

Why do Ethnography... as a Missionary?

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This is a bit of a strange question, because it boils down to, “Why should a cross-cultural missionary understand his or her host culture?” This culture is the one in which they hope to carry on a fruitful ministry, however fruitful is defined. We could even ask, why should anybody in any ministry anywhere understand their host culture? But in fact, by my observation, we often, in practice, don’t give much attention to understanding the cultural world in which we work, wherever that is. The operative term here is “attention.” And it raises the question of what kind of *attention* should we give to understanding our host cultures?

The absence of this attention in mission is easily found in our short-term mission trips. I will hear of the US pastor who is flying to India for a week to teach Indian pastors how to be pastors. This opens up a Pandora’s Box of questions that would embarrass most foreign “experts:” Can you describe these pastors? What are their churches like? What is the history of these churches? What are the needs of these churches? What challenges are these pastors facing? What leadership styles are used in these churches? And it gets worse. Can you give me three good reasons why these Indian pastors should take you seriously? Why do you believe that what you have to teach them will work for them in their churches? (Regardless of what these Indian pastors might say to you at the airport as you are leaving.) The answer to these last questions is usually a version of, “Well, I have a track record of being taken seriously in my church at home.” And, “What I am teaching them works great for me in my church.” And so, the absence of attention.

But in long-term mission efforts as well, attention to the workings and meanings of our host culture is often thin. After one year in Nepal I began to formulate chapter titles of an imaginary book that I might write. The book title would be, “Confessions of a First-Year Missionary: What I Wish I Knew Before I Stepped Off the Plane.” The first chapter would be, “How did I Get Here Without the Ability to Understand this Culture?” The chapter would focus on the skills I should have brought with me in order to understand the culture of Kathmandu. How could I have deliberately, intentionally, and even systematically, gained a knowledge of the lifeway of Nepalis so that I could have labored more effectively? The biblical justification for this kind of attention is Proverbs 19:2, “Even zeal is not good without knowledge, and the one who acts hastily sins” (HCSB). We are sometimes long on zeal and short on knowledge. I discovered after a short time in Kathmandu that my toolbox for understanding my cultural context was, sadly, empty. My hope is that you didn’t come off the plane as ill equipped as I did. Yet, for many back home in my mission minded home church, I was very adequately prepared. I had five years of graduate theological education, a number of years of varied ministry experience, some cross-cultural experience, and had been around the block of life a bit, with nine years of

marriage and four kids. But once in Kathmandu I was awakened to my need for a whole set of equipment that was missing.

So why do ethnography? Margaret and I sat down a couple of weeks ago and talked about this and here are a few of our offerings. There are two categories of reasons that can answer the question and help us to combine our zeal for ministry with a knowledge of the cultural world in which we serve. The first category has to do with the missionary and his or her relationships. The second has to do with the shape that ministry might take. But first a few general remarks about the value of knowing our host culture well.

My first general remark is that culture sometimes is regarded as a hindrance to ministry. In other words, the world of meanings and practices in a society different from our own is viewed as a troublesome set of barriers to be overcome. I think this perception is fostered by the missionary's warfare with adjusting to a new cultural context and language. I heard one missionary recently describe language study as being in prison. The way we talk about missionary adjustment often does not do us any favors. Even the terms "culture shock" brings to mind the victim of an accident. In first-aid I learned that the symptoms of shock are rapid, shallow breathing; cold, clammy skin; rapid, weak pulse; dizziness, weakness. These symptoms are brought on by all sorts of trauma, none of which is good. The term "culture stress" is hardly any better. Here we are dropped onto the psychologist's couch and are directed to develop coping strategies for our stressors which come from our host culture. Then in our ministries, we can sometimes view our cultural context as a set of communication potholes that threaten the understanding of the gospel. We can fall into the trap of viewing this cultural world negatively. The alternative is to see it as a resource. This was the experience of Don Richardson who penned *Peace Child*, and *Eternity in Their Hearts*. After a time of frustration in ministry he discovered that there were beliefs and practices found in the world's cultures that are an asset to his communication of the gospel. With this remark, I don't mean to belittle the challenges of cultural adjustment. They are real and need to be addressed in healthy ways. My point is that we need to work toward embracing this new cultural world as a set of possibilities and opportunities, however awkward that initial embrace might be.

My second general remark is that without an understanding of the ways of our host culture we stand a chance of really screwing up. And this can happen to anyone. In 2015 a Kazakh tourist was arrested for molestation when he tapped a Police woman on the shoulder in Dubai. One way we can screw up is by viewing, judging, and coming to conclusions about what is going on that are far from what is actually going on. The goal of ethnography is to gain a grasp of "what the natives are up to," as anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it. And it is an understanding of what *they*, the natives, think they are up to that you are after. Another anthropologist Richard Shweder said, "Sometimes when one gazes from a distance through ethnocentric lenses across ethnic fault lines things can seem quite the opposite from what they are" (Shweder, "Why Men

Barbecue” 285 emphasis added). This is illustrated by the research that he did on morality considered across cultures. He did interviews with informants in both Orissa, India and Hyde Park, Chicago. In these interviews, he presented informants with various scenarios and had them talk about them. One scenario went, “A young married woman went alone to see a movie without informing her husband. When she returned home her husband said, ‘If you do it again, I will beat you black and blue.’ She did it again; he beat her black and blue” (Shweder “Culture and Moral Development” 1990, 166). Was the husband’s action wrong? A sin? What is interesting is that both his Indian and American informants viewed the action of the husband as a moral issue. The problem is that the Brahmins of Orissa viewed the beating as a moral obligation, but the Americans viewed it as morally reprehensible. So, what are the natives up to that brings them to conclude that wife beating is acceptable, and more, even the right thing to do? By the way this is not just an issue for the archives in the University of Chicago library. Margaret was asked by Nepali women if I beat her and my daughters. And I was confronted with a real-life scenario of leaders in our church-plant who beat their wives and would come to Bible studies and fellowships and pray with the greatest sincerity. So, we can come to wrong conclusions about what is going on.

Another general remark. A deeper understanding of our host culture has the potential to quiet our ethnocentrism and set aside our stereotypes. Stereotypes are unflattering generalizations that are often far removed from the detailed lives of real people. Yes, we all have them. It seems to be human nature to judge others by our own lights. And it is not enough to simply shrug our shoulders and admit, “Well, it’s just like this here.” In Nepal, there is a declaration that goes, “*Nepalma yestai chha!*” It means “In Nepal it is just like this.” It is a versatile statement that could be used for traffic jams and cultural conundrums. Some of the stereotypes that went unchecked in my own thinking were challenged when I did a study of food service workers in Chicago. Many of those we interviewed were undocumented workers from Mexico. We discovered that many husbands and wives both worked two eight-hour shifts and lived in small apartments with multiple families to save money. Extended family members took care of the children. The majority of their earnings were sent back to Mexico to keep other family members alive. Things are often not what they seem to be, or what we have been led to believe they are. What that study did for me was put faces on a complex issue facing the United States that will not be solved by only considering political expediency by either party.

Another general comment. There is a cultural logic behind behaviors and it takes a bit of probing to uncover this logic. Ethnography is the probe. People respond to their world according to what it means to them. People do things for reasons. The eight-year-old daughter of an anthropologist once said, Dad, “Even the stupidest things have meaning” (Shweder “Why Men Barbeque,” 296). Referring to Richard Shweder again, he did a repeat of a classic study of who sleeps by whom (“Who Sleeps by Whom Revisited” 1995). There have been a number of studies of sleeping arrangements across cultures. In this study Shweder conducted a “sleeping

arrangement task” (30) in which informants were asked to put seven family members—father, mother and children of mixed gender—into rooms for sleeping. And so, they had to arrange the family into two rooms, then three rooms, up to six rooms. There were 877 logical possibilities, but of the 877 only fifteen were selected with any frequency (p. 31). He collected data from India, Japan and the United States. What he brought to the surface with this study is that something as mundane as decisions of where people sleep reveals a whole world of cultural values, values that are held with moral tenacity and constitute principles from which judgements of right and wrong, good and evil are made. Shweder’s Asian informants made decisions based on the values of the protection of the vulnerable and respect for hierarchy. The American decisions were driven by the priority of conjugal rights of the parents, and developing autonomy and independence of the children. Another insight of this study is that Asians morally condemned the arrangement used by the Americans, and the Americans condemned the arrangements common with the Asians. And they did so for different reasons. We have a farm and hidden below the surface of the ground in the fields are drain tiles. These are corrugated plastic pipes about six inches in diameter with lots of holes in them. Sometimes these tiles get clogged or broken and don’t drain the water in the fields the way they should. When this happens, the farmer must find the tile, dig it up and fix the problem. To find the tile he uses a probe. It is a four-foot-long steel rod with a T-handle. He pushes it below the surface of the ground until he hits the tile. Ethnography is the probe that gets below the surface and discovers the cultural logic below the behaviors on the surface.

Now why would a missionary be interested in doing ethnography? He or she should be interested in doing ethnography because credible relationships within the host culture depend on an understanding of that culture. A missionary must cultivate moral credibility in the community in which he or she lives and works. The missionary has a message, and to be heard, the missionary must be respected. One of the papers read by our EthnoExplore participants relates the experience of Wycliffe missionaries working in Latin American. Missionary Patty Bean set out to explore the local understanding of a virtuous woman. She collected data from conversations with women in the neighborhood about what kind of woman would they would want their sons to marry. She ended up with a rich moral vocabulary that locals used to describe a virtuous woman. One of the virtues of a Quechua woman was that she must be hard working. But then she discovered what qualified as “work.” (Good illustration of a cultural domain.) For the Quechua, work had to be manual work. Studying or working at the computer didn’t qualify as work. A person that occupied their time in those non-work activities was considered lazy and would be looked down upon and not be respected. This presented challenges to the husband, the Bible translator, who spent most of his time in study, talk, and at the computer. Bean shares the relief the local women expressed when they saw her husband outside painting the house. Their words were, “Oh good, your husband CAN work!” Patty Bean’s application was, “It is often easy to notice the ways in which a culture different from our own fails to meet up to *our* standards. However, each culture has its own set of standards.” And the challenge is to meet

those we hope to reach on their standards. Insensitivity to those standards can lead to no respect and consequently, no hearing.

Missionaries seeking credibility in their community of service have their own deeply internalized a way of life along with its values, practices, and responses that have become “natural” due to their enculturation in their home cultures. When confronted with a different way of life with its values, practices and responses, judgement is the result. These new ways are not only perceived as simply uncomfortable and different; they seem deficient, bad, offensive, even reprehensible. Our very consciences have been formed by our enculturation. This is what can make adjustment to the moral priorities of our host cultures challenging for us.

Some things we can't change in the logic in our host cultures, gender being one of them. SIL missionary Irene Haibucher, after a few of years in Central Africa, learned hard lessons about appropriate roles and respect. She concluded that, “Respect is a very big issue with Africans.” (LinguaLinks@ Library Version 5.0 0 2002 SIL International). In America respect is awarded for those that gain socially valued accomplishments. Higher education, high position in employment or military, wealth, even athletics are sources of social capital that elicit respect. We are, *in principle*, egalitarian. Men and women are on a level playing field. This was not the case in Central Africa where there is a strict hierarchy. She stated, “The hierarchy for respect is God, men, women, children, animals, and nature.” Haibucher “found that it is not important how much education a woman has; the man is always higher in the hierarchy.” This was not only the case in casual relationships but also in employment where she was, according to the org chart, in a higher position of authority. She shared her struggle:

By nature, I am not a very respectful person. I grew up questioning everybody and everything and felt I was right in doing so. It was only in Africa where I hit a wall. Working with different Central African men, I could often sense a tension, but I could not put my finger on what the problem was. Only after a big clash with one of them did I realize what I had been doing: by not treating them with due respect, they felt insulted, and the relationship was always tense.

Our American sensibilities have been shaped to treat all people the same. We would argue, even theologically, that all are created in God's image and have equal value. Yet most cultures are *explicitly* hierarchical. While living in South Asia I would harass my English friends saying that the reason they got on so well in India is because they came in with their own caste system that meshed quite well with that of India. English social stratification begins with laborers and tops out with nobility with its dukes, marquis, earls, barons and lords. One was born into a slot in the social hierarchy. In 1941, George Orwell wrote that Britain was “the most class-ridden society under the sun.” Even the English government is structured around social class with the House of Lords and the House of Commons. Irene Haibucher, after understanding the social

realities in Central Africa surrounding gender, developed strategies of communication and expressions of authority that allowed her to function in her roles with credibility.

A second application for mission is that a deeper understanding of culture can inform *how* we do ministry. It can shape our service and make it more effective. I am not saying anything new or revolutionary. What we are talking about is contextualization. Paul Hiebert sees missiology, and so contextualization, as answering the question,

How should we work to communicate the gospel to people in their historical and sociocultural contexts so that they understand and believe, and so that the gospel becomes a power that transforms individuals and societies to become followers of Christ who manifest his kingdom on earth? (*The Gospel in Human Contexts* 2009, 161)

Answering this question then rests on three principles for Hiebert: The first is that “the gospel must not be equated with any particular human culture,” even the cultures of the Old and New Testaments. The second is that the gospel must be put in specific sociocultural contexts for people to understand it.” And the third is that “the gospel is transformative” (2009, 31). The gospel initiates discipleship: an allegiance to Jesus that brings about change in individuals and communities. Contextualization concerns the *how* of the “putting in” the gospel into to new cultural contexts with the end of transformation in view.

Missionaries sometimes stumble upon evidence that the gospel was not “put into” a particular human culture appropriately. Wycliffe missionary Harriet Hill tripped on just such evidence working in Ivory Coast. She shares:

An older, single woman from Europe visited us one day in our village home. During her visit, a lay leader in the village church expressed his desire to have sexual intercourse with her. When I asked him what Scripture said about the situation, he replied that a servant of Christ should meet the needs of others. He assumed that as an unmarried woman her sexual needs would be great, and that the Christian response to her would be to meet those needs. (Hill, *Missiology* “Marriage and Morality” 1990, 329)

Despite the fact that there is a moral logic to his argument that is biblical (we should seek to meet the needs of others), I concluded, when I first read this, that something went haywire. Hill then probed into both culture and history to find just where things went wrong. Among other things she discovered that the indigenous view of sexual immorality and adultery did not match the biblical view. Adultery for a man was restricted to having sex with other *married* women. This mismatch between the biblical teaching and the local cultural understanding was not adequately addressed. I can imagine an early missionary teaching that adultery is a sin and local believers agreeing, “Yes, it certainly is!” We might say this is the same meaning with different

practices, with clear implications for how we do discipleship. How about the same practices that have different meanings?

Let's return to wife beating. This is a practice that occurs in both India and America. We saw that in Orissa, India that occasionally beating one's wife is morally approved. It is part of being a good husband, one who manages his household well (I Tim 3, and Titus 1). But in America what kind of husband beats his wife? Give me a profile. That profile typically includes beer, cigarettes, lower social class, and NASCAR, among other features. The wife-beater even has a shirt named after him. The implication of all this is that I would encourage the discipleship of one wife-beater differently than I would the other wife-beater. The leaders with whom I was working in Nepal were hard working, men who practiced total abstinence from alcohol and knew nothing of NASCAR. The profile was completely different. The practice was the same but the meaning of the practice was very different. And consequently, my response to how they treated their wives needed to be different as well. I sought to temper the culturally acceptable ways the Nepali man might manage his own household, with teaching on mutual submission, care and tenderness from Ephesians and the Song of Solomon. By the way my appeal to the song of Solomon was not altogether successful. One man denied that such texts were in the Bible.

An understanding of cultural realities should shape our ministry. One area of productive discussion more recently has been the consideration of guilt, shame and fear as moral cultural orientations. Sometimes you know that something cultural is going on when you see behavior that, through your lenses, doesn't fit, seems odd or is over the top. A couple of years ago while Margaret was finishing her PhD at The Ohio State University, a fellow Korean student failed in her PhD program and responded with hostility toward the administration and her advisors to the point of requiring a legal restraining order. For me, happy in my individualistic outlook on life, I would have told her to buck up, get over it and move on. Life is more than a degree. But there was more to the story. She had been selected and funded by the Korean government. She *represented* her family, and her nation in a prestigious program at a top university in the US. That was honorable, very honorable. She was part of a social web and what one does as part of that web ripples through the whole, either positive ripples or negative. She failed and her failure brought shame upon all those connected to her. It was a crisis that she desperately sought to rectify in any way she could.

In guilt-oriented cultures, like those of the West, priority is given to an impersonal legal code. These cultures tend to be individualistic. Shame-oriented cultures are collectivistic and give priority to the behavioral expectations of the community. Global Mapping International describes these orientations as cultural frameworks that function as a lens that "impact our understanding of the gospel" and how we read the Bible. It is true that no culture is entirely oriented to either guilt, shame or fear. But in most cultures one orientation is more dominant than the others. Contrasting guilt-innocence and honor-shame societies, transgression in the

former represents a loss of innocence; the latter represents a loss of face. Guilt leaves us with a sense of moral failure, even if no one else knows about our transgression.... In contrast shame leaves us with a sense of humiliation, defeat, and ridicule and is intricately tied to our exposure and loss of honor or status before our peers and those in authority within our social network. (Timothy Tennent, 2007. *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 79.)

Through the lenses of our Western guilt/innocence glasses we read the Bible. Themes of shame and honor are often invisible to Western guilt/innocence-oriented readers of the Bible. This is especially true with the Bible's teaching on sin. The first response of Adam and Eve upon their disobedience was to hide in shame (Genesis 3:8). Many descriptions of sin and its consequences are in terms of shame. Isaiah 7 says,

In that day, the Lord will shave with a razor, hired from regions beyond the Euphrates..., the head and the hair of the legs; and it will also remove the beard. (Isaiah 7:20 NASB)

These judgments were shaming judgments. Touching our understanding of the gospel itself, the death of Christ was a public shaming, in which Jesus bore our shame. And as Christ was raised and restored to honor, seated at the right hand of the father, so we are raised with him even though we experience the degrading shame of an unbelieving world. The death of Christ was not "a mere execution... [that] atoned for guilt" (Tennent 91). Was the cross retribution for God being dishonored by sin and rebellion? Is salvation a restoration of God's honor through Christ and our place of honor with him in the order of creation? Missiologist Bruce Nichols observes, "Christian theologians have 'rarely if ever stressed salvation as honoring God, exposure of sin as shame, and the need for acceptance and restoration of honor'" (Nichols, Bruce. 2001. "The Role of Shame and Guilt in a Theology of Cross-Cultural Mission," *Evangelical Review of Theology*, p. 232). What it means to put a biblical gospel into an honor-shame society is still being worked out.

In conclusion, turn to 1 Corinthians 3. In this letter, Paul reveals much about his ministry. The occasion of Paul's remarks in chapter 3 is jealousy and strife among the Corinthian believers (3:3). Some in the church were identifying with one apostle and some with another. One is saying "I am of Paul." Another "I am of Apollos." Then Paul writes of his role in ministry in verses 5 through 10. Let me read,

What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it.

The observation I want us to see in this text is this. Ministry is a divine-human cooperative. Paul and Apollos are “God’s fellow workers.” It would be a misinterpretation of this text to read vs. 7, “Neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth,” and conclude it was Paul’s view that it didn’t matter how he went about his ministry. It did matter. He says in vs 10 that he approached his ministry as a *wise* master builder. He ministered with skill and careful attention with the goal of being as effective as possible.

This is then illustrated in chapter 9. In this text, familiar to all missionaries, he says,

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

The only thing I would like to draw from this text is this: how we go about our work for the gospel makes a difference. It made a great deal of difference for Paul as he pursued obedience to his commission to break new ground for the gospel among those groups that had no access to it.

Why do ethnography... as missionaries? Because being a “wise master builder” requires us to be careful, intentional, deliberate students of our host cultures in order to save some. Ethnography gives *attention* to the world of human behaviors and meanings which provides the knowledge we must add to our zeal.