

1993

## Appreciation of American Indian traditions

Janet M. Lamont  
*University of Northern Iowa*

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright ©1993 Janet L. Lamont

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lamont, Janet M., "Appreciation of American Indian traditions" (1993). *Graduate Research Papers*. 2718.  
<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/2718>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

**Offensive Materials Statement:** Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

---

## Appreciation of American Indian traditions

### Abstract

Multicultural education has been mandated in many areas throughout the United States, for the need to understand other cultures, especially the neglected ones, is recognized as an important goal of education. Educators no longer have the option to ignore the study of minority groups. Simbol (1983) states that there has been a rebirth of the cultural pluralism concept. America is not a melting pot where cultures are dissolved into one new superior American culture.

Appreciation of American Indian Traditions

A Graduate Project  
Submitted to the  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Janet M. Lamont

May 1993

This Research Paper by: Janet M. Lamont

Entitled: Appreciation of American Indian Traditions

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for  
the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

6/17/93  
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms  
Director of Research Paper

6/17/93  
Date Approved

Jeanne McLain Harms  
Graduate Faculty Adviser

6/24/93  
Date Approved

Constance J. Ulmer  
Graduate Faculty Reader

6/24/93  
Date Approved

Peggy Ishler  
Head, Department of Curriculum  
and Instruction

Multicultural education has been mandated in many areas throughout the United States, for the need to understand other cultures, especially the neglected ones, is recognized as an important goal of education. Educators no longer have the option to ignore the study of minority groups. Simbol (1983) states that there has been a rebirth of the cultural pluralism concept. America is not a melting pot where cultures are dissolved into one new superior American culture.

America is not one culture, but rather a society of many ethnic groups. Musser and Freeman (1989) offer a "tossed salad" metaphor. This metaphor recognizes the contribution of the many cultural groups that compose the national heritage, yet each maintains its own distinct identity. Vugrenes (1981) relates that it is the obligation of the school program to nurture children's understanding of diversity: People come from different backgrounds, and they may see things differently and solve problems from these perspectives.

Studies indicate that young children have many prejudices and stereotypical images of ethnic groups (Goodman & Melcher, 1984). Teachers must take an active role in educating students about cultures. Goodman and Melcher (1984) point out that teachers must first model a bias-free attitude and then address the problem of prejudice in an open, nonthreatening manner.

The study of the American Indian nations has been widely neglected. The celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to America can be an opportunity to present the effect of this conquest on American Indians, one aspect of the adventure which is usually missing from most textbooks and literature. Existing myths can be revealed, and an appreciation for the heritage of these nations can be nurtured (Reinehr, 1987).

#### Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this paper is to examine the study of American Indians in the elementary school to propose a rationale for studying the traditions of this people and to consider folk literature as one source of this study. From this review, suggestions for inclusion of American Indian folk literature into an instructional program will be presented.

#### Study of American Indians in Elementary Schools

Children in elementary schools have been exposed to materials, both textbooks and literature works, that have presented a distorted and limited view of the American Indian nations. Little attention has been given to the unique values of the culture.

Many misconceptions about the American Indians are incorporated into textbooks. These myths get passed on to new generations of students since textbook editors rely heavily on

previously published editions for their material (Mallam, 1973). As recently as the 1960s, American Indians were portrayed in textbooks as savages. Their victories in battle were being described as massacres.

Basal readers with copyrights in the 1970s or earlier usually ignored minorities. Furthermore, the few stories that were included were usually unrealistic. An inadequate number of stories with American Indian characters were found. Among the few works was a disproportionate number of stories dealing with the Pueblo and Navajo nations. Very few stories were included in first-grade readers. During beginning primary, children's attitudes are rapidly being formed. Literature experiences can nurture understanding of others (Reyhner, 1986).

Reimer (1992), in her analysis of basal readers, found that "the children in some of the illustrations were a mix of numerous races or ethnic groups rather than carrying the distinctive features of any one racial group" (p. 19). Hirst and Slavik (1988) add the charge that the pieces featuring American Indians are interspersed with other unrelated material, preventing children from developing a proper background of understanding in order to interact with the piece. Also, the structure of basal reader activities encourages teachers to direct children's thinking rather than letting the students own their literature experiences.

Perhaps the most critical indictment of basals and textbooks is given by Musser and Freeman (1989). They argue that students get only a superficial idea of the traditions of any cultural group when they study factual material alone. They conclude that the inclusion of several genres can greatly extend cultural study.

In recent years educators have realized that elements in literature works for children--themes, characterizations, language, and illustrations--have perpetuated stereotypes that can limit children's view of their own self worth or that of others (Norton, 1991). Fiction books about American Indians frequently can be faulted for these reasons (Gilliland, 1982).

Though considerable progress has been made in the accurate portrayal of the American Indian nations, misconceptions still exist. Gardner (1988) insists that the material included in the school curriculum does not reflect "the world view of First Nations [American Indian groups]" (p. 107).

#### Rationale for Studying the American Indian Culture

In an article in the Des Moines Register on October 4, 1992, a spokesman for American Indians, Ray Young Bear, reflects on the importance of studying his culture and its values as part of the school curriculum. He stated, "My heart tells me that if the fundamentals of Native American history and culture aren't



part of the classroom curriculum, we [the American Indian] will continue to be portrayed in a limitless array of disturbing, degrading and puzzling caricatures" (p. 2C).

In the same article, published to coincide with the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus landing on the shores of North America, Young Bear gives the American Indian point of view of Columbus' role in history. He points out that Columbus initiated the centuries of genocide that has been practiced on his people (p. 2C). Harris (1992) agrees with Young Bear's assessment of Columbus as a brutal conqueror rather than as a hero. Moreover, Harris has examined recent books for children and adults and has concluded that most, with some notable exceptions, still romanticize Columbus' historical role and "ignore the catastrophic impact his arrival had on the native people of the 'New World'" (p. 30). She goes on to say that American Indians are still invisible from the pages of most books and that this continued silencing of their viewpoint "both reflects and serves to perpetuate their continued powerlessness" (p. 30). Harris does offer hope, however, that change is coming. Teachers can be a potent force in overcoming past injustices by teaching the American Indian view of history along with Indian traditions and values.

Besides giving the American Indian culture its just due, the wisdom inherent in this culture has unique values for all

people and can enhance the quality of life in all societies (Grant, 1986; Swinger, 1987). Katz (1983) relates that American Indians have "a sense of what is really meaningful in life, an aesthetic sensibility" (p. 439). She goes on to say, "When Native Americans still lived on tribal lands, a young person went deep into the forest, fasted, and awaited a sacred vision which would determine his destiny and give direction to his life" (p. 439).

Campbell and Moyers (1988) discuss the lack of such rites of passage for modern youth. They contend that one reason for the violence often displayed by teenagers today is that there are no rituals for them to engage in, in order to become part of the adult community. Earlier cultures, such as American Indian nations, had these initiation rites. The myths of these peoples can help modern youth relate to the world during their transition from childhood to adult.

A central theme of the American Indian code of ethics is the desire for harmony with all of creation (Allen, 1983). According to Tafoya (1982), every American Indian child is taught to strive for this quality. Modern American society needs this value rekindled in its youth. Campbell (1988) says: "We have today to learn to get back into accord with the wisdom of nature and realize again our brotherhood with the animals and with the water and the sea" (p. 40).

Paralleling this wish for harmony is the American Indians' love of the land (Grant, 1986). Their reverence for nature is perhaps one of their most powerful messages for the children who will be living in the twenty-first century.

Another tradition of American Indian nations of significance to all children is that the oral tradition of language is considered sacred. Words are chosen with great care and have power. For example, a warrior was not forced to fight wars. His chief had to persuade his braves to follow him to battle with stirring words. The power of language has been weakened for many children today by video games and television. Students need to return to a reverence for words. American Indian traditions can serve as a guide (Katz, 1983).

### Studying American

#### Indian Traditions Through Folklore

Several reasons can be found for offering experiences with folk literature to extend the understanding of American Indian traditions.

#### Accurate Reflection of Traditions

Gardner (1988) relates, "Storytelling is a universal communication technique through which children can learn the values, teachings and ways of the society in which they belong" (p. 107). This was especially true of the American Indian nations before the coming of European influence. American

Indians lived without written language; consequently, they told myths and legends orally to teach their history, beliefs, and customs to their children. Thus, folk tales are vehicles by which American Indian traditions can be taught in modern times (Musser & Freeman, 1989; Grant, 1986).

Hirst and Slavik (1988) say that American Indian youth were taught through traditional tribal lore to become masters of language and excellent problem solvers. In their words, "The use of legends and fables for teaching important life skills and understanding of the world around them encouraged students to become creative thinkers" (pp. 7-8). Thus, these tales were models of personal-social behavior.

Allen (1983) adds that the motifs in American Indian legends reflect behaviors that are consistent with the individual nation's world view. Folklore shows the reader how the nations dealt with the various aspects of their lives; it is "the mirror of a people" (Goodman & Melcher, 1984, p. 5).

According to Osborn (1968), if the reteller has properly researched the background of the tale, the child becomes an historian, researching first-hand data about the beliefs, history, government, customs, and the setting of a culture. Osborn compares the folklore of an American Indian nation to an unwritten Bible containing everything that constitutes the essence of the culture. This, of course, assumes that the

reteller has been true to the essence of the folk story. But because this assumption is not always correct, the educator must be careful in selecting the pieces to be studied (Baker, 1983; Grant, 1986).

### Connection of Oral Traditions with Contemporary American Indian Culture

Because traditional American Indian folklore comes from the oral tradition, the tales are meant to be performed by a tribal storyteller. American Indians even today resist Western pressure to have their legends preserved in written form. In an article on the cognitive styles of American Indians, Tafoya (1982) relates, "Some of our Elders don't want our legends and teachings written down, or even illustrated, since depicting Coyote means we have denied the child the opportunity to develop his/her own visual imagery of the trickster" (p. 24).

The oral tradition remains strong in modern American Indian nations. Evers (1983) instructs educators to "point out that American Indian oral traditions continue to be sung and told in contemporary American Indian communities" (p. 29). After working with over two dozen American Indian nations, he states that he has "yet to encounter an American Indian community in which the verbal arts do not hold an active place" (p. 30). Listening to American Indians performing their

folklore gives children a unique opportunity to experience an oral tradition that is alive and vigorous today.

### Connection of American Indian Traditions to Multicultural Understandings

As mentioned earlier, American Indians have a deep respect for the environment. This fact can be studied in a textbook but may not bring about a similar attitude in students. Goodman and Melcher (1984) point out that reading American Indian folklore can encourage this concept of the environment. They state, "We have known a number of children whose appreciation for nature and the environment has dramatically increased from listening to and reading Native American folklore" (p. 6).

When exposed to the beauty of the words used by Native Americans, the children of today can perhaps recapture the reverence for Mother Earth and develop a sense of stewardship. Then when they become the leaders of tomorrow, there is hope that saving the environment will be an achievable goal.

An example of the American Indian's identification with the natural world is seen in Pearl Sunrise's approach to her craft of weaving. This Navajo weaver uses only raw wool and natural dyes in her weaving. Before she gathers the wild plants needed for her craft, she prays. Sunrise related this prayer in a conversation with Jane Katz, a researcher of Native American oral history. Katz (1983) shares this prayer in her article

"This Song Remembers: Native American Voices and Visions."

Sunrise prays: "You've made the stars, the plants, everything in nature. I'm taking some of these plants to use in my work. Make it good for me. With beauty surrounding me to the East, South, West and North" (p. 445).

### Integration of Curriculum Areas

Folklore extended across the curriculum to the social studies area provides a bridge for the integration of the curriculum--the language arts with the social studies. Children can view learning as wholistic rather than in a piece-meal fashion (Chatton, 1989).

According to Goodman and Melcher (1984) studying the folklore of various cultures allows children to "observe, compare, identify, and vicariously experience life from a distance. This distance allows them to reflect upon what they learn and if appropriate, to apply it to their own lives" (p. 6).

Including folklore in curriculum, according to Goodman and Melcher (1984), promotes active learning. Textbooks spoon-feed facts for children to memorize, while folklore experiences can invite children to read, infer, and then draw their own conclusions based upon the tale. They state:

Students initially create a picture in their minds of the people and setting illustrated within the folktales.

Based upon this early image, they make speculations about these people and their life. These conjectures are then analyzed as additional stories are examined and other resources are explored. (p. 6)

The higher level thinking abilities that are used throughout this process contribute to children's emerging literacy and cultural understandings.

#### Instructional Development Project

From the study of the American Indian culture through folklore, a unit on the Plains nations has been extended. However, as Norton (1991) suggests, a well-rounded concept of American Indian traditions can only be accomplished if several genres are offered to students. She suggests a five-phase approach to studying a culture: 1) a broad awareness of the myths, legends, and folktales of the cultural group in general (e.g., American Indians); 2) a more in-depth study of the folklore of one or two subgroups (e.g., the Plains Indian nations); 3) biographies and autobiographies; 4) informational literature about the history of the cultural group; 5) historical fiction; and 6) literature representing the cultural group in contemporary times.

The instructional development project focused on extending a social studies unit on the Plains Indians for the upper elementary grades. Learning centers based on folk literature



with accompanying expressive activity were developed. The format for the learning centers has been adapted from Literature and Expressive Activity (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

### Reading/Listening Center

#### A. Literature Experience:

Read or listen to a story from the collection of American Indian folklore.

#### Expressive Activity:

1. Orally retell the story to others, using flannelboard pieces, puppets, or another visual aid.
2. Write your own tale that has the same theme as the legend you just experienced.
3. Make an advertisement for your tale and present it to the class.

#### B. Literature Experience:

Read two or more of the following versions of the legend of the "Star Boy": Star Boy, by Paul Goble: Anpao, by Jamake Highwater;

Star Husband, by Jane Mobley & illustrated by Anna Vojtech; and The Legend of Scarface, by Robert San Souci & illustrated by Daniel San Souci.

#### Expressive Activity:

1. Make a chart comparing and contrasting these versions. You may want to ask your classmates to join you in this project.

2. Write your own version of this famous legend. Combine elements of the versions and/or create new elements but stay within the spirit of the legend.

### Author/Illustrator Center

#### Literature Experience:

Read or listen to a book of your choice from a collection of Paul Goble's works. Note Paul Goble's recreation of traditional visual symbols in his illustrations. Read the folder with biographical information on Goble (see Appendix A for a list of Goble's works).

#### Expressive Activity:

1. Orally retell one of Goble's stories to others, using a diorama, counting rope, or another visual aid.
2. Draw your own illustration of one of the scenes from the book you have read.

### Buffalo Center

#### Literature Experience:

Read or listen to one or more of the following stories with buffalo motifs: Where Buffaloes Begin, by Olaf Baker; Buffalo Woman, by Paul Goble; and The Great Race of the Birds and Animals, by Paul Goble.

#### Expressive Activity:

Make a list of the things that the Plains Indian nations obtained from the buffalo that were important to their lives.

### Sky Myths Center

#### Literature Experience:

Read one or more of the tales of the Plains Indian nations in They Dance in the Sky: Native American Star Myths, by Jean Monroe and Ray Williamson.

#### Expressive Activity:

1. Orally retell to others a tale using a map, filmstrip, or another visual aid.
2. Write your own myth of why a known constellation came to be. You may also make up a constellation for your myth. Illustrate your constellation.

#### Summary

This paper suggests that one of the best ways to teach American Indian traditions to children is to provide experiences with folklore and then let them explore its messages and enjoy its richness. The instructional development project presented as part of the paper suggests ways that American Indian traditions can be taught to today's youth.

In closing, Joseph Campbell (1988) relates the story of Chief Seattle's reply to the U.S. Government's request to buy tribal lands. In the letter Chief Seattle asks some questions. Some of these are: "Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our Mother?" and "When the last Red Man has vanished with his wilderness and his memory

is only the shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, will these shores and forests still be here? Will there be any of the spirit of my people left?" (pp. 42-43).

The modern world cannot undo the destruction to the American Indian way of life that has been practiced in the past, but it can teach its youth to respect American Indians and in the process benefit from their wisdom.

## Bibliography

Professional References

- Allen, P. G. (Ed.). (1983). Studies in American Indian literature: Critical essays and course designs. New York: Modern Language Association of America.
- Baker, R. L. (1983). Folklore, Cultural Awareness, and Literacy (Report No. CS 007 097). In V. M. Gibbs & R. L. Pabst (Comp.), (Cultural Awareness and Reading: Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Reading Conference) (pp. 21-33). Terre Haute, IN: Indiana State University, Curriculum Research and Development Center. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 230 899)
- Campbell, J. (1988). The power of myth with Bill Moyers (B. S. Flowers, Ed.). New York: Anchor.
- Chatton, B. (1989). Using literature across the curriculum. In J. Hickman & B. E. Cullinan (Eds.). Children's literature in the classroom: Weaving Charlotte's web (pp. 61-70). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Evers, L. (1983). Cycles of appreciation. In P. G. Allen (Ed.). Studies in American Indian literature: critical essays and course designs (pp. 23-32). New York: Modern Language Association of America.

- Gardner, E. B. (1988). Ka-im's gift: A St:Lo legend (with commentary by the author). Canadian Journal of Native Education, 15(3), 101-108.
- Gilliland, H. (1982). The new view of Native Americans in children's books. The Reading Teacher, 35, 912-916.
- Goodman, J., & Melcher, K. (1984, April). Culture at a distance: An anthroliterary approach to cross cultural education (Report No. SO 015 479). Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 241 423)
- Grant, A. (1986, October). Content in Native literature programs (Report No. RC 016 756). Paper presented at the Mokakit Conference of the Indian Education Research Association, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 300 161)
- Harms, J. M., & Lettow, L. J. (1991). Literature and expressive activity. Minneapolis, MN: Burgess.
- Harris, V. (Ed.). (1992). Teaching multicultural literature in grades K-8. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Hirst, L. A., & Slavik, C. (1988, June). Using traditional teaching to expand language development and critical thinking (Report No. SP 030 482). Paper presented at the Eighth Annual International Native American Language Issues Institute,

Phoenix, AZ. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 298 092)

Katz, J. (1983). This song remembers: Native American voices and visions. Language Arts, 60, 439-446.

Mallam, R. C. (1973). Academic treatment of the Indian in public school texts and literature. Journal of American Indian Education, 13(1), 14-19.

Musser, L. S., & Freeman, E. B. (1989). Teach young students about Native Americans: Use myths, legends, and folktales. Social Studies, 80(1), 5-9.

Norton, D. E. (1991). Through the eyes of a child: An introduction to children's literature. (3rd ed.). New York: Merrill.

Osborn, L. R. (1968). The Eskimo storyteller: A responsible communication role. Journal of American Indian Education, 8(1), 13-16.

Reimer, K. M. (1992). Multiethnic literature: Holding fast to dreams. Language Arts, 69, 14-21.

Reinehr, F. (1987). Storyteaching. Teachers and Writers Magazine, 18(3), 1-7.

Reyhner, J. (1986). Native Americans in basal reading textbooks: Are there enough? Journal of American Indian Education, 26(1), 14-22.

- Simbol, M. A. (1983). Cultural pluralism (Report No. CS 007 097). In V. M. Gibbs and R. L. Pabst (Comp.), Cultural Awareness and Reading: Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Reading Conference (pp. 43-48). Terre Haute, IN: Indiana State University, Curriculum Research and Development Center. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 230 899)
- Swinger, A. (1987). Native Americans in books of Paul Goble. English Language Arts Bulletin, 28, 45-53.
- Tafoya, T. (1982). Coyote's eyes: Native cognition styles. Journal of American Indian Education, 21(2), 21-33.
- Vugrenes, D. E. (1981). North American Indian myths and legends for classroom use. Journal of Reading, 24, 494-496.
- Young Bear, R. A. (1992, October 4). Journal of a Mesquakie poet: Notes leading to 500 years after. Des Moines Register, pp. 1C-2C.



Legends of the Plains Indians for Children

- Baker, O. (1981). Where buffaloes begin. Illus., S. Gammell. New York: Warner.
- De Paola, T. (1983). The legend of the bluebonnet. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Goble, P. (1983). Star boy. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury.
- Goble, P. (1984). Buffalo woman. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury.
- Goble, P. (1988). Her seven brothers. New York: Bradbury.
- Goble, P. (1989). Iktomi and the berries. New York: Orchard.
- Goble, P. (1990). Iktomi and the ducks. New York: Orchard.
- Highwater, J. (1977). Anpao: An American Indian odyssey. New York: Scholastic.
- Mobley, J. (1979). The star husband. Illus., A. Vojtech. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Monroe, J. G., & Williamson, R. A. (1987). They dance in the sky. Illus., E. Stewart. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Penney, G. J. (1953). Tales of the Cheyenne. Illus., W. West. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- San Souci, R. (1978). The legend of Scarface: A Blackfeet Indian tale. Illus., D. San Souci. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Step toe, J. (1984). The story of Jumping Mouse: A Native American legend. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.

Yellow Robe, R. (1979). Tonweya and the eagles and other Lakota

Indian tales. Illus., J. Pinkney. New York: Dial Press.

Yolen, J. (1990). Sky dogs. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.

## Appendix A

## Bibliography of Works by Paul Goble

- Goble, P. (1980). The gift of the sacred dog. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury.
- Goble, P. (1983). Star boy. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury.
- Goble, P. (1984). Buffalo woman. Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury.
- Goble, P. (1985). The great race of the birds and animals. New York: Aladdin.
- Goble, P. (1988). Her seven brothers. New York: Bradbury.
- Goble, P. (1988). Iktomi and the boulder. New York: Orchard.
- Goble, P. (1989). Beyond the ridge. New York: Bradbury.
- Goble, P. (1989). Iktomi and the berries. New York: Orchard.
- Goble, P. (1990). Dream wolf. New York: Bradbury.
- Goble, P. (1990). Iktomi and the ducks. New York: Orchard.
- Goble, P. (1991). Iktomi and the buffalo skull. New York: Orchard.
- Goble, P. (1992). Crow chief. New York: Orchard.
- Goble, P. (1992). Love flute. New York: Orchard.