

Why Cultures Are Different

By David Burnett

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It was a typical hot sunny day in Madras as the little taxi hurried through the streets to the church where I was to speak. I had my wife and one-year-old daughter with me. It was a struggle to get out of the taxi with my daughter in one hand and my Bible in the other. Quickly I reached into my shirt pocket to give the driver the necessary rupees. As I handed him the money I saw a look of disgust flash across his face. Then I realised what I had done - I had handed him the money with my left hand. I could only apologise whilst the taxi driver smiled in sympathy at the foreigner. I could almost hear him thinking, 'Why are foreigners so strange?'

Stories such as this could be shared by anyone who has worked in another country for any period of time. They illustrate some of the practical problems of relating to the people of another country. To understand the basic problem it is first necessary to clarify the meaning of the word 'culture'.

'Culture' is a familiar word in the English language. In its popular usage it means good music, art, refined behaviour, and speaking with a well-educated voice. People lacking these refinements are often thought of as being 'uncultured'. For the social scientist such activities are simply elements within the totality of the culture; 'culture' is the total way of life of a society. There are no uncultured societies or individuals. Every society has a culture, no matter how strangely different it may appear to someone from another society. In going to work in another country one will quickly realise the differences that exist, and it is necessary to learn how to work within the context of that culture. This will certainly be a strain to some degree or another, yet it can prove to be one of the most enriching experiences of one's life.



Culture generally has six aspects to it.

1. Culture is shared

Culture is shared by a group of people. If only one person thinks or acts in a certain way, that thought or action represents a personal habit, not a pattern of culture. For something to be considered cultural, it must be shared by a group of individuals.

For example, an English person shares certain values, beliefs, and behaviour patterns with other English people. These shared customs allow them to predict, to some extent, what can happen in their society, and how they should relate to the other people in the group. In so doing, it gives the individual a sense of familiarity with the people, and an identification with that group. It is the shared customs of a society which constitute our main concern and which are called 'culture'.

2. Culture is customs

Culture is rather like the layers of an onion. When one peels off one layer it reveals another, deeper layer. Initially you become aware of many of the outer aspects of the culture of the people, but with time you begin to appreciate deeper aspects of their way of life. The outer layers of culture which tend to catch our attention first are such things as how people dress, what food they eat, the houses they live in, and the way they speak.

Take, for example, the ways people greet one another. Two Englishmen on meeting would grasp each other's right hand and shake it. In Italy the two men would embrace each other, and kiss each other on the cheek. In India each puts his hands together and raises them towards his forehead with a slight bow of the head. The Japanese would exchange business cards, and give a bow from the waist. All these are different behaviour patterns, but each conveys a similar meaning to the group of people concerned.

In many societies it is common for people to sit on rush mats – which can be a physical trial to those of us used to sitting on chairs! Then there is the matter of eating. Europeans take it for granted that when they sit down for a meal they will be provided with a knife and fork. Yet millions of people find the knife and fork as strange and awkward as we do chopsticks. Some people eat with their right hand, which seems strange to those of us brought up not to touch our food, apart from the sandwich.

British exporters are becoming aware of these and other cultural factors in their overseas trading. 'Getting straight down to business' may look efficient in European and North American countries, but in other areas of the world it may appear crude and distasteful. One must greet the other people properly, and ask about the well-being of their families before turning to business.

Etiquette can be the source of many cultural mistakes. For example, the Japanese are often shocked at the loud nose-blowing of the European. It is not considered proper etiquette in Japanese society. An Englishman would embarrass his wife if, after a large piece of his favourite apple pie, he failed to muffle his every belch. However, in much of China a loud belch is considered a polite way of saying 'Very delicious indeed!'

3. Culture is language

Language is an important aspect of any culture as it allows the people to communicate between themselves. Thus, learning a language is an important part of being able to

relate to people of a particular culture. Yet language learning is not just a matter of finding the local equivalent to your particular English word. All languages have their idioms and expressions which carry specific meaning. An Englishman speaking to an Indian visitor to this country said, 'I will pick you up at six o'clock.' The visitor was left puzzling over why the man wanted to lift him up from the ground, and especially why he wanted to do this at six p.m.

Culture-related idioms can often lead to misunderstandings. Elijah was driving in Nairobi when he had a slight bump in his car in a parking area. He sought out the owner of the vehicle, and then asked for a message to be phoned to his wife to explain his delay. When he arrived home an hour or so later he found her mourning his death. On the telephone, the message had been conveyed that Elijah had been involved in a car accident. Her immediate question was, 'Is he there?' She was told, 'No.' Her mind was in such a state that she heard nothing else. Although she spoke in English, she was thinking in Kikuyu. 'Is he there?' meant 'Is he alive?' The reply was intended to be reassuring in that he was not there but was on his way home. However, she interpreted it as 'No, he's not alive.' She was too overwhelmed to take in anything else.

If the communication of a comparatively straightforward event of a minor accident causing a slight delay was so liable to misunderstanding, we need to be aware of the greater dangers of miscommunication which can occur at other levels.

4. Culture is values and ideas

Customs are the practical expression of a culture, and they reveal the values and institutions of the people - the deeper layers of the onion. At this level are included such practices as marriage, law, education, religious ritual, economics and art.

At the deepest level of any culture is a set of basic ideas shared by the community and fundamental to its whole way of life. These basic ideas are frequently called the 'world-view' of the people, and may or may not be recognized by the people themselves. Almost always these ideas are so 'obvious' that no one of that society would ever conceive of questioning them.

For example, Western culture never considers the possibility that the material world is anything but real and tangible. People may then ask whether there is anything other than this material world which we can see and examine. However, in classical Indian philosophy the supreme reality is Brahma, and all else is maya - illusion. This explains why an Indian guru will spend much time in meditation, because for him the material world is not ultimate reality. By contrast the Westerner focuses attention on the material world, and tends to place a priority on technology and material inventions.

Western people find satisfaction in establishing orderly limits to ideas and daily life. Clarity of thought is for us a sign of intelligence. This is the result of our Graeco-Roman heritage, subsequently fortified by the influence of rationalists such as Descartes and Locke. Ideas must be precise, scrutinised, analysed and classified. By contrast, the Baoule of the Ivory Coast thirst for unity rather than analysis. They desire cohesion, and abhor separating and specifying. They want a unity of nature between man and the supernatural.

During a class on sex education geared to illiterate Baoule, male and female physiology was explained and diagrams and pictures were used to show the development of the foetus. It was all very clear, but at the end of the session the people

went away saying: 'We saw a lot of things, but that is not the way one has children; there is something invisible behind all that, and that is where truth is to be found.'

It is at this level that religious ideas are of great importance. The Westerner may have great difficulty with the proof of whether God exists, but most societies consider his existence is obvious and without question. Many African societies have a notion of a supreme creator god who for some reason has withdrawn from them. The world is therefore dominated by lesser gods and spirits, and it is to these that sacrifices must be given. Sickness is considered to be the result of affliction by one of these spiritual beings who is wanting to harm the person. Physical causes are not an acceptable explanation of why a person has contracted an illness. The Western doctor may diagnose malaria, for example, and explain that it is caused by a mosquito bite. However, the question that may be asked is: 'Who sent the mosquito?' Someone must have wanted to cause that person ill.

5. Culture is learnt

How is it that the English behave in one way, the Chinese in another, and the Arabs in yet another? Not all the features which are generally shared by a population are cultural. The typical hair colour or blood group is not cultural, and neither are sleeping and eating instincts. Culture is not passed on by genetic inheritance from one generation to another. Rather, it is the process of learning from the previous generation. Sleeping and eating are not cultural actions in themselves because one does not have to learn them, but when and where to sleep and how and what to eat are learned activities.

So a Chinese baby raised in an English-speaking environment will not know a word of Chinese. That may seem an obvious deduction because language is acquired during childhood, but we fail to appreciate the multitude of other factors which are similarly acquired. This allows us to distinguish between what is racial and what is cultural. A child can be considered as having been born cultureless, but quickly begins to learn what are the ways of his or her society. So, even before the child is old enough to evaluate, he is being conditioned, she is being conditioned, by society to speak and act in certain ways.

This process of conditioning continues throughout our lives. Gradually, these patterns become the habits of daily life which allow us to predict the behavior of others, and to concentrate on more important aspects of life. The habits and values which make up culture are passed on from one generation to another.

A nomad from the semi-arid Sahel will pass on to his children the skills of looking after their cattle. He will show them how to find good grazing, and to breed the stock. A farmer will pass on to his children the skills of growing crops. The cultural heritage of a people is handed down by the process of subconscious learning and assimilating.

Because most of us are brought up within only one culture we tend to be ignorant of the fact that there are other ways of living. We assume that because we have been brought up to follow certain patterns, must be the best. An Englishman trying to eat with chopsticks for the first time may quickly come to the conclusion that it is better to eat with a knife and fork. Strangely, however, a Chinese lady eating with a knife and fork for the first time will conclude that chopsticks are far better! In fact, both people would, with practice, develop a dexterity with the various alternative tools, but at first they are strange and unfamiliar. It is therefore easy to make the initial conclusion that one's own

ways are better than those of other people. This attitude is found in all societies, and is known as 'ethnocentrism', or more simply 'cultural pride'.

It is not only Europeans who are proud of their heritage - Arabs are proud of their culture, and look back to the time when the Arab Empire was a great civilisation which stretched from Spain across India. Likewise the Chinese looked down on the European sailors as being 'white devils'. Ethnocentrism is a two-way process: we may judge other people's customs as crude, but they may well feel the same about ours.

A Christian working overseas must be aware of the cultural prejudice which is common to us all. Ethnocentrism has an illusive character about it, and although we are unable to notice it in ourselves, those from other cultures find it dominant and often offensive. It can even lead some to argue that not only are their ways best, but as a result their people are best. This is racial prejudice.

6. Culture is integrated

One important aspect of any culture which is frequently overlooked is that it is an integrated system. A people do not just eat in one way, dress in another, work in another, and worship in another without reference to the other activities.

This integrated nature of culture is clearly seen in community development. In 1951 a yellow Cuban maize was introduced into the eastern lowlands of Bolivia. It had many apparent advantages. It grew well in the tropics, matured more rapidly, was less subject to insect attack, and produced a higher yield per unit of land.

The new maize seemed to be an excellent means of improving the diet of the people, and it has indeed proved to be very popular - but not for the reasons anticipated. Its very hardness, desirable from the standpoint of storage, makes it difficult to grind, and the people are unwilling to take the time and trouble to haul it to commercial mills in towns. It does however make excellent commercial alcohol, and prices are high. Thus a seemingly desirable innovation promoted alcohol instead of an improved diet.

The 'oneness' of culture needs to be appreciated especially in relation to Christian witness. We cannot simply think that we can replace the religion of a people by Christianity without radically affecting the rest of their culture. Their religion is interwoven with the whole culture, and any change will have far-reaching repercussions. The anthropologists are correct when they say that missionaries have changed the cultures of people. The gospel will act like 'salt' (Matthew 5:13), purifying the culture of the people and removing that which is tainted with sin. However, we must confess, with the Lausanne Covenant: 'Missions have all too frequently exported with the gospel an alien culture, and churches have sometimes been in bondage to this culture rather than the Scriptures.'

An understanding of the nature of culture is a long way from providing an answer to all the issues of working in another society, but it will help you in a number of ways. First, it will give you a greater appreciation of why people behave and think as they do. You will see that many of their ways are not so much strange, or primitive, or even wrong, but are just different from yours. Learn to appreciate, and even enjoy these differences. Secondly, it will help you to recognise that you are a product of your own culture. You will then learn more about yourself, and this will help you to evaluate your own lifestyle in the light of the Bible.