

## CLAIMING A SACRED FACE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE ROLE OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE IN CLAIMING A POSITIVE CULTURAL IDENTITY

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This paper discusses the results of a qualitative study where the purpose was to examine the role of spirituality in developing a positive cultural identity among a multicultural group of 31 adult educators, and then considers what the findings suggest for the further development of culturally relevant teaching practices within adult and higher education settings.

In recent years, there has been much discussion about dealing with culture, race, gender, class, sexual orientation in teaching for social change and greater equity in society (Guy, 1999; Hayes & Colin, 1994; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2001). There has also been some discussion of the role of spirituality in adult development and learning (English & Gillen, 2000; Tisdell, 2000), and some limited discussion on the connection between spirituality and teaching for social justice related to cultural issues (Hart & Holton, 1993; Tisdell, Tolliver, and Villa, 2001; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2002). Most of these discussions have been conceptual in nature, and there has been only limited discussion of the role of spirituality in developing a positive cultural identity from a data-based research perspective. Thus, the purpose of this paper is (1) to discuss the results of a qualitative study where the purpose was to examine the role of spirituality in developing a positive cultural identity among a multicultural group of 31 adult educators; and (2) to discuss the implications the findings of the study have for the further development of culturally relevant teaching practices within adult and higher education settings.

### Related Literature

Spirituality is an important facet of adult life, and, in recent years there has been some limited consideration of its relevance to adult and higher education (Glazer, 1998; English & Gillen, 2000; Lerner, 2000; Palmer, 1998). Most of these discussions focus on the role of spirituality as meaning making, and its connection to dealing with issues related to structuring and restructuring one's identity in order to move towards what some refer to as their more "authentic" identity. Faith development theorist James Fowler (1981) notes that spirituality is also about how people construct knowledge through image, symbol and unconscious processes. While Fowler has not discussed the connection of spirituality to culture, obviously image, symbol and unconscious processes are often deeply cultural, and thus deeply connected to cultural identity.

The fields of adult and higher education have given little attention to how people construct knowledge through unconscious and symbolic processes in general, as well as those related to cultural identity development. For the most part, the book-length discussions thus far on spirituality and education have given little attention to the explicit connection of spirituality and culture, or to its special relevance in culturally relevant education. While some authors touch on it, their focus has generally been on another aspect of spirituality. For example, the many authors who have contributed to Kazanjian and Laurence's (2000) recent edited book on religious pluralism and spirituality in higher education implicitly touch on it, given that many of the authors are also of different cultural groups; yet their focus is more on religious pluralism. Some authors do however more explicitly discuss spirituality as a fundamental aspect of their being rooted in their cultural experience. To a large extent, these contributions and discussions have been made by people of color or those who are explicitly interested in cultural issues. Indeed, as hooks (2000) suggests, these authors are a part of the counterculture that are trying to "break mainstream cultural taboos that silence or erase our passion for spiritual practice" (p. 82) and the spiritual underpinning to our cultural work. Dillard, Abdu-Rashid, and Tyson (2000), in discussing what it means to be African American women professors in the White and rationalistically dominated academy note, "Many scholars and activists involved in the reformation of the academy have worldviews deeply embedded in the spiritual. The heretofore silencing of the spiritual voice through privileging the academic voice is increasingly being drowned out by the emphatic chorus of those whose underlying versions of truth cry out 'We are a spiritual people!' (p. 448).

In some of our earlier work, my colleague, Derise Tolliver, and I have discussed the relationship of spirituality and cultural identity development from more of a conceptual perspective. In so doing, we have drawn on both some of our own earlier work and that of other scholars, who have discussed race and ethnic identity models of development based on the work of William Cross who initially posed a 5 stage model of racial identity, and others who have drawn on Cross's model and applied it to other ethnic minorities or non-dominant groups (Tatum, 1997). According to these models, in addition to the positive views of their culture they may have inherited from their families, individuals from these cultural groups may have internalized (from the White dominant culture) some negative attitudes towards themselves. This results partially in the phenomenon of internalized oppression, an internalized (but mostly unconscious) belief in the superiority of those more representative of the dominant culture. We have also drawn on the work of Latino writer, David Abalos (1998) who argues that in order for particular cultural groups to be able to sustain positive social change on behalf of themselves and their own cultural communities, it is necessary to claim and re-claim four aspects or "faces" of their cultural being: the personal face, the political face, the historical face, and the sacred face. This "sacred face" is related to the spirituality that is grounded in their own cultural community, by claiming and reclaiming images, symbols, ways of being and celebrating that are sacred to individuals and the community as a whole. Those who re-claim their sacred face and its connection to cultural identity, often experience this process of working for transformation as spiritual. In Abalos's words,

The process of transformation takes place first of all in the individual's depths... But each of us as a person has four faces: the personal, political, historical and sacred... To cast out demons in our personal lives and in society means that we have freed our sacred face. (Abalos, 1998, p. 35)

Most of us would probably like to "free our sacred face" in the way Abalos describes. Understanding how some adult educators are attempting to do this in their own lives and with adult learners can offer new insight to developing culturally relevant and transformative approaches to adult education.

Given the fact that this discussion is about spirituality, it is important to be as clear as possible about what is meant by the term "spirituality" as it is used here. As noted elsewhere (Tisdell, in press; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2001), spirituality is about the following: (1) a connection to what is discussed as the Life-force, God, a higher power or purpose, Great Mystery; (2) a sense of wholeness, healing, and the interconnectedness of all things; meaning-making; (4) the ongoing development of one's identity (including one's cultural identity) moving toward greater authenticity; (5) how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes manifested in such things as image, symbol, music which are often cultural; (6) as different, but in some cases, related to religion; and (7) spiritual experiences happen by surprise. Understanding how these dimensions of spirituality have played out in adult educators' lives who see positive cultural identity development as a spiritual process can offer new direction to culturally relevant adult education.

#### Methodology

The qualitative research study itself was informed by a poststructural feminist research theoretical framework, which suggests that that the positionality (race, gender, class, sexual orientation) of researchers, teachers, and students affects how one gathers and accesses data, and how one constructs and views knowledge, in research and teaching. Thus, my own positionality as a White, middle-class, woman, who grew up Catholic and has tried to negotiate a more relevant adult spirituality, in addition to the fact that I teach classes specifically about race, class, and gender issues were factors that affected the data collection and analysis processes.

My primary purpose was to find out how these educators interpret how their spirituality influences their work in their attempts to teach for social change and cultural relevance, and how their spirituality it has changed over time since their childhood. I was attempting not only to provide some data-based information about how their spirituality informs their work, I was also trying to examine the cultural aspects of spirituality. In essence, I was interested in looking at the often ignored socio-cultural dimensions of spirituality, and to explicitly make visible the spiritual experience of people of color, as well as the experience of White European Americans which is

the group that the spirituality literature in North America tends to primarily be about. There were 31 participants in the study, 22 women and 9 men. (6 African American, 4 Latino, 4 Asian American, 2 Native American, 1 Indo-Pak, 14 European American,). Criteria for participant selection were that all participants: (1) be adult educators dealing with cultural issues either in higher education or as community activists; (2) have grown up and be educated in a specific religious tradition as a child; (3) note that their adult spirituality (either based on a re-appropriation of the religious tradition of their childhood, or a different spirituality) strongly motivated them to do their cultural work.

The primary means of data collection was a 1.5-3-hour taped interview that focused on how their spirituality has developed over time, relates to their cultural identity and overall identity development, informs their adult education practice. Given the poststructural feminist theoretical framework, which attempts to avoid "othering" participants (Fine, 1998), I approached the interviews as a shared conversation, and looked at the process as an ongoing one where we were constructing knowledge together. Thus, if participants asked me a question, I briefly answered it. Many participants also provided written documents that addressed some of their social action pursuits or issues related to their spirituality. Data were analyzed according to the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998).

### Findings

There were several findings to the study relating to the participants' conception of the role of spirituality in claiming a positive cultural identity. Two of these are discussed below.

#### Spirituality in Dealing With Internalized Oppression

Many of the participants discussed the role of spirituality in unlearning internalized oppression based on race or culture, sexual orientation, or gender. But many of them also talked specifically about the role of spirituality in that process. As noted above, the pressure to adopt the views from the dominant culture about one's identity group can result in the internalized but mostly unconscious belief in the inferiority of one's ethnic group, and/or to being exposed to little to no information about one's cultural group if one's parents, family, or immediate community overemphasized assimilation. Unlearning these internalized oppressions is often connected to spirituality, and for most people is a process. Elise Poitier, an African American woman, describes recognizing that she had to some degree internalized white standards of beauty, when as a young adult she moved from the Midwest to Atlanta and explained, "In Atlanta, my beauty was affirmed. I could walk down the street and see myself; there was a sense of connectedness ... that I would consider a spiritual connection."

Tito, a Puerto Rican man, described the process of reclaiming his Puerto Rican identity as a spiritual process. As he explains,

I found out that I was Taino [the Indigenous people of Puerto Rico], African, and European. This made me happy. But I had to learn more about the history and stories of these cultures in order for me to be 'whole'. ... But even after learning about that, I felt empty... I then look into the sacred story of my ancestors.

For Tito, knowing about the spirituality of some of his ancestors was an important part of his healing process.

Penny, a Jewish woman, spoke very specifically to the phenomenon of internalized oppression.

Raised as an assimilated Jew in White Christian middle-class suburbs, I learned well how to blend in and belong as White. ... I felt uncomfortable around people who looked and/or behaved in ways that were "too Jewish". When told I didn't "look Jewish", I replied "Thank you".... In brief, I had learned to internalize societal attitudes of disgust at those who were "too Jewish"; I had learned to hate who I was, and I did not even know it.

Penny began the process of reclaiming her Jewish heritage, her sacred face, by reading the works of Jewish women that filled her with stories that she related to. In summing up and reflecting on how this relates to her spirituality she noted,

My spirituality is all about how I relate to my world and others, how I make meaning of life. From Jewish prophetic tradition and mysticism (via the Kabbalah), comes the concept of "tikkun olam" or the repair and healing of the world. This aptly expresses my

core motivation in life, towards social justice, towards creating a life that is meaningful and makes a difference. I believe I get this from my Jewishness/Judaism, which for me is a blend of culture and spirituality.

This blend of culture and spirituality embodied in the Jewish concept of “tikkun olam” not only motivates her activism, it has also motivated the healing of her own world, the healing of her own spirit, in confronting and dealing directly with her own internalized oppression.

### Spirituality and Mediating Among Multiple Identities

As many participants discussed, we are not only people of a particular ethnic group, we also have a gender, a class or religious background, a sexual orientation, and several participants discussed the role of spirituality in mediating among these multiple identities. Harriet, a 48 year-old nurse and adult educator is a case in point. Harriet, a White woman from a rural working class background, grew up in the Pentecostal church where she went to church four times per week. In considering the intersection of class, religious background, and culture, she reflected back, noting, “it [her religious upbringing] has to be understood in the context of being your culture. It’s not your religion or spirituality, because it’s everything you *are* and what you *do* and *how you live your life*... It’s your way of life!” While she didn’t have much class-consciousness growing up, in reflecting back, she noted, “Pentecostal folks are pretty poor people.”

It was in this religious/cultural/class context where Harriet, who found meaning and identity in these intersections, began to wrestle with another important aspect of her identity: her sexual orientation. In her early twenties, she talked to many ministers and church people, who alternately made her feel guilty and hopeful, and one finally suggested to “leave it up to God.” Harriet described a pivotal experience that happened about a year later:

I got hurt playing softball and I tore my quadriceps so bad I passed out. I went to the best orthopedist in town, who put a splint on it ...I also believed in faith healing, and one night I went to the altar I felt this real coldness go into my leg, and then [it] got really hot, and I thought “wow” and [when] the minister told me -- I took the splint off, and the big lump that was on my leg, it was gone!... Well that was a turning point for me, because I thought ‘why would God heal me, if I was this person that was condemned to hell?’

God wouldn’t do that for me, and I thought ‘OK, this is my sign that it’s OK for me to be a lesbian’.

While this particular experience was a significant turning point for Harriet, in terms of her own acceptance of her lesbian sexual identity, she knew she was not going to find public acceptance for it in the Pentecostal Church. Yet in her heart, the authenticity of her identity, confirmed through what she describes as this particularly significant spiritual experience gave her the courage to embrace who she is and, over time, to ultimately develop a positive identity as a lesbian. Over the years, she has developed a more identity positive spirituality that has helped her mediate among these identities.

Harriet has lived in the same community her whole life. While communities never remain static and are always changing incrementally, the cultural context in which she was negotiating various aspects of her identity remained relatively stable—at least much more so than if she had moved to a different geographical area. But those who are immigrants to North America (or elsewhere) generally negotiate various aspects of their identity and their spirituality against the backdrop of a very different cultural context than that of their home countries. Ayisha is a Muslim woman of East Indian descent, born in East Africa, and after living in Africa, England, Canada, she immigrated to the U.S in her late teens. Moving a number of times, and having to negotiate being a member of a privileged group in some contexts but being a member of an oppressed or lower status group in other contexts has made Aiysha have to negotiate her own shifting identity in a constantly shifting cultural context. These moves and identity shifts that are a part of her personal life experience, along with the fact that Aiysha is a professor, has forced her to think a lot about the development of her religious and cultural identity as an immigrant and a Muslim in the U.S. In describing the connection between her ethnic identity and her religious identity, she noted:

Being of East Indian origin AND a Muslim, not only here in the U.S. but everywhere I’ve lived, has served as a double reinforcement of my otherness. In some cases for me it’s a question of privilege. For example, in Africa where we were, there’s no doubt that the

Indian population was part of the business population, whereas in London, I was definitely NOT part of the privileged class.

In being both an ethnic minority and a religious minority but as one who is educated with a doctoral degree and has both education and class privilege in the U.S., Aiysha has developed the ability to cross cultural borders to be able to speak to many different groups and in many different contexts fairly comfortably at this point in her adult life. But developing this ability has been a process that has taken time, as there had always been subtle pressures to blend in. She gave the example of how this had been manifested earlier in her life. In her Muslim community, occasions of joy are often marked with the application of henna. "In the past I would think very carefully of where I was going on the past two or three weeks, before putting on henna, I now do not hesitate to do it" she explained. At this point in her development, she does not try to blend in, but rather uses those occasions when people ask what she has on her hands as a point of education about Islam and about her East Indian ethnic heritage. She described how this shift has taken place over time, and in reflected on being both Muslim and East Indian:

Before it was just a matter of fact for me. Now, it's still a matter of fact, but it's also a matter of pride. I've taken the attitude 'This is WHO I AM. If you are going to know me and like me, you're going to know the whole of me, not just parts of me.' So in a sense the dichotomization of my identity that I described at the beginning, I'm beginning to take that and create a whole from it in the way that I interact.

Aiysha attributes the shift that's taken place over time, to formal education that has partly focused on the negotiation of cultural and religious difference, positive personal experiences where she was deliberately in religious and culturally pluralistic situations that allowed her to experiment with being more overt with these aspects of her identity, and to the experience of becoming a parent. But this sense of "the whole" is related to her spirituality, which is tremendously important to her. Like Harriet, and nearly all the participants in the study, Aiysha has drawn on her spirituality and her growing sense of her "authentic" and more centered self to mediate among these multiple identities.

#### Conclusions: Implications for Practice

It seems that for all participants in this study, the claiming of the "sacred face" was key to developing a positive cultural identity. Participants discussed the spiritual search for wholeness, by both embracing their own cultural identity by dealing with their own internalized oppression and through the experience of crossing cultural borders, and finding what was of spiritual value that was more prevalent in cultures other than their own. They also discussed ways of drawing on the spiritual and cultural identities of adult learners in their own educational work to increase the claiming of the "sacred" face, and to increase greater cross-cultural understanding among participants in these contexts.

While space limitations don't allow for further discussion of these findings here, there are some specific implications for practice. These adult educators also attempted to draw on their own spirituality in their own teaching by developing opportunities for students "to claim their sacred face" in developing culturally relevant educational practices, not so much by talking directly about spirituality (Tisdell, Tolliver, & Villa, 2001; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2002), but in their own attempts to be authentic, to risk being vulnerable in exploring their own cultural identity, and by drawing on cultural image, symbol, and story as gateways to the sacred. While discussed in detail elsewhere (Tisdell, in press), some general guidelines for the implications of practice include the following seven principles or elements of a spiritually grounded and culturally relevant pedagogy for higher education classrooms:

- (1) An emphasis on authenticity of teachers and students(both spiritual and cultural)
- (2) An environment that allows for the exploration of:
  - The cognitive (through readings and discussion of ideas)
  - The affective and relational (through connection with other people and of ideas to life experience)
  - The symbolic (through artform—poetry, art, music, drama)
- (3) Readings that reflect the cultures of the members of the class, and the cultural pluralism of the geographical area relevant to the course content

- (4) Exploration of individual and communal dimensions of cultural and other dimensions of identity
- (5) Collaborative work that envisions and presents manifestations of multiple dimensions of learning and strategies for change
- (6) Celebration of learning and provision for closure to the course
- (7) Recognition of the limitations of the higher education classroom, and that transformation is an ongoing process that takes time

It is through embracing these or similar principles that both adult educators and participants in their learning activities may facilitate claiming a sacred space.

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