





**ABSTRACT**

**A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF  
CAMBODIAN METHODIST CHURCH WORSHIP SERVICES  
AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR EVANGELISM**

by

Kevin Lowe Joo Oon

Cambodia has been identified as one of Methodism's fastest growing fields of mission today. It is also unique in a sense that Methodist mission agencies from five different countries began missions there separately at different times (the earliest being eighteen years ago), not knowing of the other's existence and work. Since then, close to two hundred churches have been planted, as well as, many other social ministries. Having served over six years as a missionary sent by the Methodist Church in Singapore, I believe that I am strategically placed at a point in time in the life of the Methodist mission and church in Cambodia to make an assessment of the apparent growth. I am inclined to think that cultural factors played an important part.

The assessment will take on a cultural tack. However, I also believe that cultural factors are currently used as expressions of worship only and not consciously exploited in evangelism. Therefore, a study of cultural factors to uncover core beliefs and underlying worldviews of Cambodians found in their culture was made. An ethnographical study of the many cultural expressions found in Cambodian Methodist churches' worship, wedding, funeral services was conducted. The study was done by participating and observing in the three types of worship services, personal and group interviews with pastors and leaders of the churches observed.

Findings yielded worldviews that presented many bridges where the gospel can be effectively presented and correctly understood. As a result I hope that findings will be pertinent and instrumental to further evangelism, discipleship and church growth. Otherwise the inability to contextualize the gospel message in Cambodian thought would also mean an uncertain future for Christianity in Cambodia. Faith comes from hearing (as in understanding) and contextualization is imperative for understanding. The Cambodian church is not too much in its infancy, and the political and spiritual climate of the country of Cambodia remains tolerant and open. One must therefore take advantage of these privileges to further God's kingdom in Cambodia but in a manner that will endure by enabling Cambodians to speak to their own people and culture with the gospel.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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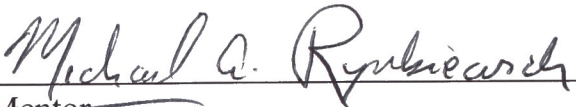
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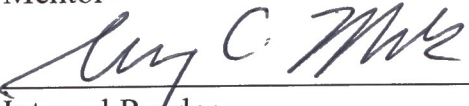
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## CHAPTER 1

### PROBLEM

I have often wondered how the gospel of Jesus Christ has become such a worldwide phenomenon. Someone once said that finally the Christian faith can now be called a world faith or a world religion for it can be found in all continents. A faith that was once borne from an ancient Hebraic background and Jewish culture has managed to travel concentrically outwards across the Roman and Grecian societies to other countries over time and space coming finally at the doorsteps and backyards of all people. Its relevance and universality is fascinating and intriguing. The gospel must have been able to enter and adapt to different cultures yet at the same time retain its pure and uncompromising message and power. Dr. E. Stanley Jones claims that the message and power of the gospel can withstand the shock of transplantation (33). People respond, lives are changed, and finally communities transformed without necessarily sacrificing or forfeiting local cultural distinctives.

Cambodia is steeped in ancient culture. Its people have a history, some people believe, dating as far back as two millennia from the Funon Empire. Cultural heritages have been passed down over the centuries incorporating influences of Indian-Chinese origins in the country's history as well as the not too distant colonial history of the French. The Christian faith, however, is a relative latecomer, the earliest witness being in the sixteenth century. The gospel needed to penetrate the established mind-set and worldview of the people of the land. Although conversion saw some measure of success, it was never to such an extent that the entire country was Christianized. One must not forget that on top of cultural and religious influences ingrained in Cambodia in the past,

its more contemporary political instabilities and recent tragic history (Khmer Rouge Holocaust) also stifled Christianity's expansion. Nevertheless, Cambodia has seen a reentry and resurgence of the Christian faith especially in the last decade and a half. The growth of the church has since been remarkable. The gospel is not just seen and heard but understood to be relevant to Cambodians' lives and culture. The faith has been received, embraced, and promptly assimilated so that the church can move towards indigenesness. This wide acceptance has come about, I believe, as a result of observing cultural sensitivities and understanding culture. Cambodians converted because they were able to understand, experience, and embrace the reality of the faith (and Jesus) for themselves in their own language and experience.

Cambodia is one of the fastest growing fields in Methodist missions today (Kimbrough). Church growth has been positive within the Methodist churches and its missions in Cambodia. I have been serving in Cambodia since 1998. Cambodia has, in the wake of a postwar era, opened itself to the international, and, more so, to the regional community which fosters an openness towards the gospel. Needs and opportunities to share the gospel abound. From a period of extreme suffering, the country, government, and people pine for a betterment of life that their recent past was unable to provide. Their openness to embrace new things is an unprecedented window of opportunity even for the church. The growth of the church is an indication of this openness. This growth of the Cambodian churches is, to a great extent different from the age of missionary expansion of the past. The growth, I believe, is more consistent with the cultural sensitivities required of missions. Cambodian churches planted are seen to be largely indigenous. They are expressed outwardly and distinctly by Cambodians and the Cambodian way.

The cultural factors and dimensions inherent in the Cambodian national culture warrant a closer look and study in order to understand and deploy these factors and dimensions extensively for evangelistic purposes.

### **The Purpose Stated**

The subject of culture is vast and wide in any cultural context and can never be fully nor comprehensively unearthed. This dissertation sought to understand how culture and gospel can play an integral part in evangelism in Cambodia. Attempting to understand all of Cambodian culture is foolhardy, may take more than a lifetime, or may not even be possible. Still, such research was vitally important. Because Cambodia is a traditional society bound deeply by culture, not surprisingly, worship services are wrapped or expressed in Cambodian cultural forms. However, I strongly contend that the inherent cultural factors employed are currently and mainly used for worship purposes and not explicitly nor consciously utilized for evangelism. Cambodian Christians themselves may not be overtly aware or conscious that culture plays as important a part in evangelism as in worship. Cultural forms are mainly employed because of nationalistic, identity, and traditionalistic purposes. The need to understand, employ, and show Cambodian Christians how to utilize and capitalize further on culture as strategies for evangelism is the very purpose this research was undertaken.

This study, therefore, examined typical Cambodian Methodist worshipping congregations in order to understand how the cultural aspects of worship they have employed in their worship services have positively aided in Cambodians' openness toward the Christian faith. It sought to discover and describe the cultural aspects of Cambodian culture, how they interplay and interact with the communication of the gospel



in the Cambodian context, and how they may contribute to and be capitalized for evangelism to the people of this land. The desire and intent of this research was to extract and localize the worldviews of the cultural forms found in their worship services, to explicate, teach, and make these worldviews known explicitly to local Christians and, more so, missionaries, and deploy these worldviews intentionally as strategies for evangelism.

This study was descriptive rather than prescriptive with the goal of assessing the importance and correlation of cultural factors to evangelism. The need to discern as much of the Cambodian culture as possible and construct as many viable bridges for the gospel to travel to the Cambodian people cannot be overemphasized. The importance of this subject of research is further underscored as it falls within the pivotal areas of Christian missions where contextualization and indigenusness determine authentic success of planted churches. I hope this research will thus help to increase the effectiveness of evangelism for both missionaries and local Christians as they understand and adopt cultural sensitivities as bridges for outreach. The research also aimed to safeguard the future of the Cambodian church in ensuring that the way missions are done by local churches to their own people will know the imperative nature of embracing and, at the same time, the peril of discarding or ignoring culture, so that it will lead to proper indigenusness, continuity, and healthy growth of the future Methodist Church in Cambodia. Otherwise, much like a rifle where small misaims will always lead to distant strays, wrong approaches will also inevitably produce weak Christians and churches in the distant future.

## **The Research Questions**

The growth of the Cambodian Methodist churches over a short period of time warrants closer observation and analysis of how this increase has come about. Apart from the Holy Spirit's anointing and empowerment, I am inclined to believe that missions undertaken by the respective agencies have sought to be sensitive to cultural issues. My leaning is that Cambodians were able to relate to Christian worship because it was expressed using Cambodian culture. For example, not even a single Methodist Church in Cambodia is bilingual. All churches planted use vernacular Khmer. Discerning what cultural factors are expressed in Cambodian Methodist churches and how they can be employed and exploited in evangelism was the aim of my research.

The three central research questions for the study were

1. What are the practices of Cambodian worshipping congregations presently found in the Methodist churches?
2. What do the observed practices mean to Cambodians and their congregations?
3. What are the underlying worldviews expressed in the observed practices of Cambodian Methodist churches, and how can they be deployed for evangelism?

## **Definition of Terms**

Several terms used in this research need to be defined for readers who may either be unfamiliar with them or to those whose understanding may differ from the meanings I intended.

## Culture

Culture refers to the total way of life of particular groups of people. Louis J. Luzbetak says that culture is a social design for living (60). Culture is an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given society and encapsulates everything about which an individual is concerned and involved in a society (Mayers 98). Culture is also learned and transmitted from generation to generation. It is the superglue that binds people together and gives them a sense of identity and continuity (Kwast, Origins and Nineteenth Century 362), which includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does, and makes—its customs, language, material artifacts, and shared system of attitudes and feelings. Culture would thus consist minimally of the following: manners, customs, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, laws, ideas and thought patterns, language, arts and artifacts, tools, social institutions, religious beliefs, myths and legends, knowledge, values, concept of self, morals, ideals, and accepted ways of behavior (Kohls 17).

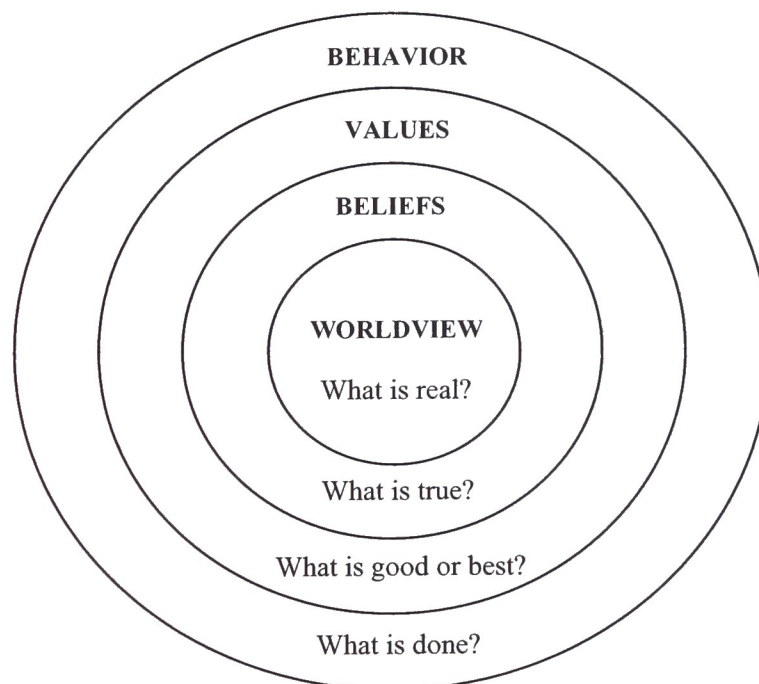
## Worldview

Worldview is the sum of ideas that an individual within a group and/or a group has of the universe in and around them. Clifford Geertz defines it as “the picture of the way things in sheer reality are” (127). Mendelson explains it more clearly:

Every worldview has a part of the self from another part, establishing a dialogue within the self: human nature from that which is not human; classes and categories of the human that is (sic) social persons; an entity called nature and another called God; orientation in time and space by reference to major natural or other phenomena; similar orientation to life crises in human existence. (qtd. in Medjuhon)

In other words, worldview deals with and tries to make sense of the ultimate issues of life and beyond. Worldview is a view of reality by which its members live. It is at the heart of

a culture and from it comes beliefs and values of a culture, which, in turn, influence its behavior. Worldview determines a person's view of God, of oneself, and of one's meaning in life. Helping to understand how a society makes decisions and ultimately manifests itself in its peculiar behavior is best seen as a diagram of concentric circles illustrated by Lloyd Emerson Kwast (see Figure 1). It demonstrates the classic “black box” problem—continual reductionism. Values cause behavior. Beliefs cause values. Worldview causes beliefs. People are motivated by what is inside the black box.



Source: Kwast, “Understanding Cultures” C-6.

**Figure 1. Cultural dimensions framework.**



In Kwast's diagram, the core of all cultures is the worldview or what is real, which affects beliefs or what is true, which, in turn, determines values or what is good, and eventually expresses itself in behavior or what is done ("Understanding Cultures" C-6).

### **Evangelism**

Good witnessing is a process that moves nonbelievers to progress closer to truth, righteousness, and Christ by helping them cross the borders of their beliefs towards conversion (Hiebert, Anthropological Reflections 14). A nonbeliever's understanding of Christ is colored by one's worldview and set of beliefs. The Holy Spirit's work of conviction is often not a sudden matter but a process of the Word of God taking root. The process of evangelism involves bringing people who initially have little or no awareness of the person and work of Christ to a situation in which they understand the meaning and implications of the truth of the gospel in a way that will be understood by the hearers in their own cultural context. Conversion takes place when one's blindness is ultimately dispelled, a realization of Jesus Christ as the only true God and a submission to him as one's Lord and Savior (Chew 38).

### **Context of the Study**

The focus of this study is on the Cambodian people and its culture. Many factors affect and subsequently attribute to a people's culture. The historical factor is definitely one of them. A brief account of the history of Cambodia may help shed light in understanding the Cambodian culture and context.

The country came into the international spotlight from its now infamous genocide, "the Killing Fields," under the dictator and Maoist Pol Pot. Preceding this episode, the

country had a colorful history and a glorious past stretching as far back as the ninth century (before that Hinduism and Buddhism played such an integral part of their culture dating Christianity). Its roots originated with the Angkor Empire. Cambodia then experienced Javanese invasion and influence, was colonized by the French, and succumbed to communist rule under the Vietnamese in the late twentieth century. In 1993, through the United Nations' assisted election, and subsequent elections in 1998 and 2004, the country stabilized. Though still a kingdom with a monarchy, Cambodia is fully democratic with an elected government today. The country is predominantly Buddhist, which is the state or national religion with a majority of ethnic Cambodians called Khmer. Its people are mainly agrarian and mostly living subsistent off the land and/or are day wagers. Still, they somehow manage not just to survive but occasionally to break into a smile with the little they have. Perhaps what has held the country and the identity of a people called the Khmer together is the steep cultural heritage passed down over the centuries.

Christian missions to Cambodia began with the Roman Catholics by Portuguese Dominican priests as early as the sixteenth century (Goh 181). The first Catholic mission to Cambodia in 1517 was not very successful; however, a Catholic presence was finally established in the year 1570, first by the Portuguese and then by the Spanish. Catholic success in Vietnam kept the focus there. French Catholics had the most success. Over four hundred years the Catholics merely produced a Cambodian prayer book. Only beginning in the late 1960s did they start to translate other Christian literature. The Catholic Church did not experience the numerical expansion that the evangelical church was enjoying. Converting Buddhists to Catholicism was not aggressively pursued by the

Catholic Church. Notwithstanding, the Nestorians had some form of success in passing Christianity to the Cambodians. In the Cambodian culture, for example, one finds the cross (Taylor 56-60) used to ward off evil spirits over the centuries, oral tradition of the creation, the Fall, and flood epics among minority groups, and the Cham people (ethnic minority in Cambodia) having ancient terms for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Maher).

One can learn vital lessons from and for church history from the extent and effects of Nestorian missions. Christianity had no lasting presence because only the form of Christianity was passed on. Somehow the message was not assimilated into the Cambodian life as the Nestorians failed to make the faith indigenous. The Scripture was not translated and indigenous leaders not trained. Not understanding the culture and worldview of people would inevitably result in a misfire of passing on the Christian faith. They did not know to whom or how they were communicating, nor did they discover how the message was being received.

Evangelical missions, on the other hand, entered the Cambodian scene later. Cambodia's recent history has been characterized by wars, coups, civil conflicts, and other spates of violence that have crippled the country's economy, resulted in millions of deaths, and hampered gospel work (Goh 181). The first Protestant missionaries arrived in 1923, translated the New Testament in 1933, and published the whole Bible in 1953. Its message was not welcomed and few believed or followed it. The history of the Cambodian church is a story of periods of growth alternating with periods of persecution culminating in a near annihilation of the church under the Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime. Also, Cambodians who have turned to Jesus Christ from Buddhism or animism have been accused of betraying their country.



The aftermath of the war and oppression saw many people open to the gospel, but the infant church needs much support and prayer. All the leaders are young, and most lack adequate biblical training. The church lacks unity with many divisions among congregations (“Cambodia Profile”). A major problem inherited then in Cambodian Christianity and the church has been the influx of many Christian organizations, churches, and denominations passing on their doctrines and practices wholesale. Again one sees a total disregard for culture and gospel. Only the forms of Christianity were passed down.

The ignorance between gospel and culture, however, is addressed more increasingly with Christian groups, mission agencies, and missionaries employing sensitivity to local culture and seeking consensus on Christian expression. The mission of the church must always seek to build mature, self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating, and, in more recent mission theological thought, self-theologizing congregations. The principle of self-theologizing believes that the presence of God has been in culture even before Christianity’s arrival. Culture then can and should serve as a tool to explain, understand, reveal, and express Christianity (Bevans and Schroeder 60).

### **Description of the Project**

This project sought to discover how culture has been effectively used in and through the life of the Christians and the church in their worship, and the potential of how much more of their culture can be exploited to make the gospel relevant to Cambodians especially in the spread of Christianity in this window of unprecedented opportunities. I gathered data about cultural practices and customs from Methodist congregations in their various worship services. The data was collected through the qualitative research

instruments of ethnography, namely participant and observation, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, and focus group interview. Worship services that included Sunday worship, weddings, and funeral services were easily observable and accessible. Arranging for pastors and lay leaders from churches for semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and focus group interview on what were observed were straightforward as good relationships granted easy access to the many pastors and lay leaders of the Methodist churches in Cambodia. Qualitative data analysis using the process of coding was employed to categorize and infer plausible deductions. Thereafter, a careful study of possible applications and implications for evangelism within the Cambodian cultural context was made.

### **Methodology**

This qualitative research presented an ethnographic study of cultural norms and forms in the Cambodian contexts. It sought to understand the perspectives and practices of Cambodian life by studying the various worship services conducted in the Methodist churches and, by way of a cultural analysis, examine what these norms imbued by the national culture mean. The methodologies involved included observation and description, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, and focus group interview for data collection. Data analysis employed the use of qualitative research analysis, beginning with a coding process. Thereafter, evaluations of the findings against biblical literature and theological understanding on the subject were made, conclusions drawn, cultural bridges identified, and relevant evangelistic themes, approaches, or methodologies from Scripture suggested. The fieldwork was conducted in Cambodia in the Khmer vernacular language.

## Subjects

In this project, analyzing data to shed light on Cambodian culture towards deployment in evangelism was researched within the church by detecting what and how culture is employed in Christian worship. In order to objectify findings from data that reflected more accurately and realistically cultural forms and norms in Cambodia, an adequately wide enough cross section and sampling size of subjects of study was included. They consisted of Cambodian Methodist churches, pastors, and lay leaders. The subjects for the study chosen were ten churches from the ten provinces through an ethnographical study from direct observation, description, and analysis of worshipping congregations, on Sunday worship, wedding, and funeral services; reflections and explanations from personal one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with ten Cambodian pastors and ten other lay leaders; and, finally, a focus group interview of ten people comprised of five pastors and five lay leaders.

As churches are littered all over the vast country, I restricted the number of churches visited to ten owing to time and distance. The criterion for selection of churches was that they represented a good and valid cross section of churches in Cambodia in terms of geographical (different provinces) and sociological (urban and rural) demography. The selection consisted of more than half of the provinces of Cambodia where churches exist. With the various instrumentations of research, collected data resulted in findings that confirmed and affirmed aspects of culture inherent of Cambodians. Ascertaining their worldviews from these cultural norms granted insight on their perception from which the gospel was accurately disseminated, so that whatever the gospel means for Christians is also received with the same meaning for Cambodians.



## **Variables**

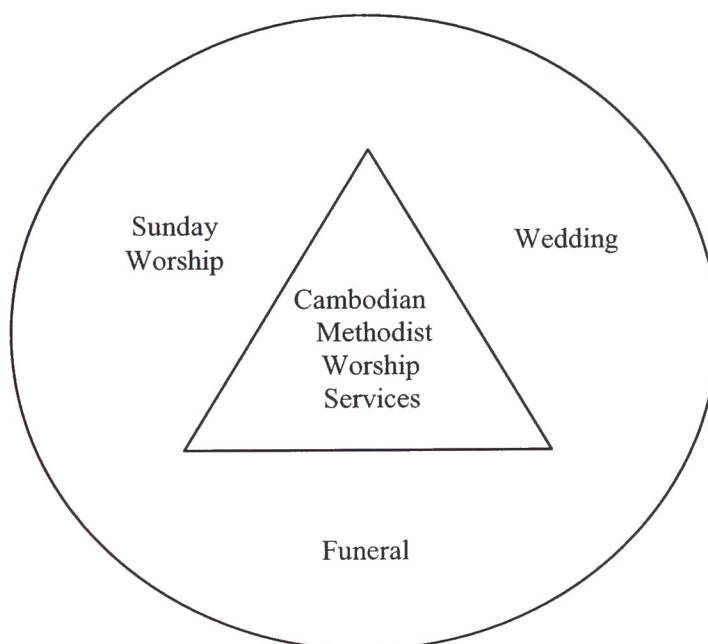
The goal of this research was not just to determine what cultural forms are used and practiced as it was to understand and eventually know what their behavior, action, symbols, and varied expressions mean. The aim was to peel the surface of superficiality in order to uncover values and most of all to expose the core of their belief—worldview. The independent variables for the study were the perspectives of the Cambodian churches in their worship which may include cultural dimensions such as behavior, symbols, forms, expressions, reasons, meanings, values, and, beliefs and worldviews (see Figure 1 p.#7). I further looked for data with cultural significance that according to Walter Goldschmidt, touches on the biological, psychological, spiritual, and sociocultural aspects of the human experience (134). The dependent variables for the study included the practices of the Cambodian churches in their worship. These characteristics include the following (Kohls 17; Medjuhon):

1. Religion—sacred, life, rituals, myths/legends, system of purity, sacred time, color, and place are all important pointers.
2. Tradition—beliefs, ideals, customs, symbols, arts/artifacts, tools, language, festivals, and ceremonies are key indicators.
3. Social norms—personality, concept of self, morals, laws, orientation, manners, knowledge, social institution, and acceptable behavior are all indispensable clues.

## **Instrumentation**

The needed data was collected through the qualitative research methods of ethnographical research—observation, description, and analysis, semi-structured one-on-

one interviews, and focus group interview. Traditional ethnography involves a blend of observation and interviewing. Bringing focus group into this combination uses group as well as individual interviews. Focus group supplemented or served as follow-up data to either complement or contrast the findings of earlier methods of ethnography (Morgan 3). A sample of ten congregations, ten pastors, and ten laypersons were selected from Cambodian Methodist churches for observation and interviews respectively. The church, its pastors, and lay leaders were observed in their worshipping contexts and interviewed individually and as a group. A worship observation schedule, based on a working framework of worship services (see Figure 2) such as Sunday worship, wedding, and funeral services, was designed for the purpose of this study.



**Figure 2. A working framework of worship services.**



The one-on-one semi-structured interview schedule, using the same working framework, aimed to understand pastors' and lay leaders' thinking, meanings, and values undergirding the worship symbols, forms, and actions. The focus group interview sought pastors' and lay leaders' consensual perceptions on culture, based on the cultural dimensions framework. The data was analysed by employing the process of coding.

### **Data Collection**

I visited ten Cambodian churches, observed and recorded the cultural forms Cambodia congregations are already using in their worship. Subsequently, I conducted personal interviews of ten pastors and as many church lay leaders individually, and some of these people were gathered together in a focus group interview of the topics at hand. Prior the interviews and focus group interview, I had to prepare and translate interview questions into Khmer. After the interviews were done, recorded and transcribed, I analyzed the data collected by coding them into different categories and finally identifying their behavior, values, beliefs, and worldviews.

### **Delimitations and Generalizability**

One of the most obvious delimitations is that this entire research was done through foreign eyes and minds no matter how colloquial I aspire to be in my interpretation of facts and figures. Constant safeguards against any form of bias, prejudice, presuppositions, and perceptions must be adopted. Fortunately, explanations derived directly from local Cambodians gave objectivity, balance, and accuracy as against mere observation and interpretation on my part.

The other delimitation present was that only two other qualitative research-type instruments were used in finding data other than sheer observation, interpretation, and

comparison, that is, via individual and focus group interviews. Nevertheless, the advantage of the painstaking case involved is that it allowed me to spend time with interviewees and enabled better clarification and greater insights.

Yet another delimitation to note is the recognition that human behavior is a very highly complex phenomenon. Many factors such as motivation, attitudes, and perceptions are not always immediately seen from overt actions or forms. The prospect of misinterpretation leading to misunderstanding and judgmentalism is always present.

Perhaps the last delimitation of which to be aware is the fact that the study of cultural anthropology in the quest to be more effective in cross-cultural missions is not a magical formula or a sure guarantee of evangelism's success. It also does not in any way substitute for the importance, imperativeness, or indispensability of the role that the Holy Spirit plays. Devasayagam S. Ponraj highlights this precaution clearly: "The study of cultural anthropology has its own limitations, and only the Holy Spirit has all the answers to solve all the problems which are faced by the missionaries on the field" (15). Marvin K. Mayers recognizes the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit but in no way diminishes the importance cultural anthropology plays:

Cultural anthropology is not a cure-all for missions. It is just one tool of a well-prepared missionary. Neither does anthropology replace the Holy Spirit. No real missionary work takes place apart from the Holy Spirit. How many Christians misunderstand the role and place cultural anthropology can have in effective ministry. (21)

The role of the Holy Spirit must be recognized and must not be displaced under any circumstances.

## Theological Reflections

Culture and evangelism are inseparable. When one thinks of evangelism, immediately, three Great Commission passages spring to mind. They can be found in the commonly quoted verses in Matthew 28:19-20, “Make disciples of all nations” (NIV), Luke 24:47, “Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations”, and Acts 1:8, “And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The word “nations” (*ethne* in Greek) from the first two passages is implicit of all ethnicities (cultural groups). The last verse actually spells out explicitly and comprehensively the differing cultural people groups that evangelism entails. Lesslie Newbigin emphasizes the need for cross-cultural mission:

But there are vast numbers of situations ... not only areas which are geographically distant from any Christian congregation, but also human communities which (even if there are Christian congregations in the vicinity) are effectively out of reach of Christian influence for reasons ethnic, cultural or political. (“Context” 309)

Cultural differences or distances cannot be ignored in evangelism.

Ralph Winter echoes this concept of cultural and not just geographical distance essential for evangelism with his explanation of E1-E3 types of evangelism which he popularized taken from Acts 1:8. The majority of non-Christians live at a cultural distance from the Christians. Winter adds, “In evangelism, cultural distance is always more important than geographical distance whether it consists of linguistic difference or structural prejudice barriers, obstructs effective communication no matter how close the evangelist is geographically” (#109).

One of the greatest challenges Christianity and the Church face in evangelism is how effectively and meaningfully to communicate the gospel to the many people of the



world, not only by missionaries but also by the local Christians to their own people. Cambodia is no different. John Stott and Robert I. Coote rightly say that “our failure of communication is a failure of contextualization” (Gospel and Culture 1). This failure of contextualization is very evident from the fact that in the process of establishing churches in non-Western nations, the culture of the Western church is more often than not transferred. Missionaries who think they are planting biblically founded indigenous churches are often, in fact, transferring their culture of Christianity to every nation of the world instead. From Eastern Europe, to Latin America, to Asia, trying to locate in the two-thirds world a truly indigenous church is difficult. Most churches reflect more the culture of the missionaries who planted them than they do the culture of the new believers.

A case in point is from my personal observation and experience. Having spent a year serving with the Methodist Church in Lower Myanmar (Burma), I find that being an autonomous/independent church is not synonymous with being an indigenous one. To illustrate, a comparison between the two sister Methodist churches/conferences of Lower Myanmar and my native land of Singapore was made. I arrived in Yangon, Myanmar (Rangoon, Burma) in October 2004 to participate in their one hundredth and twenty-fifth anniversary, the Methodist Church in Lower Myanmar having been founded in 1879. The Methodist Church in Singapore incidentally also celebrated its one hundredth and twentieth anniversary this year (2005), being younger by six years. The two churches were, however, founded by the same missionary pastor Bishop Thoburn who was the presiding bishop of the region. Presently, the Lower Myanmar and Singapore Conferences consist of about thirty and in excess of fifty churches Methodist churches

respectively. Both were born out of a missionary era coinciding with the colonial conquest by European powers, namely the British. Both conferences were endowed with plentiful funds, missionaries, properties, and church buildings, the form and architecture of which were reflective of the then glorious day and age.

The similarities, however, stop there. While Singapore became a democratic, progressive, and industrializing society and nation, Myanmar reverted to martial rule and dictatorship in the 1960s. While the Methodist Church grew from strength to strength in Singapore, with over 35,000 members today, the Methodist Church in Lower Myanmar is struggling with less than three thousand with an ongoing rate of decline. Consequentially, the church in Singapore prospered to the point of truly being independent, but the church in Lower Myanmar, though autonomous in status, continues to be dependent on handouts and donations from external benefactors.

Culturally, Singaporeans are generally Westernized stemming from education, media, and work, having adopted English as its language of commerce and Western laws and system as its *modus operandi* for public administration. Christianity that continues to be imported from the West still finds an audience who understands, relates to, and responds to Christianity wrapped in Western packaging. Myanmar, on the other hand, apart from using its *lingua franca* for ministry, sees the Christian expression no differently from Singapore. The great tragedy is that Myanmar has been in cultural isolation for the past thirty to forty years. Christians in Myanmar have difficulty comprehending Western interpretation, concepts, and expression of Scripture fully, let alone an unbeliever. For example, the only English church there uses the Psalms from the King James Version for responsive liturgical reading in church worship service. Two-

thirds of the congregation does not have a standard of English competent or capable enough to understand it, yet the form is practiced when even English-speaking countries like America, Britain, and Singapore have consistently revised liturgies to contemporary English. The chances of revivals are remote as faith comes from hearing (as in understanding).

In addition, the Methodist Church prides itself on being a connectional church, connectionalism being a forte or pillar of distinction. The Methodist churches around the world are bound by doctrine and discipline, and churches established are of similar texture and culture. The Methodist Church in Lower Myanmar upholds this church culture to the hilt when they continue to govern themselves with The Book of Discipline 1960 edition (Discipline of the Evangelical Methodist Church), where other conferences have already had several revisions and updates to remain contemporary with their own cultural changes. Furthermore, in upholding the form (culture), much focus and resources are set aside for the maintenance of buildings, impeding the growth of the church (even though God says he does not live in buildings made of stones). For these reasons, I fear and speculate what the indigenous Methodist Church in Cambodia may look like whose culture and history is nothing similar to the West. Whatever the church may become, it must not be Western in theology, expression, and structure. Finding its own Christian expression contextualized to its culture is crucial for the future of missions and the relevance of the gospel for the people of the land.

What John Wesley personified and what Methodism truly stood for, I believe, was in its indomitable spirit of scriptural holiness and reaching out to the masses. Wesley's motto, "The world is my parish," exemplifies his desire to bring the gospel to those



outside the church. Today, as in his time, most Christians lived by a reverse motto bound by its culture: “The parish is my world.” For the purposes of bringing the gospel to the masses, Wesley resisted the church system or culture of his day to bring the gospel to people of another culture (as against the aristocrats or church leaders of his day). The crucial and imperative question one has to ask in this day and age is whether the gospel preached is one of transforming power or only one of transferring culture.

Effective communication of the gospel can only occur if contextualization takes place, that is, biblical in content and culturally relevant in its interpretation and expression. Sherwood Lingenfelter elaborates about this concept:

The idea of contextualization is to frame the gospel message in language and communication forms appropriate and meaningful to the local culture, and to focus the message upon crucial issues in the lives of the people. The contextualized indigenous church is built upon culturally appropriate methods of evangelism; the process of discipling draws upon methods of instruction that are familiar and part of local traditions of learning. The structural and political aspects of leadership are adapted from patterns inherent in national cultures rather than imported from denominational organizations in the home countries of missionaries. (15)

Without contextualization, churches planted rarely have any possibility of becoming truly indigenous.

Another feature of culture important to recognize is its morphing ability. In fact, culture constantly changes. The indigenous church makes or breaks solely on the principle of its ability to speak, and transform within one’s culture, constantly and consistently, to its own generation. Otherwise, indigenization may also lead to dead churches in the third and fourth generation of believers. Such a phenomenon also happened to the New Testament Christians who had begun to define the parameters of Christianity within the limits of their own cultural understanding. Other similar instances

can be seen in Acts 11:1-3 where Peter was chided by Jewish converts for eating with uncircumcised Gentiles; in Acts 15:1, where Jewish Christians demanded Peter to do what they do in Jerusalem, else salvation be denied; and, in Acts 21:20, where Paul discovered many Jewish converts reverting back to the law. Indigenized Gentile churches also fell prey to the same problem where they too lost their vision and vitality as recorded in Revelation 2-3. The universal vision of evangelism was lost because the gospel became conditional once again on Jewish or specific Gentile culture and customs of the churches of their time.

To counter this loss of vision and vitality for evangelism, Andrew F. Walls suggests that the only way to preserve the indigenizing principle is to observe the pilgrim principle, which draws the church towards the universals of faith, rooted in obedience to Christ and the Scriptures. Jesus did warn and pray that his followers be not of, but in, this evil world (John 17:13-19). Walls believes that pilgrim churches can only arise when believers receive faithful instruction in the Word of God and respond with obedience as followers of Jesus Christ to their world (“Gospel as the Prisoner” 97-99).

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

The remaining chapters explain the process taken for the completion of the research. Chapter 2 aims at understanding prevailing major issues of cross-cultural missions and evangelism through a literature review, in order to help frame the pertinent research questions as well as for theological reflection against findings that prove vital for eventual recommendations from the research. Chapter 3 describes in detail the methodology used for the research and it ensured that findings from data acquired were accurate, justifiable, tenable, and essential for credible conclusions. Chapter 4 delves into



the actual presentation and analysis of data or findings through the methods prescribed earlier. Chapter 5 discusses the findings, evaluates, and interprets the data through the lenses of literature reviewed and theological/biblical understanding on the subject. Plausible recommendations were then proposed for possible applications for ministry in relevant contexts in the concluding chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE

#### **Cultural Anthropology in Evangelism**

The study of anthropology has been around for some time. According to Eugene A. Nida, “Anthropology is essentially the science of learned human behavior or human culture” (15). Alfred Louis Kroeber says that anthropology is “the science of groups of men, and their behavior and productions” (1). Though anthropology has primarily two main categories, the physical and cultural, the latter has particular relevance to the application for missions and evangelism. The former is concerned with the biological aspects of humans (Fuchs 12) or the relationship of human biological variation to environmental factors (Kottak 11).

Cultural anthropology, on the other hand, is the study of human culture or the study of the works of humans whose application can range from archaeology to ethnology, linguistics, and folklore. Anthropologists have long recognized that knowledge of culture is a valuable tool for anyone who is interested in the welfare of those with whom they are called to serve. Surely then, no one would profit more from the use of anthropology than missionaries who work in cross-cultural contexts. Over the last few decades Christian leaders have increasingly been aware of the relevance of the study of cultural anthropology.

This development is constructive and should be used for effective evangelization and church planting. Alan R. Tippet writes about the need for the subject: “The study of anthropology is not a luxury, but a vital necessity for a viable cross-cultural ministry. The missionary’s knowledge, attitudes, emphases and methods will determine the

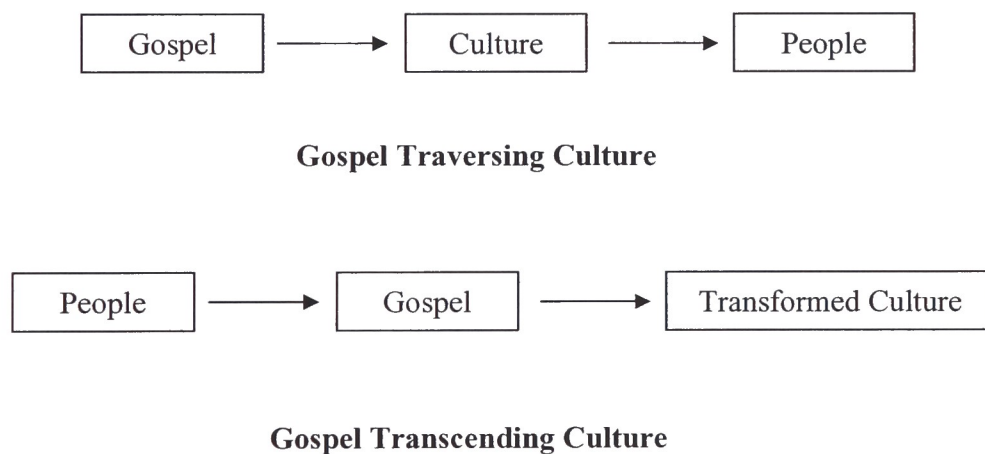
effectiveness of communication” (78). To be serious in evangelism (besides Scripture and Spirit), cultural anthropology must be taken seriously because cultural anthropology is the road map for evangelism. One must remember that missiology is the integration of anthropology and Scripture, evangelism, and social justice.

Most missionaries have been sincere and faithful to Jesus’ bidding. Some have been more successful than others in winning souls and making disciples for Christ. In the study of missions and evangelism, much has been deliberated, taught, and debated about methods. Nevertheless, in the spreading of the gospel, understanding people and their culture must precede missionary method for the latter is derived from and designed for the former; otherwise, no effective communication of the gospel can take place, making evangelism impossible. Jesus and Paul were great masters in understanding the different people whom they met and to whom they spoke. Jesus’ Incarnation and Paul’s cultural identification, especially seen in 1 Cor. 9:20 where he would become all things to all people, so that by some possible means he might save some, epitomized that mastery (Sider 177). Their approach and methodology were determined by knowing their audience. Those who listened understood the message clearly and that knowledge accounted much for their successes in evangelization and discipling.

Similarly, learning about the people targeted for outreach is an imperative for effective evangelization in this generation. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden contend that one can only be a faithful evangelist when the gospel challenges men and women within the whole context in which they live (12). The study of people and their culture is thus crucial in the effective communication of the gospel.

## Gospel Traversing Culture

In evangelism, learning about culture is imperative because culture is God's design (Gen. 10-11; Acts 17:26-27; Rev. 5:9; 7:9; 21:3). Crossing cultures is very much a part of fulfilling the Great Commission. Charles Colson says that we actually fulfill a cultural commission (140). Culture should not be viewed as a barrier but as a carrier of the gospel (Chew 17). Donald McGavran states that God accepts world cultures, and crossing cultures is a necessity for evangelism ("Dimensions" 97). God does not merely work against, simply reside in, or stand above culture but chooses to work in and through culture (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 103; see Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Understanding gospel and culture.**

All theology, Scripture, gospel, lifestyle, and Christianity are culture bound. God and his word are alive among people. He does not communicate with people in a vacuum but always in the context of social relationships and their cultural setting (Hiebert, Anthropological Insights 227). In culture, God connects and becomes real to humans. A



human being does not merely consist of the physical body but with a “moreness” that allows one to create, communicate, and behave. This is one definition of a person’s culture (45-46). Culture is the nonbiologically transmitted heritage of humans (Tylor 1), a people’s design for living (Kluckhohn 17), and a system of conduct. Every person belongs to a culture without exception (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 48). Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn explain further:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, or and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action (357)

In other words, culture defines a people.

Culture is where people derive their worldviews, forms, meanings, and actions. Any particular culture will have a view of reality by which its members live, called their worldview. It is their reality (Kearney 247-70). Worldview determines beliefs and values, which, in turn, influence behavior. Behavior manifests in language, habits, customs, social organization, identity, relationships, food, dressing, art, architecture, and other ways. If the gospel is to be communicated, one must understand a society’s beliefs, values, and behavioral patterns; otherwise, the message will not be intelligible. David J. Hesselgrave proposes that one must temporarily adopt the worldview of others and adapt the gospel in the light of their worldview so as to make the message intelligible and meaningful (C-44).



## Gospel Transcending Culture

The nature of the interaction between gospel and cultures has been one of the great contemporary debates in missiology. It has always been a critical issue for the early churches, such as the church in Jerusalem to the Gentiles, for the Corinthian church with a basically Jewish gospel to the Greeks, for the Christian apologists who had to translate Hebrew ideas and concepts in the Hellenistic period, for the schism between East and West, and for missionaries engaging with other cultures until today (Castle 46). At one point in the history of modern Christian missions, however, the issue of engaging culture and gospel has been widely condemned as incompatible and thus downplayed or ignored entirely, but the recognition and importance of culture's relevance to the gospel has rejuvenated interest in Christian missions especially over the last fifty years.

Studying people and culture (cultural anthropology) is a useful tool in separating culture from the gospel and putting it in terms of the new culture. Nida says, "When cultural anthropology is applied, people are more likely to understand the gospel message when communicated" (qtd. in Grunlan and Mayers 28). Understanding the worldviews of other cultures are powerful contact points or bridges to share the gospel (Burnett, Clash of Worlds 33). Cultivating cross-cultural theological perspectives is, therefore, a must (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 48) for this will enable deciphering what core Christian truths are, what true conversion is, and what kingdom values are expressed indigenously by different cultures. The truth will look different from different parts of the world (Soskice 51). The authentic gospel is culturally relevant to all peoples and issues of their day.

Interestingly, one of the authenticating and enduring properties of the gospel is its universality across cultures. Robert H. Glover says that nothing is more deeply embedded in Christianity than its universality (25). It can live indigenously particular to any cultural form (Walls, “Gospel as the Prisoner” 93-105). The Lausanne Covenant in its section on Evangelism and Culture states, “Because man is God’s creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness” (“Willowbank Report: Lausanne Committee” C-162). John Stott describes that “culture may be likened to a tapestry, intricate and often very beautiful, which is woven by a given society to express its corporate identity. Common beliefs and customs are part of this tapestry” (26).

Nevertheless, when the gospel is embraced within cultures, it inevitably transforms cultures because contained within every culture too is its fallen nature. A new allegiance to Christ through the gospel itself becomes the standard that leads to a cultural transformation reflecting God’s kingdom (Bryant 118). Unapologetically and inevitably, evangelism is an agent of cultural change (Kane, Understanding Christian Missions 38; see Figure 4 p.39). One must remember that “supracultural” meanings, that is, God’s kingdom values and principles that are absolute and beyond culture, are more important than cultural forms (Smalley, “Culture and Superculture” 58-71). Therefore, the gospel message, albeit conveyed by a cultural form, is in no way culture bound.

In other words, if a cultural form carries uncomfortable connotations incompatible with Christian values, that cultural form must find a new form to convey gospel truths accurately. Biblical cultural relativism must, therefore, also be respected and observed. No imposition of one form of cultural expression of Christianity upon another must transpire, but each culture can and must find its own form to express God’s truth and

their Christianity (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 116). Otherwise, true conversion and propagation of the gospel will never occur (Newbigin, Open Secret 146). David Burnett emphasizes, “The church had to be planted in the culture of the people, so that it was truly their church and real to them; otherwise it risked extinction when the outside Christian presence was withdrawn” (“Cultural Factors” 44). Roland Allen warned that what resulted would only be duplication and not real multiplication of believers and churches (Missionary Methods 35).

### **Contextualization of Evangelism**

The contextualization of the gospel cannot be overemphasized. The following sections elaborate and explain why.

#### **Biblical Mandate**

Mortimer Arias, a Bolivian Methodist, calls contextual evangelism the art of planting the gospel in culture similar to planting a flower in new soil without also planting the flower pot (Conn 12). The biblical mandate for cross-cultural or contextualized evangelism stems vitally from both the Great and Pentecostal Commissions in Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8 where they reveal the scope of God’s concern for the whole world. The injunctions to go to all the nations (*ethne*) and be God’s witnesses from Jerusalem outwards indicate that the nature of missions is more than just geographical; it must also be cultural. Winter warns about “cultural distance,” and it must be observed and bridged in the transference of the gospel. “People blindness,” on the other hand, prevents one from realizing this distance (109, 113). The cultural distance is the perception derived from one’s cultural constitution that affects or influences the interpretation of the gospel. Walls describes cultural constitution as the makeup of



worldview, or consciousness of the person derived from one's experiences and relationships. He uses the metaphor of "the play" where the gospel is played out in the human auditorium, seen and heard but interpreted differently (Missionary Movement 45-46). One needs to recognize this metaphor not just as a principle for communication but also to know that the gospel can only be adequately transmitted in the cultural context. Harvie Conn asks, "If one's worldview is constructed by one's religious commitment and by a culturally conditioned perception of reality, how can communication of the gospel ever be possible?" (15).

Cultural distances are realities to be noted for evangelism. One must thus recognize and embrace that transmission of the gospel has a twin dimension of universality (able to speak to all cultures) and diversity (will appear different in different cultures).

### **Universality and Diversity**

The church is not only local; it is also universal. It adapts to a local flavor, style, and culture. It both transcends culture and transforms cultures. The church is one, but the church is also many. The diversity of the early Christian congregations of Antioch, Ephesus, and Corinth attest to this concept of universality (Snyder 24-25). At the heart of the Christian faith is the Incarnate Word—Jesus Christ, God who became human. The divine living Word was translated in a particular human society. This translation is repeated in every culture where he is understood and accepted among its people (Walls, Missionary Movement 47). Conn substitutes the word "incarnation" with "anthropomorphism" where the nature of God is to reveal himself within the human frame of reference (13). Cross-cultural translation or diffusion has been absolutely critical

to Christianity. Without it the faith would not have survived. The process of such a diffusion was initiated in the first-century early Church where the faith was embraced not just multiracially but also multiculturally. In other words, expressions of the faith looked different (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Christianity across Cultures**

<b>Gospel</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>Culture</b>	<b>+</b>	<b>Faith</b>	<b>=</b>	<b>Christianity</b>
Object of faith Inspires faith Instills faith Generates faith Illuminates faith		Sustains faith, explains faith, articulates faith, communicates faith, celebrates faith		Interacts with gospel and culture		Produces many forms of Christianity around the world

Source: Mejudhon.

For example, the faith progressed from the Jews to the Greek Gentiles in Antioch. The first believers were devout, observant Jews, maintaining circumcision, delighting in the Torah, devoted to the worship of the Temple, and understanding Jesus through the lenses of Jewish history and destiny of the nation. The new Antiochene believers were not circumcised, did not keep the Torah or the Sabbath, ate pork, socialized and ate with pagan neighbors, were excluded from worshipping in the Temple, and had little to do with Israel's destiny. For them to maintain their faith in Jesus, a whole new lifestyle adapted to Hellenistic conditions was developed. They were not in any way lesser converts because their conversion to Christ included complete allegiance to him. This conversion, however, looked very different from the process of proselytization, which



was at that time the furthest one would go to accommodate non-Jewish converts (Walls, Cross-Cultural Process 67).

Cornelius (Acts 10:1-2) and the centurion with the sick slave (Luke 7:1-10) were non-proselyte believers who were probably among Gentiles repulsed by the requirement of circumcision. Paul taught how the gospel is both universal and diverse, able to adapt and cross cultures with phrases like, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is worth anything but a new creation” (Gal. 6:15), “There is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal. 3:28), and “barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free” (Col. 3:11). Furthermore, Luke, the author of Acts, was likely a Gentile from Syrian Antioch, writing to Theophilus. A fellow Greek (1:1) would have been greatly influenced by the issue of Christianity in culture as he wrote to the Gentile recipients (Hopler 81).

Perhaps tracing some more examples from the New Testament, the book of Acts in particular will reveal how the gospel traveled across cultures. More importantly, it would reveal the extent of God’s love for the whole of humankind (*ethne*). The first evidence comes as early as Jesus himself where he took his disciples with him in his ministry to Samaria where he encountered and converted the Samaritan woman recorded in John 4. Samaria was not geographically distant but it was culturally distant. Though they could communicate linguistically, the cultural chasm made the Samaritans despicable to the Jews. Even so, Jesus did not allow culture to be a barrier but a bridge of the gospel.

The next example would be at the day of Pentecost. Tom Hopler explains that those who journeyed for religious (Passover Feast) and economic (commercial center)

purposes would stay on until Pentecost, hear the preaching of the Apostles, and carry the news of the Messiah back to their distant lands, fulfilling Acts 1:8:

While Jerusalem was already a multiethnic town, it was even more so at Pentecost when Jews from around the world made pilgrimage to the Holy City. Who were these people? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene (way over North Africa), and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians. (83-84)

Jerusalem is an international hub for trade and is unmistakably cosmopolitan. The gospel must have traveled back with many a trader.

Several passages demonstrated the gospel's intent in crossing ethnic boundaries. In Acts 2:1-12, many were amazed when the Holy Spirit descended on believers speaking with tongues of the languages of the different ethnicities who were represented there. In Acts 2:17-21, the Holy Spirit also used Peter to preach from Joel 2:28-32 to the Jews and all living in Jerusalem that the gospel will cross Jewish ethnic boundaries and be available for all Gentiles. He emphasized that God will pour out his Spirit on all people, and that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. In Acts 8, the followers of Jesus were scattered and the gospel was preached everywhere. Philip, in particular, went south to the people in Samaria and also later was instructed by an angel to go further south where he would meet and present Christ to an Ethiopian eunuch. Multitudes were not only given the chance to hear the gospel. They believed and received the faith (affirmed by God's favor and blessings of signs and wonders, miracles, and healings) without having to meet the laws of proselytization or the behavior expected of them prescribed in the Old Testament.

The opening of the fellowship of the children of God to uncircumcised, untaught, heathens (Gentiles) was a completely new concept with no precedent. The gospel had spread from the purest Palestinian Jew to the Hellenists, the Samaritans, and the Ethiopian. The ultimate test of the universality of the gospel was for a Palestinian Jew to go to a Gentile. Acts 10:34 tells how God led Peter to preach to Cornelius with a declaration that God does not show favoritism but accepts every nation (*ethne*) who fear him. In the book of Acts the Holy Spirit further inspires Luke to repeat this episode in Peter's report (Acts 11:5-17), the culmination of which is summed up in Acts 11:18: "When they heard this [Peter's report], they were silenced. And they glorified God, saying, Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life." The gospel excludes no one; it is for all ethnicities and culture. The Holy Spirit seals the fact that Jesus had come to be far more than a Jewish Messiah. God emphatically wants to convey his will that none should perish but all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

### **Evangelistic Imperatives**

The universality of the gospel is not only vital for transmission to all people of diverse cultures, but the diversity of the gospel born out of different cultures thereafter is also crucial for the development of the faith and the church's maturity. The "very height of Christ's full stature" is reached only by the coming together of the different cultural entities into the body of Christ (Eph. 4:13). No one form of Christianity is complete and valid in itself, apart from the others. Each is necessary to complete, correct, and complement each other. Walls writes, "The understanding of Christ—knowing the 'full stature'—thus arises from the coming together of the fragmented understandings that



occur within the diverse culture-specific segments of humanity where he becomes known” (Cross-Cultural Process 77).

What happened in the first century among the Jews, Hellenists, and Gentiles has been taking place in greater effect ever since, especially now that the Christian faith has become a world religion. Walls advises about this phenomenon:

Developments over several centuries, mean that we no longer have two, but innumerable major cultures in the church. Like the old Jerusalem Christians, Western Christians had long grown used to the idea that they were guardians of a “standard” Christianity; also like them, they find themselves in the presence of new expressions of Christianity, and new Christian lifestyles that have developed or are developing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to display Christ under the conditions of African, Indian, Chinese, Korean, and Latin American life. And most of the world’s Christians are now Africans, Asians or Latin Americans. (Cross-Cultural Process 78)

Christianity has taken many new shapes today and appears conspicuously different.

While the rapid spread of Christianity is celebrated, Christian relativism leading to syncretism (too closely identified with culture) and Christian dogmatism leading to prejudice (where Christianization is actually Westernization) are also the twin dangers to fear and avoid (Schreiter 16). Fear of dogmatism can be regarded as the greater sin. After all, God loved the whole world. Jesus himself broke down cultural walls, and the Holy Spirit was able to lead and guide the development of the faith and the growth of the Church.

### **Culture and Conversion**

In evangelism, culture and conversion are not mutually exclusive. As much as culture can or is a bridge or barrier to conversion, so too will conversion have ramifications for the convert’s cultures. The roles they play and the results they manifest must be clearly distinguished and understood to achieve and discern true conversion.

Traditional understanding of conversion must be challenged to avoid the danger of confusing cultural conversion for biblical conversion, some of which are as follows.

Firstly, one should not think that conversion must by necessity require a cultural overhaul. Secondly, conversion is a process and not just an instantaneous event. Thirdly, it is not just a private experience but one where communities are inevitably transformed as well.

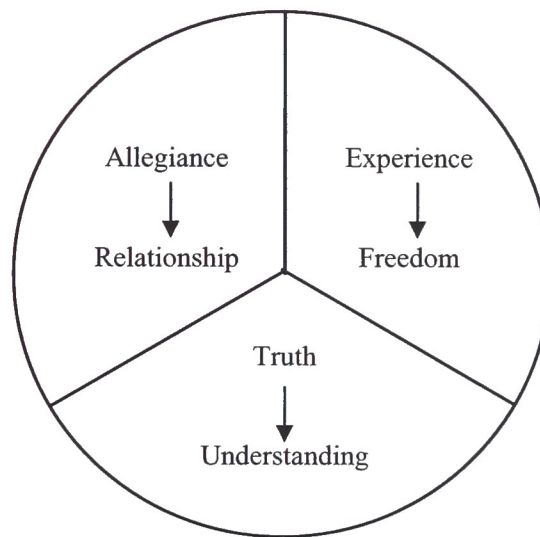
### **The Nature of Conversion**

In understanding the relationship between culture and conversion, identifying from the onset what constitutes true conversion is most helpful. The Old Testament Hebrew word *shub*, occurring over a thousand times, is commonly used to express the idea of conversion. It refers and relates more to God's people to turn or return back to Yahweh who had rejected his covenant. It more importantly carries the internal attributes of humility before God, seeking after him an increased knowledge of him and his ways. In the New Testament, two Greek words, "*Epistrepho*" and "*Metanoeo*", are used, which mean "to return, turn about or turn again," and "to change one's mind," respectively.

*Shub* connotes the idea of salvation where unbelievers turn to God for the first time. James I. Packer says that salvation is a once and for all unrepeatable event (251). Conversion is described as being born again with the commencement of a new life in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) or the initiation of the kingdom of God in one's life. Often accompanied with it, too, are the implications of a death and resurrection (being crucified with Christ). Herein lies the concept of a radical break from one's past and ultimately a change of allegiance to Christ (see Figure 4). What previously ruled (i.e., idolatries of all forms literal or otherwise) in the convert's life are now brought to conform to the



Lordship of Christ and his commands. Every aspect of life, especially one's worldview, belief, values, behavior, and relationships, is brought under his authority. They are of particular importance because of their cultural significance.



Source: Kraft, “What Kind of Encounters?” C-76.

**Figure 4. Conversion elements.**

At the core of every culture is a religion. John Herman Bavinck says that “culture is religion made visible” (“Willowbank Report: Lausanne Committee” C-177). Religion undergirds worldview from which beliefs, values, and behavior derive. Even a-religious cultures hold onto a belief system. True conversion to Christ is bound, therefore, to strike at the heart of one's cultural inheritance. Christ deposes what previously reigned at the center of the convert's life. Their worldviews, which is their view of God, themselves, and meaning of life, will change. Their values and behaviors will also be affected.

Kingdom values will begin to invade the life of the believers. They will align their minds to a Christian worldview and experience a progressive shift in all other aspects of life.

In essence, conversion has occurred and begun to take effect. The believer has repented (*metanoia*—turned away from and turned towards) and converted his or her allegiance from another to Christ. Conversion thus must be seen as a process not of cultural eradication but of an alignment of all that is in one's culture towards allegiance in Christ. Christ-centeredness is key. Bavinck explains that the Christian life takes possession of heathen forms of life and thereby makes them new.

Within the framework of the non-Christian life, customs and practices serve idolatrous tendencies and drive a person away from God. The Christian life takes them in hand and turns them in an entirely different direction; they acquire an entirely different content. Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new, the old has in essence passed away and the new has come. Christ takes the life of a people in his hand, he renews and re-establishes the distorted and deteriorated, he fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it a new direction. (179)

Although converts lives may appear to be the same externally, they have actually undergone a complete reorientation internally.

Conversion should not strip converts of their culture. Conversion does not unmake but remakes ("Willowbank Report: Lausanne Committee" C-177). In that light, converts, though different, do not segregate themselves from or abandon their culture or people. The distinction is a spiritual one. In fact, true conversion will enable converts to experience a newfound commitment and responsibility to engage their world, community, and culture in witness and service even more.

In summary, conversion is described as a turning from the darkness of idolatry, sin, and the rule of Satan to worship and service of the true God and his Son, Jesus Christ

(Acts 14:15; 26:18; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Pet. 2:25; Chew 30-31). Through God's grace, conversion is the result of repentance and faith—repentance meaning a change of mind and heart toward God and faith meaning trusting in Christ and his word. They deal with the aspects of positional change and ongoing transformation. Jim Chew says the process of God's grace is continuous. This process should not be underemphasized as it helps link conversion with sanctification and, in a practical way, enables one to be patient with people in a new culture who may seem slow to change (31).

### **The Process of Cultural Change**

Although true conversion does not necessarily require a cultural overhaul or displacement of culture, still the effects of conversion will inevitably affect culture by refining it towards Christlikeness. All cultures also contain elements that are inherently evil or adverse to Christianity when measured against scriptural norms. Whatever does not honor God must be changed. Despite the fact that culture is highly important, a Christian's or Christian community's paramount responsibility and main identity should not be culture but Christlikeness. Conversion would inexorably also see, to some degree, a transformation of cultural norms.

Culture is never static but varies and carries different meanings in different times, places, and peoples. One cannot afford to be indiscriminate about perceiving cultural forms and norms if one is to be an agent of transformation towards Christlikeness. Not all of culture is bad; one must, therefore, know the importance of discriminating what is morally incompatible with Scriptures and what are mere customs. In fact, inherently good elements are found in all cultures, bearing the image of God. One must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The Lausanne Covenant says, "The Gospel does



not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture” (“Willowbank Report: Lausanne Committee” C-177). In fact the concept of the kingdom is central in the Gospels. The kingdom speaks of God’s sovereign rule. The concept of the kingdom is relevant in ministering to peoples with their own cultural backgrounds. In emphasizing the importance of cultural understanding, one needs to be reminded that the kingdom is supracultural, that is, above culture. The teaching of the kingdom points to supracultural principles and values for all human societies (Chew 31).

Cultural practices directly in conflict with Scriptures must be renounced.

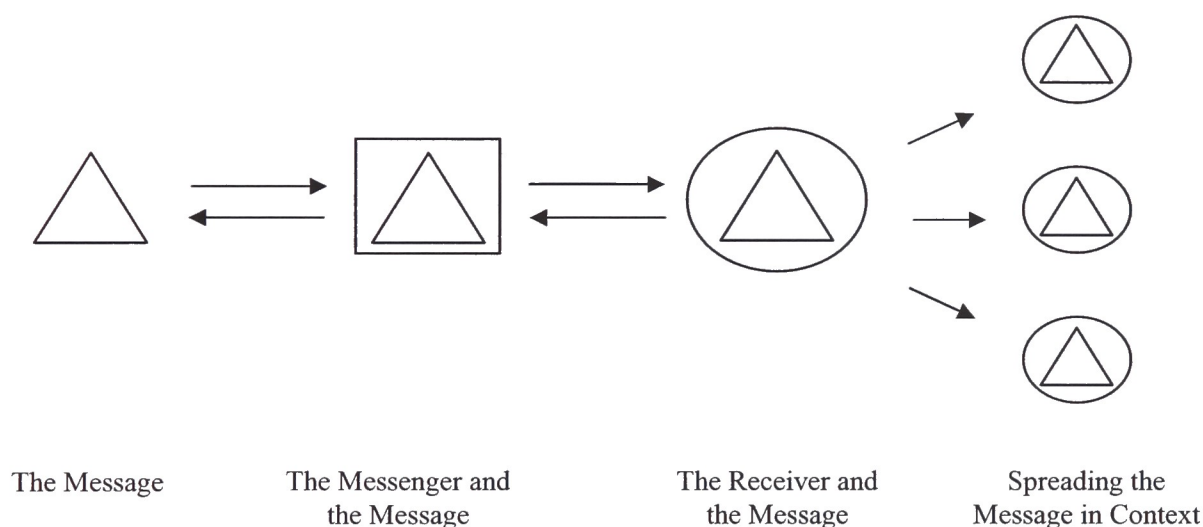
Examples of these are idolatry, witchcraft, sorcery, headhunting, cannibalism, infanticide, prostitution, and slavery. An additional and perhaps more contemporary way of understanding this issue would be to ask if a practice enhances or diminishes human life. Others that may not be so clear-cut, such as worship forms, initiation rites, marriage ceremonies, festivals, and musical instruments, need not be discarded but should be carefully studied, purged of their unclean elements and newly accorded with Christian meanings. These are available cultural bridges to enhance allegiance to Christ and Christlikeness. In any case, where evil exists in any form, society, and culture, Christians are to confront and eliminate it.

### **The Church and Culture**

The employment of cultural sensitivities were glaringly lacking in the quest to make disciples of every tribe and nation during the great missiological eras of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Western theologies and church expressions were exported and churches’ patterns of governance, structures, worship, ministry, and life



copied wholesale. Replication and duplication were more the inadvertent outcomes than conversion and transformation. The flaw became apparent when mission stations, a mirror-image form of Christianity from mission-sending countries, became the mainstay instead of true churches. In a sense, more of the form than the spirit of Christianity was passed on. Only a form of expressed Christianity that is consistent with the converts' culture will attest to true conversion (see Figure 5).



Source: Chew 10.

**Figure 5. The gospel in convert's culture.**

Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, and Roland Allen further argue that Paul founded churches that were able to continue establishing God's church on earth. They popularized the indigenous church concept of the three-self movement (self-governing, propagating, and supporting) and insisted that it is indispensable to proper church growth in maturity

and mission. Towards this end, Venn hopes for what he describes as the “euthanasia of the mission” (“Willowbank Report: Lausanne Committee” C-177).

Another point perhaps worth noting is that though the idea of indigenesness has caught on and gained wide acceptance in missions, local leadership was still trained in Western ways; thus, they preserve a very Western-looking church. Clothing the church with local leadership does not necessarily mean indigenous leadership or an indigenous church. In order to know what an indigenous church is, one must first look at the New Testament for the principles of church formation rather than to culture. On the other hand, one also rightly looks to the local culture for the appropriate forms in which these principles should be expressed. The aim is to find a dynamic equivalence model of church, that is, by using appropriate cultural forms, the essential meanings and functions the New Testament church possesses would be preserved but expressed in forms equivalent to the originals appropriate to the local culture. William A. Smalley, however, also gives a subtle warning not to regard blindly the deployment of relevant cultural forms, formal structure, and operation of the churches in the New Testament to denote dynamic equivalence, but in recognizing how the Holy Spirit has worked its transformation within respective societies through the relevant cultural expressions does one see dynamic equivalence at play and the indigenous church emerging. In the New Testament, the fact that the Jewish and Gentile churches looked so different from each other reflects indigenesness (C-153).

To illustrate further, the New Testament indicates that the church is always a worshipping and witnessing community, but the forms of worship (e.g., liturgy, ceremony, music, architecture, art forms, language, color) and the methods of evangelism

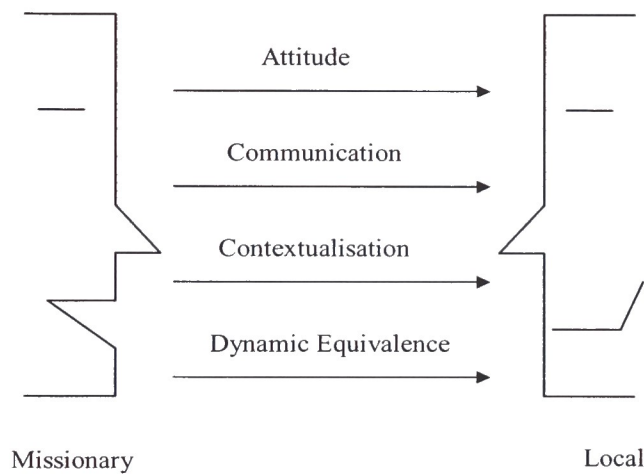
and social outreach will vary and are constantly developed in keeping with the indigenous culture. Scriptural meanings must be ensured and understood by local recipients. In the process, however, and unfortunately, undesirable issues of syncretism (indistinct from secular society), and/or provincialism/parochialism (insular and exclusive to the universal Church) might arise. In retrospect, the churches of the so-called developed cultures are also not exempt from syncretism. Evil or undesirable ways still lurk in the church, examples of which are the way wealth and power is handled (secularism). In building the indigenous church, constantly purging or transforming of what is associated with evil, which exist in all cultures, under the Lordship of Christ is a must, so that all of life and humanity is promoted. The Lausanne Covenant states that churches must seek and transform and enrich culture, all for the glory of God (Winter and Hawthorne C-188). The outworking of the church in its local culture is critical so that God's grand design for his Church can be captured, embraced, and assimilated into the hearts and minds of the local church.

### **Cultural Aspects to Practice in Evangelism**

The following areas are crucial to evangelism in cross-cultural settings. In almost all situations, the medium is also as much a part of the message as the message itself. The messenger and the message are synonymous, especially in hetero-cultural dimensions. In any form of communication, body language constitutes a large percentage of what is conveyed. It is keenly picked up by listeners or receivers. Thus, one's life and lifestyle (thoughts, words, and deeds) and message must be consistent. Effective and successful contextualization, communication, and conversion takes cognizance and observance of the following key factors (see Figure 6).

## Attitude

In evangelism, knowing what a biblical Christian model is or should be is important. Understanding what core kingdom values, principles, and beliefs are in order to share the truths of the gospel are essential. Knowing about others' worldviews, which is their perception of reality, their value system, and responsive behavior, is imperative.



**Figure 6. Key factors for cross-cultural evangelism.**

In evangelism, conversion or transformation should be aimed at a change of worldview. In a change of worldview, culture may be preserved. A transformation of worldview sees an adherence to the kingdom's values, principles, and beliefs. Their culture can still express this new adherence and allegiance. Understanding people's forms, functions, meanings, and usage of culture and speaking the gospel to and through them are all necessary (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 53-64).

Above all, behind cultural differences are greater human commonalities. People are more alike than cultures, and all have same needs and seek after the same things



(Goldschmidt 139). These commonalities must be placed firmly in the forefront of the Christian's mind on how culture is so integral to life, and how it must be understood and manipulated to effectively share the gospel. Hence, cultural sensitivity is key.

Understanding cultural differences is a vital part of evangelism; otherwise, one may unwittingly impose one's own cultural form on others in the name of Christianity. To believe such a thing as a universal Christian culture is both naïve and dangerous.

Oftentimes, Western culture has unfortunately been identified with Christian culture (Gnanakan 63). Self-consciousness about cultural prejudice and bigotry and understanding about cultural relativism is crucial. Cultural relativism teaches that no one culture is the absolute correct or superior one, yet each one is equally valid in its own right because conceptions of reality exist within each culture. Thus any form of cultural evolutionism, thinking that Western culture is most advanced and best, must be dismissed (as it was within anthropology by 1910). Otherwise, people will repel and rebel against the gospel when they perceive that their culture is under threat (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 35-36). Avery T. Willis, Jr. calls for a kenotic (self-emptying) approach that is free from all Western forms of Christianity (77).

## **Communication**

Knowing that effective communication of the gospel is receptor oriented is crucial because the hearers are ultimately the ones who formulate the message. Norman L.

Geisler puts things in perspective:

The Christian accepts as axiomatic that his task is to communicate Christ to the world. That sounds simple enough, but in fact, it is very complex. It is complex for at least three reasons: first, there are many views of "Christ"; secondly, there are many ways to "communicate"; and thirdly, there are many "worlds" to which Christ must be communicated. (241)

Communicating Christ to the world is not as simple as originally presumed.

All correspondence must be understood by the receptors. The message must contain elements (ideas, frame of reference, experiences, etc.) with which the receptors can identify. It must have impact to achieve the desired response or behavior. Essentially the receptors must discover for themselves the intended message. When that discovery happens, communication is actualized, the message owned, and the desired consequences, responses, and behaviors follow. The need to know how the message is communicated is not half as important or critical as how others receive and perceive the message (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 148). After all, if they do not understand, no communication has taken place.

Paul G. Hiebert says effective communication of the gospel needs forms that people can understand, accurately translate, critically contextualize, and theologize in their historical/cultural setting. He further brings awareness to the existence of “denotative and connotative” meanings found in symbols of communication (Anthropological Insights 144). Occasionally, the intended denoted meaning may not be received but the connoted one may be instead. Oftentimes this misunderstanding causes confusion; most times offense. Forms (e.g., method, style, action, objects) and words (e.g., idioms, allegories, analogies) can carry dual and different meanings for the speaker and the hearer. Mastery of the language and cultural forms are, therefore, critical. Transmission of information, sharing of feelings, and acceptance of the message must be accurate. This accuracy must be ensured further by constantly requesting feedback, being credible, and looking for veritable affirmations that the message was understood (Drane, Cultural Change 13).

God is himself receptor oriented and will ensure that he connects with humanity. He reveals himself in and through culture. His self-revelation is continuous and dynamic, a process evident in the Bible. God constantly reveals himself in Scripture increasingly from the Old Testament to the New. This dynamic process is ongoing and takes different forms (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 169-78).

The primary implication for communicating the gospel is, therefore, that God still chooses to interact with human beings via human beings in their set culture. God's core message remains essentially the same despite different times and situations recorded in biblical history. That central message is allegiance to God. God accepts and meets people (in their culture) wherever they are, with whatever forms they express themselves as starting points (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 239-43). He does not need them to change their culture before he can communicate with them. He connects with them and works on them towards their transformation rather than demanding them to conform to his ideals before accepting them (Walls, "Gospel" 98). No social or cultural revolution is needed to convert their culture before the gospel message can be preached. Effective communication occurs when meaning intended by the speaker and the meaning interpreted by the listener are equal (Seamands 131). The duty, thus, is to learn about their culture in order to ensure they have understood the gospel message accurately.

### **Contextualization**

Nida defines culture: "All learned behavior is socially acquired, that is, the material and nonmaterial traits which are passed on from one generation to another" (28). Knowing that culture exists and is expressed through all areas of life, individually and communally in a society, and that they are not immutable but morphing constantly is also



highly critical. Equally important to know, therefore, is what makes a culture function, a particular member of a society act/react the way he or she does, and the factors involved in the culture's stability or change (29). Understanding and making sense of behavior can only come from the context of people's lives; otherwise, one will conclude that they are illogical, artificial, immature, and even immoral. Judgmentalism inevitably hinders or blocks the communication of the gospel.

Contextualization prevents this trap and is greatly needed in the communication of the gospel. Contextualization is the movement from one's own cultural context to another's in order to communicate the gospel effectively. In the communication process, contextualization is necessary in order for the message to be clearly understood by the recipients. In other words, one has to perceive recipients' worldviews, and subsequently define, adapt, and apply the message to their contexts. One needs, therefore, to adopt temporarily the worldview of prospective respondents (Hesselgrave C-44).

The pressing question then, is to ask how the gospel, understood by another culture, speaks in a meaningful way about God at work in their very different contexts. David J. Bosch focuses this question in distinguishing between traditional theologies, which are the dominant Western theologies and newly emerging contextual theologies (423). Traditional cultural beliefs and practices of every culture pervade all areas of life. They can be found in the material, expressive, and ritual (life and annual cycles) cultures of every society. They must not be rejected or accepted blindly. They can be great hindrances or helps in either ridding or rooting gospel truths. When they are assessed and addressed well biblically, they facilitate conviction.



As mentioned earlier, culture is oftentimes mistakenly equated to gospel and culturally offends people wrongly. Consequently, people begin to resist the gospel. A contextualized gospel, however, offends sinfulness and solicits the right response from people (Whiteman 3). Context must be dealt with critically but never out of a critical spirit. Contextualization seeks identification without legalism. Joe Aldrich adds that it allows communication without contamination (63). Context, however, must be studied against Scripture on all respective aspects of their cultural life and use them as points of reference for outreach. When people can find, see, and experience answers to situations and problems of their everyday lives, expressed in their own cultural context and theology, they will cross over the gospel bridge.

The need for critical contextualization is well argued by Michael Rynkiewicz, that one cannot go deep enough in tracing all the factors affecting culture and worldview. This discipline is imperative for effective propagation of the gospel (301). The era of non-contextualization owing to the superiority complex of Western civilization and ethnocentrism hindered evangelism and produced syncretism (Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization" 104). Many missionaries of that era merely had the form of religion but not its power. Kingdom values were not embraced. Cultural forms are the vehicles through which these values travel, and those forms are found in all cultures. Patricia Suesse helps understand that in evangelism, the gospel must be relatable:

Culture as an environment, constructed and dreamed up by social groups, and as a project for life, always relates to the particular world in which these groups live and which constitutes their identity. Therefore evangelization must always start from a reading of these concrete projects and from the spheres of communication offered there. If the church is to show and communicate the love of God, it must renounce a universal code and a literal translation of it. It must experience its metalinguistic irrelevance and universal speechlessness in a long process of inculturation

and become capable of a new language which is contextual and culture-specific. (Suess 241)

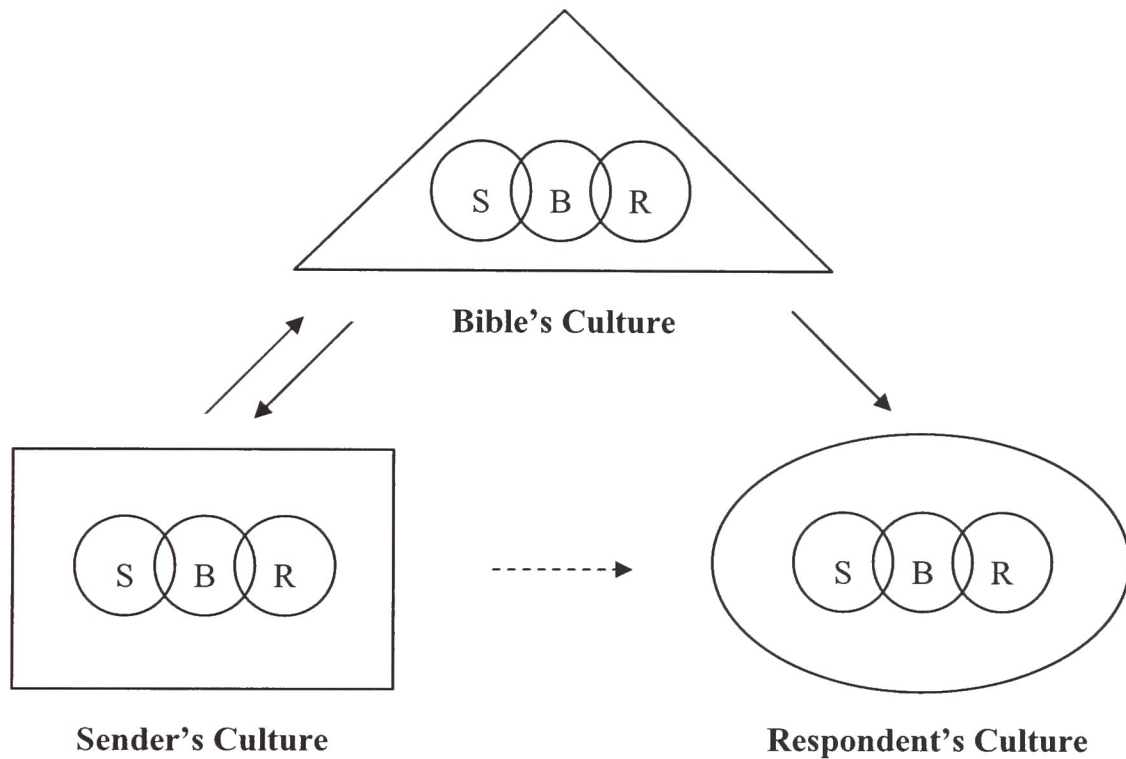
Critical contextualization serves as the bridge to those forms from which the kingdom values travel. It makes the gospel relevant, understood, and culture specific. Examples of contextualization can be found in Don Richardson's "redemptive analogy," which is basically the application of spiritual truth to local custom (Tucker 475).

### **Dynamic Equivalence**

The aim of awareness is to ensure dynamic equivalence. Dynamic equivalence involves accurate transference of the truth of the gospel via a term called transculturation. Transculturation seeks to convey what was true then (the core values, the meanings God and his kingdom intended) so that it can be true now and experienced anew and afresh. Transculturation must be practiced in the areas of Bible interpretation, translation, communication, theologization, church, evangelism, and Christian conversion. If theology and gospel are true, they must certainly be true across cultures. Their meanings must be viable and applicable cross-culturally, transcending time and space. "Ethnotheology" (the study of theology and anthropology, God and man widely across cultures) must therefore be upheld to have valid understandings of God and his workings, as against "ethnic theologies" (theological insights from only within singular cultures and imposing those as gospel truths onto other cultures), the aim of which is to present effectively a viable gospel today, to peoples of every culture and generation (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 280, 480).

The triune God transcends all races, nations, and cultures. The gospel is for all people at all times. In evangelism, knowing both the gospel and the intended audience/people well is a must. Inherent are different cultures pertaining to the

evangelist, the Bible, and the evangelized people. Effective communication of the gospel requires a bridging of all three (see Figure 7).



Source: Hesselgrave C-36.

**Figure 7. Contextual evangelism.**

An understanding of theology of missions and cultural anthropology is, therefore, crucial. The employment of cultural anthropology in evangelism strives to speak gospel truths and kingdom values in a manner relevant to all generations, culture, and context understood by others' in their worldview, forms, and meanings. It also facilitates discerning true conversion and transformation as against mere changes in cultural forms (Kraft, Anthropology 1-12).



## **Components of Non-Western Culture Relevant to Evangelism**

One must recognize one's own worldviews and repudiate the deep assumptions made about own understanding of reality so as to avoid misunderstandings, judgmentalism, or basically any form of ethnocentrism toward other cultures.

### **The Supernatural and the Natural**

Dualism is one of the most fundamental and pervasive of all worldviews held by the West predominantly since the age of Enlightenment and rationalism in the seventeenth century. Reality is seen and life is dichotomized into science and religion, fiction and nonfiction, the spirit and physical. Most cultures do not make a sharp distinction between the natural and the supernatural. The supernatural pervades the natural. Humans are seen as a kind of life, or at least seen as intertwined, among the many in nature. In fact, nature itself is thought to be alive, and all objects, animate or otherwise, are believed to have their own spirits and are, thus, alive. Humans are part of nature and must seek to live in harmony and care for nature. The prevailing Western worldview shows humans controlling, conquering, and exploiting nature all in the name of subduing it.

Related also is the matter of the physical and the spiritual. Materialism, a prevailing Western worldview, judges human worth by what they own. A person's achievement and even civilization or civilized-ness (as against the degree of barbarism) is measured by the quantity and quality of one's possessions. Happiness is the security of property and material comforts. Other cultures, however, value things spiritual in nature. Spiritualism is prized over materialism. People's welfare is treasured and championed over material welfare. Owing to the fact that humans are one in existence with nature in



general and therefore do not emphasize materialism, most cultures also do not adhere to the notion of private ownership. Properties implicitly belong to larger groups such as families and are shared with the larger community, particularly with regards to house, land, boats, and food. Correlated to harmonious existence with nature and community is also the quest to preserve society. In most non-Western cultures where the worldview assumes that resources are limited and insufficient, sustenance for all is penultimate (Foster 293-315). Their priority is to seek equilibrium in society as opposed to individual progress in the way the West understands it. For the non-Western worldview, which does not assume unlimited resources, progress for one is always understood to be at the expense of another or others.

### **The Analytical and Nonanalytical Approach**

The Western worldview based on rationalism believes that the world is orderly and that all events can be reasoned or explained. In other words, everything can be analyzed, understood, and solved through science. Knowledge can be used to control and manipulate the world; however, people in many cultures see the world as basically incomprehensible and beyond human control. Hence, no effort is made to change their conditions, nor causes or blame affixed on anything or anyone for their plight in life (Hiebert, Anthropological Insights 117). Consequently, such societies end up with fatalistic worldviews that lead people to resign to and accept their place in existence. Subsequently, planning ahead is also considered pointless. Some even question its morality besides its legitimacy and live their lives existentially. Future orientation is absent. Life is defined cyclically and time is nonlinear. Life is not tied to time demonstrated by the following: land is prioritized over time; work is not scheduled but

simply a matter of getting immediate tasks done; and, rituals, gatherings, and visitations are not restrained by time but the goal is participation and togetherness.

In relation to the analytical or problem-solving approach, Westerners are inevitably also regarded as pragmatists. Good is defined by what works; the ends justify the means. Task is lauded above people and work over relationships. Other cultures prioritize with other criteria. For example, a good person is better than good work. Persons are judged (and the gospel preached) by how their lives are lived and how they relate to others. The message proclaimed must be consistent with the practice of the messenger. Thus, even if good work is done, if their daily living does not reflect their message, other cultures will reject what they say. George F. Vicedom writes, “God is always judged in the light of what the missionaries are” (16-17). Because relationship is highly esteemed, the dynamic of work and play is closely interwoven in their worldview. Separating and dichotomizing the two, as Western worldviews normally do, is wrong. Failing to recognize this dynamic of work and play can easily result in misunderstandings and be received as “getting personal,” victimization, or even persecution by persons whenever issues on work are addressed.

### **The Mechanistic and Nonmechanistic Outlook**

The Western worldview holds fast to the belief that both nature and humans can be manipulated. Some Ancient Near Eastern religions and animistic beliefs, in essence, also fall prey to this mind-set. They thought that by the proper use of formula they could force the gods to respond in their favor. God had a problem with them for having such a mind-set. This mechanistic worldview considers the possibility of controlling both nature and humans with the right formulas. Tasks, work, doing, and production—all these

supercede the importance of finding and building right relationships with others and nature. The more, the bigger, the faster one accomplishes something, the better. Mass production is desired.

Non-Western worldviews, most of which are nonmechanistic, contend that both nature and humans are living beings and recognize the latter as having very limited control over the former. Task for them gives way to relationship, and work and doing to being and becoming (Kluckhohn, Florence, and Strodbeck 15-17). Mass production and quantity are replaced by painstaking craftsmanship. Products made are expressions, extensions, or projection of the artists themselves. Grandiosity gives way to simplicity and balance. The contemplative, the thinker, the wise, and the old, are heralded rather than competence, action, youth, and aggression. The individual, his or her value, and identity are also defined not by his or her individuality, autonomy, independence, privacy, or freedom as in the West.

In contrast, non-Western culture people do not see themselves as autonomous or self-reliant but as members of the group(s) to which they belong. Group rights take precedence over individual human rights and decide what is right and wrong for all in society. Society is held together by group cohesion and not individuals. Popularity is shunned. Harmonious relationships, group loyalties, and social cordialities are highly valued, for they foster identity, dignity, respect, and honor all of which are of paramount importance. Whatever character traits that enhance societal solidarity are welcomed and observed, such as social structures of hierarchy, formality, nonconfrontation, and cooperation. Hospitality is another key by-product and distinction of such societies evidenced by utmost consideration (e.g., sacrificing choice and expensive food that they



otherwise would never offer for themselves), sharing resources (e.g., accepted norm to eat and stay over at each others' abode), and personally assuming responsibilities (e.g., to care for victims or their children, even absorbing newly orphaned children into their families). Voluntarism and cooperation are other admirable derivatives that preserve group loyalty and are also marks of authentic relationships (Mejudhon).

### **Religion, Traditional Cultures, and Their Societies**

The expression of any culture consists minimally of the following: manners, customs, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, laws, ideas and thought patterns, language, arts and artifacts, tools, social institutions, religious beliefs, myths and legends, knowledge, values, concept of self, morals, ideals, and accepted ways of behavior. In essence they all spring from religion, and one must be aware of the differences they manifest in tradition and societies for evangelism.

At the core of every culture is a religion of some sort. To reiterate, Bavinck says that culture is religion made visible ("Willowbank Report: Lausanne Committee" C-177). In other words, religion greatly influences and determines cultural expressions. Religion undergirds worldview from which beliefs, values, and behavior derive. Geertz tells that knowing how a culture's religion expresses itself is pertinent to understanding some aspects of a culture's worldviews:

Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (90)

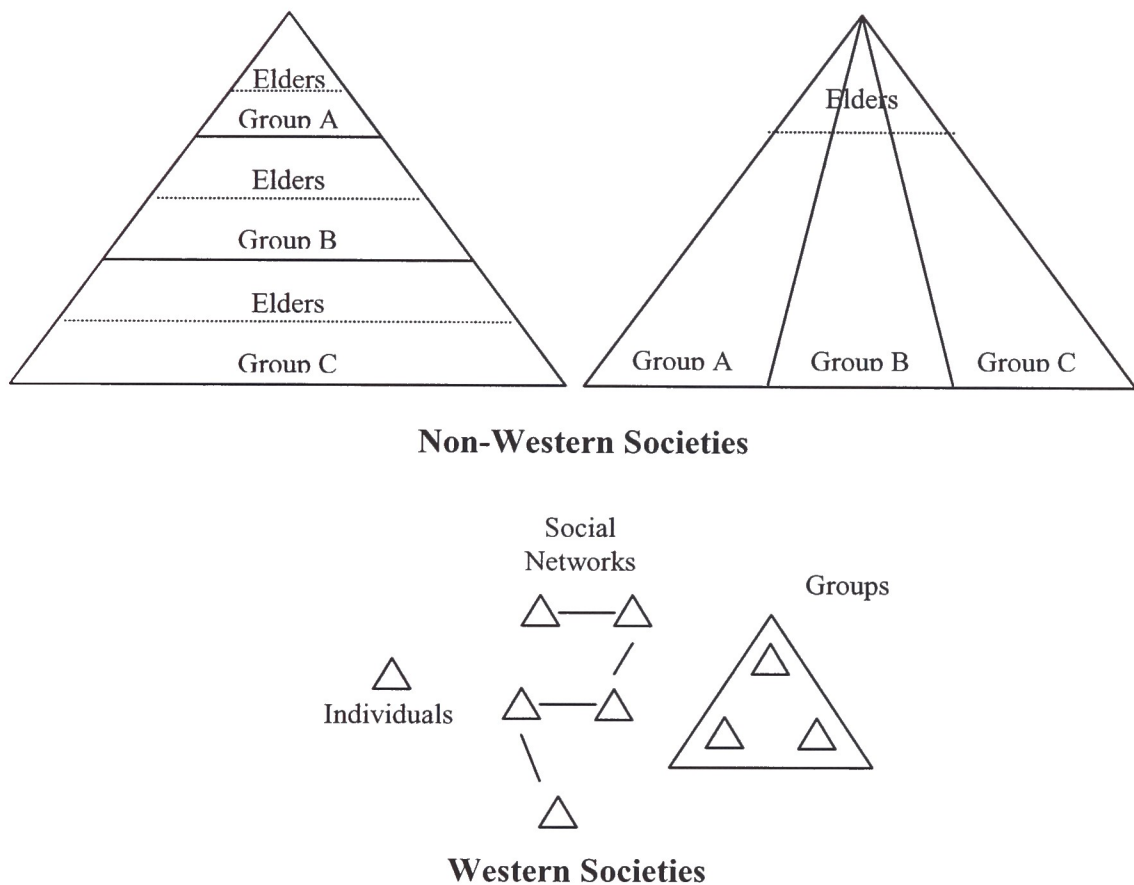
He further says that religion helps believers feel they are entering or experiencing something real and not just learning about something true (91).



Closely related to religious societies are traditional ones. In fact, all traditional cultures are religious and holistic. They do not separate the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the natural, the spirit and the flesh, revelation and reason, nature and grace, believing and knowing, evangelism and social welfare, religion and science, private and public religion, church and state, and immediate issues from ultimate issues of life. A. H. Mathias Zahniser says that traditional religious societies relate everything to spiritual reality by including into its religious symbols everything people experience (8-9, 60-61). Whatever is revealed in their religious practices, traditions, and societal or social life are all symbols used to express their worldview. Therefore, the sacred life, rituals, myths and legends, system of purity, sacred date and time, sacred places, beliefs, ideals, customs, symbols, arts/artifacts, tools, language, festivals, ceremonies, personality, concept of self, morals, laws, orientation, manners, knowledge, social institution, and acceptable behavior all hold key information to unraveling values, meanings, beliefs, and worldviews and must be observed and studied (Medjuhon). Traditional societies usually find the rational or apologetic faith lacking in relevance to their immediate needs and daily lives.

Another aspect of religious and traditional cultures worthy of notation is that of how societies are formed (see Figure 8). Societies of religious traditional cultures being more holistic in their outlook also tend to be structured more communally than individually. They are bound by their common beliefs and experiences. Social structures of non-Western cultures also inform how an individual is differently defined. It bears strategic significances and implications on evangelism in the areas of approach (methodology), decision making (acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior), and constitution of conversion (authenticity of conversion). Western cultures stress

individualism and personal decision making. Their societies are organized not hierarchically but on the basis of voluntary associations, social networks, and geographical groupings.



Source: Hiebert, “Social Structure” C-29, 31-34.

**Figure 8. Western and non-Western societies.**

Non-Western religious traditional cultures, on the other hand, emphasize kinship and lineages as the primary bases of societal bonding. Social structures are based on group orientations and hierarchies, and group decision-making processes are observed. The identity of an individual lies in his or her group association, and decision making

borne by hierarchical leaders for the good of the society always takes precedence over the individual's rights or wants. Ignorance of these vital cultural aspects for evangelism especially in the light of non-Western or two-thirds world cultures will always mean miscommunication (Hiebert, "Social Structure" C-28-34).

### **The Significances of Culture in Worship**

All cultures express worship, albeit differently. Conversely, forms of worship express cultures. From the different worship forms, worldviews of cultures can be discerned. The following elaborates the associations between worship and culture.

#### **Culture Used in Worship for Nurture and Witness**

Worship and witness are the two pivotal functions of the church. Worship itself is a form of witness and also nurtures character formation for witness. For example, worship and evangelism are inextricably linked together in the New Testament. The association was a major factor in the rapid growth of the early Church (Drane, Evangelism 16). Nevertheless, worship cannot be effective without understanding culture. One needs to know how culture influences and affects worship, and how cultural forms are employed in worship. Raymond Fung insists that worship must embrace the daily concerns of the worshippers. Such worship is authentic and truly evangelistic (4-15). Marva Dawn describes her own experience on this subject:

The Scriptures, the history of the Church, my own faith, experience, and training convince me that the vitality and faithfulness of our personal and corporate Christian lives and the effectiveness of our outreach to the world around us depend on the character that is formed in us. What concerns me is whether our local parishes and denominations have thought thoroughly enough about worship and culture to function effectively in contemporary society. How can we best reach out to this society without "dumbing down" that essential character formation? We need to understand both our culture and worship more thoroughly, to name the criteria by which we can judge various influences, and to offer practical suggestions for



choosing the best tools and forms to deepen our worship lives, nurture faith development, and increase believers' outreach throughout the universal Church and to the world. (5)

Worship and witness are the twin purposes of the church. Understanding culture is an imperative if worship is to be genuine to others. Worship must speak about God, and culture is the medium that makes God real. Otherwise, worship becomes pointless, being an end in itself, and ultimately impotent in witness.

### **Cultural Vehicles in Worship Are Necessary to See God**

In worship, God is encountered. In encountering him, conversion occurs. William Abraham makes a strong distinct connection between worship and evangelism. He says that if the reality of God is missing, then all that is done in evangelism will be wide off the mark and inadequate (168). Worship must employ culture to be effective. Cultural vehicles are necessary in worship and cultural forms inherent in all cultures are the cultural vehicles. Patrick R. Kiefert explains that one cannot possibly worship God without worship forms.

Many believe that a liturgical form is more of an obstruction than an asset to encountering God. In private devotions that might be the case, but if we want public worship, there must be a vehicle. To presume that there can be an immediate relationship with God without such "outward" things as ritual, (art, form, symbols etc.) is simply to ignore the logic of giving oneself. The point of liturgy is to receive God's self. The recipients are not private individuals relating to God in their own cozy way; they are the corporate body of the Church that experiences God's presence through public worship, the means by which God gives God's self. The most basic and important question that we must ask, then, as we plan whatever liturgy or rituals we use must be whether the worship elements are vehicles for God's self-giving presence in the community. (61)

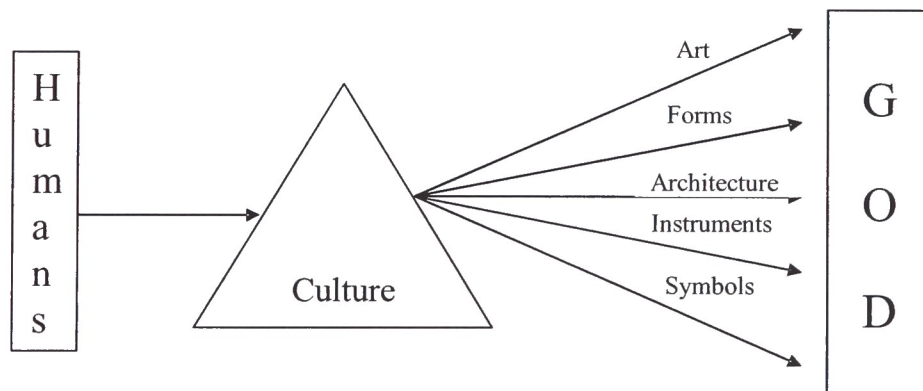
Worship and cultural understanding are strongly correlated and the experience of God in worship forms is directly proportional to the neglect or practice of understanding culture. Worship involves offering all of one's being and engages all of one's faculties—heart,



mind, soul, and senses. Worship is iconoclastic in some way for it facilitates painting mind pictures of the divinity necessary for worship of God. Cultural vehicles, in parallel, can be considered the drawing brushes.

### **Cultural Art, Architecture, Symbols, and Icons**

Neil Postman says that authentic religious experience is impossible without propriety and usage of the place of worship (see Figure 9). His first consideration has to do with the consecration of space. The first essential for a worship service is that the space in which it is conducted must be invested with some measure of sacredness. He writes, “If the congregation is not immersed in an aura of mystery and symbolic otherworldliness, then it is unlikely that it can call forth the state of mind required for a non-trivial religious experience” (119).



**Figure 9. Cultural agents in worship.**

Worship services and the places in which they are held must give the sense of God’s presence in all of God’s infinite otherness. Church buildings, as the houses of God, must symbolize the homeland of soul. The value of symbols in the worship space is that

they hint at more than can be seen. The denotation of symbols must be taught, and churches must find new ways to involve the uninitiated in the delight and mystery of their meaning. The erosion and evacuation of symbols mean a loss of the narrative of faith and a life negated of meaning (Postman 171). John H. Westerhoff and John D. Eusden affirm, “The arts incarnate our experience of mystery, wonder, and awe and thereby aid us to encounter the holy or sacred. Without the arts we are cut off from most of the means by which we perceive life’s ultimate meaning” (41).

David Barrett reports that Christians in the West are leaving the church faster than they are coming in at a staggering rate (about 53,000 each week exit the faith; qtd. in Hendricks 252). Churches desperately want to attract people to Christ, but they miss the point by offering worship, which is either not understood or too shallow by ignoring cultural forms or using wrong symbols. Churches must ask how Christ can be proclaimed enough to engender lasting belief.

### **Worship as Transcultural, Contextualized, and Dynamically Equivalent**

The resurrected Christ who is worshipped also operates above all cultures. In the mystery of his resurrection is the source of the transcultural nature of Christian worship. The fundamental shape and act of Sunday worship is shared across cultures: The people gather, the Word of God is proclaimed, the people intercede for the needs of the Church and the world, the Eucharistic meal is shared, and the people are sent out into the world for mission. The Christian calendar and the creeds (one faith, one baptism, one Lord) are all expressed variedly by different cultures, but their meanings and fundamental structure are shared around the globe.

Jesus, who is worshipped, was born into a specific culture of the world. In the mystery of his Incarnation is the model and mandate for the contextualization of Christian worship. God can be and is encountered in the local cultures of the world. A given culture's values and patterns, insofar as they are consonant with the values of the gospel, can be used to express the meaning and purpose of Christian worship.

Contextualization is a necessary task for the Church's mission in the world so that the gospel can be ever more deeply rooted in diverse local cultures. In contextualization, the fundamental values and meanings of both Christianity and of local cultures must be respected.

Dynamic equivalence involves reexpressing components of Christian worship with something from a local culture that has an equal meaning, value, and function. Dynamic equivalence goes far beyond mere translation. It involves understanding the fundamental meanings both of elements of worship and of the local culture and enabling the meanings and actions to be encoded and reexpressed in the language of local culture. Nevertheless, not everything in another culture can be integrated with Christian worship. Any elements borrowed from local culture should always undergo critique and purification through scriptural and biblical typology.

The principal transcultural elements of Christian worship and the signs of Christian unity are all strong rudiments of congregational life, witness, and mission. The contextualized elements of Christian worship vis-à-vis the liturgy, language, gestures, music, art, and architecture are all necessary for worship to be understood, rooted, owned, and propagated in the local culture. The dynamic equivalent elements of Christian



worship ensure that the truth, meaning, and value of the gospel be transmitted accurately across and received by local cultures (“Christian Worship” 24-26).

### **Missionary Methods in Question**

Evangelism and church planting had always been the *modus operandi* of doing missions during the great missionary eras spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, the philosophies behind how church planting was conducted have resulted in both fruit (converts and churches) and consequences. One renowned critic, R. Allen, was able to discern during his day (the turn of the nineteenth century) the shortcomings of mission endeavors. From his insights, distinguishing between the form and substance of missions is important. He speculated about the possible causes and flaws pertinent to how missions were done during his day, which he believed would leave churches impotent to further missions and evangelism. He addressed methods he thought were incompatible with the missionary methods of St. Paul (Spontaneous Expansion 17, 21-22, 198). In essence, he believed the spirit of missions itself was sorely missing. The call for a fresh approach was also reiterated and reemphasized by Henk J. Verkuyl (53).

St. Paul reminds all how mission and church planting were done in the early Church. He not only preached the gospel but lived out the gospel as well. The Greek word *euangelion* (good news) versus *euangelizomai* (to preach the good news or living the good news) tells that St. Paul not only preached the gospel but must have lived it as well (Thangaraj 79). Drawing principles from St. Paul’s ancient missionary methods, Roland Allen says that Paul concentrated on the following—being a Jew to Jews, becoming all things to all people so that by some possible means he might save some (1



Cor. 9:20), the ministering the Spirit of Christ, and establishing his church (Paton 104, 133).

In Paul's approach, he had only one end and one purpose in mind, that is, to ensure that churches planted will be established in the work, leading, and power of the Holy Spirit, to which many mission activities ran and still run antithetical (Paton 104, 113). Some of those activities included setting up organizations and mission stations versus that of planting churches, being dependent on funds and money versus simply sharing the gospel, creating professionalism versus voluntarism in the establishment of church structures and policies, discriminating against foreign and local Christians by creating classes leading to unhealthy nationalism, and being locked into the legalities and unwillingness to release authority versus that of autonomy of local leadership,

The nineteenth century was dubbed by Kenneth Scott Latourette as "The Great Century" in that it was not only the time when missionary efforts were most concerted in bringing Christ to the world but it also coincided with the rapid expansion of European power (Kane, Concise History 94). By implication, winning people over, applying cultural understanding, incarnation, and contextualization were not consciously high on the agenda or necessary because along with political and economic conquests comes cultural invasion as well. The relics of Western Christian culture fully imported into many countries in the name of mission can still be seen. Gustav Warneck warns one not to distort missions to that of a mere activist movement (qtd. in Yates 18). Warneck said about this distortion in fear of missions being reduced to becoming only a Westernizing of people:

There is a great danger of confounding the spread of European and American culture....[T]he missionary command does not say "*Go ye and*

*teach English to every creature* [original emphasis]”. Not more but less English should be the watchword of the twentieth century in this respect. (qtd. in Ecumenical Missionary Conference 290-91).

Warneck’s keen observation reflected accurately the bane of mission work of his day.

The form of Christianity was embraced but without the Holy Spirit’s spontaneity of the enterprise and spontaneity of the *missio Dei*. The faith was never fully indigenized and expressed. Local Christians are left, at best, ill equipped and, at worst, clueless in how to reach their own people and culture, stunting conversions, church growth, and Christianity. The faith was never able to compete with the other religions of the lands when they see their own faith synonymous to and Christianity antithetical to their culture. From observation, Christianity in many of these countries remained a minority.

### **The Oversight of Nationalism**

Christian mission stations can easily misrepresent the gospel. Activities such as purchasing land and settling down, partnering with local governments and getting support from home governments, and overruling local opposition all look suspicious to the locals. They wonder about the missionaries’ motives and can easily conclude a colonization, a conquest, a cultural imperialism, or annexation of sorts. Fear becomes the consequential product. The Christian mission may show charity, but the suspicions are not removed easily and locals are easily provoked. To buy land, build houses, and spend lots of money is such a strange way of propagating a religion that it is bound to create suspicion (H.J.B. Allen 210). In the Missionary Conference of Shanghai in 1926, the issue of spiritual force was raised as to whether the Chinese were able to see or feel the spiritual force (Holy Spirit) behind the missions’ activities. In fact, the Chinese proclaimed these activities carried a capitalistic or an imperialistic spirit, or the spirit of a Western civilization

striving to bring them into bondage to itself (Paton 90). They questioned the motive of the mission and missionaries.

Missionary methods lacked the ability to make churches national in nature. The churches were encumbered with much imported garb and the importation of traditions. Naturally foreign structures, administration of law instead of spirit, traditions of the church instead of the gospel, were attacked. Issues pertaining ministerial qualification, professional full-time clergy, self-reliance, and financing stemming from foreign soil, all necessitated dependency on foreign support. The danger of everything foreign and the issue of nationalism should never become a stumbling block to the spread of the gospel.

### **The Control over Indigenous Leadership**

Mission societies, their missionaries, and the way they supervised both missionaries and missions suggested that the issue of indigenoussness was evidently lacking. Missionaries held all positions of authority in their own hands—spiritual, material, hierarchical, and fiscal. The unfortunate consequence, though unintended, inevitably caused national Christian leaders to seek after the positions and money of the missionaries as well. Purchase of land, property, and other forms of assets did not help the situation. Missionaries controlled these assets and all spiritual authority in the name of doing missions. The result was strife and contention. Christian missions unwittingly discriminated and sowed seeds of discord among local leaders, thus retarding church growth (Glover and Kane 204).

The need to return to a transplantation and literal imitation of St. Paul's methods regardless of the differences of then and now cannot be more urgent. One might argue that one is not in keeping with modern-day contexts and methods, but precisely because



of the unhealthy consequences of missions, such as the inability to contextualize and make the gospel relevant resulting in poor conversion rates and church growth today, that churches should be indigenous from the very beginning. Everything, especially leadership under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, must be made indigenous.

Allen, who gives a succinct summary of missions' shortcomings, criticizes his era of missionary triumphalism, ecclesiastical colonialism, and condemned expatriate Westernization in the guise of Christianization. The spirit of the day was more of lording over whom they serve. Control inevitably hindered indigenesness. The excuse of accountability to supporters back home to safeguard and maintain doctrine and discipline ranked high on the agenda. Naturally they hindered handing over responsibilities of the church and ministry to new Christians (Long and Rowthorn 385). All these foreign factors only retarded church growth.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **The Problem**

This research emerged out of a necessity to know what caused the growth of the Methodist churches in Cambodia. With regards to the growth of the Cambodian Methodist churches over the recent years, this descriptive research hoped to discover what could have accounted for this apparent success, in particular to how culture, its forms and worldviews may have played a role, in order to increase the efforts and effectiveness of evangelism and ensure that the way missions are done will lead to proper indigenusness, continuity, and healthy growth of the future Methodist and all other churches in Cambodia.

#### **The Purpose**

The purpose of this research thus sought to understand how culture and gospel are integral to evangelism. The intent of this research was not so much to determine what cultural forms are used and practiced as it was to understand and eventually know what Cambodians' behavior, action, symbols, and varied expressions meant. The aim was to peel the surface of superficiality in order to uncover values and, most of all, to expose the core of Cambodian belief—worldview. Attempting to understand all of Cambodian culture is unrealistic. Notwithstanding, such research is vitally important, and the hope is to uncover as much of the Cambodian culture as possible in order to construct as many viable bridges/conduits for the gospel to travel to the Cambodian people.

This project hopes to contribute to the ministry in Cambodia in the following ways—so evangelism done by missionaries in Cambodia will always be mindful of

cultural sensitivities; so local Christians and leaders will continue to be keenly astute of their own cultural heritage as they reach out to their own people; and so churches born will continue to grow indigenously. I believe this research will also contribute towards evangelism because not as much has been written about Cambodian culture and Christianity, and the recent resurgence of Christianity and the growth of the church in a fairly postwar (i.e., after the 1990s) context will further justify the perusal of such a project.

### **A Working Framework**

For the purpose of this study, I have designed a simple working framework comprised of three types of worship services, namely, normal Sunday worship, wedding, and funeral services. This framework is potentially rich in cultural implications because practices found in the worship services are embedded in the context of national culture (see Figure 2 p.#19). The framework assumed that all aspects of the different worship services were not only influenced by national culture but were essentially culturally constructed. Thus research studied typical Cambodian worshipping congregations and how the cultural aspects of worship they employ have positively aided and will continue to increase evangelism's effectiveness.

### **The Research Questions**

Based on this framework, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the practices of Cambodian worshipping congregations presently found in the Methodist churches?

Cultural forms carry meanings which the gospel can deploy for evangelism.

Knowing these forms themselves has pragmatic significance. Many practices of Christian

worship employ and exhibit Cambodian cultural forms and expressions. This research question sought to learn, as comprehensively as possible, what they are. They ranged from activities, actions, behavior, objects, and language to arts, architecture, and literature. A guide on what significant things to notice in worship congregations is listed in Appendix A.

## 2. What do the observed practices mean to Cambodians and their congregations?

Within the practices of worship are rich meanings inherent in Cambodian culture wherein lie many inferences for evangelism. The intent of this question was, therefore, to uncover what these practices are and discover the meanings behind them. These principal practices are ideally adapted for the transmission of the gospel for Cambodians to understand the meanings behind these activities. To uncover meanings, relevant follow-up questions to pastors and church leaders were formulated, from which semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and focus group interview were executed (see Appendixes B and C).

## 3. What are the underlying worldviews seen expressed in the observed practices of Cambodian Methodist churches, and how can they be deployed for evangelism?

The cultural dimensions framework assumes from the onset that in the study of cultural anthropology, worldview eventually affects behavior, and that behavior expresses worldview. The intent of this question, therefore, sought to know what the external forms of the cultural practices I have chosen to study symbolize. The quest was to determine worldview to understand implications and possible applications for



evangelism. Many other themes in the Bible can address these worldviews for evangelism.

The research questions gave me a framework of what to study for cultural analysis through the various instrumentations employed.

### **The Subjects**

The Methodist network in Cambodia comprises of well over two hundred churches, all of which allow me easy access. The subjects for the research consisted of ten Cambodian Methodist churches for observation and description, ten pastors and ten lay leaders for semi-structured one-on-one interviews, and five pastors and five lay leaders for a focus group interview. The subjects were chosen from Cambodian Methodist churches located over ten provinces out of a total of twenty. These ten provinces are where most churches are located and the cross-section made for a good representation of worshipping congregations in Cambodia. These provinces were chosen primarily for easier accessibility owing to better roads. I have also already established good relationships with most of the pastors of the Methodist churches. These factors greatly facilitated communication for two reasons—poor telecommunication lines in the country, and culturally regarded as more acceptable and respectable to discuss matters face-to-face. Generally Cambodians are hospitable, friendly, and receptive to outsiders because Cambodian culture is generally inclusive, the Cambodian church even more so.

A main criterion for interviewees was that they must necessarily have a good coverage of both older people, prewar Baby Boomers 35 years and older, as well as younger postwar Baby Boomers to represent the culture espoused by the wide population evangelism needs to address. Interviewees were carefully chosen from experienced



pastors and older Christians (normally first generation Christians) who have grown up in and are conversant about Cambodia's past, traditions, religion, and culture. The genocide during the Khmer Rouge holocaust has in many respects sought to, and indeed wiped out, much of Cambodian culture, as it was a cultural revolution of sorts (being Maoist in orientation) that went awry. The younger generation leaders were also chosen to represent and understand the culture as interpreted by the present era in the country's history.

Another main criterion about the sample size was that it was manageable. Too large a sample would render handling data difficult. Too small a sample would limit congregation-profile diversity, which in turn limited the richness of data. Furthermore, too small a sample size would render making inferences pertaining to cultural dimensions difficult. The design of selecting one city church from five provinces and one rural one from another five provinces was deliberate in order to represent a more traditionally and culturally consistent interpretation of practices.

### **Time of Entry and Duration of Fieldwork**

The ideal period for data collection was during the second to fourth quarter of the year when churches are most active. The duration of the fieldwork was estimated to be about seven months (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Duration of Fieldwork**

<b>Dates</b>	<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
1 April 06	Prepare ethnographical study template	Adapted from Dr. Darrell Whiteman lectures
1 May 06- 15 July 06	Visitations of over 10 Cambodian churches	Observation, description, and reflection
15-30 July 06	Designed semi-structured interview and focus group interview questions with Cambodian colleague	Translated into Khmer
1-30 August 06	Interviews done with 10 pastors	Transcription done
1-30 September 06	Interviews done with 10 lay leaders	Transcription done
1-7 October 06	Focus group discussion done	Transcription done
8-30 October 06	Review information collected	In-depth reflection and evaluation
1-15 November 06	Collation of recorded data from observation, personal interviews, group discussion	Comparison, explanations, tabulations, classifications, and inferences, and deductions made
16 November on	Write up findings of study and recommendations for evangelism	Presentation of results

### **Instrumentation**

The main instrumentations of research were of three types: observation-description-analysis, one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and focus group interview. The three instruments were chosen to confirm findings and objectify conclusions by way of triangulation. The objective was to attain insights of Cambodian culture in order to make inferences for evangelism of the gospel.

The ethnographical aspect of observation, description, and analysis was taken and adapted from a list presented by Dr. Darrell Whiteman, a former professor in the E. Stanley Jones School of Missions and Evangelism of Asbury Theological Seminary (see Appendix A). The suggested aspects to observe were listed—symbols, forms, meanings, behavior, events, actions, and culture of typical Methodist Cambodian congregations for the three types of worship services according to the working framework were observed and described.

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were done specifically with Cambodian pastors and lay leaders with questions designed to probe into the external expressions of what the observed worship forms meant (see Appendix B). Explanations, reflections, and evaluation from personal observation and the pastors' and lay leaders' insights were then tabulated, coded, and classified according to categories of practices (expressions of cultural significance) and perspectives (the cultural dimensions) that make up Cambodian culture. Ultimately, meanings in the worldviews of the Cambodian congregations were ascertained.

The idea was to observe from without and confirm from within aspects of Cambodian culture used in worship through the three methods of ethnographical observation, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interview respectively in order to see how these cultural aspects can be further exploited for evangelism.

Surveys and questionnaires in written forms for data collection were not feasible owing to ambiguity problems stemming from interpretation and translation deficiencies. The result was a lack of sufficient data and information received in an aborted research I

once attempted previously. A piloting of the surveys, questionnaires, and written interviews yielded poor results. Those who participated did not answer many questions, did not know how, or gave superficial and oftentimes unintelligible answers, which were never quite to the point.

### **Ethnography—Observation, Description, and Analysis**

Having attended well over ten churches and their worship services during my six years in Cambodia gave me the opportunity to acquaint myself with the pastors' and congregations' lifestyle and personalities while working with and among them. Being able to speak their vernacular language, Khmer, not only helped open the church doors but also meant that the people welcomed me so I could observe and participate in their services and fellowship deeply. Each church visitation was about four to six days long for the ethnographical study. During each research visit, observations were described in a journal painstakingly and even instinctively so as to raise questions or make inferences in an effort to understand what was going on. Ethnography enabled me to examine a culture in a particular setting, in this case, primarily during the various worship services established in the framework of study. The aim was to ascertain worldviews, beliefs, and core values underlying their cultural forms expressed in the church and worship services. Several key things to do and discover in the ethnographical study were needed (see Appendix A).

In designing the strategy for collecting data for forms of expression in worship services, the following areas/issues were considered: type of observation, duration of observation, techniques of observation, and methods for pilot testing the instrument to collect the objective data accurately.



**Type of observation.** The type of observation in this study is participant observation in which the investigator both participates in and observes the situation under study.

**Duration of observation.** Each period of observation with a single worship service is the length of one observation unit. The total duration of fieldwork observation included actual data collection through observation, evaluation, and preliminary analysis of data collected after each period of observation and buffer time for me to familiarize myself with conducting research using a foreign language. The entire duration of observation, on estimate, took a period of about two and a half months.

**Techniques of observation.** I used a semi-structured observation technique. Observation remained unstructured in the sense that I recorded observational data as events unfolded and emerged throughout the period of investigation. I practiced indiscriminate recording irrespective of whether the details seemed important at that point. However, in order to keep the research in focus and to obtain a consistent and complete record of observed details, some broad categories of observation with accompanying guidelines are followed (see Appendix A). I should emphasize that these categories and guidelines are not deterministic, fixed, nor comprehensive. I described and recorded each emerging event in full details. The descriptions may include (where appropriate), but not be limited to, the suggested categories and guidelines. Also these categories and guidelines are refined, expanded or reduced at the discretion and evaluation of the investigator upon subsequent periods of observation. These categories and guidelines serve only to direct the observation closely to and not be detracted from

the objective of the research. The whole process of observation is essentially flexible and open in its approach.

**Piloting the observation.** The instrumentation of observation contains every possibility of misinterpreting and misunderstanding observed actions and forms owing to the biases from my own experiences and worldviews. I am thus prone to selective perception and judgments that may unwittingly distort data. Moreover, as this was a cross-cultural study, local innuendos and “lingo” may be easily missed. Therefore, questioning (interview) others in order to understand what overt actions may not tell was necessary. Together with the adapted guidelines (see Appendix A), which have been adopted for use in an earlier research assignment in a cultural anthropology course, this instrument of observation, description, and analysis resulted in collecting the correct data required.

## **Interviews**

Two different types of interviews were carried out in this study. These interviews served different purposes and also varied in designs.

**Semi-structured interviews.** For the purposes of triangulation and understanding forms, actions, and behavior expressed during the worship services, I conducted this type of interviews. I conducted the interviews on a one-to-one basis to allow for candidness in sharing and maintaining confidentiality. I designed leading questions (see Appendix B) from the earlier guidelines found in Appendix A and also according to the kind of observational data obtained. The leading questions served as a guide for the interviews by a general sequence and some preestablished open-ended questions, which are all translated into Khmer.

I standardized each of the one-on-one interviews according to a general format, covering all the different categories of questions. Such a framework not only keeps the interview focused on the research objective but also allows for response comparison during data analysis. However, I did not administer the interview schedule in a rigid fashion. I allowed for flexibility to accommodate questions not anticipated in the preplanned schedule that emerged as the interview unfolded.

Throughout the course of the interview, I allowed for latitude by permitting probing beyond the answers given and to allow for expansion on issues raised. The flexibility to clarify questions, points of reference, meanings of descriptions, terms or words used were all important in particular to this study because the difference in cultural background between the Cambodian interviewees and the interviewer; certain gaps in understanding were expected to exist.

I conducted one-on-one interviews with ten pastors and ten leaders of ten different churches over a period of two months from August to September 2006. Notes taken during the interviews were later transcribed. Each interview lasted up to two hours allowing me to pursue opportunities to probe or clarify further until aspects of culture were meaningfully and satisfactorily explained. The detailed explanations of the interviewees helped me to describe in detail. The beauty of those interviews was that I could peel layers until I finally exposed core meanings, which was exactly the goal of the entire exercise.

**Focus group interview.** After designing the interview format, I carried out this interview with all the participants in one sitting (see Appendix C). The purpose of this interview method helped to understand the relationship between religious, traditional, and



sociocultural factors that affect worship expressions and how they, in turn, impact culture. This form of interview sought to generate discussions and solicit information that would otherwise not be so forthcoming or conscious in the one-on-one interviews. The group dynamics in a focus group interview stimulates people's thinking, elicit different opinions and insights that are sometimes covert and innate, and confirm perceptions and challenges opinions. Focus groups have the ability to contribute uniquely to understanding of the phenomenon under study, thus serving either to complement or contrast earlier findings. These dynamics enhanced the quality of data obtained (Morgan 3).

Findings from different interviewees in one sitting corresponded and affirmed the accuracy of reflections and analysis attesting to the authenticity of worldviews and beliefs of the Cambodian culture.

**Piloting the interviews.** I constructed the semi-structured one-on-one interview with the working framework in mind; the categories of questions pertain to the research objectives of what takes place in the various worship services within the framework of cultural dimensions. However, in addition to asking descriptive questions, I asked explanatory questions in order to understand Cambodians' thinking, core values, and worldviews. The focus group interview included questions related to Cambodians' perspectives on the relationship between national culture and worship forms. The semi-structured, one-on-one and focus group interview questions are provided in Appendixes B and C respectively. I confirmed these questions after initial periods of observation and pretested the translated interview questions with my Cambodian colleagues in order to ensure that they were phrased coherently and easy to answer.



### **Data Analysis Method**

I chose the analytic technique of coding as the first step in data analysis in this qualitative research. It describes and interprets phenomenon or in this case, the cultural dimensions through organization of voluminous information, data reduction, categorization, description, and synthesis. The information organization reduces data through a process called coding. Coding is a process that decides on one or more categories and then organizes the data accordingly. It accurately captures the information in the data relative to what is coded and helps to describe and understand the cultural dimensions of the study. Through the method of coding data into categories, regularities in perspectives (interview data) and behavior (observational data) emerged. Such an approach suited meaningfully the objective of this research for its objective was to discover worldviews behind common cultural categories that characterize Cambodian culture.

In some studies, coding categories can be preconstructed prior to data review (Wiersma and Jurs 2007). As against pure grounded theory analysis, I have been able to construct and preassign some coding categories that fall under certain practices (expressions of cultural significance) and perspectives (cultural dimensions framework) prior to data review (Strauss and Corbin 53). In other words, prespecified codes were derived from both the dependent and independent variables of the study at hand. Data from observation and description, and particularly the interviews, were coded accordingly. The analysis began by scanning the data and assigning labels to concrete pieces of data (indicated by specific words, terms, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) as to which possible category it might belong. Constant evaluation as to what examples each

piece of data represents and the category of values/beliefs/practice into which they fit was of utmost importance. Each piece of data may have several possible labels. The data was then categorized. The categories characterized information I studied against the cultural dimensions that make up culture.

This whole process of analysis essentially reduced voluminous data to a manageable set of statements, by converting specific concrete data to more general and encompassing abstract concepts in a systematic, progressive, and inductive manner. The result of this process was the development of high-order concepts that summarised and integrated empirical data (Miles and Huberman 45).

### **Access, Confidentiality, and Courtesies**

Consent was obtained from the church pastors and lay leaders at the commencement of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity of pastors and lay leaders were ensured. Neither pastors' nor lay leaders' names were used in the write up of the report. All information pertaining to the participants were not used for any other purpose except for the execution of this study. A letter of appreciation was given to all pastor and lay leader participants at the end of the fieldwork.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Sunday Worship Services

The first of the worship services to be observed were Sunday worship services. Their backgrounds, physical settings and actions were noted and described.

#### Background and Physical Setting

A commonly furnished church is spartan with the bare necessities of altar table, pulpit, stage backdrop (usually a large piece of cloth blue in color), red cross sewn onto the cloth backdrop, Khmer Scripture written or pasted onto the walls of churches or the cloth itself, offering box with a cross on the front panel, and colorful straw handmade mats on the floors unless it has chairs or pews. Normally some guitars are used (Western folk acoustic type, which you can buy very cheaply at about US \$12 each made from neighboring Vietnam). These instruments are best because power for amplifiers/speakers is not always readily available. Guitar players are skilled in that not entire chords are always played. As in the Khmer traditional guitar known as the *chepei*, which is a two-stringed instrument, ethnic melodic tunes and accompaniment are played usually using only the first two strings of the guitar.

However, where churches are too poor even to afford a guitar, they would use a Khmer traditional handheld drum known as the *ske*. The ethnic beat and tempo that goes with the Khmer Christian hymns and songs is unmistakably distinct, which in and of itself creates an indigenous atmosphere almost instantaneously when it begins. Occasionally, they use other Khmer traditional musical instruments that form the Khmer orchestra, such as the *khem* (xylophone), *chepei* (guitar), *chepei veng* (horizontal guitar),



*trou* (vertical 2 string violin), *chap chern* (mini-sized chinks or cymbals), and of course the *ska* (drums) as well. The sounds produced are very distinctly Eastern, ethnic, and similar to songs and tunes used in Buddhist worship.

I have noticed that when Christians from my country Singapore visit Cambodian churches, they can, at times, feel rather uncomfortable with those sounds especially for those who were once formerly Buddhists themselves, but the discomfort is not extended to Khmer Christians. In fact, those sounds are great tools and bridges for the gospel. The only setback is that the instruments are in themselves very expensive even by Cambodian standards. These instruments are owned and used mainly by art organizations, government institutions, or those engaged in providing music as a business (during weddings, funerals, ceremonies, and the like). The cost of the entire set ranges from about US \$600-\$1000.

Because electrical power is not a readily available resource, most churches use 12-volt car-sized batteries for fluorescent lighting and, at times, a simple single-output mono public address system. For example, a church deep in the forest (where mines are still embedded underground) had a megaphone perched up on three joint bamboo poles towering about forty feet in the air calling people for worship and even broadcasting their services (used especially during Jesus film evangelistic rallies) over the air. Subsequently, flipcharts, hymnals, and songbooks are used instead of overhead projectors or computers. Natural (lung, paper, and unplugged) power never fails.

Hymnals, songbooks, and Bibles are owned by the church, and they are distributed only during the service. They are also collected when service ends. Otherwise, Khmers see no wrong in taking them home from the church. Their rationale is



altruistic usage, meaning, for personal spiritual growth and corporate worship in small groups. I once visited a church member's home and she proudly invited me to see her collection from the church. Only two persons were staying in her house, but at least six Bibles and a not a few hymnals were present. The notion that the church pastor's message to share the Word was understood literally by church members never dawned on him up to that point.

Church buildings do not have any distinct forms. The use of worship place is dependent on availability and pragmatism. A hall, a house, the void deck under stilted house, or under the canopy of a few trees all suffice as a gathering place for worship. More recent, newer churches built by Methodist mission agencies resemble any other churches found elsewhere in Christian countries with longer church traditions comprising a worship sanctuary, chairs, a raised platform for the stage, an altar rail, the Lord's Table, the pulpit, and the cross, flanked by side doors to the vestry. However, what is distinct about all Cambodian churches is that a large cross, always red in color, is perched high on the rooftop. In house churches crosses are also marked by paint or chalk at door entrances.

The profile or cross-section of church members is predominantly poor (as are most Cambodian churches). Transportation costs restrict their mobility. The rich have less need of God (this view especially held by the men who regard going to church as a weak and unmanly thing to do). Most do not put on their Sunday best simply because they do not have any. Those who do, I have noticed, continue to put on the same presentable attire for weeks on end. The older and/or village folks will come with their

utility cloth known as the *Kroma* from the padi fields that can be used as a scarf, shade, towel, or even a haversack.

### **Pre-Worship**

Church members begin to trickle into the church compound normally about one to two hours before the church service begins. Few come in entire families (as fully intact families are hard to find). The majority are mothers and children, and the remainders are youth. Many walk or cycle to church when within proximity. Some also journey an hour or two on foot to join the service. Some who are too far away are ferried to the church at pick-up points by modest vans if they are available (donated and maintained by mission organizations) who otherwise would not be able to come. Others make their way by *motor-dops* (motorcycle taxis) or *ramoks* (motorcycle carts).

Upon arrival, they immediately gather, and distinctly lively greetings and conversations can be seen and heard. Everyone is cordial; social graces run high and pleasantries are exchanged. No one is ostracized or made to feel out of place. Anyone can talk to anyone even if they are strangers to each other. Children shabbily or uncleanly dressed will gravitate to each other and join in whatever games and fun that is at hand. Infants half dressed (bottom half naked) and nursing mothers fellowship normally with others without a flinch of self-consciousness. Youths who are normally the logistical arms and legs of the church busily prepare the church for worship service; however, some also take their seats way before service begins for personal prayer and meditation.

When church service begins, church members flock into the church while some trickle in at their own time. Shoes are taken off and left outside the sanctuary/worship hall. Everyone worships barefooted. By and large, men and women divide off and sit

according to gender. Infants remain with their mothers breastfeeding incessantly which keeps the babies quiet. Children move about, occasionally making noise, sliding on the floor, urinating (but quickly wiped up by the mother with the child's clothes), and once after service go to the altar rail drinking up all remaining leftover communion juice from the cups. People continue their dialogues sometimes discreetly creating buzzing and humming sounds in anticipation for the service proper to start. The entire service is in the vernacular Khmer language.

### **Greetings before Worship**

The worship leader rallies the call to worship with some words of greetings. What normally follows thereafter is an exchange of the sign of peace, or, in their terms, an exchange of warm greetings or best wishes. Greeting is done one to the other (much like a handshake) with hand clasped placed in front of their face just below the nose. This exercise is not completed until everyone has literally greeted everyone. People would stand and greet one another and migrate from one end of the sanctuary or worship hall to the other as they make a walkabout passing their greetings to one another.

### **Worship through Songs and Dance**

The worship leader prepared the list of songs to be sung. Most churches have a supply of the Cambodian hymnals or photocopied songbooks. Others either use overhead projectors (mainly donated by foreigners) or songs written on large flipcharts. Still others that do not have any of these conduct their singing entirely out of memory. They sing with passion, gusto, and liveliness.

Oftentimes in the course of their singing, apart from being caught up in a state of joy and ecstasy reflected in the enthusiasm and smiles on their faces, they will break



loose into dance as well. The Cambodian/Khmer dance is most graceful. If one has seen Thai traditional dance, the Khmer dance is similar. (However, one fact must be put in order, in that the Thai traditional dance originated and evolved from the Khmer and not the other way around, which is the commonly mistaken notion. The latter predates the former.)

The dance that breaks out spontaneously in worship is the type of dance where a leader forms a chain of dancers behind him or her. As he or she and the other dancers pass the pews, they invite others to join them. People are neither shy nor awkward. Somehow, as in the case of songs, every man, woman, and child know the steps and movements as though they were born knowing them. The dance is orderly, graceful, expressive, appropriate, and rich in symbolism. Graceful hands twirl and graceful bodies sway from left to right, front to back (likened to two steps forward one step back action).

### **Worship through Items, Performances, and Drama**

Cambodian churches usually do not have choirs; however, they do have in their services much participation from the congregation in presenting items, songs, skits, and dances. They can be very simple or elaborate. They can range from common songs to adapted forms of Cambodian opera. Usually a small group, a fellowship group (such as the youth, women's, or men's groups would take turns) or an individual would give a presentation to edify the church or as a testimony of thanksgiving for something God has done in his or her life. The worship leader would invite the presenters up to the stage or front of the worship hall to present their songs, dance, or drama.

One observation is that the Cambodians' preferred mode of drama is slapstick comedy. They enjoy seeing people making a fool of themselves. (The Charlie Chaplin



type is their hero, emulating his look and style.) Laughter is a very important ingredient in communal and thus congregational gatherings. The spirit of joy, encouragement, and hope accentuates over such hearty moments. Of course when the presentation is good, the appreciation is reciprocated as well with rapturous applause. On normal occasions where common church members give mediocre presentations either to sing, read, dance, or act, the congregation is still generally attentive and appreciative. They are either uplifted or ministered to in some way by these presentations as an offering of worship to God.

### **Worship through Prayer**

A time of prayer is normally allotted after the time of praise and worship through songs. Before actual praying, the worship leader allows for prayer requests to be shared by church members. Most of the time, someone would share. One at a time, they would stand where they are and speak out audibly for the entire congregation (which is oftentimes not too large—less than fifty people) to hear. Most prayer requests revolve around blessings for good health, food and shelter, and deliverance from sickness, poverty, persecution, bodily harm, spousal infidelity, abuse, immorality, or simply from being robbed.

Personal prayer requests are shared passionately, oftentimes baring the soul. The context of the problem or request is fully disclosed with little thought of shame, embarrassment, or fear of gossip. People listen intently and show genuine concern. The worship leader needs to be disciplined in observing time usage, as several such requests will inadvertently thwart or divert the worship service. Many people who share their personal prayer requests or requests on behalf of someone they know or love are in situations of desperation.

After the time of sharing, the worship leader would share prayer concerns of the church. He would then invite the congregation to stand and pray. Several styles of prayer are adopted, as in liturgical prayer, memorized prayer, silent prayer, praying with another, or praying in groups. However the model to which they are most accustomed is communal prayer where everyone prays out loud together simultaneously. The worship leader begins verbalizing his or her prayers and soon the entire congregation is caught up in the frenzy of praying. A holy buzz or a droning sound arises when the prayers first begin and subsequently pick up in volume like chants.

It is distinctly audible, and soon many are lost in the spirit of praying. Sometimes they are beside themselves in a good way, in that they are oblivious to those around them. They pray uninhibitedly. They pray earnestly. Often times they shout with fists pumped up into the air as a sign of intensity or a declaration of victory that their prayers have been heard by God or in a celebration that God will answer and act from their prayers. Sometimes they wail and cry. They all stand to pray, heads bowed or lifted and eyes closed. Some clasped their hands in the same manner as in their traditional greeting, while others raise their hands. Just as naturally as the prayers had begun, the congregation similarly soon tapers to a hush and complete silence without prompting after all have prayed. The worship leader again prays on behalf of the congregation and finally asks the congregation to pray aloud together the Lord's prayer.

### **Worship through Testimonies**

Normally a time is allotted for mutual encouragement as to what God has done in the lives of the congregants. These occasions are not awkward moments of silence (as in some churches in my country that I have attended) but one where the people keenly

participate. The worship leader invites anyone who wishes to testify or share an item of thanksgiving, an answered prayer, or something on behalf of someone else. That person is invited to the front to give the testimony. Occasionally the witnesses stand or sit where they are if the church is small. The testimonies can be very short or can last quite a while. Sometimes, when a testimony or praise or victory is spoken, the congregation spontaneously applauds at the end of the sharing. At other times, listeners are inspired to respond or are prompted to share similar experiences to encourage or reinforce earlier testimonies.

### **Worship through Offertory**

The offertory in most churches is placed directly after the time of testimonies, item presentation, or prayer, though the order is not regimented but flexible for Cambodian churches. More common is the way the offering is collected. Many offerings are conducted and collected by way of an offering box placed on the table at the altar area of the sanctuary with worshippers making their way to the front to offer their gifts to the Lord. The worship leader will lead a song and church members will automatically stream towards the offering box, normally placed directly under the cross, in an orderly fashion to make their offerings. After all have given, the pastor of the church holds the offering box high above his or her head as a presentation of the congregation's offertory to God and the worship leader prays. The congregation immediately follows with the singing of the doxology.

The offertory is an important, and in many ways, one of the most significant times for the worshippers. I have seen on many occasions church members staring at the amount about to be given firmly gripped in their hands, wondering, pondering, praying,



and perhaps even calculating and wrestling within, finally taking that step of faith and sacrifice to put the amount into the offering box.

### **Worship through Preaching**

The pastor preaches most of the sermons. He or she preaches from the pulpit for churches that have them, or merely standing up where churches have none. He or she opens the Bible in front of him or her and begins normally with some words of greetings or introduction to what he or she will be preaching on. They are normally injected with some form of humor. The sermon begins, and preachers normally engage the audience with questions or some form of participation. The Cambodian audience, insofar as preaching is concerned, is accustomed to interaction. Live responses and comments during the preaching are permissible and commonly touted as its *modus operandi*.

I also noticed that on many occasions, the preaching goes on while others continue to talk. The talking is not an indication that the people are bored or that the preacher has lost his or her audience. It is not a sign of disrespect, either. Their intent is not to disrupt or distract anyone. It is an accepted norm that people move in and out of concentration. Most of the time, they listen but occasionally the drifting in and out of engaging with the preacher is not frowned upon. This flexibility or freedom when exercised means no harm. While some talk discreetly or sometimes not discreetly, the preacher carries on. This free-spirited atmosphere allows also for sermon participation.

### **Worshippers' Attitudes**

Upon further observation, a comment that Cambodian worshippers clearly have a sense of reverence for God must be made. I see it expressed in several ways. As in any church, the floral ministry, both for offering and arranging flowers is present. An



example can be cited especially from the floral arrangement team where they come to arrange the flowers early on Sundays long before the service begins and when the church is still virtually empty. Reverence is observed even in a simple act of approaching the altar area and moving towards the altar table. Before the team steps up from the sanctuary floor proper, the women bow their heads, pray, and pay homage to the cross before ascending.

The other example I can extract about reverence for God is during the Holy Communion service. Holy Communion services are better attended than normal ones, which are not too different from most churches worldwide. This practice is taken with utmost seriousness by those coming to receive the elements. The churches practice coming to the front of the altar to receive them. Not all churches have altar rails. In any case, holy reverence is expressed with a very unworthy disposition reflected in their posture (kneeling or squatting or crouching with outstretched hands clasped like a bowl lifted way above their heads but never at anytime daring to look up or open their eyes). Similar actions or dispositions can only be seen in marketplaces where beggars or the homeless prostrate themselves to the mercy of donors, or commoners being in the presence of a king portraying a posture of unworthiness or undeservedness. Seeing tears streaming down the eyes of those receiving the gifts of bread and wine is also not uncommon. They differ from those whom I have seen crying in other churches of my own country (Singapore Methodist churches) in that these are wails of woes and at the same time cries of mercy.

## **Worshippers' Mannerisms**

Worshippers often look for the pastor for many reasons. They would heartily greet him or her when they meet with their traditional hand-clasped exchange. They would come seeking the pastor's help in almost every aspect of their lives whether they be spiritual matters or otherwise. The pastor offers them legal, marital, health, family, career, relationship, and business advice and oftentimes plays arbitrational roles in disputes and conflicts. The pastor's help is sought as one would seek a parent of a family. Church members would come looking for the pastor at any odd time or hour. They come in person and unannounced regardless of the distance or the cost (many being poor). The pastor would also cease all activities (unless he or she is in the midst of counseling or meeting another church member) and ensure that the church member is attended to.

Conversely, also true is when a pastor visits church members, they are truly glad and will terminate all that they do to come and welcome the pastor. Sometimes, family members will run far out into the rice fields or elsewhere within the vicinity to inform the church member/s of the pastor's arrival. They will drop their work and make their way back to the home to meet with him or her. Their hospitality and respect is unparalleled. Visitation is an important aspect in church life in Cambodia.

## **Wedding Services**

The second of the worship services to be observed were wedding services. Their backgrounds, physical settings and actions were noted and described.

## **Background and Physical Settings**

Cambodians marry young, often in their late teens to early twenties. Weddings are normally held during the dry season and are traditionally very long-drawnout affairs that

can last from two to three days. Though astrologers are still sometimes sought, the day and date of weddings are not as important for Cambodians as they are in some other Buddhist countries. Nevertheless, weddings are especially avoided during the Buddhist Lenten season, which also coincides with the wetter season of the country. In Cambodia, for two months during the Lenten season, monks are confined in monasteries for meditation. Weddings are withheld during the same period for non-Christians because monks are indispensable for the occasion. Christians, however, mainly choose the drier season more for pragmatic reasons such as easier travel, better attendance, and recovery of expenses.

Cambodian weddings (all done in Khmer traditional style and language) incorporate much singing, dancing, eating, and drinking—oftentimes resulting in drunkenness at the end of the merrymaking, which is all very normal. Though more subdued these days, weddings are still very colorful, festive, and lengthy. Rituals will normally begin the night before observed by others, followed by formal programs attended by the bride and groom beginning in the morning. The celebration will eventually culminate in a wedding feast either immediately following the rituals and services or during the night when the bride and groom have had a chance to rest and change, depending on the venue of the wedding. Most weddings are done with erected tents, partitions, constructed stages, portable public address systems, tables, chairs, and all the paraphernalia associated with Cambodian style wedding decorations, normally assembled at the site of the house of the bride's family (unless the premise is too small) by bridal service companies.



Commonly seen are arched doorposts constructed with spray painted styrofoam ancient rock look-alikes reminiscent of granite stones of the Angkor Wat era. Weddings are also decorated with banana and coconut leaves, flowers, and distinctly by two bunches of silver and gold spray-painted combs of bananas. Well-dressed guests soon arrive, and women in particular, however poor, adorn themselves copiously, oftentimes in danger of out-staging the bride. The platform is set and ready for the wedding.

### **Meeting of Parents (*Sedei Dondeng*)**

A Cambodian wedding, like most marriages in the world, involves not just the two individuals but their two extended families as well. With this mind-set, decision making about marriages is never left to the bride and groom alone. Representatives or go-between persons (elderly males) used in determining marriages is a traditionally observed practice. ("Cambodian Culture").

Two events precede the actual wedding itself involving the element of matchmaking. Though not a traditional approach of matchmaking where a marriage is arranged between two strangers or mere acquaintances that have come of age, most consensual partners still require an intermediary person to present their case. The first event that must transpire concerns the boy's parents. They must approve of the girl as their daughter-in-law. They must then ask an elder (acting as a representative or matchmaker) to approach the parents of the girl to inform of the boy's nuptial intentions and to ask if the two families can meet. This required meeting is called the *sedei dondeng* and allows both sets of parents to discuss the wedding matters of their son and daughter. The boy, his parents, and family will be careful not to go empty-handed but to present fruits to the girl's parents when they meet. If they consent, the girl's parents will demand



further dowry, which will be negotiated and accepted by the boy's family. A date is then set and preparation made for an engagement party. Some couples and families do not require nor desire an engagement. In such cases, the wedding will proceed not long after the *sedei dondeng*.

Time is of the essence, and the relative immediacy is both important and observed; otherwise, an engagement party is preferred if both parties want a longer waiting period. Even then, from observation, the wedding is never delayed beyond two years. In older times and especially in the villages, the delayed wedding date was due to the fact that some dowries demanded for a house to be built by the groom designate. Two years is oftentimes considered a fair period of time for savings and construction. Only after the structure is up would the wedding date be set and allowed to proceed.

### **Flower (*Dam sla* or *P'ka sla*) and Fruit Carrying**

After *sedei dondeng*, the fruit-carrying ceremony initiates the wedding procession. Trays of fruits are prepared the night before for an entourage of families, relatives, guests, and friends to carry. Two rows are formed with the bridegroom, best men and the groom's family leading at the front. He is dressed in full Cambodian traditional garb complete with white mandarin collared shirt, golden buttons, and a pair of golden three-quartered pants flared at the thigh area worn in tunic-like fashion. A big white gold-laced brocade umbrella associated with royal processions accompanies the groom. Also heading up the procession are musicians with cymbals, gongs, and drums walking in tandem with the groom at the forefront.

This event begins in the early hours of the morning at about 6:30 a.m. The earliness ensures for an unhurried and smooth transition of the entire array of wedding

events that will follow for the rest of the day. Leading the entourage, the groom, accompanied by his parents, carries a bouquet of flowers known as the *dam sla* or *p'ka sla*. Flowers are an important element, and they are the first thing he presents and offers to the girl's parents to ask for their daughter's hand in marriage at the gate of the girl's house.

### **Bowing to Parents**

Oftentimes another section of the *dam sla* or *p'ka sla* ritual is the custom of bowing to parents, which is not readily observed by Christians depending on how the custom interpreted—whether religiously or culturally. Following the fruit carrying, the groom will carry the flowers to the gate of the bride's house. This time, however, the bride, instead of her parents, will meet the bridegroom at the gate where some words of greetings are exchanged. She is also dressed in traditional Khmer wedding apparel. It is a single off the-shoulder costume made mainly of brocade and golden-laced fabric decked with stunning gold sequins on almost the entire outfit. Heavy makeup, hairdo, a tiara, and golden shoes complement and complete the look of royalty.

The bridegroom will pass the *p'ka* or flower to someone (usually an elder) to help carry on their behalf while they talk. The bride will then put a garland of flowers on the groom and vice versa to express welcome. The couple will then carry the *p'ka sla* together into the bride's parents' house to present first to the girl's parents, followed by the boy's parents. If the couple is seated on the floor, in thanksgiving to their parents, they will bow three times to them while holding onto the flowers together before handing them over to their parents. Otherwise, if they are standing, normally a *sompiak dai* or a handclasp (traditional gesture of putting the palms together and placed in front of their

face for greeting, thanking, requesting, and worship) is practiced after the giving of the flowers.

### **Fruit Presentation and Family Union**

Once the couple is in the gate of the house, the fruit-carrying entourage will begin to place the trays of fruit on the carefully prepared floor. Fruit presentation is the next ritual, which is normally performed at the upstairs of Cambodian houses. Silver trays for fruit are standard items for Cambodian weddings. They display grandeur. The trays are placed in the center of the colorful Khmer straw mats neatly in two rows. The right row belongs to the bridegroom and his family. He will sit at the head of the row followed by his parents, grandparents, siblings, relatives, and guests behind the row of fruit. The left row mirrors the groom's but belongs to the bride's side of the family. The two families sit opposite to and face each other.

The bride and groom each appoint a representative (man only) called the *meiba* and *chow maha* respectively to act on their behalf later on. Always needed are at least two trays of each type of fruit, and each tray must have an even number of fruit on it. One tray of a type of fruit is placed on each row, one for the bride and the other for the groom. Extra care must be taken never to have an odd number of any type or unit of fruit. The bride's family, according to tradition and practice, will always demand at least thirty-six different types of fruit.

To begin the fruit presentation ceremony, the *chow maha* and *meiba* will exchange words of welcome and courtesies. The *chow maha* will also ask rhetorically if the bride is prepared for the wedding, and the *meiba* will likewise ask the groom in return. This aspect of the wedding is normally very light hearted, playful, and full of



teasing. Although everyone knows that both parties have obviously consented to the union at this stage of the proceedings, trick questions are still attempted to try and embarrass the couple. The couple must thus be on their toes in their choice of answers.

Next are the introduction and declaration of what fruits were brought. Actually at this juncture, anyone can say and declare what fruits were brought, but most will hire singers for the purpose of intensifying the liveliness and gaiety of the occasion. Some set songs are commonly used for such presentations. These singers (must be a couple, usually a husband and wife or man and woman team) are normally professional wedding performers who come with their own entourage of musicians complete with Khmer traditional musical instruments.

The two singers will then move around the trays of fruits and begin to count and pick the different types of fruit (to demonstrate the meeting of demands) onto another tray to present to the groom's representative, *chow maha*, for him to inspect. If the *chow maha* is satisfied, he will, in turn present the special tray of fruit to the bride's representative, *meiba*, and asks if the *meiba* is happy with the lot of fruits. Quite naturally he will say yes, as they always do. The *meiba* will now, in turn, present the fruit to the parents of the bride and ask for a confirmation of their pleasure. Again, the obvious reply would be in the affirmative; otherwise, the wedding cannot proceed further. Finally, the *meiba* will give the tray of fruits back to the singers, which they will take for themselves as a reward or fee called *chhnoul* for their trouble.

Following immediately is an introduction of relatives and friends from both parties of the couple, which the bride and groom will take turns doing. Another Cambodian song, pregnant with blessings to the couple and joyful union of the two



extended families together, will then be sung as a well-wishing gesture to the couple. The session closes in prayer by the pastor and a recess of a half hour is taken before the ritual of hair cutting and solemnization.

### **Haircutting (*Kut Sok*)**

The wedding ceremony resumes with an adjournment from the place of the fruit-carrying ritual within the house, to the compound outside the house building for the next ritual called *kut sok* or haircutting. Both the bride and groom participate in the haircutting, and it is done outside the house to showcase and proclaim their intentions to the public. The setup includes a big table with two trays of fruit, the *p'ka sla*, and some pots of decorative flowers. Again the bridegroom will sit on the right and the bride on the left. His best men, her bridesmaids, and their parents, grandparents, siblings, relatives, and friends will sit correspondingly on their respective sides.

The singers will moderate this earlier portion of the ritual with singing, silly joshing, and simply entertaining everyone. After about thirty to forty minutes, they will pass the time to the pastor. For Christians, no scissors, knives nor actual cutting of hair is done. Instead a symbolic cutting is practiced, and it simply carries the meaning of preparation for the wedding and their impending married life. The pastor will take the ends of the hair of the bride and groom and spray perfume on them to symbolize cutting. The pastor then prays a blessing for them and closes the session.

### **Solemnization**

The Christian solemnization of the wedding is not too dissimilar to those practiced in Western Christian liturgies. If this section of the wedding was held in church, the setting would be as according to the worship sanctuary. If it is (and often is) held at

home, the backdrop would normally consist of a banner or the cross of Jesus Christ and the names of the bride and groom either pasted on spray painted styrofoam boards or cardboard stitched on a large piece of cloth. Other accessories include one big candle flanked by two smaller ones, one on each side placed on candle stands. In the house, everyone in general sits on the floor in random fashion with no set pattern facing the front or altar/stage area. The *chow maha* and the *meiba* are required to be present for this part of the service; however, the pastor will sit right in front and in the middle facing the seated congregation.

The service begins and the bridegroom will stand facing the congregation when the opening hymn or song is sung. As the second song or music commences, the congregation is not required to sing, but only one person is needed to carry the tune. As the song continues, someone will help usher in the bride together with the *p'ka sla*, fruit, decorative flowers, and one pillow to be put behind the *p'ka sla*. When the bride reaches her position, the groom will, together with her, face the pastor and sit on the floor. An opening prayer will be offered followed by the lighting of candles by the parents of both parties. Each set of parents will step forward with a lighter or matches to light one candle flanking the larger candle in the middle. One more song is then sung, Scripture read, and the message given by the pastor or an invited speaker.

The pastor then proceeds with the solemnization of the wedding with the exchange of rings and declaration of the marital vows. The couple steps forward and, in turn, takes their individual candles to light the big candle in the middle together without extinguishing their own individual candles. Candle lighting is to symbolize the mystery of new life, one life, and a union of three (with Christ) without at the same time forfeiting

their own life and identity. The couple would then remain in front to participate in Holy Communion and offer their first family prayer to God. The pastor prays a wedding blessing over their union.

The last part of the service differs depending on the venue. In the church, a simple presentation of the newlyweds is declared, the couple exchange a kiss (on the cheek or forehead but never lips) and recess down the aisle while flowers are being thrown to wish them well. In the house, however, the *sompek p'tum* is observed where the couple reclines at the elbows on the pillow together with *sompiak dai* (hands clasped) to receive gifts, money, or blessing prayers from people. People without money or gifts seldom proceed to bless the couple. Some would practice the tying of a red thread around the wrists of the couple. This tying of the red thread is practiced more with the Buddhists. Following immediately is the act of *bieb p'ka sla*, which is the showering of flower beads or buds thrown at the couple for well wishes and blessings while the couple is still reclined on the floor.

A final song is sung, and at this point, the couple finally stands and recesses out of the house with the bride in front with the groom holding up the train of the bride. They then promptly return again to kneel before their parents to express profound thanks to them. The service ends, words of thanks are uttered, and instructions are given for the wedding feast.

### **Wedding Feast**

Most wedding feasts are done under makeshift tents with tables and chairs. The kitchen is promptly set up in the open air but away at a corner from the dining area. Commonly seen both in the city, as well as villages, are big pots larger than bath tubs and



ladles challenging the size of boat oars balanced on stones as improvised stoves burning above firewood. Richer folks, though, have their wedding banquets in restaurants normally on the night of the wedding after a break of about three to four hours after the wedding rituals and services in the morning. Either in the city, village, or restaurant, some characteristics of the feast are prominent. Many who do not come to attend the morning session will make a point of coming for the meal. Guests who came for the morning session will naturally stay on for the meal.

Another notable aspect of the wedding feast is the loud music being played endlessly. Amplifiers and speakers stacked up about ten to twelve feet high are not uncommon. The music is close to deafening and conversation during the meal is quite impossible. The meal, normally a ten course affair, is distributed the moment a table of ten is filled. No fixed seating is arranged. Guests who arrive simply take up empty seats to make up the numbers. The bride and groom will together with their parents be hospitable and move from table to table to make guests feel welcomed. At the end of the meals, guests leave at their own time just as casually as they had came. A monetary gift placed in the envelope of their invitation card will be passed by the guests at a reception counter raised to receive gifts. The amount given is only decided after the meal depending on the quality of the food and satisfaction level of the guests.

### **Funeral Services**

The third of the worship services to be observed were funeral services. Their backgrounds, physical settings and actions were noted and described.



## Background and Physical Settings

The funeral service is a very important event universally, perhaps even more so for the Cambodians. Just as wedding rituals must be properly followed for a smooth transition for the couple into the future, the belief that a proper funeral rite will usher the deceased into the next life is no less crucial. The trauma of Cambodia's period of genocide during the Khmer Rouge regime left Cambodians very uncomfortable and even fearful about the inability to perform funeral rites for their loved ones ("Cambodian Culture").

On this sentiment, the church also takes this rite as one of the most sacred events for Christians. Although the Cambodian Christian funeral service is not extremely elaborate by any means, its significance is no less downplayed. Cambodia with a Christian minority either buries or cremates the deceased, the latter being less popular. Almost all funerals are conducted from the home of the deceased and decoration is not sophisticated. In fact, no Christian funeral parlors or undertakers to arrange funeral processions are available. Community spirit comes into play and neighbors pull together to help prepare flowers and food on such occasions. At most, general tents similar to those used at any other functions, are hired for guests to have a meal together in between the funeral procession.

A funeral sign is placed at the front of the street where the house is located to signify a death in a certain household down that road. This sign is a piece of white cloth very much like a kite in the shape of a crocodile. It is called *tung kmaud* or *tung kroper*, which literally translated are ghost flag and crocodile flag respectively. The design has Buddhist origins, but most Christians also use this design. Christian funerals have no

additional backdrops, no banners, and no names depicted. A cross, some candles, wreaths, a photo, and coffin are about all the physical arrangements present. A reception table set up to receive contributions and condolences from sympathizers is also placed.

### **The Immediate Service**

Cambodians, especially older ones and depending on how rich they are, facing near or impending death, engage elder people to come and chant Buddhist scriptures as words of assurance for the terminally ill to hold onto at their time of death. This practice is called *so tuah*. Once death occurs, an immediate service is the first thing to follow. In Cambodian funerals, the body is not kept long, normally over a night or two at most depending on the financial ability of the family. Expenses grow over longer periods, and naturally only the richer will be able to keep the body a little longer.

When a person dies in the house, or in hospital, the body is brought inside the house and wrapped with white cloth laid on the floor of the house or on the ground of the house in the village. Immediate family members wear white tops and bottoms. Appropriate attire for guests is white and black combinations. Family members also wear a small square piece of black cloth for three or seven days (for the Christians and Buddhists respectively), not much larger than a postage stamp, pinned onto the sleeve of the shirt or blouse as a sign of mourning. The house is quickly arranged to make space for a short service, which takes place immediately following the arrival or placement of the body. The service is to let others know that a particular person of the household has passed away and also to give thanks to God for taking that person back home to himself. This service normally takes less than one hour. Following the short service, the Khmer music for Cambodian funerals called *ping peard* is played. If a particular person dies at

night, or is brought to the house at night, no immediate short service takes place. The short service is conducted the next morning. A longer and formal funeral service is conducted later in the afternoon.

### **Body Washing**

One hour before the funeral service, the act of body washing, dressing the body, and placing the body in the coffin takes place. The funeral service proper then begins and people gather into the house for the service to start. The act of body washing is an act practiced more by the Buddhists, but many Christians include it in the funeral ritual albeit for very different reasons. Body washing is normally done more for the older deceased such as an aged parent or grandparent by sons, daughters, and grandchildren. For children, parents do not wash them but allow siblings to carry out this practice. The immediate family does this act by pouring water over the corpse from head to toe and using a sponge or cloth wipe the face and limbs. All the while the body is not exposed but covered. The body is however naked for children. Next, the body is dressed, and new clothes must be put on. All these actions can still be executed before rigor mortis sets in, and often one sees the body propped or sat up for the water to flow down the body. An additional act often follows during this time as well. After the body has been washed and dressed, members of the family, and even friends will approach the body to ask for forgiveness and reconciliation for whatever wrongdoings or misgivings might have occurred in the past.

### **Cremation or Burial**

If a loved one dies in the hospital, the body would be embalmed and prepared to be brought home for the short service and ritual of body washing. However, if the death



occurs at home, the body is not embalmed. Decomposition of the body is retarded and the body preserved from smell by the use of tobacco and tea leaves, which act as a kind of deliquescent to lower humidity. Humidity accelerates bacterial action and decay. A layer of tobacco and tea leaves are placed at the base of the coffin in preparation for the body to be laid. This measure only slows down decomposition but does not remove it entirely. Without embalming, bodies at best can be kept for a maximum of three days, especially in tropical climates such as Cambodia's, not to mention the increased expenses of prolonged wakes and services. The preparatory process with tobacco and tea leaves carries no religious connotations other than pragmatic ones; however, this process is only used for burials. Bodies for cremations, on the other hand, are not kept long, perhaps a night or two at most, and so do not undergo any further preparation other than washing and dressing.

### **Funeral Service**

The funeral service is normally done inside the house. Anyone who knows the deceased or the family of the deceased can come join and participate in the service. In Christian circles, pastors of churches will normally contact each other, and churches will send their representatives as a show of support. In the village, megaphones are also perched high and the service announced. Generally, however, much word of mouth is used. When the wrapped body is not yet laid in the coffin but on the floor, a cross and a white or yellow candle is put at the head end and another candle at the foot end. When the body has been prepared and placed in the coffin, the coffin is closed but not sealed. The coffin is then placed at the front of the living room. The cross will again be put at the



head end of the coffin, but the two white or yellow candles will be placed on top of the coffin.

The funeral service begins with a song or an appropriate Scripture text read, followed by an opening prayer. One more song is then sung and Scripture read (but omitted if read earlier). Any lay leader can arrange and lead this part of the service. A history into the life or a eulogy of the deceased is then read followed by a time of testimony giving by people who knew the departed. Thereafter, a person thanks God for the life of the deceased and also offers a prayer for the bereaving family. Normally this privilege is reserved for a very close friend of the deceased. The pastor reads the scripture passage for the sermon, followed by the message itself, after which one more song is sung and the closing prayer said.

After the funeral service has ended, the coffin is reopened for loved ones and friends once again to bid farewell and pay their respects. The coffin is then closed again but not sealed to prepare for transportation to the burial or cremation site. The coffin is carried to the hearse and ready for travel. Before the hearse departs, the pastor must pray over the site where the coffin and body were resting during the entire funeral ordeal. A meal of hospitality, appreciation, and thanksgiving is then given before guests travel to the burial or cremation site.

### **Cremation or Burial Service**

When traveling to either the cremation or burial site, everyone carries a stalk of flower as a sending-off gesture much like offering flowers to bid farewell at airports or other places of departure; however, one must be careful never to have roses or inappropriate types of flowers for the occasion. This flower is left in the coffin for burial

or on it for cremation. When the hearse arrives at the burial or cremation site, another service is conducted, similar to the funeral service in the house except that the eulogy and testimony time are omitted, and a different sermon is also preached. After the service, the coffin is reopened for the last time for people to put their flowers inside, to bid farewell, and to pay their very last respects. The coffin is thereafter closed. Before the coffin is lowered into the grave, the pastor puts his hand on the head of the coffin and a prayer is offered as a committal or send-off prayer. The coffin is then lowered, and the pastor takes a piece of soil and throws it onto the coffin as an act of committing the body back to God and the dust from which man and woman was made. Others then follow suit in dropping soil into the grave.

Much of the process is similar for cremation as it is for the burial up to the point where the pastor prays the send-off prayer. Then, instead of throwing soil, the people put flowers on the coffin ready for the furnace. The pastor then steps forward, and he is the one who lights the furnace. Because kerosene and firewood are used, the ignition of the fire oftentimes comes close to singeing the pastor and does pose a little danger. When the coffin is buried or burned, people begin to disperse and return home.

### **Further Observances**

Family members continue to wear the black piece of cloth on their arms for another seven days of mourning before it is removed and discarded. Buddhists, however, continue to observe another seven days of wakes and services. During this time, the house must not be cleaned, doors cannot be locked, and kerosene lamps must remain lit all the time to allow for the soul to return home. Commonly seen are older widows shaving their entire head bald as a sign of mourning. In fact, anyone can do so. Younger

females can also choose to do so, but most would normally just cover their head with white cloth.

For burials, a tombstone is erected with the photo, name, date of birth and death, and preferably a Scripture verse inscribed. A photo of the deceased is then framed and hung on the wall of the family's house. In the case of cremation, both the photo, and ashes of the deceased contained in an urn are displayed in the house; however, Christians seldom keep or display the ashes. Besides the earlier mentioned white flag or ghost flag, *tung k'maud* hung at the entrance of the road of the house, another white cloth is placed at the burial or cremation site called *tung proleng* or soul flag to represent the body of the deceased. People fight over this cloth as they might over a shroud.

### **Summary List of Major Findings**

The major findings from Sunday worship, wedding, and funeral services that bear cultural significances for further analysis are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3. Major Findings**

	<b>Sunday Worship Services</b>	<b>Wedding Services</b>	<b>Funeral Services</b>
<b>Religion</b>	Blue cloth, Khmer instruments, rooftop/house crosses (red), early arrivals (for service), barefooted worshippers, offertory, godly fear and reverence.	Flower carrying and throwing, fruit presentation, haircutting.	The pastor, ghost and soul flag, red thread in funerals, white cloth and words of assurance, black cloth on sleeve, cremation, yellow candles and flowers, photos and urn.
<b>Tradition</b>	Khmer scripture, red cross, kroma, vernacular language, handclasp greeting, songs/tunes/dances.	Ancient decorations, royalty and regality, male representative in weddings, marriage preparation.	Traditional Khmer music.
<b>Social Norm</b>	Highly perched megaphones, unchurched men, nursing mothers, celebrations, taking Bibles/hymnals home, prayer requests and testimonies, items performances and drama, preaching interactively.	Pastor, meeting of parents, wedding date, bowing to parents, red thread in weddings, wedding banter and feast.	Body washing and asking for forgiveness, shaving of head.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Cambodia is a society bound deeply by culture, and so Cambodian worship services are enwrapped in Cambodian cultural forms. However, cultural aspects employed are mainly used for worship purposes and not explicitly nor consciously utilized for evangelism. Cambodians Christians are themselves not keenly conscious that culture plays as important a part in evangelism as in worship. The need to understand, how to contextualize the gospel and to demonstrate that to Cambodian Christians and missionaries, that is, to utilize and capitalize further on culture as strategies for evangelism is the very purpose why this research was undertaken.

#### Religion

An analysis of cultural aspects that bear cultural significances under the category of religion are listed below. The ten pastors and ten leaders interviewed yielded the following results. Beside each heading is a statistic indicating the number of respondents, out of a total of twenty, who know or agree with the meaning behind each cultural form.

#### **Blue Cloth (15/20)**

Cambodians understand the color blue to symbolize both peace and prosperity. The understanding for peace is particularly in the area of being without trouble or smooth operations without hitches or glitches, and prosperity connotes success in endeavors. The symbolic connection between blue and peace is linked to the church premise because Cambodians believe that spirits govern premises. In this instance, the spirit known as *komrom* is referenced. Every place devoted for a program, activity, drama, skit, movie, or

presentation has such a spirit, to which the group must first pay homage. The Cambodians will offer homage, respect, and prayer to that spirit prior to any event.

A belief that the spirits of previous persons who have once been in charge of those skits known as *lakaun*, still lives and linger on in that place, exists. They need to be respected. In a sense, a kind of permission is being asked so as to avoid incurring the wrath or being disturbed by the angry spirits (for a peaceful gathering or event). Spirits are also invoked for their blessings (for a prosperous and successful performance). The blue cloth as the backdrop for church's front stage symbolizes respect to God's presence, wanting to find favor with him so that church services will run smoothly and successfully and his *shalom* will bless the congregation.

### **Khmer Musical Instruments (16/20)**

The *chepei* (two-stringed guitar) is the instrument commonly used for entertainment purposes. Poems, folklore, stories, and monologues are sung accompanied by this instrument. Religious connotations and references with regards to this instrument are rare as it is generically used for pure entertainment. The *trow* (two-stringed violin), *sko* (drum), and *chap chern* (chinks), however, are instrumentations required for any common celebration, especially religious ceremonies. They are used to invoke and call spirits during these ceremonies to come bless the occasion. For example, they are indispensable for coronations, swearing in of the government, and wedding and funeral services. These instruments are used occasionally during Sunday worship services, especially Holy Communion services. The Cambodian church, too, wants to invoke the Holy Spirit to come reside, lead, guide, and bless their time of worship. These instruments are thus used for this purpose.

### **Rooftop or House Crosses (Red 13/20)**

Crosses are called *cher-cherkang*, or *chern aik*, or *kakabard*. Oral tradition traces the practice of using the icon of the cross to the time of the Nestorian Christians who came into contact with the Khmer empire. Today, even non-Christians use it for protection from evil spirits. They paint crosses on their doors, windows, and small holes of their houses to ward off these evils. Legend says an evil spirit called *Arb* is a witch whose incantations can dismember her head from her body, pulling all internal organs and intestines with it. Her grizzly head with the internal organs would then take flight during the night in search for unclean things to devour.

This practice was especially observed during childbirth because the placenta, umbilical cord, and all other discharges were considered dirty things in the house. The belief is that if a witch gains access into the house, she brings along with her black magic and curses, causing sickness and even death to members of the household. The cross somehow became the icon for protection. Naturally, the church used the cross as an icon to symbolize many things. It is a very powerful icon in a society like Cambodia where the belief of the supernatural is so prevalent. It is a very relevant tool for power evangelism and faith building. Icons do help build faith. Cambodians recognize the power behind the icon and not the icon itself in fear of idolatry. A simple teaching of the church should safeguard against the pull of idolatry.

### **Early Arrivals (for Church Service 18/20)**

Cambodian culture has a very high regard for honor and respect. For example, many people make their way to church on foot for over two hours just to arrive early. Although different levels of respect are given to different statuses, it must not be



mistaken for class or castes (as in India). Cambodians do not discriminate but do fraternize with each other. The caste system, however, has the element of contempt. As in many Asian countries, the social structure is hierarchical, but the hierarchy is more for functional purposes and not for pegging one's worth or unworthiness. For example, marriage is not restricted only to similar tribes or people of the same stock.

Although respect and reverence applies to every area of Cambodian life, they are especially accorded their highest levels to all things religious. Buddhist ceremonies and rites see devotees arriving very early as a mark and sign of enthusiasm, respect, reverence, and general high regard. The accepted mind-set is always for the lower to wait for the higher. Dignitaries, ministers, and guests of honor, for instance, have the right and liberty to come last; however, King Sihanouk, I was told, as a sign of respect to his people, is always known to arrive early for any celebration. In a sense, his attitude of waiving his right and behaving humbly endears the people to him greatly. Church members' early arrival speaks volumes about their regard for God. This aspect of the Cambodian culture is one Christianity must seek to preserve. Punctuality and/or tardiness affects Christian witness.

### **Barefooted Worshippers (19/20)**

As another sign of respect given towards things religious, just as in temples and pagodas where Cambodians visit and worship, no shoes, hats, running, or riding is allowed within worship premises as a sign of respect. Shoes keep dirt off the feet and thus are considered dirty. Holy places, worship places, or places recognized as houses of God are treated with utmost respect. Christians will do well to observe "holy ground mentality" even in their own churches as a testimony to the omnipotence of God. This



concept is neither new nor alien to the Bible. Many Bible passages record taking off one's shoes when coming into the presence of the Lord (e.g., Exod. 3:5; Josh. 5:15; Acts 7:33).

### **Offertory (Trust and Thanksgiving 16/20)**

One walks forward to give one's gifts, tithes, and offerings. The journey and walk towards the offering box is both a step and journey of faith. It is a personal and also corporate expression to say that God is above all in their lives. It is also an act of utmost trust in God much like the widow with the two coins or the widow of Zorababbel who would soon run out of food. This act of obedience is an expression of complete dependence on God's providence and continual supply in their lives. Offerings done in such a manner parallel the Buddhist's practice of alms giving and making merit. Though the element and intent of thanksgiving and gratitude in the offering must not be dismissed, the mind-set of giving and expecting returns embedded in the beliefs of worshippers is the more dominant reason for making offerings.

Monks ply the streets of Cambodia daily making their rounds from house to house asking for alms. Givers give because they believe they do good and gain merit. Temple lay leaders actively set up toll booths on some roads collecting donations from passersby and car passengers for building or restoring temples. Donors give as a duty to support the community and also to gain merit. Religious festivals invite Buddhist families to sponsor or cohost with others by underwriting the expenses. Such sponsorships are known as *bon tiearn*. Sponsors give to gain merit for their future life, jobs, and business. A Cambodian gives also because of community pressure so as to avoid shame, embarrassment, and loss of reputation.

Giving as a form of worship is already in the mind-set of every Cambodian; however, the attitude of gratitude as the reason for giving is weak and lacking. Because worship service is weekly, giving is not an occasional investment in the hope of some returns. With proper education, the Cambodian Christian can easily be taught to give as an expression of thanksgiving for what they have already received from God. Needless to say, God's continual outpouring of provisions to an open hand (i.e., one that continually offers to God) will further testify of a God most trustworthy.

### **Godly Fear and Reverence (20/20)**

In addition to knowing that Jesus is God, he is also regarded as brother and friend. Nevertheless, Cambodians consider it unthinkable and sacrilegious to equate God as a brother and friend. Entrenched deep in the minds of the Cambodians is the belief that God or anything religious cannot be trifled with or taken lightly. They understand the consequences of their actions, at least when in religious or worship situations. Icons and practices of previous religions, folklore, or ceremonies passed down from oral tradition or those they have witnessed personally cause them to see religion literally. A potpourri of religions enmeshed in the culture since days of old contain elements of Hindu, Buddhist, and animistic religions. Trances, spells, curses, and even voodooos make them all too aware of the power of the gods. Religion is not a mere philosophy of life or a rational belief that provides answers for the origin of life and the life after. It is real, literal, and present. Reverence for God is fearfully observed indeed.

God, spirits, and the supernatural world are very literal to the Cambodians. They have always been brought up with the notion of a higher being and a higher authority in this world. Until the time when the country fell under communism, God and spirits, and

the worship of them, were never questioned. Today, the deeply entrenched worldview of the spirit world has made its resurgence and is once again a paradigm in the minds of the people. For example, small “idolettes” and altars reside in every house or miniature idol houses placed near the gates of houses as protection from evil. If one needs to do something and an idol is at that certain place, Cambodians will first ask permission and also forgiveness from that idol before proceeding.

When these Cambodians become Christians, the paradigm does not shift. The same mind-set remains. When they go to a holy place, they do not speak loudly, run, or misbehave. Especially during the partaking of Holy Communion, they never look up or at the priest or the altar. Their unworthiness, undeservedness, unholiness, and filthiness are personally understood. To dare to lift one’s head up is a declaration and symbolization of disrespect, equality, and fearlessness. God as a higher being is recognized and thus needs to be worshipped. The worship of him is an imperative never doubted or questioned. Cambodians not wishing to offend a higher authority (as is true regarding earthly authorities) worship to ward off trouble. A Cambodian proverb captures this idea: “Be careful never to hit a rock or a wall with an egg.” While we constantly have to remind people with secular mind-set about the reality of the spiritual realm, Cambodians never questioned it. Their lives are dictated by it.

Again the belief of the spiritual realm is especially evident during Holy Communion. Partakers come kneeling and receiving the elements with tears streaming down their eyes. For many God is their only hope, with no other way to survive. They partake Holy Communion believing strongly that the elements are spiritual in content, supernaturally able to protect and heal them from sickness and harm and also to provide



them for the month ahead. They literally trust and obey because there is no other way. Basically their attitude and intent are to find favor with God in order to gain, benefit, or receive blessings. One suspects that this stance parallels their previous faiths/religion in the act of appeasement to ward off the wrath, disfavor, and punishment of God. Appeasement is a strong motive for worship.

### **Flower Carrying and Throwing (18/20)**

How the flower *p'ka sla* or *dam sla* was obtained deserves some mention here. Another ritual by the name of *kan sla* or *kut p'ka sla* was performed the night before. In the village, elders seek out the particular tree bearing the required flower or *p'ka sla* days earlier before the wedding. Once a fruitful tree is located, a red ribbon is tied around it to restrict and reserve its flowers for cutting the night before the wedding. On that night, a ritual is performed where musicians play some songs invoking the village spirit to bless the flowers. The flower is then cut. This practice originates from animism and its superstition is still held, especially in the villages. Many regard or blame divorces on the belief that this ritual of *kan sla* or flower cutting was performed inadequately or not at all. Appeasement to and blessings from the spirits are the purposes of this ritual. Cambodian worldview shows little divide between the physical and spiritual world.

Christian weddings, however, do not undergo this ritual, but elders still practice flower cutting the night before the wedding. Without performing the ritual, elders would simply just go and cut the flowers. When this flower is carried to the bride's house to meet her at the gate on the wedding day, the selection of the person to carry the flower on behalf of the groom during the exchange of formalities is of critical importance. The groom is careful not to choose anyone with any history of marital problems. Anything



that may connote a curse for the wedding is carefully avoided. For Christians, the flowers serve merely to symbolize the asking of the girl's hand in marriage; however, the apparent superstition also runs across Christian practice with regards to the man carrying the *kan sla* or *p'ka sla* on behalf of the groom. The significance of *kan sla* symbolizes the entire wedding. A phrase *meimai* (widow) *kan sla* (flower cutting) meaning "widow without marriage" is used to refer to a girl when engagement does not culminate to a wedding and underscores the meaning and significance of this ritual.

The *biep p'ka sla* or throwing of this particular flower originates from a Cambodian adage that "men in old age would eat tobacco and women would eat *sla*." *Sla* was at one time eaten as commonly as rice. Probably the practice of throwing rice and *sla* has similar meanings. This flower is harder to find today, so the similar looking but harder coconut flower is used as a substitute instead. The throwing of the flower connotes a long and lasting marriage, food on the table, and a fruitful life ahead. Flowers are a crucial symbol for Cambodian weddings because they denote gardens. The picture of the Garden of Eden portrays marriage as God's idea and that blessings come from him alone.

### **Fruit Presentation (18/20)**

The significance of the silver trays used for fruit presentation revolves around the ritual of *vongvel pramperl* (circling seven times). In this ritual, Buddhist monks walk and chant prayers around the trays seven times to ask for blessings for the perfection, of the wedding. Seven is a number widely regarded for perfection which is not dissimilar in mind-set to Christianity. The even numbers required in fruit presentation is symbolic of well-wishing and is believed to bring blessings and luck. Marriage forms a pair and is deemed good and inseparable. Odd numbers are believed to invite curses. Whether

superstitious or animistic, Cambodians recognize that the physical and spiritual and the natural and supernatural worlds live side by side. Good and bad forces or spirits are always at play. The Cambodians' mentality believes in avoiding all trouble in order to avoid angering the gods and to be safe. In other words, good gestures beget good results. Cambodian Christians do not practice the ritual of *vongvel pramperl* because it is explicitly seen as Buddhist with monks involved. Christians, however, observe the custom of even numbers and invoke God's blessings in the institution of marriage. Fruit-like flowers draw back to the Garden of Eden to say that marriage is not only God's idea, but fruitfulness his intention when Adam and Eve were told to be fruitful and multiply (Gen.1:28). Several cues for evangelism present themselves—God intends for all persons to have full redemption and restoration (in seven days he created all things perfect and humankind after his own image; Gen.2:2) and an abundant and fruitful life (John 10:10).

### **Haircutting (14/20)**

In Cambodian thought, the head represents the whole body. Cutting of hair from the head signifies a total offering of oneself. The head is also the most revered part of the body as the feet are most despised—the former being considered pure and sacred; the latter having constant contact with impurities and dirt. When Cambodians sit, on the floor or chairs, their feet are well tucked in and never pointed toward anyone. Not to do so is considered offensive and insulting. Patting children or touching others on the head is also considered improper.

The activity of *kut sok* is in actuality to invoke angels, their personal gods, and the spirit of the land or place to bless the couple, which the singers, in the course of their

singing, invoke. The singers believe they are transported to a place to collect a pair of golden scissors or knife back for the ceremony. Actual bits of hair would then be cut from both the bride and groom and wedged between a banana leaf. The monks would then sprinkle some water and chant prayers of blessing over it. Christians, too, invoke God to bless through his Holy Spirit as well as for his angels' protection for the couple's life ahead. The head was also considered sacred and holy in Jesus' time. Jesus covered his head during the transfiguration, and men would cover their heads when they read the Torah. Jesus' head was beaten, spat on, and finally crowned with thorns, speaking much about the love, suffering, and sacrifice he endured for humankind.

### **The Pastor (17/20)**

The act of lighting the furnace for cremation has spiritual significance. The pastor is recognized as a person with spiritual maturity and having the ability to enter and encounter the spiritual world. Moving on from this life to the next brings some degree of apprehension to all. The courage shown in lighting the furnace gives assurance to family members that the pastor is leading the way in sending off and guiding the soul of a beloved to his or her heavenly abode. As much as non-Christian Cambodians regard religious leaders such as Buddhist monks as a mediator between this world and the next, pastors are also seen as official representatives standing between the two worlds for Christians. Religious leaders are given the authority and leadership in all matters spiritual. Their right to confirm the rite and guarantee the passage of the deceased is unquestioned.

The Buddhist monks, albeit not promising the deceased a promotion to a better life owing to their teaching or merit and karma, dare indeed assure that the deceased has



successfully departed to the next world and is unable to return to cause harm to this world or the family. Chants from monks are believed to prevent evil spirits called *prei bai saich* from entering the corpse during the funeral service. For example, a widespread belief amongst Cambodians is about cats and corpses. Cats indicate the presence of evil spirits. When a cat crosses over the corpse, the body is said to sit up, signifying a possession has taken place. Other fears include deaths of pregnant women and other unnatural deaths such as accidents, murders, and suicides. Souls of natural and unnatural deaths are called *k'maud tormada* and *k'maud tai houng* respectively. Unnatural deaths are seen as untimely deaths, that is, before one's appointed time. The souls of such deaths are believed to be trapped between this world and the next, lost between time and space. These souls, unhappy with their existence, wander and cause havoc to others. Religious representatives such as monks and pastors play a crucial role in assuring a proper dispatch of souls and protection for the family and community.

The cleansing prayer by the pastor when the coffin is moved to the hearse plays a similar role. The prayer is done because Cambodian Christians believe that the devil or an evil spirit will assume the void or vacuum left behind by the removed body and will haunt and disturb family members of the household. Family members experiencing the return of the spirit or soul of the deceased or another to the house have not been isolated cases, even for Christian households. The cleansing prayer prevents this phenomenon from happening. Faith in God's protection is increased upon this act. The omnipotence of Almighty God is displayed before all and is a powerful witness of how evil spirits are subject to Jesus, the High Priest. Evangelistic messages abound from passages of Jesus



casting out demons and spirits. Protection from spirits is a very real need in this part of the world.

### **Ghost and Soul Flag (15/20)**

The design of the *tung k'maud* or ghost flag is Buddhist in origin. Legend says that when Buddha was meditating one day by the side of the water, two courting crocodiles who adored Buddha asked to be his disciples. Buddha refused because he could not receive animals as disciples. At their dismay, the crocodiles further requested Buddha at least to hang their skins up to remind others of their love for him when they die. Another legend continues that Buddha had Satan bound so that no one would be able to release him. Buddha designated the sign of the crocodile flag to indicate that whenever that flag is seen, there Buddha will be. The flag is a warning against Satan's mischief lest he will be bound (Institute of Buddhism 96-101). The crocodile flag is believed to ward off Satan and his evil spirits.

Buddhists believe that the other flag, the *tung prolerng* acts like a travel document (passport or map) for the departed soul to find his or her way as souls do not travel together but individually. This flag is also thought to bring protection and good luck and is especially powerful if contenders retrieve it at the stroke of midnight. Many believe that during the time of contesting for the flag, many ghosts and spirits are also sighted. Although reports of sightings have been few, many, however, develop severe ailments from their intense fear. Competition for the flag is fierce, especially in the villages and during the Khmer Rouge regime because it is acted as a powerful charm against the many perils of mines, bullets, and dangers. Oftentimes idolatry and iconoclasm are not differentiated. The former places faith on the object whereas the latter uses it to direct

faith onto the subject Jesus Christ. The hem of Jesus' clothing and Peter's handkerchief brought about an experience of power of healing from God. Cloths such as the flag can point to the real source of power.

### **Red Thread (16/20)**

Red thread is put on the reception table for others to tie around their wrists after they have given their contributions. The giving of this red thread is not exclusively practiced by Cambodians alone. Many Asian cultures have it as a counterbalance where the red thread symbolizes something positive. In Cambodian thought, red symbolizes life as white or yellow symbolizes death. Black is more commonly held in Western traditions to symbolize death. The red thread, thus, is commonly used as a neutralizing agent, that is, to counteract the bad spirit and omen believed to be present at the funeral. Essentially the red thread is used as a protective charm.

Besides this counter effect, Cambodians wear red more to show benevolence, that they have done something meritorious to help the bereaved because financial gifts help defray costs and relieve additional emotional burden at the time of grief. Gifts are sometimes not just brought for the bereaving family, but also for their own relatives departed earlier sent via the deceased. The red thread expresses an undergirding worldview of the non-divide between the physical and spiritual world, and their own merit making. Red thread reminds of other things red—the Red Sea crossing, the bloodied doorposts at Passover, the scarlet cloth of Rahab, and, most of all, the blood of Christ that acts not just as a protective charm but offers salvation and eternal security both in this life and after.

### **White Cloth and Words of Assurance (15/20)**

White or yellow is the color associated with and reserved for funerals. For example, the color selection of the banner or backdrop for the wedding can be anything bright except yellow. Buddhists in general believe that the white cloth used to wrap the body symbolizes purity, holiness, meritocracy (having gained merits by striving to be righteous in this life as a reward for a better next life), and a declaration of freedom from the encumbrances and problems of this life. It also symbolizes purity and holiness for the Christians, although under very different explanations. Christians understand that one's salvation to the life after is never based on one's merit and righteousness but by the blood of Christ. This theme is most appropriate for *so tuah* or words of assurance practiced by Buddhists near impending death. The idea of *so tuah*, sharing words from Holy Scriptures before death as words of assurance, is a readily accepted norm in the Cambodian context and can be exploited for evangelistic purposes where the gospel can be shared at the point of greatest need.

### **Black Cloth on Sleeve (16/20)**

What white is to purity and holiness, black is to pain, sadness, and darkness for Cambodians. During the seven days of wearing the black cloth, the house is not cleaned, doors are not locked, and kerosene lamps remain lit at all times to allow for the soul to return home. Cambodians believe this period of mourning is necessary to alert the departed soul of his or her condition. A Cambodian mind-set that it normally takes about seven days for anyone to be convinced of, or learn a lesson, from any wrongdoing in life exists. Similarly, Cambodians believe seven days is required for the soul to realize that he or she has indeed died and departed when he or she no longer has any body to return to



upon coming home. The soul oftentimes cries; Cambodian households profess literally to hear such cries from souls. In villages, Cambodians also believe that dogs barking in the night for no apparent reason testify to the wandering of these souls. The importance of this period of mourning is to ensure that the soul knows he or she belongs to the other world and should not remain in this one to cause any trouble. The Cambodians' worldview of the physical and spiritual world living side by side produces much fear for the living. The Bible demonstrates how all spirits, even departed souls, such as the centurion's daughter, Lazarus, and Peter's mother-in-law are all subject to Jesus. Jesus further testified of the great divide from the passage of Abraham and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The omnipotence of God is a powerful antidote for humans' impotence against spirits and fear.

### **Cremation (16/20)**

Cambodians generally do not like cremation. Buddhists believe, especially, that in sudden deaths such as accidents or heart attacks, the soul has no path to find his or her way back to the body. Christians similarly dislike cremations and will always choose burial if the family can afford it (if it is within their economic means to buy and maintain a grave plot). The belief, however, differs from the Buddhists' in that it is influenced by early Christian Missionary Alliance missionaries' doctrinal teachings of Jesus' second coming, where bodies of Christians will be caught up to heaven, the dead being the first to rise. The possibility of forfeiting this rapture because of not having a literal body, not even the bones of one, makes missing out on this all important event a very fearful prospect. The thought of what form the afterlife will take is a very real apprehension faced by all.



Another reason why cremation is less entertained by the Christians is that crematoriums are only found in Buddhist temples. At a time where assurance is deeply needed, the religious dissonance from the sights and sounds of the environment of the temples do not help in bringing comfort to the Christians at their time of bereavement. Surroundings and icons affect mourners no matter how spiritually mature they may profess to be. Unfortunately, the poorer Christians normally have little choice but to cope with this added difficulty. Wherever possible, a literal burial must be preferred for it conjures the imagery of salvation and resurrection.

### **Yellow Candles and Flowers (15/20)**

Legend or folklore tell of a certain game hunter who killed many animals in his lifetime. One day he fainted and nearly died. During that time, he was confronted with all the souls of the animals he had killed and realized all the misdeeds he had done. He cried for his son's help in his unconsciousness. Upon his rescue by his son from the animals, he suddenly regained consciousness. Out of gratitude, his son became a monk. The hunter then asked his son to remember to put candles and flowers on his coffin when he dies so that others will think only good of him, helping him gain merits for his entry into the next life (Institute of Buddhism 96-101).

Buddhists also believe that candles must be kept burning to provide light for the spirit or soul of the departed to find the way to the next life successfully. Otherwise, he or she will lose the way and get lost if the light goes out. Together with the candles, flowers are also used to bid a good farewell from this life, a good journey ahead, and a warm welcome into the next life. The Christians, however, use candles and flowers to remind them of the light and fragrance of Christ to whom the departed soul will return.

## **Photos and Urn (14/20)**

The reason for keeping the photograph and cremated remains of the deceased is for remembrance. Buddhists further believe that the soul of the deceased will return home and be asked to protect the household. On other occasions, the departed is feared and will be entreated to spare the family from harm. Essentially, the point is to appease and manipulate the departed for the family's benefit. Food is thus often placed before the photo and urn as an offering for the departed in the spirit world.

Christians, however, do not keep the ashes of the deceased at home. They are either scattered in the fields, the sea, or given to a non-Christian relative. Sometimes family members do not even bother collecting the remains after cremation because many Cambodian Christians believe that some other spirit(s) may repossess the ashes instead. Many experiences testify to this belief that some other spirits come to disturb the family when the ashes are kept at home. Not keeping the urn at home gives peace of mind. Keeping ashes at home may also confuse other Christians and cause them to stumble. Fear is a factor regarding the urn. Again the literal coexistence of the physical and spiritual worlds passing in and out of each other's domain is the underlying worldview of Cambodians. By not denying this worldview but further affirming it with Jesus' omnipotent protection is a ready bridge for the gospel to walk across.

## **Contextualization of the Gospel in Cambodia**

Examples of how the gospel can be contextualized by using Cambodian worldviews as bridges for evangelism extracted from the cultural aspect of religion are illustrated in Table 4.

**Table 4. Religion as Gospel Bridges**

<b>Symbol, Form, Expression</b>	<b>Cultural reasons/ meanings</b>	<b>Worldviews Beliefs</b>	<b>Implications for Evangelism</b>
Blue cloth	Permission from spirit, appeasement of spirit.	Living in the midst, reality and presence of the spirit world.	Preach about omnipotence and awe of God.
Khmer instruments	Invoking spirit's blessing literally.	Life is subject to the spirits. Spirits bless.	Invoking the Holy Spirit's anointing and God's blessing.
Rooftop/house crosses (red)	Protection from evil spirit.	Life is subject to the spirits. Spirits curse.	Employ Christian icons as altars of faith.
Early arrivals (for service)	Reverence for things spiritual.	Fear of spirit's wrath and punishment.	Punctuality lends witness to greatness of God.
Barefooted worshippers	Respect for things religious and holy.	Gods and spirits are holy and higher beings and are not to be trifled with.	Holy ground mentality towards a holy God (e.g., Burning Bush).
Offertory	Finding favor with the spirits. Trusting God.	Utter mercy and dependence on the spirits.	Preach about God's providence to those who trust him.
Godly fear and reverence	Expression of unworthiness, undeservedness toward God.	Cause and effect of daily lives directly dictated by the spirits.	Preach that those who fear and trust the Lord lack nothing.
Flower carrying and throwing	Security, happiness, and fruitfulness in marriage subject to spirits' blessings.	Spirits can be manipulated—certain actions appease and certain others bring blessings.	Infer flowers to Garden of Eden where men, women and marriage are God's creation. Only he can and wants truly to give life and bless.
Fruit presentation	Invokes blessings and good luck with seven and evenness. Good gestures bid good results.	Spiritual and physical world live side by side, and the latter is subject to and at the mercy of the former for good transitions in life.	God offers perfect (seven) redemption and restoration, thus a fruitful abundant life for all.



**Table 4. Religion as Gospel Bridges, continued**

Symbol, Form, Expression	Cultural reasons/ meanings	Worldviews Beliefs	Implications for Evangelism
Haircutting	Invoke angels, personal gods, and spirits to bless the couple.	Head represents the whole. Blessing of hair from head denotes total blessings, wholly and eternally blessed.	Jesus' wounded head symbolizes His total sacrificial self, demonstrating the fullness of His love for the blessing of eternal salvation
The pastor	Spiritual guidance to ensure soul's proper dispatch and departure to the other world.	Religious heads represent the living to the spirit world and are believed to have supernatural ability to cross, contact, and even manipulate spirits.	Pastor must be open, apt, and ready to apply power evangelism and emphasize that all spirits are subject to Jesus the High Priest.
Ghost and soul flag	Acts as charms to ward off Satan, evil spirits, and harm.	Idolatry and iconoclasm are not differentiated. The material represents the spiritual.	Using cloth—the hem of Jesus' clothing and Peter's handkerchief—to demonstrate God's power seeks only to do good and not evil.
Red thread in funerals	Charm to counteract bad omen from harassment and exhibit benevolence to the bereaved.	Cause and effect of physical elements with the spiritual world are directly related and can be manipulated.	Red—the power, protection, salva-tion and eternal life found in the Red Sea crossing, red doorposts, Rahab's scarlet cloth, and Jesus' blood.
White cloth and words of assurance	Symbolizes purity, holiness, meritocracy, and freedom of the deceased from this life.	Merit making together with holy Scriptures increase one's chances of a better afterlife.	Surety of salvation by faith through grace alone by being clothed in Christ's righteousness.
Black cloth on sleeve	Mourning—alert the departed of death and belonging to the other world.	Spiritual and physical worlds without barriers, subjecting Cambodians to much fear from the deceased.	Omnipotence and protection of God plus the doctrine of the great chasm between the living and the dead.
Cremation	Fear of lost soul due to inability to return to the body.	Future of the departed soul depends solely on the physical body's presence.	Burial preferred whenever possible to depict burial, salvation, and resurrection.

Symbol, Form, Expression	Cultural reasons/ meanings	Worldviews Beliefs	Implications for Evangelism
Yellow candles and flowers	Make merit, light the way, bid a good farewell, and journey to cross successfully to next life.	Physical assistance bears literal significance in the spiritual world.	The light and fragrance of Christ Jesus—only way, truth, and life to salvation (John.14:6).
Photos and urn	Appease and manipulate the departed for family's protection and benefit.	Coexistence and interfacing domains of the physical and spiritual world begets fear.	Preach about the omnipotence and protection of Almighty God.

### Tradition

An analysis of cultural aspects that bear cultural significances under the category of tradition are listed below. The ten pastors and ten leaders interviewed yielded the following results. Beside each heading is a statistic indicating the number of respondents, out of a total of twenty, who know or agree with the meaning behind each cultural form.

#### **Khmer Scripture (Pasted onto the Walls 14/20)**

In addition to pragmatic reasons of visibility, easy reference, reminder, memory, understanding and educational purposes, Khmer Scripture inscriptions on walls are very historical. They have been passed down since ancient days. The Angkor Wat, which is one of the seven ancient wonders and the largest Buddhist temple in the world built in the ninth century AD for example, has Buddhist scripts and folklore carved in Pali/Sanskrit from every floor to ceiling, wall, and pillar into the hard granite structure. These words are only fractionally larger than as normal handwriting and serve as a teaching tool. They also preserve culture and reinforce ethnicity when their language is made visible. In many ways, the cultural parallel is used to work in Christianity's favor where, when made

visible in churches sanctuaries, the Word of God is taught to Christians. At the same time, their culture is preserved when their ethnicity is honored through their language (Khmer writing). This cultural mode serves as a bridge to the gospel and emphatically announces that one can be a Khmer and also a Christian. This indigenous feature of the Cambodian culture facilitates, as against hinders, conversion.

### **Red Cross (15/20)**

Cambodians understand the color red well. It is the color of blood, and blood symbolizes life. The cross, which is red, denotes blood, which is life. The red cross is life. Red (blood) also carries the meaning of absolute commitment. It depicts the laying down of one's life and the willingness to sacrifice one's all. For example, the Khmer Rouge, a notorious band of guerilla soldiers in Cambodia's recent history used Rouge as its name because it means red in French. Its selection of name is obvious. The soldiers were willing to die for their cause, which then was Maoism (a fanatical strand of communism). Although this color is associated with an unpleasant past, the mind-set of red carrying the connotation of life existed even prior the Khmer Rouge whose original intention was noble (for liberation of country) used the term but is now infamous. Nevertheless, without Christ, no life but death remain and literally so for the Khmer Rouge, for they caused the death of two to three million Cambodians. In any case, traditionally and ethnically, red unmistakably carries the meaning of blood and thus life. The red cross clearly symbolizes new life in Christ whose blood was shed for us.

### **The Kroma (19/20)**

The *kroma* represents being Cambodian. To wear one is to display proudly one's nationalism. It is the most basic expression as a Khmer. It symbolizes the equality and



unity of all Cambodians. During Pol Pot's regime, all people, regardless of their status, wealth, education, and gender, were forced to wear the kroma. It was a convenient and available instrument used to inculcate egalitarianism, which was the underlying philosophy of communism. This utility cloth is also symbolic of the masses and reminded them of their roots, which were basically agrarian, a people of the land. The kroma is used decoratively or worn wherever possible to identify with the people's nationalism, which buys goodwill and openness towards the gospel. Furthermore, the evangelistic link is that all people are made equal in the eyes of God, equally loved by him that equally none should perish (2 Pet. 3:9).

### **The Vernacular (Khmer) Language (15/20)**

In addition to the obvious reason of communication, language is as vital a part of culture as air is to life. The Cambodians are very proud of their language. Offense made to their culture is as serious as any literal attack on them as a people. To stress the point further, a commonly mistaken identity floating in people's mind is the similarity of Thai and Cambodian culture seen in dance, music, writing, and food. Many quickly assume the latter results from the former. The Khmer empire is far more ancient. An interesting fact worth highlighting is the international patent registration with UNESCO of one's culture as an international property. The Thai culture cannot do so without admitting the source of its cultural heritage.

The consequence of disrespecting Cambodian cultural heritage is sometimes death. Once, a Thai television soap opera that was dubbed into Khmer and aired in Cambodia showed an actress saying that the Angkor Wat originally belonged to Thailand. What resulted was an arson attack on the Thai Embassy in Cambodia,

destruction and looting of Thai companies in Cambodia, and also hate groups going from house to house to flush out Thai citizens living or working in Cambodia to be killed.

Another example that comes to mind is during the French colonization era. The French tried to Romanize languages belonging to colonized countries. Vietnamese was successfully converted but not Khmer, owing to strong resistance. Rumor has it that the Khmer language, being Sanskrit based, originated from Hinduism (Sanskrit) or Buddhism (Pali) because of similar sounding words; however, this is untrue. When a country embraces a certain religion, some words are naturally incorporated into the language owing to nonexisting words needed to describe new things. The same is true for the Khmer Bible; glossaries are needed to explain the etymology of such words. The Khmers had their own language since the formation of their race and surely have cause for guarding it fiercely.

Some have a conviction that Christianity will be the only way to preserve the original Khmer culture. Christianity preserving culture has often been the case. Though sometimes missionaries contribute to destroying culture, often they have a hand in preserving culture instead. Buddhism may have aided to an erosion of Cambodian culture. Cambodia under the regime of previous empires was able to fend off aggressors and defend itself from enemies. Buddhism's passivity in the name of peace, and its inability to fight against evil, was an erroneous philosophy for the sake of national security; thus, the country suffered unimaginably under evil hands resulting in destruction of lives, environment, and culture. Christianity, which seeks to share and preserve the gospel in their own language, will inevitably also preserve their culture.

Language is the key to the mind, heart, and eventually soul of people (Seamands 92). Knowing how the vernacular language is embodied in culture becomes the vehicle, door, bridge, and gateway for Christianity to travel into Cambodian lives. The story of the birth of cultures and nations as a result of the explosion of languages at the Tower of Babel would be a useful association and ready gateway for evangelism where God's desire is to gather peoples of different tongues and races back to himself.

### **Hand Clasped Greeting (18/20)**

Men and women are not accustomed to making physical contact in public. Their culture deems cross-gender touch inappropriate indicating a lack of propriety. The practice of the handclasped greeting became a comfortable, appropriate response, but the act is in no way inferior to a handshake or other form of greeting, for it is done with such grace, genuineness, friendliness, and sincerity that one comes away with feelings of intense encouragement and acceptance. The spirit of oneness and unity is further accentuated by the fact that everyone must be greeted by everyone. This form of greeting creates warmth and a sense of belonging, which, in turn, creates or sets the climate for a sense of community in preparation for congregational worship in unity and solidarity in faith.

The *sompieh* or handclasped Khmer form of greeting (equivalent to handshake or kisses on both sides of the cheeks) is a noncontact expression of respect, honor, and well-wishing. Its noncontact is consistent with the conservative society upholding traditional and societal laws for both genders, children, youth, married, and family life. The form symbolizes, defends, and preserves high morality. Cambodians have a proverb that says men and women are like "sweets to ants, honey to bees." The laws of nature will bring



them together. Through traditional laws, moral order in society is maintained. Even husbands and wives do not hold hands in public to reinforce conservativeness among the young. They are taught propriety from the start of their lives to prevent and protect society from becoming loose. One will almost never see a single man and a woman walking side by side together. The Cambodians have another saying: “Walking needs three [persons], and talking needs four” is to safeguard one’s integrity by having witnesses to testify of one’s innocence lest one is wrongly accused.

One common understanding of the clasped hand, though traditional, can also be traced to religious origin. It is reminiscent of the lotus bud where Buddha emerged from the pod after meditation. In other words, it conveys a form of blessing. Another aspect of understanding the form is to communicate value to the person greeted and how one treasures the other. Essentially the clasped hand is also a stance commonly used in worship, and no form is higher to express worth to God than that. In worship, the pose and position taken by the worshipper is one of total commitment, offering, sacrifice, and giving of oneself to and also at the mercy of. The clasped hand, with all ten fingers (*meirien tiang dob*) on both sides coming together symbolizes the bringing of every aspect of one’s life, essentially all of a person’s offering as a respect to the other. Issues of love, respect, morality, and holiness are all ready bridges for introducing the gospel.

### **Songs, Tunes, and Dance (16/20)**

Worshipping God through songs is much anticipated. No service or ceremony (Christian or otherwise) is complete without songs and singing. Singing comes as second nature to the people. As in many older and ancient societies, where education is not via literacy and print, oral tradition via memory is crucial. Songs play a vital role in relaying

and passing information, tradition, and culture. Also, people remember songs because many cannot read (the older and rural folks) or cannot see the words in printed form (due to their poor eyesight).

Songs, centuries old, are successfully passed down. Cambodians sing to reinforce unity and solidarity as a people. Common tunes are deeply rooted in people's lives. Indigenous Cambodian Christian songs composed or written to cultural folk tunes are sung with greater vibrancy and passion because they identify with nationalism, culture, language, and tradition. Cultural expression has a progression and it heightens in intensity from music (listening), song (singing) to art (dancing).

Inherent in the minds of individual Cambodians are common folk songs or popular songs either caught or taught when people are young. Everyone knows them. Whether indigenous songs are written or adapted to folk tunes, set to newly composed songs, one can always notice the difference in vibrancy when they are sung. The quality, volume, and enthusiasm of singing are always a notch or several notches up because these songs strike ethnic chords in hearts, they are well familiarized, memorized and internalized, and lastly they are most directly relevant to life issues of the Cambodians.

Worship often climaxes with dance. One can say that worshippers' spirits are enraptured to that of God's. Dance is symbolic of intense joy, emancipation, unreservedness and total freedom. It is an expression of the whole self and the real self lost in the midst of the community. The Cambodian dance is always done in a group and is never individualistic. Whatever is done in public as a community is always encouraged (consistent to communally based culture). Dance is also an expression to encourage Cambodians to love, enjoy, and express life.

Dance conveys meanings of giving, blessing, praise, thanksgiving, joy, peace, love, and so on. A distinct feature of the Cambodian dance is the graceful hand (representing the whole life as in the handclasped greeting) twirls. The hand twirls convey deep meanings about life. Another Cambodian proverb says, “Without these [songs, tunes, dance] Cambodia and her culture like ice, would soon melt [*roleay*], slowly deforming and becoming more and more like something else.” It is also described as *prolud*—a loss of light, shine, or glow. Cambodians are by nature a people steeped in culture, and as in every culture, the arts, songs, dance, and drama place an important and deep role in their lives. Christianity expressed through such forms seeks to preserve, enhance, and reinforce the good in their culture. The gospel can be powerfully communicated through the arts.

### **Ancient Decorations (13/20)**

Wedding decorations depicting ancient Cambodia show how important and proud Cambodians are about themselves and doing things the Cambodian way. The nationalistic sentiment dates back all the way to a person by the name of *Tunar Chey* during the Funon Empire, as well as practices passed down from the ancient Angkor Empire. They all define what marriage practices should be adhered to today. Certain glorious eras depicting grandiosity and prosperity during those dynasties are symbolically replicated. The desire of the wedding is to relive such grandeur. The hope of the marriage yearns for prosperity as in the days of the grand empires. Commonly seen decorations for glory and grandeur purposes are called *serei suesedei* or *serei rongreng*. Ancient decorative, silver and gold bananas are all symbolic of glory days. In the same way, no day is more glorious for a man and a woman than their wedding day.



Cambodians recognize that the pillars of society are religion, culture, economy, and politics. Of the four features, culture is considered the most important. Culture is understood to uphold the foundation of society, the identity of a people, the morale of a community, and the survival of a race. Not difficult to understand is why traditional practices, from the decorative to the smallest detail, are so keenly observed and upheld. Nationalism is guarded. The gospel is not just able to adapt to but adopts the culture in which it is working. As Jesus came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it, safeguarding Cambodian nationalism augurs well for evangelism.

### **Royalty and Regality (18/20)**

Royalty and regality are associated with wealth and power. Dressing up like royalty was not just reserved for noble blood in older times but also by the rich in society. Dressing up essentially is to have or show high regard. Again the element of *mog muat* or face is of primary concern for Cambodians where honor and respect is more important than life itself. (For example, cases of students gunning down teachers after being embarrassed or humiliated in class are known.) Honor is not just tied to external fanfare but attitudinal attributes as well. When a wedding is well organized, the sense of responsibility, capability, maturity, and confidence will all speak honorably for the bride and groom as well. If the wedding is shabbily conducted or ceremonial preparations inadequate, parents of the bride and groom would be too embarrassed to participate. Themes of royalty and regality correspond with the King of kings and Lord of lords who is robed with glory and majesty, and whose kingdom is invincible, powerful, excellent, and perfect.

## Male Representatives in Weddings (16/20)

Culturally, only men are regarded as official representatives or worthy to represent things or events of importance. The understanding stems from Buddhist teachings where the rung of existence places women much lower than that of men. For example, Buddhist monks are regarded with much veneration and are candidates for salvation *Nibanna*. Nuns, on the other hand, are only respected and do not qualify for salvation. This discrimination distinguishes man's status in society as official representatives. Cambodia is today largely patriarchal with regards to official representation. Patriarchy is the predominant structure of authority in society (however matriarchal sentiment is also very much recognized in other areas of life, especially in the family), and male domination is seemingly ubiquitous in almost all things pertaining to leadership, influence, and prominence in the Bible.

## Marriage Preparation (16/20)

The Cambodian word *api-pipear* speaks about the girl departing from her own family and entering into the boy's family. This practice was followed in the past, which is quite similar to many cultures today. According to Cambodian practice today, the groom marries into the bride's family instead. The notion of marrying off a daughter or losing a daughter but gaining a son-in-law is absent in the present Cambodian mind-set today. Brides do not take on their husbands' surnames or family names. They continue to use their maiden names as their official names. The marital status is differentiated by the titles before the name. *Kanya* or *neak neang* and *neak srei* refer to spinster and married status respectively. These factors explain why weddings are normally referred to, held, and arranged at the bride's house.

Cambodian history testifies of a matrilineal society (Vickery 261). Except for the royal family, which is organized on patrilineal lines, the overall family organization in Cambodia is on matrilineal descendency. Female-managed households continue to be matrilineal (Miwa). One evidence of matriliney, mentioned earlier, is where the man goes to live with the woman's family after marriage ("Country WID Profile p.#4). In fact, some go so far as to say that traditionally, a major root of Khmer mentality is not just patriarchal or matrilineal but matriarchal, and it has and continues to be a very strong influence and accepted mind-set in society (Lot and Sarann p.#311). The focus group interview recognized the controversy surrounding this patriarchal, matriliney and matriarchal issue. However, no one could dismiss the notion that such a perception still exist in present day Cambodian society which helped analysis via triangulation. Wedding preparations continue to underscore the underlying mentality of society in many areas of Cambodian life as remaining largely matriarchal. Women do play leading roles in certain aspects of societal life in Cambodia. Their roles in society are respected. Esteeming them by making reference to the many women characters in the Bible, such as Esther, Ruth, and Dorcas who played such key roles of influence and inspiration, as well as the many women listed in the genealogy of Jesus found in Matthew 1 can be important contact points for evangelism.

### **Traditional Khmer Music (12/20)**

*Ping peard* is normally played throughout the three days of the funeral in between services. This traditional Khmer music is also aired for other occasions such as the Khmer New Year and house blessings except weddings. Buddhists play another kind of music called *sod* before the cremation or burial. It depicts sorrow, grief and despair. *Ping*



*peard* is also played after cremation or burial. Christians do not play *sod* as a testimony of the hope they have. Playing only *ping peard* is a very powerful witness of evangelism in and of itself. The inherent worldview expressed through this and not any other kind of music is a ready cultural instrument of communication for the gospel that must be observed. Playing western-translated hymns, however familiar, though sufficient for believers will always be deficient in bridging the gospel for evangelism.

### Contextualization of the Gospel in Cambodia

Examples of how the gospel can be contextualized by using Cambodian worldviews as bridges for evangelism extracted from the cultural aspect of tradition is illustrated in Table 5.

**Table 5. Tradition as Gospel Bridges**

Symbol, Form, Expression	Cultural reasons/ meanings	Worldviews Beliefs	Implications for Evangelism
Khmer Scripture	Educate and remind to preserve culture and ethnicity.	Identity and perpetuity of life lies in ethnicity.	Make Khmer Scripture visible to reinforce the strength of being Khmer and Christian.
Red cross	Blood = absolute commitment = life.	Martyrdom for cause, country, and race is venerated.	Blood of Christ on the cross = new life.
Kroma	Symbolize equality and unity.	Nationalism preserves ethnicity.	God loves all people equally, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.

**Table 5. Tradition as Gospel Bridges, continued**

<b>Symbol, Form, Expression</b>	<b>Cultural reasons/ meanings</b>	<b>Worldviews Beliefs</b>	<b>Implications for Evangelism</b>
Vernacular language	Language symbolizes culture.	Identity and perpetuity of life lies in ethnicity.	Story of Tower of Babel; but God so loved the whole world, he called all peoples back to himself.
Handclasp greeting	Express friendliness, acceptance, respect and bestow blessings	Morals and morale preserve ethnicity.	God's standard of love, respect, morality, and holiness.
Songs, tunes, dances	Express identity as a people who love and enjoy life.	Reinforces unity, solidarity, and ethnicity.	Expression of worship to God as a people through their art form will encounter God.
Ancient decorations	Recalling past Cambodian glory, empires, and dynastic prowess by reliving grandeur.	Nationalism upholds society, identity, morale, and survival as a race/ethnicity.	Use and conserve ancient ways to foster goodwill and openness toward the gospel.
Royalty and regality	Demonstrate high regard and deference.	Honor and respect uphold society as "face" is larger than life.	Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords filled with glory, power, honor, and majesty whose kingdom knows no end.
Male representative in weddings	Legitimizes, seals, and makes official important things and events.	Patriarchy upholds society as men are regarded at higher level of existence.	Males dominate much of biblical examples in areas of leadership, influence, and prominence.
Marriage preparation	Expresses the importance of women's role in families.	Matriarchy/matriliny prevalent in some areas of life to balance, uphold society, and preserve ethnicity.	Female biblical figures such as Esther, Ruth, Dorcas, and Jesus' genealogy in Matt. 1 are important contact points for evangelism.

**Table 5. Tradition as Gospel Bridges, continued**

Symbol, Form, Expression	Cultural reasons/ meanings	Worldviews Beliefs	Implications for Evangelism
Traditional Khmer music	Appropriate expressions speak powerfully of important occasions in Cambodian life.	Cultural instruments/practices impact, affirm, and preserve Cambodian society and ethnicity.	Use traditional music wherever possible as a ready & effective means of communication of the gospel.

### Social Norms

An analysis of cultural aspects that bear cultural significances under the category of social norms are listed below. The ten pastors and ten leaders interviewed yielded the following results. Beside each heading is a statistic indicating the number of respondents, out of a total of twenty, who know or agree with the meaning behind each cultural form.

#### Highly Perched Megaphones (19/20)

In any celebration, such as New Year, parties, weddings, funerals, memorials or others, Cambodians like them to be loud. Celebrations can last rather long, sometimes a few hours to several days (especially religious ones). Music, singing, or chants are blasted or broadcasted continuously. Weddings, for example, have walls of speakers literally stacked up even in very rural villages. Mobile sound system people offer such services entirely run on batteries or small generators. One finds it impossible to talk in a wedding when seated around the dining table. Surprisingly, few are deaf. In other countries, citizens would be arrested for disturbing the peace but not so for the Cambodian. In fact not only is the loudness not rude or disturbing, but tolerated and indeed welcomed.



The Cambodian people are by nature a very community-based people.

Community life is vital to their culture. Their ability to live and survive is dependent on mutual support (literal not just morale) and encouragement. Whatever happens to any family or individual is cause for announcement and participation. The desire is for others to join in. The loudness of these announcements is meant to invite and include everyone in the village or even the next.

The motive and motto of a Cambodian is to have only friends and not any enemies. Not wanting to offend, everyone is included. For example, church pastors commonly invite one another to their churches' Christmas parties during the season. They will attend up to twenty Christmas parties if they have twenty churches within the vicinity. In terms of loudness, inclusion is "as far as the ear can hear." The loud celebration is an accepted mode of practice that can be used in witnessing during festive seasons.

### **Unchurched Men (15/20)**

The immediate conclusion one is tempted to offer for men not attending church would be that most men died during the genocide, but even the remaining men are found wanting in churches. The reason for this absence is that men, being the official representatives of the household are seen as disloyal to both religion and community should they become Christians. Their actions speak loudly and are seen as an attempt to cause dissension in community which is predominantly Buddhist. The cultural and social pressures of a community-based society bind the men from conversion.

Women's actions, on the other hand, will not be interpreted as harshly. This leniency was not always the case. In fact, since the birth of the Khmer people, their

history has appeared always to foster a matriarchal society (“Selected Comments”).

Women played crucial roles in society, which has been inscribed and recorded on the walls of Angkor Wat. For example, many words today have the feminine prefix of *mei* to convey this truth. Words such as *mei-tuab*, which is the word for army commander, or *mei-krusar* for head of the house lend credence to this notion (Sarun). Though debates for and against the notion of matriarchy have transpired between local and western scholars respectively, the fact remains that the perception of both patriarchy and matriarchy coexist on various aspects or levels of Cambodian society.

Matriarchy prevails in matters within the family; however, on the level of national sovereignty or for official representation (the man represents to society as head of the family although the woman runs the affairs within the family), Cambodia is seen to be patriarchal by and large having been ruled by kings, with only a short period of rule under a queen (Briggs 135, 179). This cultural barrier of men can be overcome and even become a potential bridge for the gospel as biblical teaching advocates masculine authority cum responsibility over matters of life.

### **Nursing Mother (14/20)**

In Cambodia, societal laws, though unspoken, are accepted for each gender. As far as the breast is concerned, it is a private part, and Cambodia being a conservative society (e.g., no contact across gender), the female is highly conscious to uphold chastity and preserve honor, dignity and integrity by ensuring non-exposure. (Even when bending down to pick up something, a woman will always press her collar towards the chest to prevent gaps from showing.) At most, women are allowed to dress a little less modestly when attending parties, but by and large, the private parts and legs are always covered.

After marriage, breast-feeding is expected, and the exposure of the breast no longer conveys “looseness” or “temptation” but care, love, patience, and sacrifice. The Cambodians see breast feeding *jied* or *niksei* which literally means natural. The understanding goes deeper to mean an innate, inherent quality akin to nature or basic instincts. The Cambodian women are a very resilient lot indeed and much respected for their ability to raise many children single-handedly. Exposing the breast to feed a child in public has nothing to do with shame; in fact, it is quite the opposite. Missionaries unaccustomed to breastfeeding publicly can react adversely and judgmentally causing hurt feelings. One sure way to identify and build bridges of relationships with them for the sake of the gospel is to do likewise (which my wife actually did when she nursed our young son). Furthermore, teachings and examples of esteeming mothers found in abundance in the Bible can be used for evangelism.

### **Celebrations (Meetings and Greetings 18/20)**

Being a community-based people, where friendships and relationships are the highest orders of the day, respect for others is the highest virtue embraced by all to uphold social bonds and societal cohesion. Culture encourages all to have friends and no enemies. Naturally whenever the chance arises to express this virtue, Cambodians characteristically jump at the opportunity to do so; thus, the time of greetings during a church service is a much anticipated event. The desire is evident by not seating until everyone is greeted. Apart from preserving this aspect of their culture, Cambodians also are by nature a very fun-loving people who would find every reason to meet together. They thus thrive on celebrations and festivals. For example, Cambodia is a country with



the most number (officially declared) public holidays in the world. Unofficially, the Khmer New Year celebrations can stretch for as long as two months.

In addition to being free-spirited, every festival is a commemoration of an event normally attached to a religion, legend, folklore, or something historical, which carries rich meaning behind them. Festivals symbolize history and history is symbolic of life and power. For example, the boat race known as *oum tuk* commemorates war victories over the Thais and Vietnamese fought over the sea. Another example is the *bichembun*, which is an ancestral worship rite to commemorate the passing of the dead and the bringing of food to deceased parents. It is a derivation and combination of Buddhist/animistic beliefs together with the festival celebrating the harvest. The idea is a time to enjoy both for the living and the dead. Being a people who see the spirit and physical world as a continuation, and the natural and supernatural as one, community extends to departed souls as well. Often pictures of ancestors can be found hanging in the houses of Cambodians. Herein lie many bridges for the gospel, namely, the body of Christ, *koinonia*, genealogy, and the cloud of witnesses who have gone on ahead.

### **Taking Bibles and Hymnals Home (15/20)**

The obvious and good reason why the Cambodians take Bibles and hymnals home is the desire to own one when they cannot afford one. Unless specifically stated that they are not to be taken, this behavior is common among Cambodians especially village people who see no wrong in it. The reason for this behavior is a mentality that the ends justify the means, similar to the notion of telling white lies. The reverse is also true for them that if the truth hurts, do not tell it.

This mind-set is not an inherent part of their culture. This state of mind is a corruption infused into the Cambodian society after the insurgence and genocide of the Khmer Rouge era. For that reason, this time is commonly referred to as “Year Zero” where society was stripped and reduced to its barest. A Khmer proverb prophesizes, “The Cambodian people live high in the sky, and a time will come when they will also live under the ground like the earthworm.” The Pol Pot regime was widely regarded as the fulfillment of this prophecy. The Cambodian people were brought so low in morale and morals they became a people who do not know how to differentiate between right and wrong. Rynkiewicz’s article about the historical past affecting culture sheds some light on this phenomenon (301). In any case, allowing them to take Bibles and hymnals home with good intentions may not be such a bad thing. It is a good problem when compared with people in own country who reject the Bible altogether. The desire to own Bibles and hymnals can be capitalized on evangelistically.

### **Prayer Requests and Testimonies (15/20)**

Cambodia is a Buddhist country. Belief in God or gods is a given. Many aspects of their religious worship parallel Christian worship. Prayer is one such area in the life of worshippers. For example, the chants, droning, or communal praying is something they are used to doing in their previous religion, namely Buddhism. In the time reserved for the sharing of prayer requests, poor church members’ lives are often compounded by so many ills around them. Many simple problems that beset them easily spiral to become life-and-death issues. Their belief in God thus becomes very literal. Because life is barely subsistent for many due to illiteracy and unemployment, merely trying to survive day to day is a matter of faith literally. One is thrust into trusting God. Prayer requests can

appear to be selfishly oriented. Their requests seem to focus on themselves most of the time. Though the congregation must mature and learn how to pray more for others and also the things that are important to God, for now, I can quite understand why prayers are desperately yearned for. Prayer is not mere words; it is a lifeline.

Another reason why their prayer requests appear to be self-focused is that being a community based-culture where mutual respect is the principal code of conduct, people do not wish to interfere in other people's affairs not because they do not care but for fear of being rude and intrusive. Furthermore, they may not know enough or accurately lest the sharing creates unwanted misunderstandings. However, if permission is granted or a request to share on behalf of another is made, it will be heartily done. On observation, while personal prayer requests are unashamedly uttered but rather reserved when sharing for others, conversely prayers are vocalized loudly when praying for others but quietly when praying for oneself. Care is taken to edify and not offend another. Whatever may cause unhappiness to others is avoided which is consistent with Cambodian culture where community is placed above self.

Cambodians readily share their prayer requests and testimonies for several reasons. The act itself is therapeutic. It releases pain and suffering, however temporary, by off-loading one's emotional anxiety and knowing that others will support and pray for them. (Counseling is a much-needed ministry in Cambodia.) The community lifestyle poses no restraint for such openness. No shame or embarrassment lies in sharing one's lot in life. The community-based culture is further evident by the way they pray. During congregational prayer everyone vocalizes their prayers simultaneously as a sign of



mutual strength, encouragement, concentration (instead of distraction), and a corporate cry to God.

Again, growing up and living in a communal environment, everyone is encouraged to speak up and share. Many people participate in testimony sharing; especially in rural churches, unlike many churches in other parts of the world. Oneness is of the essence. The more rural one's community, the less one is conscious about propriety of order, time, and content of sharing. A family mind-set is firmly imbued in their minds; thus, less reservation and restriction is available to share about themselves and what God has done.

### **Items, Performances, and Drama (15/20)**

The Cambodian/Khmer society being agrarian is by and large communal. The basic unit of society is made up of villages. They are then clustered into communes, municipalities, districts, and provinces. Life in the village revolves around communal events. Gatherings for work, play, and communication are common. Standing up to speak, presenting items and dances, and performing in public are a way of life inculcated since youth. Joyfulness and gaiety fuel morale and togetherness in the village via such celebrations. The Cambodian people like to present and express themselves through songs, dances, and drama. Being a non-individualistic society, they are not so self-conscious.

Again owing to the communal spiritedness of the people, they are not too perturbed with the quality of the performance. The congregation also has a high acceptance for whatever is presented as the act, and what it symbolizes is celebrated more than the actions. Whatever and however the presenters perform, rough or polished, poised

or awkward, shyly or confidently, the congregation appreciates by show of participation with laughter and applause. Involvement, participation, and coming together is cheered and lauded. The whole aim is to nurture the community spirit and makes it very conducive for people to participate in worship through presentations.

In fact the Cambodians being a very fun-loving people welcome slipups, bloopers, and fumbles in the presentation. Their fun loving nature is especially depicted in the dramas they do in presenting a Bible story or Christian message. Thus, for drama, the congregation has a preference for slapstick. Drama must be humorous either in costume, makeup, dialogue, or action. They enjoy a play on words, not in the witty-pun way, but in using impolite, rude, stupid, silly, and degrading ones. Play on actions is an exaggeration on common daily behavior, accidents and incidents depicting real-life situations. The idea is to portray the other extreme or opposite behavior, in this case, a mockery on respect as in a play on words, and a mockery on life as in the play on actions. Using drama is an excellent way to portray the gospel. Satires, parodies, and caricatures on biblical characters, narratives, and even parables will likely be well received and understood.

Humor is a universal language. Many interpret the preference for slapstick as a means to forget about suffering as a result of the wars; however, such plays were already in existence in villages, long before the country's fall. Cambodians are a live and let live people. This mode in delivering the gospel through drama is important lest attention is lost and the message becomes devoid of meaning when people do not see the connection to real life.

## **Interactive Preaching (16/20)**

Oratory and homily are always regarded highly in any culture and society, all the more so in the Khmer society where oral tradition takes centre stage and plays such an important role in their culture. Preaching of the word is esteemed in the Cambodian congregation, for the words touch the spirit, move the soul, inspire hope, and build up the faith. Cambodians normally preach extemporaneously. At best points are jotted on paper but never a script. They have the prowess of the mother tongue. The ability to engage the audience is very much like an actor on stage. Eye-contact, gestures, and body language are expected in preaching. Narrative preaching (storytelling) engages and impacts the audience more than any deductive three-point, exegetical, or expositional preaching.

Preaching time can be, and most times is, responsive and interactive. Freedom is granted to ask questions by worshippers, to answer questions posed by the preacher, and to laugh loudly with, to, or at whatever/whoever is deemed humorous. As in most black churches in the West, “Amen!” is sounded and resounded constantly in affirmation to the preaching. The audience at the church has a cross section of women, poor, and youth. Though sermons of comfort and hope that address their plights are better received than sermons of kingdom’s righteousness and God’s demands on their attitudes and actions, I have noticed that being a culture steeped in the arts, what captures attention is the form more than the substance.

Local preachers, especially older ones, whose competence in the language and crafty use of deep ancient idioms capture the imagination of listeners. Younger preachers in the Methodist churches today are not as adept because most are products of homiletics training received from Bible schools and courses conducted by foreign missionaries. The



impact of the message is due to how it is said rather than what is being said. Cambodian worshippers enjoy rhetoric and are easily mesmerized. Perhaps a taxonomy of Khmer categories for types of oral literature, rhetoric, and preaching might help to remember which style of preaching should be employed. The power of language strikes a deep chord with the audience. If the oratory is coupled by finesse, poise, and content by the preacher, much like an opera or what is known in Chinese as *wayang*, or in Cambodian as *aiyai*, the preaching of the sermon is a powerful tool indeed. All these can be used as additional or varied forms of *at-ti-bai* (Khmer word for preaching).

Generally, owing to the genre of a community-based society and mutual respect, the ability to listen is another characteristic prominent in the Cambodian people inculcated since young. The community-based culture begat a freer environment and fosters interaction in rhetoric. Questions and answers tout participation and interest. Involving others demonstrates an attitude of equality (not a teacher-student, top-down approach) and humility by talking with and not to or at effect. It naturally also promotes respect, which is the all-important ingredient in Cambodian culture. In preaching the gospel, the art of communication (Khmer way) with the subtle innuendos must be observed so as not to turn people off from hearing the eternal word of God.

### **The Pastor (18/20)**

Pastor are much-respected persons in the church. They are like shepherds, parents, village chiefs, judges, and most of all, monks. They are God's chosen and suspected to wield supernatural power and have contact with God. In every country whose evolution is intertwined with religion, religious heads are revered tremendously. Where church and politics played crucial roles in Western societies in the past, monks, holy men, and sages

have great influence over governance in Middle Eastern and Eastern counterparts too.

The religious leaders of the church are no different in Cambodia. Members look to them for help, advice, arbitration, blessing, and fellowship and want to rub shoulders with or get into their good graces.

Furthermore, coupled with most non-Western countries' concept of hierarchical societies, the sense of class consciousness further accentuates the pecking order for the pastor. To have a relationship with the pastor is a status symbol. What the pastors says carries weight. Pastors command respect, reverence, deference, and protocol. Everyone likes to greet and be greeted by the pastor. The deference shown to the pastor differs from normal greetings expressed in the height of the greeting hands (clasped). The higher the hands are raised, the greater the respect for the person. Members yearn for their pastor to visit them and to pray for them. Members also drop in frequently unannounced when they need to see the pastor on weekdays. They seldom call to make an appointment nor do they discuss matters over the phone. Coming in person is more respectable. The presentation of oneself is important and honorable. If the pastor is not in, church members wait or go home trying again another day.

The closest parallel to the pastor in Cambodia is the Buddhist monk. Unlike monks, pastors are respected but not worshipped. They are respected for what they represent. They are representatives of God and his authority. A pastor is an office and a status (government official), a position in society (like an elder person), and a person of high education. They, therefore, are also expected to represent his people. In terms of the level of respect, holy persons command a higher degree as against persons of authority in public office. Pastors are not just persons of authority; they are also regarded as good and

moral, and persons with whom others can develop relationships. As loving, caring, friendly, gentle, and mild persons, pastors are readily esteemed in the Cambodian culture. Their advice is sought, example followed, and words taken seriously. Pastors are ultimately revered as models for church members' lives for they would epitomize all that is inherently espoused in the Cambodian culture.

### **Meeting of Parents (19/20)**

The representative of the bridegroom is a very important person because weddings are a very central event in the lives of Cambodians. When family and personal honor is at stake, declaration of intent of the groom must be very unambiguous. To ensure clarity of intent, the services of an elder representative are required. No one is respected more than an elder, and his words will be taken seriously. His own reputation is at stake, and he will not risk embarrassing himself by representing anyone who might be dishonorable. On this count, the elder's words carry a greater weight than the groom or his family. In other words, the indirect approach of the representative is more legitimate or trustworthy than a direct declaration of intent by the groom and his family. *Mog muat* or face must be preserved and even the perception of offending anyone's honor must be painstakingly avoided. Cambodia is a very conservative society and honor defends it. Attesting to this conservativeness was Prime Minister Hun Sen's recent outcry and displeasure on Miss Srey Mom representing Cambodia donning her swimsuit in the Miss World Pageant 2006, saying it went against Cambodian culture ("BBC News"). Preserving a conservative society by upholding honor especially in matters pertaining to sexuality is integral to God's character.



### **Wedding Date (16/20)**

Cambodians fear that too long a period from meeting the parents or marriage engagement will result in a change of mind from either party. This change of mind is especially a taboo for the girl if such an event occurs. Her reputation would be ruined if the boy changed his mind. Cambodia, being a conservative society, would not suspect fornication or blame the girl. Her image would not be tarnished on the grounds of promiscuity or loss of chastity. The fear is also not on the fact that her emotions may be damaged beyond repair. Notwithstanding those reasons, the most common alibi opted for such a withdrawal is that of incompatibility.

Nevertheless, she still suffers ill-repute because Cambodian society will always blame the girl as the one at fault and as being difficult to get along with. If the breakup happened after *sedei dondeng*, her reputation bears no consequences; however, if it came about after engagement, it would be nothing short of disastrous. Under such circumstances, a girl who undergoes an engagement without a wedding would be branded *meimai kansla* which means “a widow without marriage”. Her subsequent chance of finding another suitor diminishes significantly but would not be nearly as drastic for the boy if the reverse had occurred. Upholding morality, honor, chastity, and equality of women are noteworthy gospel bridges for evangelism.

### **Bowing to Parents (11/20)**

The act of bowing to parents is not an act of worship but one of respect. The act is good on two counts. Firstly, no clear action or opportunity presents itself in the wedding to demonstrate love and honor to their parents. Secondly, it also serves to testify and remind people of the deep respect and gratitude the marrying couple has as children of

their parents. Unfortunately, many Christians prefer to interpret bowing as worship and thus reject a powerful occasion and opportunity for Christian witness. The differing interpretation displayed itself clearly during the focus group interview. The point of contention was on the grounds of whether it was done as a religious act or cultural one. In any case, the contrast highlighted by the focus group interview confirmed views via triangulation. The underlying reason for this respect has much to do with thanksgiving to their parents. This thanksgiving called *deng kun* is not just a general appreciation or gratefulness. Literally translated, it means “knowing who one’s life is owed to.” In essence, a deep respect out of love for their parents whom they recognize as owing their lives to lies behind this thanksgiving. Honoring and loving parents has been one of the most enduring and effective evangelistic means when increased filial piety is expressed while parents are still living rather than in ancestral worship upon death. This honoring of parents would fit very well with Scripture, starting with the Ten Commandments.

### **Red Thread (12/20)**

With regards to the tying of red thread around the wrists of the couple, in generations past, no rings were exchanged in weddings. People who came to participate in the wedding and to give gifts to wish the couple well also came to tie a red thread around the couple’s wrists together as a sign, recognition, approval, and support of the couple’s betrothal. This red thread is an important sign of legitimacy of the couple’s marriage and union. Without it the boy and girl would be considered fornicators or adulterers. Again where honor is paramount in Cambodian society, tying of the red thread on the wrists of couples was an important symbol indeed. Although the tying of red thread is practiced more by Buddhists, there are no religious connotations with regards to

warding off of evil or protection to the couple. Religious activities delving on the spiritual realm can only be performed by monks. Only then can they be considered efficacious. The red thread differs from that used in funerals, in that it depicts conservatism and honor. Preserving morality of society vis-à-vis the integrity of men and chastity of women in matters relating to sexuality is one of the most important topics directly related to godliness and holiness.

### **Wedding Banter and Feast (18/20)**

The performance of singers and loudness of music from amplifiers play a similar role, that of increasing entertainment value. The aim of the banter is to create joviality, encourage jolliness, and fuel high spiritedness for the occasion. No concern or fear of disturbing the peace is considered as loudness is an accepted norm in society. The heightened celebrative mood is very much tolerated and even promoted by the neighborhood.

The wedding feast is crucial for recovering as much money as possible for the bride and groom. Couples are heavily set back from loans taken for the wedding again all in the name of upholding honor. The reputation of being in debt is not as bad as not putting up a good show. Guests understand and come to contribute financially. However, other reasons include—no more greater or universal way to witness, express support, congratulate and celebrate the wedding occasion for the bride and groom, the fear that the couple might read it as a snub and be offended, and also fear that in future the couple would not reciprocate for their own events. Showing “face,” respect, and honor are interlocking factors that augur well for societal cohesion; communality is defended at all times. Feasts for different occasions abound in the Bible and are always tied to



communality in celebration, worship, and witness as a community. Feasts and festivals are inherent settings for evangelism.

### **Body Washing and Asking for Forgiveness (12/20)**

Body washing and changing of new clothes is significant and emotionally intense as the care and tenderness showered depict a treatment not dissimilar to one given to the living. The meaningfulness is further pronounced because it is the last deed of kindness a loved one can show to the deceased. The act, of course, is really not to ensure hygienic cleanliness but is symbolic in gesture. New clothing is understood to prepare the deceased for the journey ahead. Physical elements do not just symbolize but are believed to transfigure into the spiritual form for the other world. Cambodians' worldview of the physical and spiritual world coexistence is evident here. The gesture of body washing, changing clothes, and asking for forgiveness and reconciliation demonstrates and expresses respect for the Christians. The motivation behind this respect is deep love for the departed. Non-Christians adhere to the same reason of respect in this act albeit with a very different motive. Respect for the non-Christian comes out of fear for the deceased, that he or she will not return to harm the household.

Similarly, although the act of asking for forgiveness and reconciliation is practiced by both Christians and non-Christians alike, again the rationale and significance behind it differs. The former do so out of paying their last respects to the departed, especially to older people. The latter again do so in order that the spirit of the deceased will not return to haunt them. For that matter, anyone, not just the family members, can ask the deceased for forgiveness in a bid that they will be spared from harm from the departed. Several mixed feelings of grieve, love, and fear, embraces a worldview of death

as something evil and despairing. The body of Jesus was also washed and prepared for burial. However His death rings only knells of hope—comfort, love, forgiveness, and protection from fear.

### **Shaving of Head (12/20)**

Shaving carries several meanings. Firstly, shaving is to show thanks to the departed without any chance of reciprocation from that deceased. However, oftentimes, family members who are touched will repay with a gift. Secondly, it demonstrates the sacrificing all of this present life in order to attain a higher life in the next. The idea is abstinence and withdrawal from all entanglements of secular life. The final meaning is the sacrifice of one's glory (hair is commonly considered a woman's crown) which heighten the sense of loss and mourning. The act of shaving essentially displays mourning. However, at a deeper level it is about sacrificial giving and merit making for oneself. The shaving of the head for mourning is not uncommon in the Bible; however, biblical mourning always turns despair to dancing as in the case of King David, Samson, and King Jehosaphat.

### **Contextualization of the Gospel in Cambodia**

Examples of how the gospel can be contextualized by using Cambodian worldviews as bridges for evangelism extracted from the cultural aspect of social norms are illustrated in Table 6 below.

**Table 6. Social Norm as Gospel Bridges**

Symbol, Form, Expression	Cultural reasons/ meanings	Worldviews Beliefs	Implications for Evangelism
Highly perched megaphones	Express communality, inclusiveness, mutual support and encouragement.	Personhood and survival are not found in individuality but in the community. Community comes before self.	Preach how God called his people to be a household of faith from the Old & New Testaments.
Unchurched men	Going to church will be read as betraying and causing dissension to the community.	Male representation in the order of society. Upholding community is vital to continuity.	Gospel speaks much about masculine leadership and authority.
Nursing mothers	Natural, respected, and honorable.	Female chastity and honor is cherished and is in the order of society. Upholding community is vital to continuity.	Gospel addresses and highly esteems women, widows, and mothers.
Celebrations	To uphold social bonds and cohesion.	Friendships and relationships (even towards deceased persons) are the building blocks of the community.	Festivals, fellowship, and genealogies are championed in the Bible.
Taking Bibles/hymnals home	To hold worship services at home as they love to have social gatherings.	Morality is defined by social acceptance because preserving community is of the utmost importance.	Conducting evangelistic Bible studies (EBS) and reward with a free Bible upon completion.
Prayer requests and testimonies	Readily share for personal, communal encouragement, and support.	No self-consciousness or embarrassment as oneness is found in community	<i>Koinonia</i> and the <i>allelons</i> must be exploited to experience the power and presence of God
Items, performances, and drama	Participation express, depict, and build communal life and spiritedness.	Joy, gaiety, and togetherness define community and life.	Biblical narratives/ stories through items and dramas (exaggerated) are powerful modes of evangelism.



**Table 6. Social Norm as Gospel Bridges, continued**

Symbol, Form, Expression	Cultural reasons/ meanings	Worldviews Beliefs	Implications for Evangelism
Preaching interactively	Powerful interactive rhetoric reinforces culture, equality, and mutual respect.	Oral tradition helps perpetuate the Cambodian culture, life, and community.	Jesus' homiletical style is narrative, evangelistic, and, more often than not, interactive.
Pastor	Religious head in any community is regarded as authority over all matters and highly respected.	Religious heads are venerated representatives and mediators of God for the community.	Ultimate models and witness for Christ. Must walk the talk.
Meeting of parents	Honorable declaration of intent.	Conservativeness and sexual wholesomeness preserves honor and upholds society.	Holiness and sexual purity are matters integral to God's character.
Wedding date	Safeguards reputation, especially of the girl.	Moral and physical chastity is prized and strengthens societal order.	Morality, honor, chastity, and equality of women are noteworthy gospel bridges.
Bowing to parents	Expresses love, respect, and gratitude towards parents for others to witness.	Gratitude, respect, and love establishes honor, all of which are pillars of society.	Express love, respect, and filial piety to living parents—powerful witness of transformed lives of children.
Red thread in weddings	Acknowledge legitimacy of couple's union.	Moral laxity is deemed to corrode societal order and destroy community.	Sexual morality relates directly to godliness and holiness.
Wedding banter and feast	Increase high spiritedness for occasion and ensure guests well entertained.	Face and reputation guards honor and is defended at all times to ensure communal and social cohesion.	Participate in their feasts—Biblical Feasts is a time of communal celebration, worship and witness.
Body washing and asking for forgiveness.	Expresses love, respect, and fear to the departed.	Harmonious living includes even the dead in the communal body.	The tortured body of Jesus brings comfort, hope, love, forgiveness, and peace.
Shaving of head.	Sacrificial acts of mourning to support grieving family.	Interpersonal support upholds community and renders societal cohesion.	Examples of shaving in the Bible turns mourning to dancing.

### **Implications for Evangelism**

Michael Green observes that the two major pathways of evangelism for the early Church in that Greco-Roman era was none other than Greek culture—language and thought—and Jewish Religion—Judaism (Green 17-31). Likewise, Cambodian culture, and even Buddhism, can and must be used as conduits for evangelism.

### **A Summary of Cambodian Worldview and Beliefs**

The importance of understanding the worldview of the Cambodians inherent in their culture classified under the three categories listed under cultural analysis cannot be overemphasized. The manifestations in religion, traditional cultures, and their societies of non-Western societies all hold true for the Cambodian people (see pp. 54-56). Firstly, the Cambodian culture is steeped in religion. They are a people who have been brought up with the conviction that the spiritual and supernatural world exist alongside the physical and natural. Cambodians have a complete belief in ghosts and evil spirits who can do great harm and wreak havoc in their lives. They see themselves at the utter mercy and manipulation of these spirits who can and must be called upon and appeased. Thus, a profound regard, respect and reverence for all things religious exist because of the fear of imminent punishment, curses, and disturbances. They literally have the fear of God in them. Their entire existence and being is subject to gods. Seeking favor and making merits to deities are believed to affect their lives in direct proportion. Little difficulty is required in trying to convince Cambodians of the existence of God or addressing the direct cause-and-effect syndrome of the spiritual life in relation to daily life. I agree with Geertz when he says that religion and its system of symbolism regulates a culture's way of life so that it synchronizes, supports, and reinforces worldview or a culture's view of

reality (91). The Cambodian's worldview of the spirits and the spirit world can be taken advantaged of by pointing Cambodians to the one true, omnipotent benevolent God who protects and provides, and allowing Cambodians to experience for themselves His power and reality.

Secondly, the Cambodian culture is highly traditional. Tradition is espoused and embraced because it protects and preserves ethnicity and nationalism. Nationalism can become an obstacle to evangelism. The oversight of nationalism for the Cambodian people will almost definitely impede the spread of the gospel because it will be received as a cultural invasion of sorts. The mistakes of missions done especially during the colonial era (Kane, Concise History 94) where the mind-set of subsuming territories in empire expansion also affected kingdom of God expansion can provide many lessons. The attitude of the conquered was to submit to and emulate the superior culture of the conqueror.

An important feature in all races of the world is identity; tradition at its core seeks to conserve it. Displacement is a loss of identity and dignity, and dignity is an integral makeup of the human being. For the Asian dignity and honor are normally regarded as larger than life. Removing them essentially takes life away. The Cambodians will, therefore, safeguard all things vernacular. They will proudly utilize all things traditional that seek to remind and promote their identity as a nation and race. Traditional greetings, gestures, gender sensitivities, decorations and apparel, together with stories, writings, songs, dance, and drama in the vernacular language, that are symbolically related to the Khmer tradition will be more readily accepted. Otherwise, the gospel will be received or perceived as an attempt at cultural assassination. A rejection of their culture will produce



an equal response to evangelism. People who believe that their culture is under threat will repel against the gospel (Kraft, Christianity in Culture 35-36).

Their worldview believes that their eternity is traced back to and will be based upon tradition as a race; therefore, their concept of eternal life is tied very much to the idea that continuing to live on is understood as living on as a race and as a people.

Genealogies and Genesis recorded in the Bible are powerful approaches that address the one true Creator God, his people, and eternity. By showing that Cambodians indeed belonged to, originated from and will continue on through God the maker of all things and all peoples can appeal to the Cambodian's worldview of their origin and eternity based on ethnicity.

Thirdly, the Cambodian culture governs social norms. Social norms depict or express the Cambodian life. The Cambodian society is a communal society, and certain norms extend across gender, family, and celebrative and business issues. Cambodians are also a fun-loving lot and do not see nor regard themselves individualistically but as part of a community. Societies of religious traditional cultures being more holistic in their outlook tend to be structured more communally than individually (see p. 61).

Communality safeguards their identity as a race, and social cohesion fosters communality. Relationship, therefore, ranks high on the agenda—right relationship with one another and with society. Doing something deemed immoral or unacceptable by the community is unthinkable. Social norms exert strong social pressures. To be frowned upon, ostracized, and condemned, is a powerful deterrent from behavior outside social norms in society. People refrain from doing anything that may disrupt communality.

Conversely, whatever is socially accepted is allowed and encouraged, especially that which upholds the development of social cohesion and unity. Togetherness, fellowship, laughter, and fun are, therefore, vital to the Cambodian society. Missionaries will do well to immerse themselves in local activities. Detachment or dichotomization of work-play, task-people type attitudes will undermine building vital relationships. Relationship is key in Cambodian society (as in most societies), and without it, Christian witness will always be an uphill task because the medium is very much the message (Vicedom 16-17). The cliché “people don’t care what you know until they know what you care” is not understood as a cliché in a society like Cambodia’s. Celebrations and festivities are keenly observed. Participation by all to enliven and fuel gaiety is encouraged. Their worldview believes that this communal fellowship extends even to the dead, whom they believe reside in their midst. Ancestral beliefs are strong and literal. This inclusive mentality is to live peaceably and joyfully as one. Fellowship (community and even ancestry) and festivals, being key components of evangelism in the early church and Old Testament Feasts respectively, can be used advantageously in evangelism. *Koinonia* and *ekklesia* both of which are key witnesses present Christianity as a corporate/communal faith, which in effect, utilizes the Cambodian’s worldview of communality for attractive and effective evangelism.

### **Cambodia Gospel Bridges**

The form of worship must be relevant to a particular community/society in a concrete situation. The culture—religion, tradition and social structure—of that nation/people must be studied in order to determine which cultural tools may be used to communicate the gospel. One must understand how a culture functions in order to

communicate the gospel effectively (Nida 29). Most pastors want to see cultural connections but also gospel distinctions—a confirmation and confrontation of culture. Hesselgrave calls this a temporal adoption of another’s worldview (401). Culture must be used to bridge Christianity. The use of language is a good example. Even a simple word such as *baramei* which means majesty, would immediately conjure (even pictorially) in a Cambodian’s mind the power or the spirit behind it because they have the assumption of a god already engraved in their minds. One only needs to introduce who or what god is. When meanings are accurately transmitted, dynamic equivalence ensures that the gospel is clearly understood and facilitates conversion (Kraft, Anthropology 1-12). Cambodian worship, funeral, and wedding services are excellent showcases to share Christ, for in them are actions, artifacts, symbols, and meanings that can be powerfully used to redirect their understanding to Jesus as the giver and sustainer of life. Culture is an evangelistic tool. Smalley says, “While the basic need of man and the basic message are the same everywhere, the most effective presentation of the Gospel is that which takes into account the cultural beliefs and fears of the people” (Octavianus 1247).

The Cambodian Christians have manifested and also incorporated much of their culture in their understanding and expression of Christian worship. Underlying their actions, behavior, attitudes, arts, artifacts, and architecture, life is defined communally and not individually (Hiebert, “Social Structure” C-28). Their worldview of the *ethne*, a people, extends beyond time and space and infuses both the living and the departed. This worldview explains their belief of the coexistence of the spirit and physical worlds in which they live and underpin all that they do in desiring to maintain this peaceful balance and existence of the community. Respect, honor, relationships, friendships, love, care,



clothing, buildings and places, festivals, and ceremonies are all expressions and expected duties and responsibilities of Cambodians. These events foster their community, their culture, and their existence as a particular people. Life as they understand it solely revolves around people. The three areas of religion, tradition and social norms manifesting or expressing their worldview present evangelists with many doors and bridges through and over which the gospel can move as illustrated in Tables 4-6 (see pp. .

Humanity in almost all cultures embrace the tripartite understanding of humans, as body, soul, and spirit. Culture is an expression of humanity. The Bible also speaks about the tripartite nature of humans. The holistic gospel addresses these three aspects of the human life and is relevant to any culture and society. To reiterate, Paul G. Hiebert says that God does not communicate with people in a vacuum but always in the context of social relationships and their cultural setting (Anthropological Insights 227). The Cambodian culture is no different. Its religion relates to the spiritual nature of Cambodian life. Naturally the Bible is emphatic on the importance of worshipping God in Spirit and in truth (John 4:24). In tradition, where the soul of the people is, the Bible says to worship God with one's heart, mind, SOUL, and strength (Mark 12:30). Finally where social norms depict the body and the community, the Bible tells about presenting bodies as living sacrifices to God, which is a reasonable act of worship (Rom. 12:1-2), as well as loving and serving one another in the perfect body of Christ.

Evidently, inherent in every culture, too, are glimpses of the image of God. The Lausanne Covenant recognizes that people being God's creatures, must inevitably possess some of his beauty and goodness ("Willowbank Report: Lausanne Committee" C-162). Similarly, many aspects of Cambodian culture are good and can be used as tools

to convey the gospel message. Because Christ is the epitome of all that is inherently perfect and good, the gospel can use and perfect those aspects of Cambodian culture. Though Cambodia may not be a very advanced country or technologically abreast with the rest of the developed world, they are however highly developed as a people full of social graces and protocols. In fact, biblical life, times, and teachings are less dissimilar to theirs than to many parts of the world today. Culturally, more bridges are available for the gospel to traverse, and they are also shorter. The gospel is resoundingly and unmistakably relevant for evangelism if the understanding and use of culture is employed, the richness of which is seen even in just their worship and congregational life.

Imparting the spirit of contextualizing the gospel to Cambodians and missionaries by using worldview and cultural forms as bridges is crucial for evangelism. Contextualization allows any culture to develop its own theology or to self-theologize (Bosch 423). Each culture must be able to self-theologize and find its own form to express God's truth and their Christianity. Cambodians must also know how to do likewise in order for them to continue reaching out to their own people (Newbigin, Open Secret 146).

### **Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism**

The many cultural aspects and worldviews of the Cambodian people are opportune bridges for evangelism. However, one must be mindful that one of the major barriers to evangelism across cultures is ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the assumption that the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality. It also assumes that it is culturally superior to all other cultures (cultural evolution). Peter Wagner calls this

phenomenon cultural chauvinism (64). In ethnocentrism, one perceives and evaluates persons, things, and events according to one's values, beliefs, and assumptions, often not knowing or accepting other worldviews as valid or important. When one is ethnocentric, one reacts, denies, and becomes defensive and judgmental towards others who have a different cultural worldview; consequently, one minimizes the differences as unimportant.

Ethnocentrism results in the inability to communicate and relate to persons of another culture (Law 46). It unfortunately thwarts evangelism. Moreover, those who appear to succeed frequently see an importation of one's Christian culture or denominational structure and form with profound dire consequences. Dr. Rene Padilla at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization charged "that the gospel some European and North American missionaries have exported was a 'culture-Christianity,' a Christian message distorted by the materialistic, consumer culture of the West" (qtd. in Stott and Coote, "Bible in World Evangelism" A-3). McGavran calls this term a "Cultural Overhang" (Understanding Church Growth 59). The inevitable result at the end of the day is the failure to produce converts and/or churches that can live, grow, reproduce and share the Christian life in and to their own community. Verkuyl comments that this failure falls far off the widely accepted "three-self" formula of Henry Venn as the benchmark of real evangelism and church growth (184). Perhaps, more importantly, the "fourth-self," that of self-theologizing, must also not be omitted.

Conversely, the other important thing to understand and embrace in evangelism across cultures is "ethnorelativism." Ethnorelativism is the understanding that cultural differences are neither good nor bad, only different. It promotes crucial intercultural



sensitivity in order to find bridges for the gospel. In practice, one must be willing to live in the realm of uncertainty and yet be nonjudgmental, practice “interpathy” (not just sympathy and empathy, which are a temporal stepping out of one’s frame of reference to theirs in order to understand their feelings and values as they understand it themselves; Ausburger 17-27), be committed to cultural pluralism (the need to listen, observe, and process information until one understands from the standpoint of another worldview; Castle 47-48), and to practice critical contextual evaluation and allow God to speak to a particular cultural context (Law 61-70).

### **Further Considerations for Evangelism**

The scope of this research is in no way comprehensive to every cultural issue facing the Methodist and other churches in Cambodia. Other related issues that may be of interest and have need for further perusal, particularly to the Methodist missions in Cambodia, are perhaps in the areas of social ministries, connectionalism, and globalization.

### **Social Ministries**

Methodism has always prided itself in the many social ministries initiated since the day of its founder. Social ministries bring relief, freedom, knowledge, health, and prosperity, albeit oftentimes temporal; however, they also have a tendency to create dependency and may distract the focus away from conversion. Methodism in Cambodia is without exception. The high costs and maintenance of activities shift the center of evangelism in missions. The business of the missionary is to minister the Spirit, and the business of the church is to express the Spirit in social service (Paton 105). Vincent J. Donovan refutes the belief of social ministries as bridges for evangelism. He cites:

By the very nature of the case, this new breed of missionaries must condemn the previous system of missionary work—and one would have to agree with them in their condemnation. To bring freedom or knowledge or health or prosperity to a people in order that they become Christians is a perversion of missionary work. (12)

Very often meeting physical or felt needs are mistaken as bridges for the gospel. They do not necessarily address real spiritual needs, and conversions remain low on a percentile basis because the meeting physical needs alone can miss out on addressing belief systems and worldviews of people and thus allegiance to their own god remains. They come to receive handouts but not God. Physical need is not culture but a-cultural or across all cultures; however the way needs are met is cultural, one where holism is observed. When culture is bypassed, the chances of understanding and meeting real needs are slim. Fascinating to know would be how many social ministries have been directly translated into souls won for Christ.

### **Connectionalism**

Charles H. Long and Anne Rowthorn supports Roland Allen's view of mission done during his day, who gives a succinct summary of missions' shortcomings, criticizes his era of missionary triumphalism, and ecclesiastical colonialism and condemns expatriate Westernization in the guise of Christianization. The spirit of the day included lording over those they served. Control inevitably hindered indigenesness. The excuse of accountability to supporters back home to safeguard and maintain doctrine and discipline ranked high on the agenda. Naturally they hindered handing over responsibilities of the church and ministry to new Christians (385). All these foreign factors not only retarded church growth, but they prevented any real growth at all.

Methodist missions in Cambodia today is not immunized from these issues as well—that of structure, money, and headquarters control stemming from traditional missionary approaches, institutional preservation, and perpetuation that seldom regard cultural understanding of any significant consequence. Methodism's connectionalism manifests itself through The Book of Discipline in areas of structure, finance, and leadership. When connectionalism is applied devoid of cultural understanding, it will ultimately thwart indigenous leadership and church health as in the case of the Myanmar Methodist Church. An example of cultural oversight in Cambodia would be the issue of itinerancy. Leaders of communities are always nominated, raised, and accepted from within the fold. The appointment system often creates a cultural dissonance. The new pastor struggles to be accepted and the church splits because its founding pastor is no longer present. The result within the Methodist system here in Cambodia is that vital relationships are lost. A key component of Asian culture, Cambodia without exception, rests on relationships. Communal ties are the building blocks of society. The itinerant system attacks this culture. Trying to preserve tradition in the form of structure may not necessarily be the only or best way to foster kingdom expansion. Cultural bypass or trade-off for institutional preservation is not synonymous to kingdom goals. An area of interest for study would be the impact of connectionalism to church growth in the future.

### **Globalization**

Cambodia appears to have missed out on this age of globalization although it has always been a country open to foreign aid and investments. So low was its isolated economy that in the worldwide recession of 1998 and 2002, Cambodia's Gross Development Product (GDP) and currency remained relatively unaffected. Strangely



enough, Cambodia has, in fact, been touted as one of the most liberal and accessible country with regards to laws pertaining to commerce; however, few have entered the country owing to its torrid history and political instabilities not so long ago. This scenario has changed since the last election in 2004. Its acceptance as a member of Association of South-East Asia Nations (ASEAN) signaled a recognition and return to the international community, and the country has since sparked investor confidence. The influx of businesses and people into the capital city by both foreigners and nationals attest to this fact.

Along with this deluge of foreign investment and by rejoining the world stage, Cambodia's culture has been exposed to and influenced by Western values and systems. Cultural changes are bound to occur and are evident especially with the younger generation in Cambodian society (at least in the city) as demonstrated, for example, by their dress codes—skimpier clothing—physical contact between boys and girls, smoking and drinking, and partying at discos late into the night, just to name a few. One ponders about the possible displacement of traditional Cambodian culture by global pop culture in the years to come and the relevance of the research findings to evangelism in the generations to come. Then again, the Khmer people have been resilient to numerous onslaughts and attempted annihilation to their existence in the past. Perhaps their culture preserved them, instead of them preserving their culture and will continue to do so allowing them to remain resolute in the face of modernity and its cultural assassination attempt. Perhaps most important to recognize is that culture and society, gospel, tradition, history, and globalization are always kept in tension so that one will know how to address them effectively in evangelism.

## APPENDIX A

## ETHNOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF A CAMBODIAN CONGREGATION

Name of church : \_\_\_\_\_  
 Location of church : \_\_\_\_\_  
 Time of worship service : \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_  
 Type of service : \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date : \_\_\_\_\_

1. Aim is to know about congregation's life, beliefs and worldview.
2. Meet people outside church events.
3. Gather some information about:
  - History of the congregation
  - Socioeconomic makeup of the congregation

Who are the people in the church?

What are they like?

What are their concerns, worries, joys and aspirations?

What's the connection between what they believe and do in church and their life the rest of the week.
4. Observe and note the type, place, time, length, and dates of the services.
5. Observe and describe who attends the services, how they come, and who they come with.
6. Observe and describe movements before and after the services.
7. Observe and describe their worship services, what they do, say and use.
8. Observe and describe these things about the church:
  - Physical setting
  - Worshippers' personalities, behavior and mannerisms during the services.
  - Other observable elements like artifacts and architecture of the church
9. Observe and describe pastor—member relationships and the way they relate to one another.
10. Observe the different behavior of the cross-section of the church—the young, old, men, women and listen to what members talk about and observe how they relate to one another.

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS AND LAY LEADERS OF CAMBODIAN METHODIST CHURCHES

**Name of Church :** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Place of Church :** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Pastor :** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Lay Leader :** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Date :** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Time :** \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

#### Introductions

1. Small talk about ministry and family.
2. Appreciate participation.
3. Explain objectives.
4. Clarify roles and expectations.
  - a. Interviewee as expert, interviewer as learner.
  - b. Feel free to skip questions if you feel uncomfortable answering them.
5. Provide assurance of confidentiality.
6. Put the interviewee at ease as tape-recorder is turned on (if permission granted prior to interview)

#### General Information

1. Please state your name.
2. What church are you attending/serving/pastoring?
3. Where is your church located?
4. How many people are there in your church?
5. How long have you been a member/serving/pastoring in this church?

#### Questions on Cultural Perspectives

1. Describe your church's physical setting in the following areas:
  - i. Architecture
  - ii. Art and symbols



- iii. Interior and exterior decoration and arrangements
  - iv. Musical instruments
2. Explain what specific aspects of the Cambodian culture have dictated the physical settings.
  3. Explain their understanding, inferences or meanings with regards to the church and gospel.
  4. Describe your country's history and church's historical setting.
  5. Explain how these may have helped shape or change the Cambodian culture into what it is today.
  6. Describe your congregation's setting in the following areas:
    - i. Socioeconomic makeup
    - ii. Former religious beliefs
    - iii. Regard for church authorities
  7. Explain what specific aspects of the Cambodian culture has contributed to their present positions.
  8. Describe in detail your church worship service in the following areas:
    - i. Mannerisms, greetings, language
    - ii. Greetings, songs, items, performances, drama, prayer, testimonies, offering, preaching, and attitudes
    - iii. Days and times of worship, leaders, church institution.
  9. Explain what specific aspects of Cambodian culture have influenced their behavior.
  10. What do you think are the worldviews, core beliefs or values underlying these structures, forms and actions?
  11. What are the possible barriers and bridges to the gospel? How would they be so?
  12. What is your main concern if these aspects of the Cambodian culture were ignored in communicating Christ?
  13. What other areas that have not been asked in the earlier questions that you might think are correlated between worship expressions and culture that are important and why?

## APPENDIX C

### FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Name of Interviewees :**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

**Date :** \_\_\_\_\_ **Time :** \_\_\_\_\_ **to** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Place :** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Introduction.**

#### **Questions.**

1. How would you describe Cambodian culture? What are its salient characteristics?
2. How is a Cambodian person defined and how does the Cambodian personality express him/herself?
3. What do you think describes the way he/she sees life and even death?
4. How are Cambodian communities or societies defined?
5. What are some social practices that evidence this?
6. Do you think tradition preserves Cambodian communities and in what way does it do that?
7. Why is worship so important to Cambodian people and how is its expressions shaped by culture?
8. What relevance/correlation has religion influenced the way Cambodians worship in the church and in what way?
9. What do you think are things of supreme value to Cambodians and why they are regarded so?
10. What are other things of supreme value that define Cambodian culture and why?

#### **Conclusions**

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