

# The Major Components of Culture

By Dean Papadopoulos, PhD

**H**ighly effective educators in multicultural settings develop communication competencies for educating students in the islands.

One strategy is to recognize and relate to the students' core identity, which includes making their family proud and assisting their extended family in every way possible. Another strategy is to leverage the linguistic competencies of the students for the achievement of the educational mission. How are these strategies accomplished while teaching them the qualities of effective writing? First, we realize that the students learn best from what they know first—this is true for language and for culture. One guiding principle to oversee this strategy in its delivery is to remember that educational systems that teach students how to count without teaching them that they count, their families count, their first language counts, the groups they belong to count, their community counts, and their island counts have failed to unfold the bridge that unites our students with the ideas, skills, and English language that are crucial to their success in a 21st century economy that demands all of these.

Educators in island settings can show students that their teachers and administrators care about what is most important to them—their culture. This nurtures the community of learners in the classroom by announcing that the teacher wholeheartedly hopes they will honor both their past and their future.

The three components of culture include language, customs, and land. These components are found in everyday life. The most interesting fact about culture is that everyone has a culture of their own.

Daily activities, monthly celebrations, and annual remembrances constitute the major component of cul-

ture known as customs. Customs are activities and events that occur on a regular basis. If you go to church on Sundays, you are participating in culture. If you celebrate birthdays, you are participating in culture. If you celebrate annual memorial days of deceased family members, you are participating in culture. Customs, in turn, have another element that makes them so important—customs provide the place and time where people form their identity of who they are, who belongs to them, and who they belong to. Moreover, customs play an important role in developing and maintaining the identity of the group. Along with identity, customs bring about the cohesion of a group.

The next component of culture is language. Language is the sounds and written symbols that allow people to express their thoughts, their feelings, their hopes, and their dreams with themselves and with one another. Language is the one unifying component of culture that binds one member of a group to another. In fact, language can be said to be a major cornerstone of culture. Without language, people cannot interact; without interaction, there is no identity with the group. In a place like the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) where many cultures meet, it is important to understand what languages mean to you and your success as a person and as a professional. To begin with, your first language, the one taught to you by your mother, is the language that will bind you to your parents. Your first language not only binds you to your parents, but just as importantly, it binds you to your grandparents. Your grandparents are your link to understanding two major questions in life: *Where did we come from?* and *Where are we now?* Answering these questions helps to answer the next two

important questions life asks you: *Who am I?* and *Who will I become?* The link that language provides to family, group identity, and individual identity makes it a major component of culture.

The component of land in the discussion of culture is often missed by sociologists and anthropologists alike. This component is the real bedrock of culture (pun intended). There is no thriving culture without land. If a people lose their land, they become a surviving culture or an extinct culture. History is full of groups of people who have lost their land and then vanished—the Babylonians, the Assyrians, and the Carthaginians. How powerful is land? One-third of the land mass of the United States (or 1.2 million sq. mi.) is owned by the federal government. The largest land owner in the world is the Catholic Church. In the CNMI, Article XII (restricting land ownership to persons of Northern Marianas descent) exists so that land, and consequently culture, is not lost—forever. The U.S. federal government and the Catholic Church are the major agents of their respective cultures. So, the lesson here is that land is more valuable to you and to the group if it is kept. Once it is out of your hands, you will have to acquire new land. This is why governments, like ours, defend land at all costs (\$500 billion a year is spent on U.S. defense). Land is a major component of culture.

Culture, then, is that ephemeral quality consisting of customs, language, and land. In other words, these three components equal culture. If we remove one or two or all of these components, the result would be anything but culture—a surviving culture, a fading culture, or an extinct culture. Every time we celebrate an annual event, like a Rosary and a Chief's Annual Remembrance Day (September 25th), every time we use our language

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and take steps to ensure that our children learn this language, and every time we buy or hold on to existing land so that our children and their children will have a place to live and even to create passive income from, then we preserve our culture. We accomplish much more from these activities than from the energy we give to believing that “my culture is better than someone else’s.” Let’s clarify this point. A culture is something that simply is. It is not better or more than another culture, and it can’t be worse or less than another culture—it just is. Our language is just a way in which we communicate with one another; our language can’t be richer or more important—neither can it be poorer or less important—than another language. Land is the place we live and where we raise our children. Land is

not prettier than another piece of land; to the owner it is the most valuable piece of land on the planet, because he or she owns it. Lastly, because of modern transportation (the jet airplane), modern transportation of ideas and elements of culture (the Internet and the Web), and the predominant use of one language in the business world (i.e., English), cultures from around the world end up meeting in all types of places on the earth—including the CNMI. Whether we choose to emphasize our similarities—like the fact that all of us have a culture and part of having a culture is being interested in and accepting of all the other people that have cultures too—or whether we choose to magnify our differences depends on what type of community we want to live in. Do we want to be able to walk around

during the day and at night knowing that we are safe and that our home is safe? Or, would we rather live in a place where everyone lives in fear because of the distrust and hate that some people have of other people whom they consider less important, less valuable, or substandard, simply because they might look different, or because they may not make a certain amount of money, or because their job isn’t connected with status and prestige? In the end, life asks us this very question and awaits our response. The choice is ours, and I believe we will make the right choice for our sake and our children’s sake.

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