

Challenges of Intercultural Living and Service

Steve Eliason

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Abstract

Kraft (1997) uses two illustrations to describe culture and how it interacts with people in that society: “A culture may be likened to a river, with a surface level and a deep level” (p. 31) “We may liken the interaction between people and their cultures to that between actors and their scripts ...” (p.38). This paper discusses the notions of culture as river bed and as the script of a drama. Examples from intercultural living and serving in the Philippines are cited and explained. Factors such as Translation and Communication, Choice of Words and Sentences, Language Learning and Progress through Errors of Understanding, Worshipping at the feet of Science, and the need to Understand the Culture of the Community You live in – *We Can Do It vs No, We Can't!* are focused upon.

Key words: intercultural living, images of culture, translation and communication, errors of understanding.

Images of Culture

Kraft (1997) uses two illustrations to describe culture and how it interacts with people in that society: “A culture may be likened to a river, with a surface level and a deep level” (p. 31) “We may liken the interaction between people and their cultures to that between actors and their scripts ...” (p.38)

The image of culture as a river is used to differentiate between what we can observe and what is partially or completely hidden. If one assumes that what is seen is all that there is, we are consciously or unconsciously forced to interpret meaning through the hidden things of our own

culture. This will likely result in misunderstanding because unconfirmed assumptions have a great potential for error.

Worldview as River Bed

The characteristics of a river are based on three things: water, earth and gravity. Water is the obvious definitive element, which can be compared to the cultural patterns of any society. But it is the bed of the river that gives the river its distinction. I would compare the structure of the river bed to the worldview, beliefs and values of a culture. We observe the consequences of the structure beneath the surface, but to understand the structure, the how and why of its flows, obliges us to investigate the nature of that structure.

The physics of the earth is often forgotten altogether. Were it not for gravity, there would be no flow and therefore no river. As a religious person I would compare this to God, the unseen One, the power that creates and makes things work. It affects all things, not just the river, so it brings cohesion and order on the largest scale.

Culture as the Script of a Drama

The illustration of culture as a script is given in the context of differentiating between culture and the people of that culture and why change in culture happens. Kraft contends that culture has no independent life; it is not a thing that exists, but is only made alive by the people who give it definition. For that reason culture is like the script actors use in a play; they basically follow it, but if circumstances demand adjustments, they can do that. An observer of the play probably has no idea that such adjustments are occurring. Unless they were quite familiar with the script they couldn't differentiate between pure memorization and improvisation.

Our Living in the Philippines

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In the first village we lived in I was quite shocked to see that married women were quite comfortable taking their shirts off to take a dip bath by whatever pump they normally used. Since this was not an isolated incident or practiced by only a few women, I took it to be standard operating procedure in provincial life. I held this conviction for almost a year until I heard Filipinos from other villages commenting about the same thing, and how surprised and ashamed they were.

What I thought was script-following was actually a local improvisation based on a particular historical event (the Japanese took the clothes away from the people of this village during World War II to control them). The lesson for a religious and social worker like me and my wife is to be wary of drawing conclusions about observed behavior until one learns the script (the cultural patterns).

Translation and Communication

It is important that when we make an effort to learn and live in another culture, we need to develop some clear notions of local culture, its subsystems, forms and meanings, and the relation of the individual to the group, based on our observations and available studies. Of ultimate concern for the intercultural social and religious worker is that he or she communicates clearly when he or she wants to communicate their message. This requires both a cultural and linguistic interpretation, and naturally the process is wrought with complications.

Kraft makes a very relevant observation for all of us. Whether it is at the level of speech or writing, we need to choose and use local forms that would fully reflect what we really want to communicate. Talking about the translation of the Bible and the Bible translators, he suggests that “The experience of Bible translators is that, in general, it is less risky to use indigenous forms than to import foreign labels for concepts that already exist in the language.” (p.143)

This has been carefully adopted by translators of the Bible into languages such as Tamil in South India. The Tamil translation, I understand, follows the natural and commonly used style and diction.

Choice of Words and Sentences

Since words are forms which represent meaning, choosing them, as Kraft says, carries an element of risk. The risk is the likelihood of misunderstanding or misinterpretation. The classic problem faced by translators is what word should be used for God. The indigenous form likely carries ideas which are not biblical, yet a foreign form, at least initially, carries no capacity for meaning. The local people are forced to ask themselves, “What do they mean when they use this word?” All they can do is rely on existing similar concepts and come to their own conclusions, which generally means retaining the same meaning. So a religious and/or social worker shouldn’t think that just because the people he or she serves begin using or even praying to “God” that they mean the same thing he or she does.

Language Learning

Even non-religious forms in language can prevent the foreign social and religious worker from communicating well. Our team in the Philippines used a language learning approach that required us to memorize a few sentences and repeat as often as we could to whomever would listen. The first step was to come up with English sentences we wanted to say, then get them translated, then practice until they were memorized and finally go out and share them.

This first step was sometimes not well thought out! We came in thinking like Americans, so we asked questions that Americans would ask. We didn’t think to ask our Filipino language helpers to give us ideas about how they have conversations. That is something that is so unconscious one does not have to think about it.

One of the first sentences we wanted to translate was the typical American greeting, “How are you?” It was short, which was important since we had to memorize it, and it seemed like an appropriate question to ask. The translator translated it, “Kumusta-ka?” This is a very literal translation, so we thought, “Great! That’s one of the simplest sentences we’ve had to learn!” We used that constantly for most of the first couple of years.

Progress through Errors

But once my Ilokano improved I noticed that sometimes the answers to that question made no sense. I would be sitting on my porch and someone would walk by and I’d greet them in Ilokano with, “How are you?” and then I’d hear, “There!” What kind of answer is that? I eventually noticed that when someone was passing by your home, the person at home would either say, “Pappanam?” or “Naggapuam?” which meant “Where are you going?” or “Where have you been?” depending on if you are going to or from your home. If the person walking was first to speak, he would normally say, “Lumabasak pay” which meant, “I’m just passing by.” That has other cultural implications.

Looking back at greeting I first learned, I realized this was really just a foreign expression, taken from the Spanish. “Como estas?” was translated to “Kumusta-ka?” Filipinos rarely asked that question! By asking the questions they asked, I sounded more like them, using the appropriate forms instead of simply translating my American ones. Anytime we can do that we will increase our odds of communicating well.

My Worldview: Worshipping at the Feet of Science

Until I lived for several years in a very different culture, I did not realize the degree to which I worshipped at the feet of science; it was clearly a conviction of my subconscious worldview. But as I became more aware of the deep seated control this worldview had on me, I saw examples of my Western culture promoting this idea everywhere. Kraft declares, “We have become victims of our

drive to control the universe and have made the vehicle of that mastery (science) our real religion” (p.177). Kraft also suggests, “the western technological focus,[is] driven by a worldview bent on control and efficiency” (p. 177).

An Example from *Iron Man 2*

The U.S. media is full of amazing statements expressing this view. Consider this dialogue from the movie *Iron Man 2* that defines what the Western man “manipulates the environment”:

Tony Stark: And now, making a special guest appearance from the great beyond to tell you what it's all about, please welcome my father, Howard.

Howard Stark: Everything is achievable through technology. Better living, robust health, and for the first time in human history, the possibility of world peace. So, from all of us here at Stark Industries, I would like to personally introduce you to the City of the Future.”

There was no guffawing from the audience in the movie itself or in the theater where people were watching it. It was simply regarded as a true statement, and we were just waiting for the answer!

One of the first expressions of this view of technology that I observed was from a Honeywell commercial several years ago. Granted, they make thermostats, which are designed to control the temperature of a room, but the statement was a rather audacious one nonetheless:

“Honeywell- Helping you control your world.”

We Can Do It!

The consistent message of the West is “*We Can Do It!*” This was the famous statement in an American wartime propaganda poster produced by J. Howard Miller in 1943 for Westinghouse Electric. Barak Obama used a modification of this expression as his 2008 presidential campaign slogan, “*Yes we can!*” These sorts of cheers are accepted because we have a firmly established assumption that this is true.

Understand the Culture of the Community You live in – *We Can Do It vs No, We Can't!*

The situations where this worldview assumption impacts a social and religious worker are everywhere. The opposite of this assumption is a fatalistic worldview that says, “*We can't do it*”, or “*No, we can't.*” I ran into the consequences of this thinking in 1987 when my wife and I tried to help a family with a medical situation. Since our Team had established a policy of bringing situations to the group that might demand a lot of involvement or money, we presented this family's case. We agreed that we couldn't pay for the surgery that the doctor said was necessary, but that we could buy a two-man saw so the husband could work to get cash to pay for it (we lived right down the road from a large sawmill). Since the husband worked as a day laborer, we assumed he would embrace this technology and opportunity to make money and save his wife's life. But he declined, simply stating that if his wife would die, she would die. We were confused, angry and finally hurt as we watched this woman die. Our, “*We can do it!*” worldview faced off against his, “*No, we can't*” worldview and his prevailed.

Do Not Pass Judgment

Our response to such beliefs may be negative, but as Kraft says, “our aim at this point is to understand, not pass judgment” (p.218). The intercultural worker will face this again and again, but the best that he or she can do is to seek to understand on a deeper level why the people believe what they do, and then seek to help give an understandable answer or solution from their perspective.

Reference

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