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L. Lynn Thigpen

Liberty University, lynnthigpen@live.com

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How a Novel Research Framework Resulted in Fruitful Evangelism and Discovery: Introducing Ethnoscology and Spiritual Patronage

L. Lynn Thigpen
Liberty University

Abstract

Faced with an unusual question from a Cambodian friend who had heard stories from God's Word, I embarked on a quest for an answer. He worshipped an unusual and unfamiliar object and wondered whether he must abandon it to serve Christ. I knew he did, but I needed to explore the meanings ascribed to that object of worship to communicate the gospel more clearly, just as Paul did in Acts 17 while in Athens. According to Jesus' parable of the soils in Matthew 13, fruitful evangelism involves understanding. How might individual missionaries and evangelists aid in that crucial need? With that question in mind, as well as my friend's question, I embarked on extensive interviewing, qualitative research, and participant observation. In that process, I followed a novel framework I termed "ethnoscopic analysis" or "ethnoscology," which examines the problem scenario and the findings through four critical lenses. Through this grounded theory study, I came to understand that a spiritual entity, a "kru gom-nigh-uh" or birth teacher, was believed to dwell within the unusual object. That entity was perceived to offer

benefits to the worshipper in exchange for keeping its obligations. I recognized this as a form of patronage and called it “spiritual patronage.” Acquiring that insight felt like Paul finding the altar to an unknown god. I was able to use the concept acquired through ethnoscopic analysis to begin sharing from their known beliefs and bridge to the previously unknown gospel, resulting in fruitful evangelism.

Keywords: evangelism, understanding, contextualization, patronage, folk religion.

Note: This story and a different portion of this research were presented at the 2015 EMS North Central Missiology Conference.

“If I follow Jesus, do I need to get rid of my *kru gom-nigh-ut* (birth teacher)?” my Cambodian friend Somnang (a pseudonym) asked.

Each week, he had been listening to one Bible story after another, presented in chronological order, starting from Genesis and moving toward the second coming. While Somnang and his wife learned more about Jesus, they ushered me into a much-needed understanding of their worldview. By this time, I had lived in Cambodia for nearly fifteen years, but I did not know what a birth teacher was. Observing my ignorance, my friend entered his home and returned with a mass of paper and string from the altar at the apex of his ceiling. The object looked much like a child’s art project. I thought, “This is keeping you from following Jesus? What on earth is it?”

While I called the teepee-like object “it,” my friend talked in relational terms, calling the object a “he/she,” using a personal pronoun in the Khmer language that encompasses both genders. Then I realized I had no clue of its significance, and I needed to explore further. Of course, I knew my friend could not have two masters, but I did not understand enough to converse about this enigma. That day we all launched on a journey of understanding. The question remained, “Would that journey result in conversion?”

The Role of Understanding in Evangelism

“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the one sown with seed beside the road,” Jesus explained (Matthew 13:19, NASB). In contrast, fruitful or good soil was “the one who hears the word and understands it” (Matthew 13:23, NASB). This Greek word used for understanding, *sunieimi* (συνιημι), means “to piece together” or “join

together in the mind,” according to the *New Testament Greek Lexicon*. We tend to think of the cognitive element and grasping information. “However, cognitive science research has shown that this received intellectualist conception is substantially out of touch with how humans actually make and experience meaning” (Johnson, 2015, p. 1). Johnson added, “Understanding is thus less a form of *knowing* or *thinking* than it is a matter of *experiencing and acting*” (Johnson, 2015, p. 3, emphasis in original). Those studying such philosophical concepts maintain, “One may know many unrelated pieces of information, but understanding is achieved only when informational items are pieced together by the subject in question” (Kvanvig, 2003, p. 192).

Somnang had bits and pieces of knowledge but did not yet understand the gospel, and herein lies a critical issue in evangelism. One may teach truth from Scripture, but Jesus emphasized understanding as a necessary component of fruitfulness. Mission history shows that new converts do not necessarily espouse new Christian propositions or messages, but rather, a way of life: “The issue that mattered to the recipients of the Christian mission was not theology or dogma...but the ‘securing of life,’” in Balcomb’s (2016, p. 46) research.

Little is written about the importance of this concept of understanding in evangelism except in the area of contextualization, where an abundance of literature exists. Moreau (2012) defined the goal of that process “to make the Christian faith as a whole – not only the message but also the means of living out of our faith in the local setting – understandable” (p. 36). Whiteman (1997) began his definition of contextualization as communicating the gospel “in ways that make sense to people” (p. 2). Understanding and making sense are vital to the situation.

Sitting on a dirt floor in Cambodia, sharing the unchanging gospel of Christ, and pondering the meaning of my friends’ image, I was not doing a literature review or exploring the 249 proposed contextual models (Moreau, 2012, p. 371). Unfortunately, the process I needed was not readily evident to me. No one on our team had ever seen this object. No one could tell me how to handle the situation. Since Somnang had heard the gospel as I had conveyed it, the immediate reaction to his question might have been to burn the object. The family was not ready for that step, nor did I know how to properly prepare them. For my friends to understand the foreign gospel I presented, I had to first understand this object of worship foreign to me.

The core of presenting an understandable and truthful picture of God’s grace could be summarized in Jesus’ commission to Paul: “I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and

from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:17b-18, NASB). While I wanted Somnang’s eyes opened to the gospel and God magnified, I also needed an eye-opening experience. I could not see the meanings attached to this *kru gom-nigh-ut*. As Hiebert, et al. (1999) explained:

To understand the world of signs for a given people requires learning to exegete their symbol systems...Exegesis is our effort to uncover deep meanings – to make explicit what often lies implicit in human statements and actions. (p. 252)

In this vein, Hiebert (1987) proposed critical contextualization, a process conducted in conjunction with the local church. Hiebert et al. (1999) described four steps for conducting this seemingly linear process: phenomenological analysis, ontological critique/theological reflection and reality testing, critical evaluation, and missiological transformations (p. 21). I certainly needed a process like Hiebert’s but had no access to a local church body at the time. Chang et al. (2009) thought there may be additional dimensions to Hiebert’s (1987) critical contextualization and explained, “Hiebert’s article does not focus on initial evangelism and church-planting but presupposes the presence of an indigenous church, with the missionary simply a dialogue partner with an indigenous church doing the contextualization” (p. 205).

With that in mind, I developed and employed a novel exploratory framework using multiple lenses to explore all the issues in a process conducted where and when the local church is absent or unavailable to the evangelist or missionary. deVries (2021) called this personal “communication of the gospel message” X2 or missional contextualization: “The goal of X2 is to accurately communicate the gospel, within a different language and sociocultural context, in such a way that is understandable and without any unintended distractions, or misapplications” (p. 3). The following is the story of that exploration, the novel process used, the contextualization of the message based on research, and the results that ensued.

A Novel Research Framework: Ethnoscapy

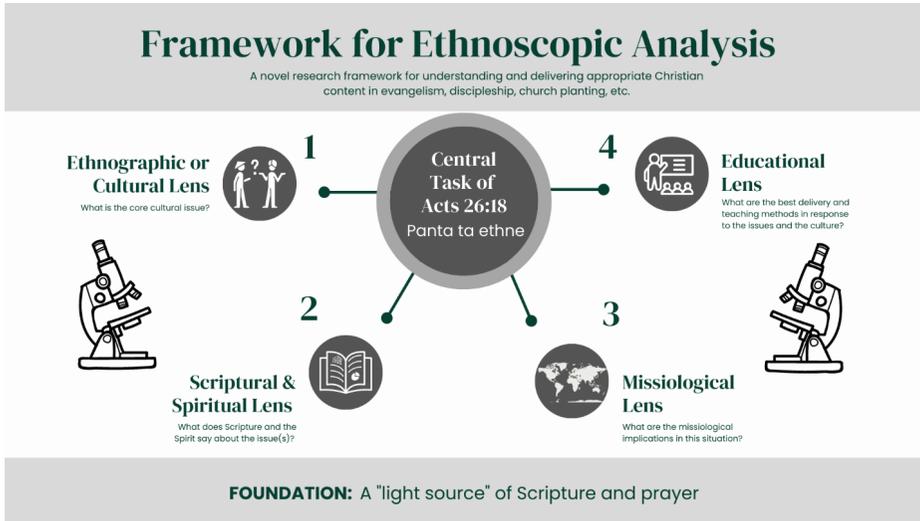
I had unexpectedly entered life in the “excluded middle” (Hiebert, 1982), was blind to that murky world, and ignorant of its ways. Hiebert, introducing this critical concept in evangelizing much of this world, explained the excluded middle as being the world of folk religion, of magic

and astrology, as this-worldly, but unseen and occupying the supernatural realm. Many Westerners are blind to or unaware of this “world” of folk animists, of these foundational beliefs in and fear of the spirit world, as well as the use of shamans as mediators.

On the other hand, my friend was equally blind to my world of higher religion and the “upper realm” of worshipping a Creator God (Strand, 2014). What might an emic or insider perspective of this object expose? What meanings did the *kru gom-nigh-ut* hold? Challenged by Hiebert’s call to engage in human exegesis (2009), I set out to understand the meanings my friend ascribed to his birth teacher in order to adequately communicate the gospel message.

As a former clinical laboratory scientist, I frequently used microscopes. Beyond the cylindrical center allowing light to shine through, a microscope holds several objective lenses rotating on a turret. As the lenses move up and down, they bring the unseen into focus. When exploring a slide, one begins with a lower power and works up to using a higher magnification.

I believe the process of understanding an audience and helping them work toward understanding the gospel is similar to that of using a microscope. Hidden beneath macroscopic differences lie invisible beliefs, values, thoughts, and other cognitive and affective phenomena. Exploring that world requires light and lenses – a kind of “ethnoscope” instead of a microscope. Here I do not propose an instrument, but a systematic process for gaining an emic or insider perspective and responding appropriately. Ethnoscopic analysis is a proposed way of examining cultural issues in evangelism. I coined the term from the words, *ethne* or *ethnos*, meaning *nations* or *peoples*, and the word *skopein* meaning *to view*. As depicted in the figure below, ethnoscopic analysis includes employing or viewing a situation through the lens of ethnographic/cultural analysis, the lens of Scripture and the Spirit of God, as well as the lenses of missiology and education.

Figure 1: A Research Framework for Ethnoscopic Analysis

Ethnoscopic Analysis Applied

At the center of the analysis is God's call to open eyes (Acts 26:18) and the missional task to reach all peoples, *panta ta ethne* (Matthew 28:19). I see this analysis as having Christ and his mission at the core. He is the central illuminating power, with the foundational light source involving Scripture and prayer. Four lenses would then be available for examining and responding to cultural issues in evangelism, as represented in Figure 1. The following sections explore the problem scenario, apply ethnoscopic analysis under the scrutiny of each lens, and provide the final outcome.

Employing the Ethnographic/Cultural Lens

When Paul encountered the non-Jewish culture of Athens, Acts 17:16, 22-23 (NASB) states the following:

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols... So Paul stood in the midst of the Aeropagus and said, "Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you."

Paul passed through the town, examined worship practices, and found one altar that offered crucial information. Paul was first a participant observer. With research complete, he could respond more effectively to the Athenians, albeit with a troubled mind.

Hiebert advised similar phenomenological analysis “to carefully study the people in their contexts in order to understand them” (Hiebert, 1997, p. 204). Technically, phenomenology is “the study of phenomena and the discovery of their essence”; and “the goal of empirical phenomenological research flows from this and is to describe the world-as-experienced by the participants” (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992, p. 1356). This “study of people” or anthropological practice (Hiebert, 1983, p. 1) aims to grasp the emic or insider’s vantage point, but did Hiebert mean phenomenology was the only qualitative approach a researcher could espouse? In one of his last works, Hiebert (2008) explored various methods for worldview analysis and stated,

There is no overarching set of methods for discovering worldviews; rather, several methods can be used. It is best to triangulate the findings of any one method with those produced by other methods. In the end, uncovering worldviews is often as much an art as a science. (p. 91)

Since I had been introduced to grounded theory, I chose that qualitative method in its classic or emergent form for my exploration. Baker, Wuest, & Stern (1992) maintained,

The grounded theory method generates inductively based theoretical explanations of social and psychosocial processes...The object of grounded theory study is to discover a conceptual framework that explains the scene being investigated. (pp. 1357-1358)

Certainly, a beneficial research lens for ethnosopic analysis, grounded theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) provides a strong framework for exploring “interaction grounded in the views of participants in a study” (Creswell, 2009, 13). Charmaz (1995), who extended the Glaser and Strauss legacy, elaborated:

The hallmark of grounded theory studies consists of the researcher deriving his or her analytic categories directly from the data, not from preconceived concepts or hypotheses. Thus, grounded theory methods force the researcher to attend closely to what happens in the empirical

world he or she studies. (p. 32)

I believe Hiebert would approve.

Inherent in grounded theory study is theoretical sampling and purposeful selection of participants who fulfill certain criteria and who have the potential to inform the research question. My research involved locating Cambodians who had possessed a *kru gom-nigh-ut* as well as shamans who made them. To locate additional participants besides my friends, I utilized snowball or chain sampling as well as opportunistic sampling. The principle of data saturation in grounded theory determines that research continues until no new data emerges. Therefore, I conducted face-to-face, open-ended interviews with nine participants in Siem Reap, Cambodia, while I was a doctoral student in 2013. Every interview in that group-oriented culture had an audience, so I actually conversed with over twenty-eight people.

As for the nine major players, four were male and five were female and ranged in age from twenties to sixties. The men had more education than the women, a statistic true countrywide. In addition, while the interviews were conducted in one location, the participants hailed from across the country. The majority lived in rural settings, as is true for Cambodia as a whole. Therefore, this small study represented a range of ages and educational levels and included a variety of locations, reflecting the idea of generalizability championed by Glaser (2002).

Being acutely aware of pervasive animistic beliefs, I expected to have no problem finding people who had possessed a *kru gom-nigh-ut*, but I was wrong. In total, I talked with over fifty-six people, and received more than twenty-eight negative responses from Cambodians unfamiliar with the concept or never possessing a birth teacher. I wondered whether having a *kru gom-nigh-ut* might be a regional phenomenon. I finally encountered a fruit seller from Kampong Cham province who once had a *kru gom-nigh-ut* and confirmed others from her province and the capital had them.

In grounded theory, data analysis is an iterative process concurrent with data sourcing. After each interview, I transcribed audio files into QSR International's NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software, analyzed the data line-by-line, and coded. I began with initial in vivo coding, then more focused codes emerged from a thorough analysis of patterns. Finally, the focused or intermediate codes served to inform a more complete framework represented by advanced or theoretical codes (Birks & Mills, 2006, 2011). During the entire process, I wrote memos tracking evolving trends. In the end, a central understanding emerged from this step-by-step analysis.

During each interview, I treated the individual participants and their information respectfully. I obtained verbal permission prior to each recording because signed permission forms would only have alarmed the participants, making them fear an “official” process. Use of pseudonyms protected identities. When appropriate, I also gave suitable tokens of appreciation, such as sharing a meal. Seeking to ensure valid and trustworthy results, I discussed analyses with participants on multiple occasions. Additionally, even though I had been in the country for over fifteen years at that time and spoke fluent Khmer, I consulted peers proficient in the language to confirm my understanding and translation. To produce dependable results, I used constant comparison during analysis and kept copious notes and memos.

What was the central understanding of this ethnographic exploration? Nearly everyone interviewed perceived the obligations of having a *kru-gom-nigh-ut*. They also understood the benefits of serving a *kru*. Those benefits seemed to outweigh any hardship or sacrifice. These elements - benefits, obligations, and unequal relationships - resembled a form of patronage. In the end, I found the meanings ascribed to this object of worship were akin to what I called “spiritual patronage,” a variation of traditional patronage commonly practiced in Cambodia but in cooperation with the supernatural realm, with a tutelary deity, or spirit. I discuss further elements in the following sections.

After arriving at this central understanding, I felt a sense of epiphany, but when sharing the findings, people asked, “So what? What did you do with this knowledge? Did Somnang abandon his birth teacher?”

Employing the Scriptural/Spiritual Lens

Using the lens of qualitative ethnographic research produced enlightening information, but what were the implications? What did Scripture say in response? What reality lay behind the findings? The participants possessed a multi-faceted system, but what about the truth in Scripture of which they were unaware? “The social sciences stop with phenomenology, but we must move on to *ontology* - to judge our preliminary understandings in the light of Scripture,” in Hiebert’s (1997, p. 204) thinking. I now move to the second lens of ethnosopic analysis - the scriptural and spiritual lens.

Many Cambodians interviewed received a similar object during an illness and used words that implied comfort when speaking of the spiritual entity indwelling the object. They also explained obligations to the *kru* as if they were minuscule in comparison to the benefits. Fasting from certain foods, heeding travel restrictions, burning incense, or making offerings seemed no burden. The *kru* seemed personal, present, and reliable. Belief

ran deep in the efficacy of this remedy. I marveled how someone could deal so relationally with what I perceived to be merely an object.

During discussions of benefits, obligations, and meanings, participants talked about relatives, community, traditions, and ancient ways. One participant who had become a Christian apologized for his involvement and confessed, “Honestly, I cannot deny my relatives. I have to obey them, or they will not help me when I need it again.” He added, “I don’t want to walk in the old ways. We always had to do things for the kru. I don’t want to do that anymore. If we do not follow them, they do bad things to us.”

I understood the participants’ viewpoint, but as a believer in the higher realm of the Creator, I could not agree with their reality. I learned that deep within many of these objects nestled two sticks, symbolizing Hanuman, the monkey god or *svah ohm*, the “grandfather monkey.” For Cambodians, spiritual patronage seemed like being “under Grandpa’s watchful eye” (Roveda, 2003). The ancient Khmer story, the Reamker from the sixth century (Marrison 1989, 126), described Hanuman as “powerful in deeds of prowess” (Jacob, 2007, p. 167). Eisenbruch’s (1992) study of traditional healers in Cambodia confirmed this kind of invocation of “the monkey god Hanuman” (p. 297).

What did all this mean spiritually and scripturally? I believe it is no coincidence the monkey god is the son of the “king of the air.” Ephesians 2:1-2 (NASB) reveals his true identity:

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

The needy had unwittingly become subservient to the “prince of the power of the air” in exchange for certain benefits. Unfortunately, they did not realize the dangerous consequences. As Stein (1984) found in analyzing physical patron-client relationships:

Patronage is an internalized relationship of reciprocal dependency which limits the developmental and therefore adaptive capacities of role participants. In this way, as a relationship of simultaneous exploitation and benefit, patronage perpetuates itself and is unchallenged by the social system it does not threaten. (p. 34)

The relationship between the client and the shaman (*kru k’mly* or *kru tee-*

aye) is an integral part of this system, participating with the supernatural patron, keeping the client “in the dark” and under his/her power. Stein (1984) continued:

Lamentably, the client does not learn within the symbiotic patron-client relationship that his anxieties might be unfounded; instead, they are experienced as realistic threats – from which he seeks protection by the fantasied omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, and the prescience of his patron. Patronage capitalizes on anxiety and is itself part of the stress. It requires the hostile universe it mediates. (p. 33)

I respect the beliefs of my Cambodian friends; but as a Christian who believes in Scripture, I viewed the entity with whom Somnang forged a relationship not as a kind and benevolent grandfather but as a malevolent spiritual force. The entity indwelling Somnang’s object certainly did not desire the long-term best for his subject. According to Scripture, the entity behind the “kind” mask is a trickster and an enslaver. This entity had no right to “rule” or be worshipped but had usurped that position. While fascinating, it is not within the scope of this paper to explore the nature of these spiritual entities/gods and conduct an exhaustive Scriptural study. However, it would be appropriate to participate in such a study with national believers coming from animistic backgrounds.

In Scripture, we find that God alone is worthy of allegiance. Before the Israelites’ sin in requesting, “Make us a god” in Exodus 32:1, Moses sang: “Who is like You among the gods, O Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?” (Exodus 15:11, NASB). When we view the situation through the lens of Scripture, we see God alone should be magnified. Peter declared, “You are...a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9, NASB). Practically, how do we do this? How can we help our animistic friends understand this truth?

As part of this step, we must also ask the question, “What is the Spirit saying? How is he directing us to pray and to speak?” Too often, we gather information from Scripture but neglect to ask for the Holy Spirit’s direction and intervention. Our mission is inherently spiritual, and without holy assistance, we are powerless. In my situation, we continued to share truth from God’s Word with Somnang and his family. Many prayed for them to have dreams, and they did. Many prayed for open eyes and understanding, and we called for intercessory prayer. Combining these understandings with the use of the next lenses assisted in developing

an effective and well-rounded approach. We found that “the Holy Spirit miraculously bridged linguistic, regional, and ethnic disparities” (Hertig, 2004, p. 64).

Employing the Missiological Lens

Returning to the concept of spiritual patronage and employing the lens of missiology, I came to understand leaving a familiar relationship or religious practices to follow God could be daunting for Somnang. Folk religionists can feel they are leaving “home” never to return, losing security for the unknown. I realized I was not asking this family to simply burn an object. I was asking them to divorce themselves from a trusted friend. Tienou (2004) spoke of the “kinship bonds” Africans had with deceased ancestors and the hold they had even on Christians (p. 214). In light of this research, how might we remedy that situation and help those involved in traditional religion see the primacy of God?

Some participants in the study remedied the prospect of alienation by avoiding family and community in their home villages. However, some of those who distanced themselves from countryside beliefs still seemed to hold to the model. One noticeable difference was the sophistication of the images. My urban neighbor proudly displayed his costly metal and cloth talismans (*yantras*) that had been blessed to ensure driving safety. Although more expensive than my friend’s object, they served the same general purpose.

When another long-time friend saw the photo of Somnang’s object, formally known as a *some-nome sawng-vah*, he labeled it “ancient” and assigned the term *ah-roop-ay-ee* (*animistic*, meaning “cannot be seen or held”). He explained most Cambodians do not follow the tenets of Buddhism until old age. Rather, they trusted fetishes, talismans, protective strings, amulets, etc. While “to be Khmer is to be Buddhist,” the majority of participants readily confessed these animistic practices were profoundly Cambodian, not Buddhist – magical practices and a social “religion” living happily together. Van Rheenen (1991) defined *magic* as “the use of rituals and paraphernalia to manipulate spiritual powers;” differing from religion, magic seeks to manipulate the use of power and is unconcerned with relationship (218).

While no longer “in vogue” to refer to *fetishism* (Ellen, 1988) or even *animism* (Lutgendorf, 2007; Pool, 1990), these terms are still used in missiology. Lutgendorf (2007) explained the difficulty in classifying such sacred objects: “Nearly everyone, myself included, who writes in English about Hindu practice still grapples with terminological issues when it comes to sacred ‘images’” (p. 21). Technically the object I studied could be

called a “fetish” (popularized by De Brosses and presented in Ellen, 1988). So, to complete the definition mentioned earlier, the object, a *some-nome sawng-vah*, could be called a fetish used in shamanistic practice in rural Cambodia, a visual symbol of a protective entity – the *kru gom-nigh-ut*, a tutelary deity, or guardian spirit, according to Lutgendorf (2007). The addition of Hanuman, the monkey god, in the center of some fetishes represents a theriomorphic deity or one having an animal-like form (Lutgendorf, 2007).

After realizing the concept of spiritual or supernatural patronage was the central meaning behind the veneration of a *kru gom-nigh-ut*, I searched for similar terminology. With roots in ancient Rome, the patron-client notion stemmed from hierarchical relationships between the *patronus* and the *cliens*. The *patrocinium* of the *patronus* protected the *cliens* (Gruen, 1984; Westbrook, 2005). Stein (1984) added:

Mediating the social universe in behalf of his clients, the patron offers protection in the face of danger, greater security in an insecure world, greater predictability for the powerless, more resources for the resource-starved or -deprived, reduction of stress, stability in the face of uncertainty, and reliability in an untrustworthy world. In short, if you cannot rely upon anyone else, at least you can count on the patron. (p. 31)

Stein mentioned the same benefits and themes Khmer ascribed to their *kru gom-nigh-ut*. The difference was this patron did not “exist” in the physical realm – only in the “excluded middle,” in the unseen or supernatural realm, but affecting this world.

I discovered that the term “spiritual patronage” was used mostly in a few discussions surrounding devotees and saints in the Catholic tradition, as a kind of ecclesiastical patronage (Boissevain, 1966; Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984; Raj & Harmon, 2006). However, as Raj & Harmon (2006) maintained, in spiritual matters, “Humans replicate the norms and mechanics of social relations” (p. 8). It makes sense to assume such a strong patron-client society in the political and social arena would also have a system of dealing with spiritual entities, except heretofore scholars have not written about traditional folk religious practices in this light.

The supposedly powerful spiritual entity is expected to supply the needs of the loyal and trusting client. The “norm of reciprocity” and “the legitimacy of dependence” (Scott, as quoted in Ledgerwood, n.d.) undergirds the philosophy of the system. Ledgerwood (n.d.) succinctly explained the extensive patron-client relationships in Cambodia: “The

only way to get something that is beyond your capacity is to attach yourself to a superior.” Mazlish (2000) referred to the process as “an economy of power,” emphasizing the importance of connections (p. 3). Mazlish entitled his article “Invisible Ties,” apropos for this research, where invisible ties of spiritual patronage, trust, and loyalty bind a person to his or her *kru gom-nigh-ut*.

When presenting these results to colleagues, I originally used an illustration with two spreading shade trees, contrasting taking refuge in one of two different worlds. However, I came to realize portraying two trees of equal size did not accurately represent spiritual reality. The system of spiritual patronage was more like the “vine slips of a strange god” (Isaiah 17:10 NASB). People claimed to receive fruit and protection/shade from the system, but the majority seemed blind to God’s greater system. If the Westerner suffers from the “flaw of the excluded middle” (Hiebert, 1982), the animist suffers from the flaw of the excluded upper level (Strand, 2014), unaware of the Creator God. We know primary confidence must be shifted, old patrons shed, and God’s Kingdom embraced. How do we accomplish this? How might I help Somnang discover God to be a reliable spiritual Patron, jealous for exclusive worship and spiritual monogamy? I discuss that while presenting the next lens.

Employing the Educational Lens

Using the educational lens, we explore the question, “What is the best delivery method for the truth needed?” Given the findings from employing each lens, how do we communicate the message accurately? Here, we must continue to employ the understanding gained by viewing our audience through the first lens, through a firm grasp of culture and worldview. Are they mainly oral learners, needing recorded lessons, visual portrayals, songs, stories, proverbs, or bite-sized chunks of teaching? Are they group-oriented? Are they egalitarian or hierarchical? So many cultural values become important factors when employing the educational lens.

The roots of the folk religious system go deep, with a strong pull from kin and community. When people seek to renounce the old system and convert, they need new roots and a support system. They need deep and abiding kinship relationships with other believers and their Creator. They also need gospel presentations and discipleship processes that can be easily reproduced to share with friends and family.

I came to realize folk religionists have been socialized into their beliefs and traditions. They watch family, friends, and neighbors burn incense, visit shamans, receive sacred sprinklings, etc. How do we socialize new converts? What visible and tangible symbols can we offer for their

observation? Do we model the Christian walk for them to view? Many Westerners seem to believe discipleship is a cognitive process. For animists, however, religion is acquired by observation and relationship. I came to understand the need to incorporate more relational and observational elements into evangelism, discipleship, and training.

Moreover, Cambodia is a predominantly oral culture (Thigpen, 2020). Even though my friend Somnang was educated, his wife was not. I knew from my storying experience people first needed the meta-narrative of Scripture to understand “the big picture” of God’s grand story. They already had stories of the efficacy of animistic practices. Now they needed testimonies of God’s power and Bible stories that illustrated the same, that God is worthy of allegiance and can be trusted.

With my own understanding of Somnang’s worldview firmly in mind, I returned to share the gospel with his family. I prepared to share the Grand Narrative of Scripture with a patronage theme. I bridged the gap from the known to the unknown by first sharing what I learned about their *kru gom-nigh-ut*. I explained how I now understood the benefit of following the *kru* and the obligations, how living with the object and its spiritual entity was like living under the protective shade of a beloved grandfather. I crudely drew a picture of a spreading vine and them sitting underneath.

Then I launched into the gospel, but not any gospel presentation I had ever shared before. Because “information is giving out; communication is getting through,” (Ascribed to Sydney Harris. See Muzychka, n.d.). I sought once and for all to “get through.” I mentioned that they lived under the protective shade of their beloved *kru* but that there was another Person much greater and much more powerful. I then drew a huge, spreading tree that overshadowed Somnang’s vine and filled the paper. I told them the One True and Living God, the Creator, was large enough that all people of all time and every place could live under His protection and care. Then I shared God’s story from creation until the consummation. I talked about a wonderful Patron deserving of worship, allegiance, and honor, but who continually faced dishonor and disappointment from His creation and still finally came in person to deliver us from sin, sorrow, and shame.

Throughout my talk, Somnang and his wife gave numerous understanding nods, comments, and smiles, confirming I grasped their worldview. At the story of the crucifixion, Somnang’s wife said, “We didn’t ask Him to do this for us.” At that moment, they grasped what Christ had done and their personal obligation to respond to such a precious gift. They finally understood.

After that presentation, I left them to ponder their choice. I continued to pray for them, thinking the spiritual entity might be too dear to be

abandoned, too efficacious to leave for an unknown relationship. Fortunately, I was wrong.

Sometime later, after much prayer on the part of many, I returned to visit this dear family. I asked to take another picture of their *kru gom-nigh-ut* because it was difficult to discern the object's features in my dark photo. Somnang responded, "We don't have it anymore."

"What?" I queried.

He simply replied, "We got rid of it. We don't need it anymore. We follow Jesus."

I could hardly believe his response. That day we arranged for them to be baptized and become part of a local house group. Mission complete. Somnang and his family had come to understand – "not just an intellectual operation" (Baker, 2015, p. 3), but wholeheartedly with the experience of a sincere change of allegiance and evidence of a life transformation. Ethnoscopic analysis had done its job and was ready for another evangelistic endeavor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to share the gospel with my friends in a way they understood, I needed to engage in a bit of research. It was not that I did not understand or know the gospel. The issue was how to convey those truths to people whose lives revolved around a completely different spiritual force.

Modifying Hiebert's work, I employed four different lenses in my research, in ethnoscopic analysis of the concept or problem. By first analyzing the problem from an ethnographic or cultural perspective, I discovered the answer to the question, "What is the core cultural issue?" Spiritual patronage emerged as a foundational concern.

With that understanding, I engaged the second lens of ethnoscopia, the Scriptural and spiritual lens used to answer the question, "What do Scripture and the Holy Spirit say about the issue at hand?" Of course, God's Word commands spiritual monogamy and avoiding dependence on any other entity. How do those who fear the spirit world, who have seemingly experienced its efficacy, leave those relationships and their accompanying ways? They need to see God as greater, as worthy of trust, as a faithful Patron.

The missiological lens then helped to answer the question, "What are the missiological implications?" Missiology shed light on the excluded middle and all that beliefs in the spirit world entail, as well as the difficulties in overcoming the fear of spirit beings and coming to serve the One True God.

Being aware of the issue, the potential pitfalls, and the truth of Scripture was not sufficient. How should this life-changing message be delivered? The fourth lens of ethnosopic analysis, the educational lens, helped explore the question, “What are the best delivery and teaching methods in response to this information?” Knowing my friends were oral learners and knowing that biblical storying had been effective in the context, I crafted a Grand Narrative or “big picture” of the whole of Scripture with a theme focused on patronage. Utilizing that theme gleaned from the research was key to seeing the truth of God’s great story of faithful love for an unfaithful people penetrate the hearts of my friends.

As I gaze at a photo of those *kru gom-nigh-ut* perched on their altar, I now see what appears to be the image of a brown face with a red crown, straw plumage, and several sashes over a white body – a definite attempt at creating a deity for a makeshift throne. I could not see it at first. I was blind to the meaning such a symbol held, blind to the middle zone of fear of the spirit world, and ignorant of the concept of spiritual patronage. Now it all makes sense.

Exploring this situation through the four lenses of the proposed framework for ethnosopic analysis helped me gain an understanding of spiritual patronage. I utilized this insight to help open the eyes of my friends, resulting in fruitful evangelism, Christ being magnified, and the mysterious process of 2 Corinthians 4:6 repeated: “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

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About the Author

Lynn Thigpen (PhD, Biola University) is an emeritus IMB missionary and an adjunct professor at Liberty University and the Asia Graduate School of Theology. Winner of the Hiebert Global Center Award and a SAGE Social Science Impact in Action Writing Prize, she is the author of *Connected Learning: How Adults with Limited Formal Education Learn* (ASM Monograph Series) and other publications.