

# Response

## A Response to Miriam Adeney's "Why Cultures Matter" (ISFM 2014)

by Gene Daniels

I remember when, as a budding anthropologist, I first read Dr. Miriam Adeney's article, "Is God Colorblind or Colorful?" So you can understand why it is a little unnerving to follow her at this podium. Dr. Adeney is one of the giants in the field and her presentation "Why Cultures Matter" was a *tour de force* on the topic.

The essential argument of her paper was that culture still matters in mission because it addresses fundamental issues of our humanity. Culture is critical to conducting the practical aspects of mission such as community development and microfinance. It hangs as a backdrop to globalization as peoples from distant parts of the world come into close and sometimes sharp contact with Christians here in the West. Perhaps most importantly, she pointed out that paying attention to culture helps us stay focused on the human dimension despite a trend toward what some have labeled "American managerial missiology."

Dr. Adeney also offered a brief survey of the different schools of anthropological thought that have influenced mission these past forty years. This part might have seemed a bit esoteric to those not steeped in the discipline. But I am amazed at how often these ideas lie at the root of our mission conversations. For example, whether or not a person has ever studied anthropology, their view of Insider Movements will usually conform to either a structural, symbolic, or deconstructionist view of culture. Yes, culture and the theories about it still do matter.

With her presentation as a backdrop, I will expand on one of the points Dr. Adeney raised and then tease out something she did not talk about explicitly, but which was certainly implicit in what she said, here as well as in many of her previous writings.

### *Hybrid Identities*

In her discussion of deconstructionism and postmodernist thought, Dr. Adeney talked about changing and flexible cultural identities. Many anthropologists today are using the terms hyphenated- or hybrid-identities. Globalization is allowing for the blending and bending of cultures on an unprecedented scale. Do the children of Turkish emigrants to Germany think of themselves as Turks, or Germans, or German-Turks, or something else entirely? Or what about

the "pop idol" culture in Japan? The young people who follow it are still deeply Japanese, but in ways that render that word almost unintelligible to their elders.

In the circles I am a part of, a hot topic the past few years has been the identity of Muslims after their conversion to Christ. How do we refer to them? Are they Christians? Are they *Muslim Background Believers* (MBBs), *Believers from a Muslim Background* (BMBs), or even *Muslim Followers of Christ* (MFC)? Not only are each of these identity choices pregnant with complexity, but they also beg the question, "Who decides?" People like Jens Barnett (2013) and Katie Kraft (2007) have made a good start to explore these topics, but more research is needed.

However, the issue of cultural hybridity is not just a post-conversion concern. I saw this clearly in my dissertation work among Muslim converts to Christ in the former Soviet Union. The people in that study are what we call *Russified Muslims*. And I found that understanding their particular form of cultural hybridity was crucial to understanding what conversion and discipleship meant to them.

To view their culture as only Muslim masks the very significant part of their heritage rooted in Russian society. On the other hand, to focus on linguistics, that is to reduce them to simply another kind of Russian speaker, ignores the impact of growing up with even one foot in the Umma. The hybrid nature of their identity affected everything from evangelism, to conversion, to discipleship.

I distinctly remember the story of one Kazakh man. He grew up in a very non-religious home. He went to Russian schools and Russian was his first and most fluent language. He was led to Christ by another Kazakh, but later someone took him and his wife to a Russian-speaking missionary church. They attended that church for over a year, yet in retrospect he said:

Of course, the Christians in that church smiled and were nice, and I liked that, but I couldn't go any further with them. They had their own world and I felt like I came from another world... They could not understand the difference between saying "Yesus" (Russian) and "Isa" (Kazakh) for me, especially since I knew they were the same person. So [they] were worried and suspicious of me.

The people around him were "worried and suspicious" because they did not understand that although he seemed to fit into Russian society just fine, there was a whole other side to his cultural identity. It is a classic case of what happens when a flat, two-dimensional missiology runs into the complexity of cultural hybridity.

There has been a beginning toward missiological reflection on these pre-conversion hybrid identities. For example, at last year's ISFM Michael Rynkiewich presented a paper about peoples in the diaspora (2013). Although I disagree with

**W**e need people doing careful research into how the fusion of global pop culture with traditional Arab identity is affecting perceptions of the gospel, not just looking for quick new ways of using social media.

some of his conclusions, he did open up some important points for this conversation we should be having.

We need to be discussing how growing up as a Gujarati, but in the context of Los Angeles, might influence someone's conversion to Christ and subsequent discipleship. We need people doing careful research into how the fusion of global pop culture with traditional Arab identity is affecting perceptions of the gospel, not just looking for quick new ways of using social media.

The missions community needs to wrestle with this issue of cultural hybridity in all its forms, both pre- and post-conversion. Yes, the nuance and complexity of it can be frustrating, but that is just part and parcel of doing mission in our globalized world.

### *Anthropological Representation*

Now I would like to tease out something that was not exactly explicit in Dr. Adeney's presentation, but it seems to me is implicit in her thinking. This is something the literature refers to as "anthropological representation," which is the way we use rhetoric and voice to shape people's perception of the cultures we describe.

A few years ago Daniel Varisco wrote a book entitled *Islam Obscured* (2005). In it he argues that most ethnographic writing is filled with *researchers* telling us what people say or do, and contains very little of what they themselves actually have to say. Thus, we end up with a view of people that is highly filtered by the researcher's perceptions of them.

At times I worry about this same problem in mission, a problem I would call missiological mis-representation. I am concerned that we often give the church back home carefully filtered perceptions of other peoples and cultures rather than honest representations of them.

For example, I constantly hear the word "Evangelical" used to describe the new, vibrant churches emerging on mission frontiers. I have a problem with this. I would argue that the term "evangelical" was coined for a certain kind of Protestant church which emerged to revive the faith of nominal Christians in a certain kind of nominal Christian society. Thus, when we apply it to young churches in somewhere like Uzbekistan, it is more an act of filtering for our audience's sake, than of accurate missiological representation.

During the years my family lived in Central Asia there was a push to develop national evangelical alliances in various post-Soviet countries. Many of the former Muslim church leaders in those organizations are my friends. I have spent

hours drinking tea and talking with these men on a wide range of theological topics. I am convinced that all of them are sound biblically, but as an anthropologist I would call few of them "evangelical." They and their churches are simply too different to place in the same category as my home church in Arkansas.

Nevertheless, missionaries often use this warm and familiar term because it is so much easier than struggling to give a truly authentic picture of the other. But accurate missiological representation is important for many reasons. One reason is that it helps move us from an orthodoxy built exclusively on Western theological ideas towards one that is informed by a globally-shared faith. Mission anthropology should help us paint accurate pictures, not just palatable ones.

### *Conclusion*

So here we stand forty years after the sea change in mission brought by Lausanne '74. Dr. Adeney made a strong case that culture still matters in mission. As she said so well, it matters because "it keeps us seeing humans as humans; not projects, not souls to be saved, but humans created in the image of God." Or as an MBB in Central Asia once told me, "I am so tired of being some missionary's 'project.'" Paying attention to culture helps us fight this tendency, and for this reason it will continue to play a major role in Christian mission until we stand before the throne of the Lamb, and mission is no more. **IJFM**

---

*Gene Daniels (pseudonym) and his family spent twelve years working with Muslims in Central Asia. He continues to focus on the Muslim world, now primarily through research and training. Daniels has a doctorate in Religious Studies from the University of South Africa.*

### *References*

- Barnett, Jens.  
2013 "Living a Pun: Cultural Hybridity among Arab Followers of Christ" in *Longing for Community*. David Greenlee, ed. Pasadena: William Carey Library.
- Kraft, Katie.  
2007 "Community and Identity Among Arabs of a Muslim Background who Chose to Follow a Christian Faith." PhD diss., University of Bristol.
- Rynkiewich, Michael A.  
2013 "Mission in 'the Present Time': What about the People in Diaspora?" *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*. 30, no. 3, (Fall 2013), pp. 103–114.
- Varisco, Daniel  
2005 *Islam Obscured: The Rhetoric of Anthropological Representation*. New York: Pelgrave Macmillan