



Introduction to Cultural Anthropology

Reading Assignment

Welcome to “cultural anthropology”; the study of human cultures.

First things first.

Cultural Anthropology: What is it?

“When you tell people you’re taking a cultural anthropology class, what do they think you’re studying?...The truth is that cultural anthropology is the description, interpretation, and analysis of similarities and differences in human cultures.” (*Introducing Cultural Anthropology A Christian Perspective*, page 4).

- Anthro, from the Greek *anthropos*, meaning “human.”
- “ology” from *logos* or “study.”

Cultural Anthropology is the description, interpretation, and analysis of similarities and differences in human cultures.

Cultural Anthropology, according to Stephen Grunian and Marvin K. Mayers in *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*, page 21, contributes in at least four ways to an effective missionary strategy:

1. It gives the missionary understanding of another culture.
2. It aids the missionary in entering another culture.
3. It facilitates the communicating of the Gospel in another culture.
4. It aids in the process of planting a church in another culture.

Cultural Anthropology, according to Brian Howell, claims, “My students find anthropology inherently fascinating. It helps them to make sense of short-term missions experiences, multiculturalism, or their

own background as missionary kids, ethnic minorities, or simply people who question cultural assumptions” *Introducing Cultural Anthropology A Christian Perspective*, Preface, ix).

Bob Thune in his blog “A Cultural Anthropology for Christian Missions” (March 2, 2016) encourages us to think of Cultural Anthropology as “mapping our cultural moment—tracing the contours of the cultural and social milieu we inhabit. I’ve found many leaders who are ineffective in mission have an inadequate grasp on cultural anthropology.”

Many times, a cultural anthropologist goes and lives among people in the culture being studied. This is referred to as “fieldwork.” Others stay at home and do armchair cultural anthropology study through research and study without the joys and pains of immersing in the culture. One learns from inside the culture the other from outside of the culture.

“Armchair anthropology” is “gathering of data from travelogues and books rather than from their own direct research” (*Introducing Cultural Anthropology A Christian Perspective*, page 28). You may not be currently on the mission field. However, you can study your host culture from a distance and be better equipped for missionary ministry once you arrive on location. We call this approach “armchair anthropology.”

Perhaps, you’ve left the comforts of your armchair and have stepped into the realities of a culture that is not your own; not your home culture but your host culture.

It is important to study the culture before one embarks on living in the culture. Once there, the missionary continues in the study of the culture, endeavoring to be a student of the culture.

Cultural Anthropology: Why Study it?

Why study cultural anthropology or human culture?

1. You can gain interesting insights into the culture and why people there behave the way they do.
2. You can better understand yourself and your own culture.
3. You can be better equipped in shaping those in a culture toward a biblical culture.
4. You will be able to understand what we have in common, as well as how we are different.
5. You can be better positioned as a global citizen in a shrinking, diverse, multi-cultural, global village.
6. You can connect insights of cultural anthropology with one’s faith.

Culture: What is it?

Culture is...

- Is everything human beings do and think, often in ways that are hidden.
- Helps identify similarities and differences among humans.
- Describes a reality that people experience.
- Is the behaviors and assumptions held by a particular group.
- Helps distinguish one group from others.
- Comes from the German word “Kultur” meaning to develop or grow
- Is a total way of life that is learned, shared, integrated, and adapted.
- “Culture is a way of thinking, feeling, believing” (Chris Kluckhohn).

- “Culture is a design for living” (Louis Luzbetak).
- Dr. Fritz Stenger states culture consists of all the things we learn after we are born into the world that enables us to function effectively in our environment.
- The sum of the distinctive characteristics of a people’s way of life.
- Conceptual design of how people “order their lives, interpret their experiences, and evaluate the behaviors of others.”

Culture is:

1. **Learned:** Not biologically learned or restricted by race.
2. **Shared:** It is held together by society.
3. **Integrated:** The parts affect each other and contribute to the whole.
4. **Changing:** It is constantly changing because of innovation, internal and external pressures, and so forth.
5. **Adaptive:** changes and continues to change; sometimes dramatically and rapidly and sometimes slow and steady; sometimes imposed from with, and sometimes from without.

Julien S. Bourrelle in *How Culture Drives Behavior*, a video presentation, explains three ways to relate to culture.

1. **Confront:** You believe your behaviors are the right behaviors.
2. **Complain:** Will develop social bubbles living in segregation to society.
3. **Conform:** Adapt your way to behave.
 - a. Conform to the society.
 - b. Implies you are observing, learning, and understanding behaviors of others and adapting your own so it fits with the behaviors of the society you are in.

Relationship between the individual and culture:

1. All people are creatures of culture.
2. Some modify, change, mix and match culture due to cross-cultural exposure.
3. Some cultures give little room to wiggle and others give great latitude.
4. Each individual has his/her own individual culture characteristics.
5. Cultures spawn sub-cultures within the larger culture.
6. People who step outside of the culture are seen by the majority culture as deviants, marginals, loners, and outcasts.
7. Christians are “supra-cultural” in their exposure to biblical culture.
8. Denominations function much like tribal societies with their own totems, taboos, language, social networking, roles and status, and kinship systems (Fletcher L. Tink, presentation entitled “The Effect of Culture on Teaching and Learning: Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity.”

Donald McGavran in *Christianity and Cultures* encouraged missionaries to take a high view of the Bible while taking a high view of culture. He categorized the relationship between Christianity and culture with four possible options:

1. A high view of the Bible and a low view of culture.
2. A high view of culture and a low view of the Bible.
3. A low view of the Bible and a low view of culture.

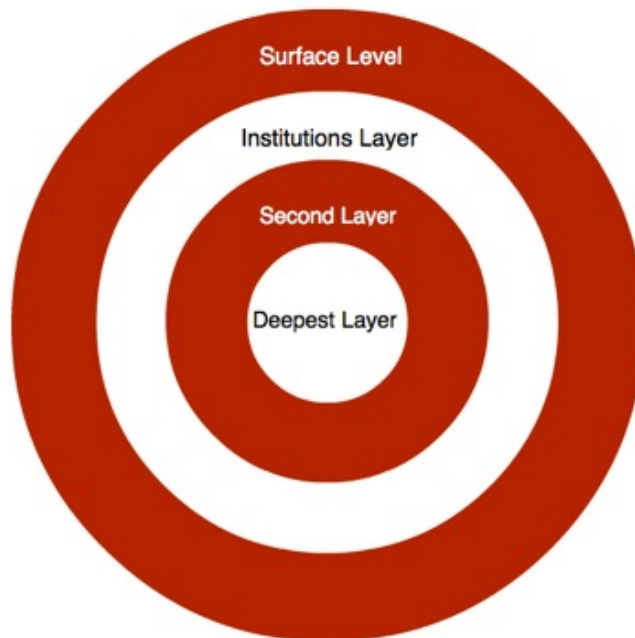
4. A high view of the Bible and a high view of culture.

We need to remain faithful and obedient to the Bible while being sensitive to the culture of the people we are working with. Culture becomes a problem or concern when a particular aspect of the culture compromises the Scripture.

Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions defines “missionary” as one called of God and sent by the church “to serve in a culture, a geographic location, and very likely, in a language different from the missionary’s own.” A missionary is sent from his home culture to a host culture.

Researchers have identified that there are various layers of culture with over 3,500 ethnic groups worldwide. No two of them are identical. However, they do share some common elements. G. Linwood Barney in *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples* (ed. R. Pierce Beaver, Pasadena: William Carry, 1973, pages 48-55) identifies layers of culture.

Level		Comments
Surface Level	External	Observable behavior.
Practices Layer	Just below the surface	Marriage, education, and so forth. These are practices.
Values (Second) Layer	Internal	Derived from the first or deepest level; values.
Deepest Layer	Internal/Heart	Ideology, worldviews, and beliefs.



In ministry we strive to impact the deepest layer of culture. The core of a person's culture is where change needs to be made to truly transform lives. It is also at this level that it is most difficult for us to identify and modify genuine thoughts or worldviews. It is much easier to concentrate on surface-level change and to leave things at that. David Hesselgrave in *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* states, "Biblical Christianity, however, requires change at the deeper levels of values, beliefs, and worldview." It is not enough to simply recall teachings, or temporarily make external, surface changes. Our teaching must transform hearts and change thinking patterns for eternity. We target the heart for from it comes all the issues of life (Proverbs 4:23). God's Word has the capacity to deeply change the unbiblical aspects of culture, worldview, and behavior. On the surface level (actions) behavior is observable. But it is at the deep level worldview where values, assumptions, and allegiances are challenged and changed.

David W. Shenk in *God's Call to Mission* talks about the "culture onion" and confirms, "Although the worldview culture core is most resistant to change, it is within that core that Jesus Christ seeks to make His home. Authentic change in a culture must happen at the worldview center. Change at any other layer of the culture is less significant."

Fieldwork Journal: What Does it Involve?

Peterson, Aeschliman, and Sneed in *Maximum Impact Short-Term Mission* claim Confucius said "Ruh ching wen fu." Being interpreted, "Upon entering a territory inquire about its customs." That entails learning about the culture.

The Peace Corps list the following features of culture:

1. facial expressions
2. religious beliefs
3. religious rituals
4. importance of time
5. paintings
6. values
7. literature
8. child-raising beliefs
9. ideas about leadership
10. gestures
11. holiday customs
12. ideas about fairness
13. ideas about friendship
14. ideas about modesty
15. foods
16. eating habits
17. understanding of the natural world
18. concept of self
19. the importance of work
20. concept of beauty
21. music

- 22. styles of dress (clothing)
- 23. general world view
- 24. concept of personal space
- 25. rules of social etiquette
- 26. housing, architecture

To this list we could add:

- 1. Understanding of the spiritual world
- 2. Quest for the spiritual
- 3. Marriage (Dating)
- 4. Government
- 5. Communication
- 6. Symbols
- 7. Education
- 8. Arts and recreation
- 9. Sports
- 10. Map. Flag, population, languages
- 11. Roles of men and women
 - a. in society
 - b. in the church
 - c. in the family

Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris in *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* tell us, "Anthropological research is never distant or detached. Like Jesus's ministry, anthropological research involves being close to people, speaking their language, eating their food, participating in their weddings and funerals, and caring about their concerns. In a sense, Jesus could even be described as God doing participant observation. In Jesus, God came to live among us and experience our lives as we do. An anthropologist never "incarnates" from one context to another, like Jesus, anyone can draw closer in understanding and love through participating as fully as possible in another's world"

Enjoy the study, exploration, and discovery!