

How diversity is challenging the status quo

Culture Clash

By Patricia Greenfield

Last spring I went to a lecture on the African heritage in American English. In the course of the lecture by Joseph Holloway, a graduate in African Studies and professor at Cal State, Northridge, I learned, much to my astonishment, that Wolof, the West African language I had used for my Ph.D. research in cultural psychology 30 years earlier, had left numerous vocabulary traces in American English. I had assumed that the similarity of sound and accent between Wolof and English was simply a coincidence. But now I discovered that the English word "jamboree," which originally meant slave celebration, came from the Wolof word "jam," meaning slave, and that the English slang expression "dig it" derived from "diga," the word for understand in Wolof.

The history I had been taught simply excluded the possibility of African slave influence on U.S. culture. The Eurocentric paradigm in which I was educated blinded me to the historical relationship between the two languages, even though I spoke both. But the new perspectives introduced by African and African-American studies brought me, as it can bring us all, closer to the full historical reality. We are led to recognize that cultural influence does not merely go from the powerful to the powerless; it is a two-way street.

The presence in California and at UCLA of large numbers of people representing racial and national groups that have historically experienced political subordination stimulates us in the academy to provide equal representation to all perspectives in all of our disciplines, not just to the perspective of the dominant European-American cultures.

As chair of the Joint Committee on Multicultural Studies of the Academic Senate and College of Letters and Science, I have been privileged to encourage the development of many courses that will help our students (and faculty) enlarge and deepen their understanding of the world by incorporating such perspectives as have previously been neglected in the academy.

Sometimes, however, the expansion of knowledge to better reflect the complex nature of reality is a painful process. The sociology of science has long acknowledged the relationship between political or economic power and the control of knowledge. But the academy has an ideal image of itself as being removed from politics. The presence of diverse groups on campus challenges our idealized picture and brings this understanding into collective awareness. When Chicano students staged demonstrations a year and a half ago to change Chicano Studies from a center into a department, they stimulated my colleague, Professor Marian Sigman, and me to reflect on the institutional structure of academic fields at UCLA.

Is it a coincidence, we wondered, that European cultures have their own departments (French, Italian, Germanic Languages, Spanish/Portuguese), whereas Third World and minority cultures do not (African, Latin American, American Indian, Afro-American, Asian-American and Chicano Studies, World

Cultures and Arts)? Is it a coincidence that the former were the conquerors, colonizers and enslavers of the latter? Given that departments have autonomy and the ability to control their own fate that interdisciplinary centers and programs lack, doesn't the academic structure at UCLA replicate the power structure of our society, past and present?

Our analysis went still further. We noted that the cultures of the United States' major competitors for political and economic power of the last 50 years also have their own departments: Slavic Languages and Literatures, East Asian Languages and Cultures, Near Eastern Languages and Cultures. However, these competing geographical areas do not have a department for each culture. Hence, their power in the academic establishment of UCLA is midway between that of European cultures and that of Third World/minority cultures.



Students celebrate diversity.

We concluded that, in cultural studies, the scale of relative academic power at UCLA reflects a scale of relative political power in the world. It was cultural diversity, in this instance the presence of a significant group of Chicano and other Hispanic students, that led us to this realization. Indeed, it is culturally diverse students and faculty who have begun to transform the university's institutional structure.

There is another way in which the cultural diversity at UCLA can enrich our community. We have many children of immigrants studying at UCLA. Without exception, these students (or their parents) come from societies that place more stress on family unity and social interdependence than is the norm in this country. Instead of trying to eradicate their family loyalties as we assimilate them to our individualistic society, we must learn from them in a process of cultural accommodation and intercultural exchange. These communitarian values could be important antidotes to the rampant alienation, isolation and aggression in which our society seems gripped. Providing us a means to learn from each other's values, multiculturalism is a life-giving process. **T**