicultural education one must include the religion of oral culture people. Gollnick and Chinn (2006) remind us that we live in a society that has become increasingly diverse and no one should ever underestimate another's religion beliefs.

When the author first arrived in the United States he quickly discovered that Americans do not place much emphasis on oral culture values. His oral culture background was not being recognized at school. School was very foreign and difficult for him. It took the author many years to adapt to the school culture. His mother faced a similar dilemma. She cannot obtain a

job in this print culture society with her oral credential. She receives support from the author. It is sad to see how this modern American diverse society has forgotten and no longer values oral credential. To make sure this would not happen to future oral culture background students and parents, American cultures must embrace and have respect for oral culture values. Including oral culture values in multicultural education curriculum at schools and providing oral culture training to peer professionals is the foundation to introduce all culture values. This will help the modern American diversity society develop greater understanding for authentic American cultural pluralism.

### **Recognize The Values Of Oral Culture**

It is important to recognize both oral and written cultures. People may have different views of interpreting, learning and processing information based on the cultural society that they belong to. There are many culture representations in American society and each culture has its own unique system to maintain the importance of their culture creativity. Hall (1981) reminds us that culture is an identification of people and it draws a line separating one thing from another. Printed words convey meaningful information to oral culture people as to print culture people. Oral culture people see print words as a mark and this mark means nothing to them. For example, "elephant" in print may not deliver the same message to oral culture people that use a live example drawn from real Mong experience. The author remembers many readings. How have Mong translated a concept foreign to their experience? Such as "autopsy" or "spirit/soul" is a big different from a picture of an elephant does. If the print culture people see the word "elephant" they would immediately know the meaning that it is a beast. However, if one would ask a member of the print culture to recite any story about an elephant he or she might need to research from books in order to tell the complete story. The member from an oral culture would not need such books to help him or her. Ong (1982) points out that a person who has never seen a car in his or her life may think of a car as a horse. A horse provides similar services as to the car.

People cannot assume that in this modern American diverse society all people function the same way because everyone attends school to study print culture values. Even though some cultures may be in going to school they have high expectations to keep their oral values. For example, Native American Indian education incorporated many cultural values from indigenous tradition (Cajete, 1994). In addition, some minority American communities have after school and weekend classes that teach heritage values to their children. The successful of Korean-American community schools are existed in the weekend and the majorities are operated by Korean Christian churches (Lee, J.S & Shin, S. J., 2008). Importantly, school is a place where many cultures including oral and written meet. School should promote heritage, language and culture rather than leave to the community to run as after school or weekend programs. Schools need to be a place that helps people reinforces different culture orientation. Since the modern American diverse society is moving in the direction of transdisciplinary pedagogy, the American people need to understand oral and written cultural diversity. Both oral and written cultures are equally valuable to the American pluralistic society since knowledge becomes more transnational and globalized. People no longer live in isolated communities. There are all types of cultures living together in one community throughout the United States. Therefore, it is extremely important to address the issues raised by the differences in oral cultural and written culture in this modern society. With this information it will help the American people to be conscious about the different dimensions of culture. There are many culture modalities and forms that evolved in the various cultures now found in the United States. Many Americans do not know about the Mong-American culture and the Mong-American are often referred to and lumped with a larger Asian group such as Chinese, Japanese

or Korean and other groups from Southeast Asian (Lee, J.S, 2005). It is time to have an openness and honest discussion about all the American cultures. Representations of all cultures from oral to print and be recognized in the American schools make United States a strong multicultural and multilingual nation.

### CONCLUSION

Oral and print cultures have differences and similarities, and they both have equal important values that benefit in society. Oral culture has different norms and values than print culture. Multicultural education in this current society must include all cultural perspectives from oral and print cultures. No culture should be neglected, ignored or marginalized. The way to understand our past is through the contribution of oral culture values. One must not forget this oral culture. It is one of the oldest existing culture and some people have great respect for it. In some communities throughout the United States, oral culture is still going strong as a way to celebrate tradition, attain knowledge and pass on wisdom. It is important for one to understand both the oral and print cultures in order to deliver effective multicultural and multilingual education when American schools are questing to address social justice education. Modern American diverse society needs to remain connected to past historical and oral culture values to make America a strong country in embracing global culture.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The arguments on this paper continue to be a complex problem in the modern American society and pressure the American's modernization culture. The author encourages researchers to further investigate how the on going changing of technological revolution enhances oral cultural communication and its replication of many oral cultures in America such as the Native Americans, Mong Americans, Somali Americans, Appalachian Americans, etc. Also, there are many significant changes that will renew the importance of understanding multiculturalism. For instance, consider people use of modern electronic media and the relationship to oral culture. The evolution of oral culture and print culture identity formation that widespread throughout America and the globe particularly in like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter in social media have becoming an everyday culture inter-action. How the oral culture and print culture represent in modern American and the global diversity society?

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