

Learning All About Other Communities

Steve Eliason

Abstract

To truly understand how we want to communicate our message in another culture it would require that we have to ask questions we wouldn't normally need to ask when working among those who are similar to us. In cultures such as the Filipino culture, in situations of conflict, broken relationships and shame had to be avoided at all cost. This made sense because interdependence was critical to survival. Because all of us eventually become comfortable with our own culture, the vast majority of its characteristics are held subconsciously. When we are confronted with someone from another culture who holds different beliefs (also subconsciously), it is not surprising that there is confusion, conflict misunderstanding. As a consequence, we all normally respond with some form of ethnocentrism.

Key words: Cultural anthropology, Filipino, social judgments of languages and dialects.

Knowledge of Cultural Anthropology

Howell and Paris (2011: *Introducing Anthropology - A Christian Perspective*, Baker Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI.) suggest: "Anthropology develops the abilities to ask the right questions, observe more critically, and think more deeply about the differences and similarities we will encounter ..." (p.21)

As I consider my own personal life, I feel happy that during a major part of life and my wife's life we have been engaged in cross-cultural service. We know for sure that the importance of understanding the lessons of cultural anthropology cannot be underestimated. Yet, it is not that easy.

Ask Right Questions

To truly understand how we want to communicate our message in another culture it would require that we have to ask questions we wouldn't normally need to ask when working among those who are similar to us. I think the key skill any cross-cultural worker needs to nurture is the ability to ask "the right questions," questions which will enable one to grasp the significance of words and behavior. This will also prevent one from unintended consequences, since being unfamiliar with the implications of words and behavior can be devastating to the intended message. We must be careful not to miscommunicate our intended message.

Cultural Elements Specific to the Communities

During my first term in the Philippines, I quickly realized I had not been taught to ask the right questions or to give the right message. I simply asked the same questions I would have asked any American if I was witnessing or going over a Bible text or any other text. Soon we realized that there was a cultural element specific to the community with whom we were working. There was a more important element which impacted the Filipinos most. In situations of conflict, broken relationships and shame had to be avoided at all cost. This made sense because interdependence was critical to survival, and if you became isolated, you would eventually die. When conflict occurred, a go-between, a "mangbabaet" was employed to do the communication to avoid personal, direct confrontation. This reality helped all of us to communicate our message and work together both in the spiritual realm and in day-to-day transactions.

Meaning of Cultural Differences

"This understanding of culture – as plural, porous, and power-laden – has led anthropologists to reevaluate the meaning of cultural differences. If there is no singular direction to 'progress' – if cultures change in response to historical events, environmental issues, and power dynamics – cultural differences must be evaluated on their own terms...this is the foundational anthropological concept of cultural relativism." (Howell and Paris, 2011, p.30)

Because all of us eventually become comfortable with our own culture, the vast majority of its characteristics are held subconsciously. When we are confronted with someone from another culture who holds different beliefs (also subconsciously), it is not surprising that there is confusion, conflict misunderstanding. As a consequence, we all normally respond with some form of ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism

Three types of ethnocentrism are mentioned by Howell and Paris, 2011: **xenophobia**, **cultural superiority** and **tacit ethnocentrism**.

Xenophobia

Because of my deliberate training in my undergraduate classes, I believe I can truly say that I did not demonstrate xenophobia while living in the Philippines, but I know that I did believe in some unmerited American superiority.

One example of this was in the area of honesty. A common reaction by an Ilokano when asked to contribute to a cause or to simply buy something was, “Awan kuartak” (“I have no money”). But I knew this wasn’t true, I had just seen them spend money on gambling or junk food or a ride to town. I had begun to view them as habitual liars, even Christians, and prided myself on being more truthful, more honest than they. What I failed to understand was what they meant when they said they had no money. As time went on, I realized that there was an unspoken word critical in this expression. It was the word “extra.” They were simply saying that they couldn’t afford whatever it was that was demanding money, or that it wasn’t important or valuable enough for them to spend their pitifully small savings. Once I realized this, I found it to be a very useful phrase myself!

Time Orientation

Another example of my ethnocentrism had to do with the area of time orientation. As an American, I viewed time as a commodity to be “spent”, so we must value everyone’s time by coordinating our activities so we don’t “waste” anyone’s time. When it came to having meetings,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:10 October 2014

Steve Eliason

Learning All About Other Communities

this cultural belief regarding time caused me to once again extol the superiority of the American way. Even our Filipino President seemed to strive to change the village mentality regarding time, although I never really saw him frustrated when church members failed to comply with an 8:00 am starting time for a service. Thoughts like, "They're stealing my time or they're so thoughtless" filled my mind. But I misunderstood them. Their life experience had rarely been dictated by a clock, only by people and events. Such a life demanded flexibility, because people, the events involving people and those relationships were the most important thing. Too many unforeseen circumstances made this a necessary perspective to get through life.

Once I realized this, I chose to live life with them with a similar view and found that I felt better about them and our relationships. It made life so much more enjoyable and the objectives of a church meeting were fulfilled without the angst and frustration caused by my American preoccupation with the clock.

Social Judgments of Languages and Dialects

Howell and Paris (2011) point out "Three issues of importance to sociolinguists include social judgments of languages and dialects, multilingual societies, and language contact." (p.53)

Brian Howell, one of the authors, "spent a summer doing fieldwork in a small mountain village in the northern Philippines, interviewing people and learning about the process of social change following the widespread conversion to Christianity" (p.3). This was understandably interesting for me since he was relatively close to where I worked and mentioned at least one man I knew from his time there.

Tagalog versus Other Languages and Dialects

One of the observations he made while in the Philippines related to the "social judgments of languages and dialects." The Filipino language is based on one of the eight major languages found in this archipelago of over 7000 islands. Tagalog was the language around the capital region of Manila, so as the country was drawing near to independence, the commonwealth government created a "national" language based on Tagalog.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:10 October 2014

Steve Eliason

Learning All About Other Communities

When a Language is Called a Dialect

This was a circumstantial decision, based on geography, not number of language speakers. A far greater number of Filipinos counted Cebuano as their first language, and to this day, many Cebuanos prefer English to Filipino if they don't use Cebuano. The "social judgments" the authors refer to are demonstrated in the way many Filipinos speak of their own language. There is a subtle superiority exhibited when a language is called a dialect. I found this to be true as I improved in Ilokano. Many commented that they were surprised I had learned their "dialect;" very few referred to Ilokano as a language. And even though most of the people we worked among would consider Ilokano their first language, they were also surprised we didn't learn Tagalog/Filipino instead. There was clearly a sense of inferiority attached to the Ilokano language, so as religious and social workers we intentionally promoted Ilokano by translating songs and Bible study helps into their language.

Need for a National Language

I can understand the need for a national language; it brings a sense of cohesion to people who might be very dissimilar, yet count themselves as fellow citizens. The younger people tended to prefer using Tagalog the further along they went in school. During the presidency of Corazon Aquino (1986-1992), laws were put in place for radio stations to limit the number of English songs being played and required that Tagalog songs be included in the playlist. This was all very intentional, as the need to build a sense of nationalism among diverse communities was important especially during the time immediately following the People Power Revolution of 1986.

The lesson for a religious and social worker is to be aware of assumptions regarding the use of language and how one ought to refer to different languages in the country of service. One can affirm a nation by honoring or recognizing the national language, while at the same time giving honor to other languages. Doing this is really honoring people and also better communication and understanding will be achieved. Jesus for example, used the relatively "back

country” language of Aramaic while living on the earth, although he was undoubtedly familiar and used Hebrew, his people’s “national” language.

Reference

Brian M. Howell and Janell Williams Paris, 2011. *Introducing Anthropology - A Christian Perspective*, Baker Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI.

Steve Eliason
Faculty
Bethany Global University
Bloomington, MN 5543
USA
stevenjeliason@gmail.com