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Critical Contextualization: Case Studies from Cambodia

In the late 1960s a struggling Seventh-day Adventist Church was started in Cambodia. By 1975 when Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge took over the country, forcing Adventist missionaries to flee, there were fewer than 40 members—all in Phnom Penh. During the war that followed most of the Adventists were killed, with a few escaping to the United States.

In 1992/1993 hundreds of thousands of Cambodian refugees who had spent years in the refugee camps in Thailand were repatriated back home after the Khmer Rouge was defeated and some sort of normalcy returned to Cambodia. Among those returning home were several hundred Seventh-day Adventist Cambodians who had become followers of Jesus Christ and Seventh-day Adventist members in the camps.

My wife and I moved to Cambodia in 1997 to give leadership to the Cambodia Adventist Mission (CAM). At a workers' meeting late in 1997 the pastors mentioned that one of the challenges they were facing was what to do for weddings and funerals. The pastors were troubled that church members were being married and buried in traditional Buddhist ceremonies; therefore, it was agreed that at the next workers' meeting the group would begin work on developing Adventist Cambodian wedding and funeral ceremonies.

The Process

During the 1998 workers' meeting a complete day was set aside to deal with the issue of weddings. I explained a process called critical contextualization that Paul Hiebert had developed, which involves a four-step process (1985:186-190). The first step is most important—those working on a cultural issue must make the Word of God the basis for deciding lifestyle or cultural issues. Attending the workers' meeting were 17 pastors, so they were in complete agreement with this basic principle.

Second, the group spent most of the morning looking at typical Cambodian weddings in an uncritical way in order to understand the importance and significance of each aspect. I divided the pastors into groups of four or five and asked each group to list all the activities that happen in a typical village from the time a person chooses a spouse, what they do to prepare for the wedding ceremony, and then each aspect of the ceremony itself. In Cambodia, weddings can last from several hours to a couple of days with multiple acts or distinct parts of the ceremony that take place in various places in the community.

Third, in the afternoon we looked critically at each aspect of the typical Cambodian wedding. We created a list of biblical passages that suggested biblical themes or principles that should be used to decide what aspects of the Cambodian wedding could no longer be followed, which ones could be altered, and which ones needed to be discarded because they went against Bible teaching. During this aspect of the process time was spent praying, reading relevant Bible passages, and discussing the deep cultural meanings.

The fourth step in the process was to allow the local Cambodian pastors to decide what could remain, what needed to be altered, and what had to be discarded from the traditional practices. The group prayed, asked for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and then decided how to deal with the issue.

Some of the things that were discarded included having Buddhist monks involved in the ceremony—an activity that was replaced by having an Adventist pastor present a message from the Bible about marriage, love and respect, and principles for happiness in a Christian home. Most of the other practices were left intact so that community members would not call the wedding ceremony *foreign*, but would at the same time realize that it was a Cambodian wedding with a Christian emphasis.

In the end, the pastors were very happy that they had come up with an Adventist wedding that still had a Cambodian flavor. Another benefit from following this process was that the foreign missionary did not impose a ceremony on the Cambodians, rather it was the local pastors who took ownership of promoting a Christian and biblical approach to weddings.

Weddings

Most Cambodian weddings last for several hours and in some cases two or three days. There is a festive atmosphere as the community celebrates the various aspects of the wedding.

One of the first activities is for the bride and groom to go to their parents' houses and wash their parent's feet as a symbol to the community

that they respect and honor them. This aspect of the wedding was kept intact with no changes.

Another activity that was retained was the procession of family and friends carrying gifts of food and drink to the place where the activities would take place. This activity was how the community contributed to the cost of the wedding. This was also retained.

During an early part of the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom would stand before a Buddhist monk with a string tied from the wrist of the bride to her parents and another string from the groom's wrist to his parents. The Buddhist monk would cut the strings and tie them together. This part of the ceremony was altered just a bit. Instead of a monk, a pastor cut the strings and read Matthew 19:5, 6 (NLT). "This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together."

By largely keeping this aspect of the ceremony and by reading from Matthew several people in the village mentioned that they had never realized the meaning of the cutting of the strings. This illustrates the importance of good biblical teaching. We took a ritual that was infused with Buddhist meanings and replaced those meaning with biblical meanings. In this case the traditional string cutting was tied directly to a biblical passage that poured biblical meaning into the old form. In order to avoid syncretism it is vitally important to constantly teach biblical principles.

Another aspect of the traditional Cambodian wedding that was altered was that part of the ceremony where the groom would sit on a chair while the bride knelt in front of him with a basin of water to wash his feet. This act symbolized that the bride would respect and honor her husband. We retained this part, but added a second element where the bride then sat down and the groom knelt in front of her and washed her feet. The first time we did this a murmur ran through the crowd, but when we asked them what they thought about husbands also indicating that they respected and honored their wives, there was broad agreement that it was good. Many also indicated that they were happy that Christians were not destroying typical Cambodian culture with Western ceremonies, but were actually strengthening it.

One of the final acts of the wedding was for the bride and groom to recline on a mat facing the audience while friends and family came and sprinkled water on the couple as a sign of blessing while saying a word of encouragement and placing some money in a special bowl. This also was retained with some change. Instead of just giving a personal blessing, the Christians in the audience were encouraged to share a Bible text with the couple.

Funerals

At another worker's meeting in 1998 the group of pastors went through the same process to develop a Cambodian Christian funeral. Again, the first part of the day was spent in groups of four or five listing all the activities associated with a typical Cambodian funeral from the time a person passed away until the last ceremony several years later (in Cambodia and in many Buddhist countries there are ceremonies that take place after one year, after three years, and after seven or eight years). Just before lunch we compiled a master list with all that was involved in a typical Buddhist funeral ceremony and the deep cultural meanings of the various events and practices.

Then in the afternoon, I asked the group to list any activities that they felt went against biblical principles. We listed biblical passages that suggested biblical themes or principles that should be used to decide what aspects of the Cambodian funerals could no longer be followed, which ones needed to be altered, and which ones needed to be discarded because they went against biblical teaching. Again, during this part of the afternoon time was spent praying, reading Bible passages, and discussing the deep cultural meanings.

Finally towards the end of the afternoon session the local Cambodian pastors decided what could remain, what could be altered, and what had to be discarded from the traditional practices. After praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the group decided on a format for a Christian Cambodian funeral.

Some of the things that were discarded included having Buddhist monks chant—an activity that was replaced by having a pastor present a message from the Bible about death and hope in Jesus. The typical Cambodian funeral music that was blared out over speakers to alert the community of a death was replaced by Christian hymns that spoke of hope in the resurrection. Many of the other practices were left intact so that community members would not call the funeral activities *foreign*, while at the same time realizing that there were some elements that were definitely Christian.

Once again it was not the foreign missionary that was imposing a change on the new Cambodian church. Rather it was a group of local pastors who dealt critically with cultural issues and who then owned the final process. They were also the ones who promoted the importance of doing funerals in biblical ways among their members.

Song Book

Another area that needed contextualizing was in the area of music. When Linda and I first arrived in Cambodia we visited different village churches each week. These were out in the countryside where the churches were often simple structures made from bamboo and thatch. There were no musical instruments to accompany the singing so people just started singing in any key they wanted. It was awful as thirty to forty people sang in three or four different keys at the same time. One time they sang six verses of a song and not until the last verse did it dawn on me that they were singing a well-known Western hymn. I also noticed that the awful singing was associated with their attempt to sing foreign songs, but when they sang familiar Khmer tunes they could sing in the same key.

Before we arrived in Cambodia in August of 1997 Mrs. Hearn, a retired music teacher from Florida, had come to Cambodia to develop a contextualized Adventist hymnal. During the summer of 1997 there had been a coup so the Hearn had left and did not return until October. By that time I had heard the chaos and dissonant sounds when Cambodians attempted to sing Western music so I was convinced that the hymnal needed to consist mostly of Cambodian tunes with Christian lyrics.

When Mrs. Hearn returned I talked with her about what I had observed. She was almost finished with the first draft of the hymnal and the songs selected were about a 50/50 mix of Cambodian tunes with Christian lyrics and well-known Western hymns. I asked that the ratio be changed to 80-90 percent Cambodian tunes. Why? Because when the villagers sang familiar Cambodian tunes they sang together in unison. No dissonance, no chaos. It was beautiful.

In the end the hymnal had 83 percent Cambodian tunes with Christian lyrics. Why is this important? There are a lot of different music genres, rhythms, and harmonies. Christian missionaries do not need to teach North Atlantic hymn tunes and traditional Christian hymns to converts in newly developing Christian communities. By teaching Western hymns, missionaries often give the impression that God can only be worshipped by using imported and foreign ways to praise him. Instead local musicians should be encouraged to develop their local genres to express the great themes of the Bible. I believe it is important that when non-Christian people pass a Christian church and hear singing that the tunes and genres not be viewed as foreign, but indigenous.

Dress

Another area that I inherited was in the area of what a Christian pastor in Cambodia should wear to indicate that he was a religious teacher. The previous president of the Adventist Church had insisted that all the pastors wear a white shirt and tie—something that was quite out of place as they traveled to rural villages on motorcycles through clouds of dust during the dry season and sticky gumbo mud during the rainy season.

Again we consulted with the pastors to find what type of clothing would indicate to unchurched people that the pastors were religious teachers. As we talked we found that religious teachers in Cambodia did wear white shirts that allowed them to be recognized as religious teachers. So a group of pastors designed a shirt with a Chinese type collar. The color was not stark white, but rather an off-white that did not show the dust as much. When the pastors wore those shirts they were usually recognized as religious teachers, and by not wearing a shirt and tie they were less apt to be associated with a foreign religion.

Missiological Implications

Why is it important to do critical contextualization? Why not just give new Christian groups the songs, the dress, the religious ceremonies that are commonly used in the West? Why go to all the trouble of developing new Christian forms and rituals in non-Christian parts of the world? There are many reasons, but let me share some of the most important ones.

First, there is a growing sense of national identity around the world. People are proud of their country, their heritage, and their way of life. Therefore, it is important to avoid foreign songs, foreign dress, foreign architecture, and foreign ceremonies. When people pass an Adventist church I do not want them to resist attending because everything appears foreign. If they are going to reject Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, I want them to do so because they do not want to commit their lives to Jesus and not because the way he is presented is so foreign.

Second, God is not just the God of Western people. He is the God of all peoples, in all countries, and in all cultures of the world. While it is true that there are common biblical beliefs that all Christians share, it is equally true that the Good News about Jesus Christ can be shared using the language and the local cultural forms of each people group. Unfortunately the Adventist Church is a North American dominated church. An illustration of this is that the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, which is primarily written from a North American perspective. Many of the suggested formats for the various church ceremonies are very Western and very American.

I believe strongly that people should not have to take on Western names, use Western music forms, dress in Western clothes, get married in Western-style wedding ceremonies, or do other church things in Western ways. Critical contextualization provides an approach where local believers can be involved in developing local expressions of biblical Christianity. Western and foreign ways just create unnecessary barriers that prevent many from hearing the beautiful message of the gospel.

Those of us involved in world mission must be at the forefront to encourage local people to develop local expressions of their faith. When I hear people rejoice about the fact that regardless of where they travel in the world the Sabbath school and church service order of worship, the songs sung, and the way of doing church is the same, I do not rejoice, I groan. For that means that the foreign visitor is comfortable, but how about the local people? Are they comfortable with the often foreignness of Adventist worship? We can and must do better to allow local cultural expressions of biblical faith and practice.

Works Cited

Hiebert, Paul G. 1985. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.



Bruce Bauer was the president of the Cambodia Adventist Mission from 1997 to 2001 during which time he was able to introduce concepts of critical contextualization to the newly established church in that country.