

# THE BILLIKEN: BRINGER OF GOOD LUCK AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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*In this narrative, the authors describe their exploration of the various cross-cultural meanings of the Billiken, a good luck figurine, which they use in classroom and professional trainings about cultural competence and spiritual sensitivity, both in Japan and the United States. The stories are based on their two different cultural vantage points and ongoing cross-cultural interactions regarding the Billiken, which originated and gained much popularity in the United States and then made its way around the world, including Japan. The stories revolve around how they encountered and reacted to the Billiken in two different cultural contexts, discovered their very different understandings, and pursued the meanings of the Billiken for enhanced mutual understanding. The authors explain lessons learned from their experiences for effective cross-cultural learning and for promoting cultural competence and spiritual sensitivity among social work students.*

The Billiken is a creature attributed by various cultures to bring good luck. In this article, we tell stories about how we each separately encountered the Billiken in Japan and the United States, the divergent meanings we gave to it, and the ways our cross-cultural interactions and dialogue led to a transformation of understanding. In order to set a context, we first explain the historical background and various cultural meanings of the Billiken which neither of us knew at the times of our initial encounters with it and with each other. Our stories illustrate lessons for social workers who wish to develop cultural competence and spiritual sensitivity. In the conclusion, we discuss how the lessons we learned connect with social work education for cultural competence and spiritual sensitivity (CSWE, 2010; NASW, 2001).

As scholars, including Anderson and Wiggins (2003), Canda and Furman (2010), Devore and Schlesinger (1995), Green (1999), Haley (1999), Lum (2003), and Pedersen (1988) have pointed out, cultural competence and spiritual sensitivity are not merely concrete end points to achieve; rather, they involve a life-long process of learning attitudes, values, knowledge, and skills for effective relationships, collaborations, and helping practices. Direct life experience across cultural and religious differences can

be more powerful than classroom-limited learning in order to promote this life process. Also, stories from people who have gone through significant cross-cultural encounters can be enlightening to students. Therefore, this article illustrates the power of such interactions and provides a narrative for use in social work educational settings.

## History of the Billiken

In our personal stories to come, we will explain our encounters and explorations with the Billiken and each other across many cultural and religious contexts. When we write in the first person style (i.e., "I"), we will add the name of the writer in parentheses. Throughout, we shared our initial and emerging impressions with each other and continued to re-shape our understandings of the Billiken as well as each other, along with the various cultures in which Billiken has appeared. We hope that this history will be read not only as a statement of information but also as a recounting of the many surprising revelations that came to us over a period of seven years, sometimes through serendipitous encounters with the Billiken and sometimes through research. We also use this historical background when conveying our story about explaining the Billiken. As a result, this background information can be used

by social work educators to explain the multicultural meanings of the Billiken and also to illustrate the process of discovery and cultural awareness raising.

### Origin and History in the United States

We discovered that although the origin of the Billiken as a trademarked image is well documented, details of its development into various and unexpected forms in the United States and across cultures are very difficult to ascertain. There has been little scholarly research about the Billiken while there are many speculations, unfounded claims, and popular cultural beliefs. The most detailed accounts of the Billiken's history were written by Dorothy Jean Ray (1960/2002; 1974/2008), an anthropologist who is well-known for her Alaskan research. A wide variety of Billiken images and forms across several languages and cultures can be seen at the flickr website (<http://www.flickr.com/groups/528571@N25/pool/page6/>).

We were both surprised to learn that the image of Billiken was originally created by Florence Pretz, an art teacher and illustrator of Kansas City, Missouri (Ray, 1974/2008), which is nearby our university. In 1908, Pretz patented her design of the later-named "Billiken." Although Pretz did not leave a record of her exact inspiration, there are several claims about it (Church of Good Luck, n.d.; Ray, 1974/2008). One claim is that the Billiken image appeared to her in a dream. Another possibility is that she was inspired by mythical 'little men,' which appeared in the poem "Mr. Moon: A Song of the Little People," by Canadian poets Bliss Carman and Richard Hovey (Carman & Hovey, 1986). Others claim that she was inspired by a Chinese image of a Buddha or a Daoist deity or by pixy-like Brownies as invented by Palmer Cox in 1887 (Ray, 1974/2008). In addition, there are no definite explanations of the origin and meaning of the name, Billiken. Possibly, it came from the principal manufacturing companies of the original Billiken objects, all of which had the patent number of Pretz (Ray, 1974/2008). The ambiguous nature of the Billiken's origin influenced our reactions to it, as will be described in our stories of encounters with it.

The Billiken gained much popularity in a very short period. It was created into many different commercial objects, including marshmallow candies, dolls, metal banks, pins, statues, and ornaments. Catchphrases were attached to many of the original Billikens for advertising it as a good luck charm, such as "The God of Things as They Ought to Be," "Grin and Win," and "Good Luck." Printed verses were also attached with some Billiken objects; they emphasized the miraculous luck and fortune that can be brought by the Billiken (Ray, 1974/2008). As another evidence of its popularity, Billiken-featured songs were developed: "The Billiken Man and The Billiken Rag" (Rogers Historical Museum, n.d.).

Billiken figures were included in the 1909 Seattle World's Fair, which highlighted several kinds of culturally stereotyped exhibitions (Berger, 2009). I (Sachi) realized that this could have been the point of connection for the Billiken's transition to Japan. According to Ray (1974/2008), a famous Alaska territory Inuit (so-called Eskimo [sic]) carver named Angokwazhuk (nick-named Happy Jack), who lived in Nome, used a Billiken figure from the United States as a model to begin carving Billikens in 1909. Since then, particularly in Nome, Alaska, thousands of ivory Billikens have been produced by ivory carvers. The Billiken has continued to be a popular Alaskan souvenir. Many Alaskans came to believe that the Billiken originated from Indigenous cultures. Indeed, the cryptozoologist Drinnon (2011) claims that Alaskan artists converged the commercial Billiken image with longer standing shamanistic Indigenous images. Alaskan popular beliefs surrounding the Billiken include: 1) possession of the Billiken keeps bad spirits away, 2) rub the Billiken's stomach while making a wish, and 3) a gifted Billiken brings more luck than a purchased one (Ray, 1974/2008). Coincidentally, while we were writing this article, my (Ed's) friends went to Alaska and purchased Billiken souvenirs as gifts for us. One of many verses that accompanied the ivory Billiken is as follows (cited in Rays, 1974/2008): *Rub his tummy or tickle his toes, You will have good luck so the story goes.*

Despite the fast fame the Billiken acquired, the Billiken fads in the United States had a fairly short life outside Alaska. By 1912, the Billiken faded away in its popularity (Ray, 1974/2008).

However, during and even after its peak of popularity, the idea and name of Billiken were attached to some events, organizations, and publications. For example, around 1910-1911, the Billiken became associated with the football team of St. Louis University (SLU). Based on several versions of its origin, it appears that the image of the Billiken became associated with John Bender, the football coach, and then the sports players became referred to as Billikens (Senay, 1983). To this day, the Billiken remains as a good luck charm for the university athletic teams and is the official mascot of the university (Billiken Media Relations, 2011). The Billiken name is associated with many SLU students' events, including ones that promote cross-cultural understanding. As I (Ed) will explain, discovery of this positive educational use of the Billiken at SLU was especially significant to me (Ed) since it related to my initial concerns when first encountering the Billiken.

The Billiken name also became associated with African American culture in Chicago. The *Chicago Defender*, an African American newspaper founded by Robert Abbott in 1905, created the "Bud Billiken" figure in 1923. A 10-year-old boy, Willard Motley, who published a story in the newspaper, drew a character, "a Billiken, apparently named after a Chinese 'guardian angel and patron of children'" (Rutkoff & Scott, 2004, p. 318). Motley took the Bud Billiken pen name and became the first Bud Billiken for seven years. He continued to make contributions to African American literature in later years. Abbott used Bud Billiken as a mascot for the newspaper and organized the Billiken Club for African American children in Chicago (Rutkoff & Scott, 2004). The Billiken Club raised a sense of "race pride" among African American children and expanded its branch clubs and membership over the years. Several individuals took the position of Bud Billiken over time. Bud Billiken "became the symbol of guardianship and protection for children"

(Higuchi, 2005, p. 156). A picnic event for children held in August 1930 developed later into the large scale *Bud Billiken Parade and Picnic*, celebrating African American culture and youth education, which is annually held in Chicago yet today (Higuchi, 2005). We were pleasantly surprised to learn that the name Billiken became associated with this celebration of African American culture.

### **The Billiken around the World with Focus on Japan**

Although the Billiken's mass popularity faded away in the United States in a relatively short period of time, the Billiken fad brought the Billiken outside of the United States. The Pelliken (Russian for Billiken) became absorbed into the culture and imagery of the Chuckchee people of Siberia, most likely due to the influence of the Alaskan Billiken (Drinnon, 2011; Ray, 1974/2008). There is a variety of Billiken objects manufactured in various countries (Fujii, 2000; Ray, 1974/2008). The Billiken even inspired a popular weekly magazine promoting education for children in Argentina. The Billiken was interpreted as a smiling Hindu divinity and used for the name of the magazine. The first edition of the *Billiken* magazine came out in 1919 and continues to be published (Speedylook, n.d.; Tangocity, n.d.). The image of another publication on the Billiken in Argentina can be seen at the flickr website (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/20148734@N06/1968146107/>). We were impressed by the uses of the Billiken in various countries.

The Billiken appeared in Japan in 1909 and continues to be very popular. The best-known representation of the Billiken today is the one enshrined in the Tsutenkaku Tower, in the Shinsekai area of Osaka. This is how I (Sachi) came to know the Billiken. In 1911, the Tamurakoma Company, a textile company in Osaka, acquired a registered trademark of the Billiken and began using the Billiken as the company's symbol and lucky charm. In 1912, the Billiken was enshrined in Luna Park, an amusement park, where the first-generation Tsutenkaku Tower was located in the Shinsekai area. However, in 1923, when Luna Park closed, the enshrined Billiken

disappeared. In 1979, the Billiken was re-enshrined in the second-generation Tsutenkaku Tower as a symbol of the Shinsekai area. At the time of re-enshrinement, a Billiken statue created by the Tamurakoma Company was loaned to the Tower and a celebration event was conducted, which attracted many people. Based on the loaned Billiken statue, a new wood curved Billiken was created, which is the one still sitting in the Tsutenkaku Tower today (Fujii, 2000; Tsutenkaku, 2009).

Throughout Japan, the Billiken is considered a kind of *kami* [god], that is, *koun no kami* [lucky god]. The Billiken beliefs in Japan relate to *minzoku shukyo* [folk religion], which does not take a form of organized religion. It is a popular belief in Japan that Billiken will grant people's wishes if they tickle the soles of its feet. A variety of manufactured Billiken objects is on the market, including dolls, cell phone straps, and Billiken-shaped sweet buns as lucky goods. The Billiken statue can be seen mostly in Osaka but also outside Osaka in Japan. The popularity of Billiken in Japan is also apparent from the fact that the Billiken was featured in a comedy movie, *Billiken*, which was staged in Osaka and directed by Sakamoto Junji in 1996.

The preceding discussion shows vividly that the Billiken has a history full of twists and turns that have taken it from its Kansas City origin, possibly inspired by Chinese religious or European and American folk cultural images, into various forms and meanings around the United States and the world. This history set up the situations for us to encounter the Billiken in the two very different cultural contexts of Japan and the United States. Next, we recount our stories of these encounters, how we met each other, and how our cross-cultural interactions led to deeper understandings.

### **Personal Encounters with the Billiken Encountering the Billiken Starting in Japan**

**The Billiken in my Japanese perspective.** I (Sachi) grew up in Osaka City and came to be familiar with Billiken during my youth. "Billiken-san"—Japanese call this lucky god with affection and respect. Osaka City is where the original Billiken resides in the

Tsutenkaku Tower. Therefore, when the Billiken comes to my mind, it is the one enshrined in the observatory of the Tsutenkaku Tower. The little creature with pointed-head, pixie-ears, fat belly, and a beaming smile sits with his feet stretched out, welcoming visitors to the Tower.

I visited the Billiken as a child with my parents. Later I began taking visitors there because the Tsutenkaku Tower is the one of the emblematic buildings of Osaka. Whenever I visited the Billiken, there was usually a line of people waiting to meet the Billiken, which reminded me of its popularity. I often heard visitors say "how cute!" when looking at the Billiken and often saw them buy Billiken goods in the souvenir shops in the Tower. The routine for me to greet the Billiken was roughly as follows: 1) proceed to stand in front of the Billiken, 2) bow to it, 3) put some change in the donation box, 4) tickle the soles of its feet, and 5) make some wishes. Although I did not know scientific proof of the Billiken's ability to grant my wishes, I felt at ease just by looking at a big grin on the Billiken's face. The mysterious appearance of the creature made me believe that it would bring me good luck. The soles of the Billiken's feet are well-worn and have noticeable finger traces. Evidently, they have been rubbed by many people over time. People have rubbed its feet to make their wishes come true. The Billiken has been adored by many people in Japan over 100 years.

**The Billiken in my cross-cultural encounters.** I first met Ed in 2004, when he was a visiting lecturer from the United States at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan. I was introduced to him and asked to give him a casual sight-seeing tour in Kyoto by a Japanese professor I knew. We visited some places and then stopped by a small restaurant. Outside of the restaurant, there was a Billiken statue, and Billiken objects were sold inside the restaurant. I did not think much about it as I had seen Billiken statues elsewhere, although it was less usual for me to see the Billiken outside of Osaka. What surprised me most was that Ed knew about the Billiken! I wondered why he knew about this "Japanese" lucky

god. Although I can now see information about the origin of Billiken available on the internet in Japanese, at that time I did not know anything about its United States context until this visiting scholar explained it to me.

Throughout my life I just accepted the Billiken as a lucky god, which is strongly associated with the Tsutenkaku Tower. The thought of searching for the origin and history of the Billiken had never occurred to me. Moreover, I had never imagined that the Billiken came from the United States. Accordingly, I was quite astonished to learn about its American context. It was simply beyond my imagination that the Billiken originally came from the United States and is still there (i.e., as a mascot of SLU). To me, the Billiken has always been a lucky god who resides in Osaka, Japan. Interestingly, Ed shared with me his original reactions to the Billiken when he first saw the Billiken statue at SLU. He did not know anything about the Billiken at that time. To my surprise, he had ambivalent reactions to the Billiken statue, as he will explain in the next section. In contrast, Billiken-san has always appeared to me as a positive figure, as I always associated it with an image of a lucky god.

I now think differently about the Billiken because I found out about the Billiken outside of the Japanese context. Long before I knew about the Billiken as a lucky god at the Tsutenkaku Tower, the Billiken had its own history outside of Japan, which was unknown to me. Similar to the remarks made by people in Alaska responding to Ray about the Billiken--"Oh, it's just something the Eskimos always made" (Ray, 1960/2002, p. 111), the Billiken to me was "something that has always been sitting in the Tsutenkaku Tower." I now think about the meaning of Billiken not only in the Japanese context but also in the cross-cultural context. Now, I am more mystified by the fact that the Billiken has been appreciated as a good-luck piece or inspiration for other meanings in different cultures.

I also feel more connected to the Billiken. The interactions and conversations I had with Ed regarding the Billiken ever since our first meeting in Kyoto helped me to re-think about the Billiken. The Billiken represents my

cross-cultural learning. Ed and I discussed our experiences and understandings in our own cultural contexts in a mutually respectful manner. Through the dialogue, I learned not only about the Billiken, but also about myself by becoming aware of my own faulty assumptions. Moreover, I related with Ed more comfortably, and most of all I enjoyed sharing our own experiences.

Coincidentally, I currently live near the city where the Billiken originated. If Ed and I had not stopped by the small restaurant in Kyoto, we would have never talked about the Billiken and expanded our cross-cultural understandings. Nor would this paper have been written by us. After all, I feel like the Billiken did bring me good luck.

### **Encountering the Billiken - Starting in the United States**

**My first encounter with the Billiken.** I (Ed) first encountered the Billiken at the fourth annual conference of the Society for Spirituality and Social Work in 1998. The conference was hosted by the School of Social Work at St. Louis University in Missouri. This conference brought together social work practitioners, educators, and researchers who promote respectful, knowledgeable, and skillful ways of addressing the spiritual perspectives of our clients and their communities. There was an enriching blend of intellectual, practical, and experiential presentations along with a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among participants.

One day as my wife, Hwi-Ja, and I walked across campus, we noticed a puzzling statue. We were intrigued by its unusual appearance, but at first sight, we could not figure out what it represented. When I looked closely, I was startled, because it seemed to me to be a silly caricature of an East Asian man or a distorted version of a Buddha figure. (An image of the SLU Billiken can be found at: [http://kccollegegameday.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/434px-Slu\\_billiken.jpg](http://kccollegegameday.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/434px-Slu_billiken.jpg)). We learned that this is a mascot for SLU. A sign below the statue said that there is a legend that tickling the belly can bring good luck. I could recognize that this figure had a positive meaning for SLU, but I felt ambivalent about it.

I was sensitive about the issue of racist mascots among American sports teams and universities because of my familiarity with the all too frequent caricatures of Indigenous people. I grew up in Cleveland, where the Cleveland Indians baseball team uses a cartoonish so-called Chief Wahoo face as one of its emblems. I was never comfortable with this as I grew up, but rarely heard it questioned in my social circles. My awareness and ire were raised in subsequent years, as I came to know First Nations friends, colleagues, and students, some of whom were opponents of the misuse of so-called Indian mascots and First Nations images as colonialist playthings (e.g., Yellow Bird, 2004). Indeed, some of my First Nations students had protested the Kansas City Chiefs' use of that football team name, their so-called tomahawk chop cheer, and related emblems. I was especially incensed when I heard one of my students describe how he had been insulted and even spat at by some white sports fans during a protest gathering near the Kansas City Arrowhead stadium. I have been an advocate for cross-cultural and interreligious respect in my professional work and personal life. And unfortunately, as a Czech American/Korean American couple, my wife and I have experienced occasions of racist attitudes and actions in both the United States and South Korea (Canda, 2007). So all this predisposed me to be attuned to signs of racism in educational settings.

My wife and I talked about this Billiken issue. She was not sure how to regard the Billiken. I was a bit perturbed and considered sending a letter of concern to SLU. On the other hand, my wife was curious though not offended. I realized that I did not know enough about the Billiken, its origin, and meaning to make a judgment. After some time passed, we both forgot about the issue. I filed the Billiken in the back of my mind with a mixture of curiosity and indignation.

**The Billiken in my cross-cultural encounters.** Flash forward to 2004: I was a guest lecturer on spiritual diversity in social work at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan. I had wonderful conversations with students, my translators, and my

faculty colleagues about the complexities of understanding and applying spiritually sensitive social work practice across cultures, especially given the significant cultural differences between the United States (the cultural context of the approach I used) and Japan. This experience increased my desire to learn more about Japanese religions and customs.

One day, one of my faculty hosts introduced me to her co-worker (Sachi) and asked her to accompany me for sightseeing. After visiting various places, Sachi brought me to a small restaurant for a break. Entering the restaurant, I noticed a strangely familiar figure in the window. Once inside, I looked around the restaurant, enjoying the ambience. I was very surprised to realize that the statue on display at the front window and smaller statues set around the restaurant were Billikens. I blinked my eyes, wondering if I were really seeing what I was seeing. I thought to myself, "What in the world are those Billikens doing here?!" I was dumbfounded.

I asked Sachi what those figurines were. She explained that the Billiken is a good luck god popular in Osaka, which is not far from Kyoto. Sachi pointed out the soles of the feet. She said that if you tickle the feet just right, the Billiken will send you good fortune. She said that there is a shrine for the Billiken in Osaka. I told her about my surprise to find Billiken in Japan and my previous experience and ambivalence regarding the Billiken in St. Louis. She was as surprised to hear that the Billiken was in America as I was to see it in Japan. I realized that there must be a lot more to the Billiken than what my first impressions and concerns suggested. And one thing was clear—the meaning of the Billiken in Japan had nothing to do with my personal impressions of the SLU Billiken.

I asked her to inquire with the restaurant owner for more information about why she has the Billiken featured there. She confirmed Sachi's explanation and then directed us to a poster that explained more in Japanese. To the surprise of both myself and Sachi, the poster indicated that the Billiken originated from an artist in the United States in the early 1900s and that it somehow made its way into

Japanese custom as a god of good fortune.

This was a wonderful revelation for me. I was struck with the contradiction between my first ambivalent impressions of the SLU Billiken and the unambiguously positive meaning of the Billiken in Japan. All at once my mind jumped with surprise, curiosity, and clarity about the limitations of my own earlier assumptions about the Billiken. When Sachi shared her understanding of the Billiken based on her experience growing up in Osaka, I was amazed.

We got to know each other more during my later visits to Kyoto, during which Sachi worked with me as translator and cultural mediator. In 2007, Sachi came to my university for further study. As we explored the Billiken further over the years in Japan and the United States, the mystery and complexity of the Billiken grew. My evaluation of the Billiken became higher and higher. The fact that this figure took on different meanings and inspired people in so many varied contexts reinforced the importance of keeping an open mind. It is as if the good luck Billiken figurine truly graced me with a deepening insight.

Although there is some speculation that the original Billiken image might have been inspired by Americans' superficial views of East Asian cultures and religions, it became clear to me that the significances given to Billiken across time and several cultures included many positive values, including good luck and joy (United States and Japan), synergy with Indigenous imagery (Inuit and Chuckchee), pride in university (SLU), African American cultural pride, and positive youth education in Argentina. Although I feel that my original concerns about the misuse of cultural and religious imagery remain important, I gave up attributing any positive or negative meaning to Billiken outside of a particular context and particular people's interpretations.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

We came to share our Billiken stories with social work students, hoping that they would provide insights with regard to cultural competence and spiritual sensitivity for social workers. Indeed, we both realized

that the Billiken reminded us of things we have told ourselves, social work students, and social workers many times regarding cultural competence and spiritual sensitivity. More importantly, the Billiken also reminded us that everyone, including those who teach about cultural competence and spiritual sensitivity, has limitations and that cultural competence is a lifelong process of growth. When we tell our stories to students, we always emphasize this point, so that we model the ideals of self-awareness of limitations and commitment to continual growth in cross-cultural awareness through a respectful and enjoyable relationship.

When we tell our stories, we give time for each of us to share separately in order to draw students into each perspective and the feelings and changing reactions that we experienced. We also show pictures of Billiken images from different contexts to reinforce our points about the dynamic and contextual nature of the meanings of a cultural or religious object. We also take time to interact spontaneously with each other, interjecting mutual reflections and humor.

We enjoy the reactions of students and we explore wherever they might lead. For example, some students giggle when Sachi describes the Japanese custom of tickling the toes of Billiken for good luck. This can be an occasion to discuss the ways that religious practices and cultural customs taken for granted and enjoyed by one group can seem silly or bizarre to another group. Discussing this in a non-threatening way can lead students to become more careful in showing their immediate reactions to clients' religious practices. As another example, Ed's discussion of his initial ambivalence about the SLU Billiken and his ongoing concern about culturally inappropriate mascots sometimes raises agreement from First Nations students and sometimes raises puzzlement from Euro American students. This can be a great opportunity to explore the controversial issues of cross-cultural and interreligious use and misuse of spiritually and culturally significant images and practices in social work and in the general society (Canda & Furman, 2010). Further discussion of the complex

and contextual understandings of the Billiken adds even more questions about these issues, while taking the concerns about cross-cultural misappropriation very seriously.

In the next section, we suggest implications for culturally competent and spiritually sensitive social work, which we drew from our Billiken stories. When we teach about cultural competence and spiritual sensitivity, we sum up these insights from our stories and students' discussions.

### **Not Assuming**

We should be cautious about making any assumptions, especially in cross-cultural contexts. As we have seen how the Billiken has been presented in various contexts over time, the same thing can be interpreted differently by various individuals and groups in different cultural and historical contexts or can be interpreted similarly in very different cultural contexts and across long periods of time. As each individual is a cultural entity, gut reactions to a mere object could differ significantly among people. Gut reactions can be especially strong when they relate to objects with religious significance. Even within our own cultural context, we need to be careful of making baseless assumptions about things that seem familiar.

### **Not Reacting Hastily**

Naturally, we react to something that has an emotional or cognitive impact upon us, as Ed first reacted to the SLU Billiken. Instead of reacting hastily, it is important to be aware of the reaction and to reflect on what it is in us that evokes our reaction in terms of our own values, beliefs, life experiences, and biases. This would also help us not to jump to conclusions or to act rashly.

### **Self-Reflecting**

Self-reflection and self-awareness cannot be over-emphasized in pursuing cultural competence (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999; Pedersen, 1988). Haley (1999) regards self-awareness as the first step toward cultural competence. Similarly, Lum (2003) states that "the road to cultural competence begins with an understanding of your own personal and professional cultural awareness" (p. 75).

Green (1999) emphasizes the importance of awareness of self-limitations. Importantly, the Billiken in our cross-cultural encounters reminded us of this fundamental element of cultural competence. We must always be in a process of self-reflection and growth in striving for cultural competence.

### **Building Accurate Knowledge**

Accurate knowledge requires continuous learning and critical thinking. Acquiring knowledge is often considered as a component of cultural competence (Lum, 2003; Sue 2006; Weaver, 2004). Utilizing various learning sources, including direct experiences, would enhance the process and outcome of knowledge acquisition. Indeed, in our search for further information about the Billiken, we critically reviewed literature and online-sources and asked our colleagues about the uses of the Billiken in their own cultures. We also talked with people who were familiar with the Billiken in various contexts. After all, we realized what we originally believed about the Billiken was a very limited aspect of the Billiken.

### **Fostering Cross-Cultural Dialogue**

Mutually respectful dialogue in cross-cultural interaction can bring an opportunity to realize our own cultural assumptions and to expand our understandings of distinctiveness and commonality across different cultures (Green, 1999; Lum, 2003). Although differences are often focused upon in cross-cultural encounters, commonalities that connect different cultural groups need to be more highlighted. Discovering both the commonalities and differences of understanding can lead to insight and deeper connecting between people across cultures and religions (Canda & Furman, 2010). We believe that respectfully sharing our own understandings and experiences of Billiken during our first meeting with each other laid the foundation of our mutual respect and further connection. We also found that the Billiken has been used for similar purposes in different cultures (e.g., as good luck figure) but with different connotations and specific forms. As we continued our explorations and discussions over several years, we deepened



understanding of the many nuances of the Billiken and enhanced our understanding and appreciation of each other.

### Being Curious

Curiosity and cross-cultural experience interact and enhance each other. By being open and curious about people's experiences and stories, we might discover something that we have never expected. Any assumptions and beliefs that we have held for a long time might even turn out to be inaccurate or faulty (Lum, 2003). Curiosity can motivate us to delve more deeply into the meaning and significance of a cultural or religious item. As our Billiken stories illustrate, exploration of just one thing could take many years to open up its many facets. Genuine and respectful curiosity requires long-term commitment. Curiosity can carry us through as long as it takes, sometimes many years, to develop authentic cross-cultural or interreligious understanding.

As we reflect on this several years long process of exploring the Billiken, we are grateful to the Billiken figure for the good fortune of our enhanced learning and teaching about cultural competence and spiritual sensitivity. So during our final discussion to complete the writing of this article, we enjoyed looking at the grin of a newly acquired 1910 Billiken bank figurine.

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- For a picture of the Billikin, please go to: [http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E3%83%95%E3%82%A1%E3%82%A4%E3%83%AB:Billiken\\_200712.JPG#filelinks](http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E3%83%95%E3%82%A1%E3%82%A4%E3%83%AB:Billiken_200712.JPG#filelinks)

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