

Marking the Inhabited Space

By Joanne B. Mulcahy

When we truly inhabit a place, we mark it with our traditions—our crafts, music, stories, food, and games, the ways we celebrate and mourn, and the ways we heal from psychic and physical pain. Each culture does so differently, each marked by the contours of language, history, place, and the convergence with other cultures.

Oregon is a rich mix of languages, cultures, and landscapes intertwined like a thick braid—tightly bound and occasionally threatening to unravel when cultural values clash. *Culture* is a broad umbrella, a term encompassing economic and political systems as well as shared beliefs, values, and modes of expression. The ways we work, eat, play, or create are cultural, woven into webs of symbolic meaning. Folklife is created in face-to-face interaction, taking shape in forms we call vernacular, from the Latin, “pertaining to the native language”—our homegrown expressions. Traditions include the beliefs, practices, and forms that are passed down from generation to generation, with implicit cultural messages. Among the many quilters in Oregon, for example, the use of scraps of leftover fabric and old clothing carries the dictum to use what is at hand. In the fine artistry of small stitches and shared patterns, quilters embody the community-based aesthetics of folk or traditional arts.

Folklore includes the collective verbal arts of a community—forms such as logger and cowboy poetry, myth, legend, and other stories. Sometimes, oral traditions are shaped in private, challenging public histories. Such was the case with the Japanese Americans incarcerated in camps during World War II, whose histories are only now emerging in written form. Conflicts may also arise when a group’s interpretation of events clashes with the “official story.” Yet these diverse versions of events, taken together, contribute to a complex collective history.

Communities or folk groups are tremendously varied. Our families are often our first folk group. Stories, games, and other expressions of kinship take shape through a lifetime. Groups such as Portland’s Vietnamese or Chinese may be linked by ethnicity; others, such as Astoria’s fishermen or Willamette Valley’s farmers, are connected by occupation. Some communities are recreational, such as fly-fishing aficionados. Often, people learn their work as much through the informal path of folklore as we do from formal manuals and education. Hanging around the office coffee machine, watching an elder make a basket, listening to a group of teachers tell stories—these are the kinds of ways we apprentice ourselves, observing the oral instructions of the more experienced.

Sometimes, folklife and folk arts express multiple aspects of our culture in a new context. Among the Hmong, who immigrated to Oregon in the late twentieth century from Southeast Asia—healing rituals serve medical needs and reinforce religious and ethnic identity. Feryal Abassai Ghnaim’s embroidered dresses carry on a needlework tradition, but they also relate the history of Palestinian women. Vernacular arts also express a convergence and a balance of individual and collective expressions. A fine quilt or saddle, for example, conveys a group’s aesthetics and values. A Tibetan dance or a Kwanzaa celebration reveals what the group holds sacred through individual artistry. These traditions and practices that originate outside the United States may change in Oregon and other places, translated to new languages, adapting to local circumstances, and sometimes melding the vernacular with popular culture.

Ritual is the terrain of shared joy and pain, a place where people cross into new stages of their lives through ceremonies and rituals. Among the Yi Mien people, an ethnic group from Laos, for example, Chiem Finh Saechao performs a healing ritual called “crossing the bridge.” Latina artist Eva Castellanoz creates *coronas*—crowns fashioned from wax and paper flowers—for a young girl’s *quinceañera*, a fifteenth-birthday celebration, to smooth her passage into adulthood.

These traditions matter. We invest them with meaning to deepen our bonds to one another and to our landscapes. Relocated immigrants and refugees may have left behind all else from their homelands but their folk traditions. Valeriana Bandwa, for example, sings of her native Angola to remember its beauty. Belongings and ceremonies once essential to physical survival, such as a fishing net or a spear, may endure as symbolically central. Even though European and American colonizers claimed the land of Native peoples in Oregon and forbade their musical and religious

traditions, many practices endured or are being revitalized. Many of the loggers' and fishers' cultural traditions have shifted from the harbors and woods to museums. Folklife forms are never pure, as hybrids emerge in the flux of change.

Hybrids may be new forms emerging from the mixing of peoples, languages, and cultures. Women composing cowboy and logging poetry choose new topics and novel forms; traditional Indian artists choose baseball caps rather than ceremonial robes for their beadwork; Latino lowriders use that central symbol of American life—the car—to explore and display Mexican values and decorative impulses. New technologies also shape hybrids, as folk communities form through the internet.

Even as we lose some traditions, others rise to take their place. Oregon-born anthropologist, linguist, and folklorist Dell Hymes suggested that people think about tradition as a verb as well as a noun. People traditionalize experience to invest it with meaning, sometimes inventing traditions that come to feel like established and natural parts of their lives. At a Hmong New Year's celebration, for example, elders in bright red and blue dresses and sneakers dance to a band that combines reggae with traditional music. In Latino communities, from the Applegate Valley to the Oregon-Idaho state line, grocery stores stock salsas and tortillas, and young people perform hip-hop in Spanish. Traditions rise from the shifting nature of social life.

Folklorists have uncovered the traditions and practices of Oregon's diverse people by doing fieldwork—observing, visiting, and sometimes living with individuals and communities, attending festivals and religious ceremonies, watching traditional artists, and listening to stories. Fieldworkers record life histories, oral traditions, myths, and other stories; photograph and videotape songs, musical performances, and artists at work; and participate in festivals and other events.

Fieldwork is important because traditional culture is not always represented through popular media. The Oregon Folklife Program works to identify and help preserve traditions that might remain invisible or disappear without public support and awareness. As documenters of culture, folklore fieldworkers take with them a set of cultural beliefs, and they try to correct for biases by recognizing the lenses they use for viewing a culture.

Institutions such as schools, churches, or arts agencies can instigate change by either fostering or discouraging traditions. For example, government agencies and policies contributed to the loss of many Native American languages from the nineteenth century through the present. Disease had already taken many Native speakers, especially in western Oregon, when the Indian Bureau issued regulations in 1880 that all instruction in both mission and government schools would be in English. Boarding schools took children hundreds of miles from their families, disrupting language instruction and the accompanying transmission of stories and cultural knowledge. Today, tribes are reviving their languages. One example is the Grand Ronde Tribe's Chinook Jargon program, which conducts classes in the language that evolved between different tribes and incorporated French and English loan words. Another example is the Folklife Program's support for master artists to pass on art forms that may otherwise disappear to selected apprentices. Churches, too, contribute to the maintenance of tradition through aid in resettling refugee groups. Medical authorities can help when, for example, they honor the choices of a Mien woman who visits a doctor for an infection but a shaman for soul loss. When doctors, ministers, or others denigrate cultural practices as "backward" or "pagan," they discourage what may be essential to a group's identity.

We are meaning-making creatures. Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff suggests that we think of ourselves in this stage of evolution as *homo narrans*—humankind the storytellers. To be human is to express our individual and collective selves through story, song, dance, material arts, celebration, and ceremony. One early Oregon settler is credited with saying, "I make my quilts sturdy to keep my children warm. I make them beautiful to keep my heart from breaking."

All of Oregon's cultures are borderlands where young and old, new immigrants and settled populations, established traditions and novel forces meet. We can "expand and deepen" our language as Oregonians, welcoming each new cultural group and its vernacular arts and folklife. Each of us contributes to Oregon's vibrant and changing traditions, reflections of who we are and who we hope to become.

© Joanne B. Mulcahy, 2005. Updated and revised by OHP staff, 2014.

Oregon History Project

<https://www.oregonhistoryproject.org/articles/marking-the-inhabited-space/>