

## Chapter 12

### *WHAT GOD WANTS...*

### *CULTURAL LITERACY*

Perhaps the biggest challenge for short-term missions is making sure that the people that sacrifice their time and money to go and make a difference in foreign cultures have adequate information and training about the culture where they will be working and the people they will be serving. This chapter is designed to provide short-term missionaries with some basic information about peoples from different regions of the world: African, Asian, Eastern European, Indian, and Latino cultures.

Obviously, the material will need to be very general. For instance, there may be significant differences between the tribal cultures of one of the many tribes in Nigeria (West Africa) and one of the many tribes in Kenya (East Africa). But despite the specific tribal differences, most African people share a number of basic worldview assumptions. It is possible to discuss (in broad general terms) a “*African*” worldview that is different from, let’s say, an Asian worldview, which is different from a Latino worldview, which is different from an Indian worldview. As long as we keep in mind that we are speaking in the broadest general terms, we can discuss the basic similarities and differences between peoples from these major geographic regions.

To accomplish my purpose in this chapter, I have enlisted the help of a number of missionaries who are specialists in some of the geographic regions listed above. Since I did mission work in Africa, I have written the material on understanding African peoples. I have also written the sections on Eastern European, and Chinese peoples. Each of the other specialists will be introduced at the beginning of the sections they have written.

#### *Understanding African People*

In this section, I will highlight some of the worldview assumptions, along with the subsequent beliefs that grow out of those assumptions, that impact the lives of African people in significant ways. I will be discussing their assumptions and beliefs regarding spiritual powers, ancestors, and family and community relationships. I will also highlight their assumptions regarding time and how this impacts their lives, especially as it works in conjunction with the value they place on relationships. The tendency of African people to think in literal terms when reading and interpreting the Bible is also an important consideration in this context. As we discuss these features, I will suggest things short-term missionaries need to keep in mind along with things they should not do

and things they should do, as they work with African people.

### **Spiritual Powers**

If the many different cultural groups that make up the *African people* share one thing in common, one thing that is foundational to their identity as African people, it is a belief in spiritual powers. African people believe that the cosmos is populated by personal spirit beings that are powerful and that impact the lives of human beings in significant ways. Spirits can be benevolent (we might call them angels) or malevolent (we might call them demons).

Evil spirits, or demons, are everywhere and can make a person's life miserable by bringing sickness or other calamity to an individual or his or her family. Lack of rain, an infestation of bugs, rodents or snakes, business reversals, a wife's inability to conceive, a deformed child, someone "going crazy" (as they might say), being hit by a car or a motorcycle, being attacked by an enemy, being robbed, getting sick: any bad thing that one can imagine can be caused by an evil spirit. A demon might be angry with you on his own for no particular reason or someone may have paid a witch doctor to put a curse on you by getting a demon to do you harm. This is called buying magic or buying medicine.

Because evil spirits can do so much harm and the individual is basically powerless to defend himself, Africans who are not Christians live in constant fear of evil spirits. Everything bad that happens is thought to be the work of an angry god or goddess who has not received the proper respect or an evil spirit whose power has been bought, or who is simply out to hurt as many people as he can. Most African people do not think in terms of accidents or random occurrences the way Western people do. In their world, there are no accidents. Everything that happens happens because someone makes it happen: God, or a god, Satan, or a demon, or a person who has bought magic against someone with whom he or she is angry. Nothing just happens. Someone is always behind it. It is essential, therefore, to stay in everyone's good graces. To offend someone (a spiritual being or a human being) may result in something bad happening. So be polite and respectful to everyone.

Americans often have trouble with this aspect of an African worldview. We do not really believe in a spirit world that impacts our lives a great deal. Most of us do not live in fear of an evil spirit selecting us as a target of his evil intentions. It is not uncommon to see an American who is new to the African context try to talk an African out of his or her belief regarding evil spirits. Regardless of what you believe on the subject, it is absolutely inappropriate for you to attempt to tell an African person that he or she is mistaken about evil spirits and that that they do not exist or if they do have no power to harm and should not be a concern.

There are a couple of basic reasons why this is inappropriate behavior. One is that regardless of what you believe, you do not know in any certain way that you are right about the spirit world and the Africans are wrong. The fact that most Western people believe that demons, if they even exist, are of no concern may be part our Western scientific worldview, but we might be wrong. The Africans might be right. The spirit world may be ordered and may function as Africans believe rather than the way we believe. Just because we think they are wrong doesn't mean they are wrong. We should

not be arrogant and tell them that their fears are invalid.

A second reason telling an African person that evil spiritual beings are not a concern is that it is simply not our place as cultural outsiders, foreigners who do not understand their worldview perspectives, to be imposing our Western views on them. To do so would be sort of like someone coming to your home for dinner and then telling you that you have the wrong furniture in your home, that it is arranged poorly and that the food they serving is improperly prepared. Would you appreciate someone you invited to your home behaving in that manner?

### **Ancestors**

Another belief that African people share in common is ancestor veneration. Africans believe that when a person dies his or her spirit continues to live and that the person continues to be present in the family context. Just because grandfather is dead does not mean that he is not present and should not be honored as he always was. Dead ancestors are part of the *living dead*. They are part of the spirit world and are very active in the material world, having the power to impact all sorts of events.

An ancestor who is not remembered and honored will be offended. An ancestor who is offended has the power to cause great harm. He or she can cause sickness in the family or cause one's crops to fail through the withholding of rain or some sort of insect infestation. Ancestors who are given proper respect can be asked for and have the power to grant favors: the conception of a child, a good harvest, a profitable business venture, and more. Respect for ancestors is essential.

How does one respect his or her ancestors? There are several ways: 1) by remembering them, 2) by offering your ancestor a drink by pouring out a small portion of your drink on the ground before taking a drink yourself, 3) by setting out a small portion of food at meal times for the ancestor, 4) by asking his or her advice before a major decision, 5) by keeping the traditions begun by an ancestor. Basically, the way one shows respect to a living parent or grandparent, or an aunt or uncle, would be the same way one honors that person after he or she is dead.

Dead parents are often buried in the family's house. If your father is living, would you make him go sleep out near the back of the compound? Of course not. So why, just because his body has ceased to function, would you bury him (make him go sleep) out near the back of the compound? What an insult that would be!

Ancestor veneration is often called ancestor *worship*. This is a misunderstanding. Africans do not worship their ancestors. Veneration and worship are not the same thing. Veneration is more like respect than worship. If you ask an African if they worship their ancestors as they worship God they will explain that they do not. Veneration is a more serious and deeper kind of respect than Western people usually engage in (we do not like giving a great deal of respect and do not do it very well), but veneration is not worship.

Again, this is not something a Western person should criticize an African for. We may not understand what they do and how they do it, but that does not make it wrong. Our understanding of a thing or how it appears to us is not what makes that thing right or wrong.

### **How Relationships Impact Life**

Another worldview perspective Africans share in common is their view of themselves and of how relationships work. Western people are individualistic. We are individuals before we are anything else. Africans are not individualistic. They are part of their family and community group before they are anything else. Africans are group oriented. They live their lives as part of a group. They exist because of their family and community. Decisions are made as a family and as a community. One's allegiance is first to one's family and then to oneself. A young person, for instance, who is fortunate enough to be able to go to college, will not decide what he or she would like to study. The family will consult together as to what path of study and what skills will be most beneficial to the family. If they need someone to study business so he or she can help manage the family business, then their student will study business. If they want someone to study education and become a teacher, returning home to teach in the village school then their student will study education. It is not a matter of what the young person is interested in. It is a matter of what the family needs. Decisions are made based on how the family will be impacted.

This can be a problem for short-term missionaries when they are encouraging someone to make a decision regarding becoming a Christian. To Western people, the decision to become a follower of Jesus is an individual decision. In Africa there are very few individual decisions. Africans would not even think of making such a decision (one that impacts behavior and values as Christianity does) without first consulting with family. Any decision that is reached regarding someone's religious commitment is a family decision. Do not push or even encourage African people to make an individual decision. That kind of Western behavior is not part of life in Africa.

Because African people are group oriented, relationships are the foundation of their societies. Nothing is more important than maintaining harmonious relationships. Time spent with a person is time well spent. Sitting and talking, or not talking, sometimes just thinking or watching the rain or the sunset, is a vitally important activity that strengthens a relationship. Time spent with people is more important than anything else one can do with one's time. Relationships come before business. If an African person has some business to conduct, business that may require five minutes to complete, he or she may spend forty-five minutes just visiting, engaging in what we call small talk, before getting down to business. Western people consider this a waste of time. We want to jump right in and get down to business. We feel like if we visit for two minutes before getting to business matters, that is more than sufficient. Africans find such behavior rude and insulting. To Africans, relationship building is never a waste of time and must always take priority.

### **Time**

Because simply being with someone is important, and getting down to business and moving on is never important or proper behavior, Africans are seldom on time for scheduled meetings. Again, this is not something about which Western people should be impatient or critical. If you go to Africa you are simply going to have to slow down and not worry about productivity and schedules.

Africans think differently about time than we do. They view time in a circular or

cyclical fashion. Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall—birth, youth, maturity, old age, and death: cycles such as these are characteristic of life. What was will be again. Time is something humans live in. Africans see themselves as participants in time as it unfolds. The past is real. The present is real. The future is not yet real. The present is what it is and not much can be done about it. The past is what makes an African who and what he or she is. Just as the roots are the most important part of the plant, (without the roots, there is no life, no fruit), so the past is the most important part of life. It is the past that nourishes the African person.

How different this is from the typical Western future orientation. We think of time as a linear process. We conceive of time as a river that flows out of the past, into the present and on into the future, and we are in a boat moving quickly downstream toward the future.

We are people of the future. To us, the past is gone. Nothing can be done about it. The future is here and little can be done about it. It is what it is. But the future, ah the future—if we plan carefully enough and work hard enough we can actually impact the unfolding of the future and make it more like we would like it to be. We send our children to school to get an education and a degree so they will be able to get a good job and make a good living and enjoy a good retirement. We are always thinking ahead. We are future oriented people. If Americans live in the future, the Africans live in the past.

Africans know the future is coming, but it has not arrived yet. It is not yet real. The present is real. They would rather visit with a friend or family member strengthening a real relationship than worry about an event that is not yet real.

Americans live by the clock. We schedule everything. Africans live in the moment, scheduling little. And what they do schedule is always approximate. A 10 AM meeting or a 3 PM meeting means a mid-morning or a mid-afternoon meeting. They arrive for the meeting when they arrive. And the meeting is not a real event until they arrive, so why worry about that which is not yet real? An American would look at his or her watch (or more likely the clock of their cell phone) and cut short a conversation with a friend or family member because they have a meeting to go to. An African, unless he or she has been thoroughly Westernized, would not do such a rude thing. Don't expect Africans to be on time and don't think they are rude or lazy or irresponsible because they are not. They simply do not value punctuality as we do. They have a different way of thinking about time. And in their culture, their perception about time is more important than ours.

### **Spiritual Protection**

Africans are very spiritual people and are very interested in spiritual concerns. Because they worry about the power of evil spirits, a message that faith in Jesus offers protection from the power of Satan and his servants is interesting and readily embraced. When a believer is baptized and receives the gift of the Holy Spirit, he or she then has protection from the power of demons. Demons have no power where the Holy Spirit is present. A life that can be lived without the fear of evil spirits is a life of peace and blessing. If you go to Africa, the good news needs to be presented not only as freedom from sin and its consequences, but freedom from the fear of evil spirits as well.

## **A Tendency Toward Literalism**

When studying the Bible with African people, one notices their tendency to interpret everything in a very literal way. Many people who are just beginning to read and interpret the Bible tend to read it in a literal way. Some passages in the Bible can be understood in a simple literal way. But many cannot. For instance, in 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul discusses the need for the men who pray in the assembly to *lift up holy hands*. We take the comment to be symbolic, with *holy hands* referring symbolically to a *holy life*. The men (people) who pray should be of good reputation, people that live Christian (holy) lives. Just as the phrase *the Christian walk*, refers to how Christians live rather than any literal way a believer actually physically walks, so the phrase *lifting up holy hands* refers to living a holy life not literally to lifting one's hands while praying. Africans, however, generally interpret the passage in a literal way, requiring all men who pray in the assembly to lift their hands while praying.

It is important for people who will study the Bible with Africans to be aware of this tendency and be prepared to offer an explanation and illustration of why a passage is not to be understood literally. Why is this important? Because a literal interpretation of the text in some places leads to interpretations that can be problematic. For instance, Jesus said if your hand offends you cut it off. If your eye offends you gouge it out. Should those statements be understood literally? Jesus said some men make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God. Should that passage be interpreted and the example followed literally? A simplistic, literalistic reading of the biblical text can result in a number of problematic interpretations. Should the commands that masters must be kind to slaves and slaves must obey their masters be interpreted in any literal way without considering the vast differences in culture in the Hellenistic world 2,000 years ago when slavery was common?

A simplistic, literalistic reading of the Bible often leads to interpretive problems. Short-term missionaries who lead Bible studies with African people need to understand the potential problem and be ready to respond to it.

## **A Final Thought**

African people, for the most part, are smart, kind, happy, and poor but generous people. If you go on a mission trip to Africa you will be deeply touched by the people and will make friends for life. It is essential while there that you avoid criticizing them about cultural practices you believe are wrong or worldview assumptions you consider mistaken. As a newcomer and visitor to their culture that is simply not your place. Love them and tell the story of Jesus. Lead them into a relationship with God. As a short-term missionary, that is your job.