



# A Comment on Encountering Cultural Differences

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Joshua Stitt | August 8th, 2016

*“Learning about culture is fundamental to transcultural competence. Learning details about a specific culture is worthwhile, but one can never anticipate all of the possible cultural variations that might be encountered.”*

**JERRY GLOVER**

Recently, during a research project in northwest Thailand one of the members of our team made a mistake that greatly upset a Thai music teacher. At the conclusion of a music lesson Peter stepped over a khong wong yai while walking to the door (a khong wong yai is a set of gong chimes set low to the ground that is c-shaped around the player). This resulted in instant anger from the teacher. Even though there were some locals who spoke both Thai and English in the room, the reason as to why the teacher was upset was left unclear. The teacher seemed to forgive Peter after a few minutes and both parties went their separate ways.

We were aware that in many Southeast Asian cultures the showing of the bottoms of one's foot can be offensive. However, we had been spending our time with the Karen (Kuh-rin), a hill tribe that reside in northern Thailand and southeast Burma/Myanmar, and these particular Karen did not observe that practice. The Karen have a population close to 9 million (depending on who you ask) and much diversity within such a large population. We asked several of the Karen in our residence and they said it probably had something to do with a spiritual matter. We had not interacted much with Southeast Asians who practised animism, "...a belief that the natural world is organized and 'animated' by the supernatural world...Spirits may reside in objects, shamanic tools, and musical instruments." When Peter pointed the bottom of his foot at the instrument as he stepped over it he showed the bottom of his foot to an object with a spirit. The teacher was gracious and at least still thanked Peter for visiting after Peter offended the man. We do not know the consequences of Peter's actions because he left and has not seen the teacher since.

I was speaking with an environmental engineer from Chiang Mai who had been working in Karen villages in northern Thailand for close to a decade. He told me that he had seen some consequences of when someone upsets the spiritual realm. He was leading an environmental

research project in a Karen village and two of his students, a boy and a girl, decided to ignore the traditional practice of the separation of the sexes and spend alone time in a closed room. This resulted in the village sacrificing a pig to remedy the situation. They were informed multiple times how to behave but chose to ignore the guidance.

While the previous examples are isolated incidents that happened in a very short period of time, ignorance to another culture can take place over years and on a larger scale. Jerry Glover's *Transcultural Competence: Navigating Cultural Differences in the Global Community* shows this. In chapter four, *Respecting Cultural Differences*, a large western company opens a gold mine on a Pacific island and after years of ignoring the religious rites and traditions of their local employees, the workers went on strike. During the strike, the company was sold to another owner and this new owner was pressured by the government to resolve the situation. Thus, the new owner sent in a consultant. The previous bosses had invited the chiefs of the locals to come to a meeting to fix the problems but the traditions of the locals were that the foreigners needed to come to them. The consultant went to meet with the chiefs in their village; this sign of respect began dialogue between the company owners and leaders of the locals.

We can see from these examples that Glover's statement has value. Learning about the behaviors and customs of another culture can be beneficial although it may be difficult to understand and recognize the differences prior to encountering them. ☺

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