CITIES, CULTURE, IDENTITY AND MISSION

Posted on September 21, 2011 by Eddie

Categories: Africa, Mission, Observations

I remember a university lecturer in Abidjan telling me that when left the city of Abidjan, he felt as though he was leaving CÃ´te d'Ivoire all together. For him, the cosmopolitan city with its sky scrapers and supermarkets, not the rural majority, was the real Ivory Coast. For my translator colleagues and I, the opposite was often true. We loved the outlying areas, that's where our work, and the wonderful richness of Ivorian linguistic diversity was to be found.

Many of the people I have worked with have been world leaders in specialised fields of Ivorian linguistics; they know more about Ivorian languages than anyone else in the world. It's pretty impressive. However, when it came to urban life, we linguists and Bible translators often knew very little. People who knew all there was to know about an obscure particle in an Ivorian language would struggle to name the main football clubs in the country. Experts in rural culture and anthropology knew next to nothing about the life of the city and its multi-layered culture.

These thoughts have been inspired by reading Mike McGovern's excellent Making War in Cote d'Ivoire, which shows the way that the cultural and political life of Abidjan led the country into civil war. The book has a huge amount of detail about facets of life in Abidjan about which I knew very little; despite having lived there for six years. The point is, that although we often have an attachment (often a sentimental one) to rural life, cities matter. It is in the big cities that the policies are made and the actions taken that shape the fates of nations.

Not only that, but cities are very much the frontier for mission. Over 50% of the world's population now live in cities, yet a vast proportion of missionary activity is focussed on rural areas. Cities are complex, confusing things. They are actually quite threatening for Bible translators, because when people move to the city they will often drift away from using their indigenous language. The whole question of what is a people group or a language group becomes very confused in the melting pot of the world's great cities. But as cities grow and their influence develops we cannot escape the importance of the urban world for Christian mission.

This short video from Tim Keller, is a great illustration of this.