

# Traditional Philosophy and Oral Language

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Oral, technical language is a terrific intellectual tool in the pursuit of elucidating the fundamental concepts/philosophical principles of different cultures. But oral language is not merely a tool keyed to support analysis. Through the use of metaphor, language also exists as a major tool for the expression of synthetic/subjective awareness – revealing/expressing the way all things are connected/related that is not objectively/intellectually apparent [eg. “You ‘cherry on top of the sundae,’ you”]; and consider that most of our idioms even in the standard use of language are metaphorical in nature]. The metaphorical use of language carries humans in the direction of expressing their participation in the inclusive subjective rather than the exclusive objective. So, the pursuit of traditional philosophical principles through oral language can only be complete if this pursuit includes the metaphorical use of language in art – narrative, song, drama, and poetry, and not just its use in intellectual statement in the objective.

As significant as oral language in both of its iterations can be in investigating traditional philosophy, it is important to recognize that these philosophical principles are also expressed traditionally in the entire world of non-verbal communication: dance, dress, village structure, housing design, decorative/graphic art, music, etc. And some of these principles may only be expressed in these non-verbal forms. So, when seeking to elicit these principles, it is critical for investigators to explore these non-verbal domains of expression.

The nature of causality, reality, truth, identity, etc. for any group is realized collectively in all modes of expression – verbal, non-verbal and combined. Trying to tease the complete system of traditional philosophy out of evidence from the native, technical/intellectual use of oral language alone is likely to be partial, at best, in my view. Ideas/concepts that arise traditionally in the subjective, that are understood intuitively and that are expressed metaphorically and non-verbally are not readily converted to be expressed intellectually in the objective through analytical, oral language. As western academics, we are accustomed to dealing with this “conversion” challenge, and we are trained for years in the effort to accomplish it. But most native peoples neither experience this level of challenge nor this extent of training. It is not that they are incapable; there is just no need. So, when it comes to gleaning information in traditional settings, we academic westerners need to be careful about imposing our technical language focused analytical expectations. Instead, we need to broaden our perspective and observe more and interview mostly secondarily – something field oriented anthropologists learned long ago.