# THINGS HOME MISSION CAN LEARN: STUDY

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How well do we understand the culture that surrounds us?
**Category:** Church: UK

This is the third part in a series on what those involved in mission to the UK can learn from cross-cultural mission around the world.

When Sue and I first went to live among the Kouya and before we were allowed to start translating the New Testament, we had to demonstrate that we knew something about Kouya culture. We spent a long time chatting to people, doing some informal interviews, and taking part in village life. Eventually we gathered enough information to allow us to write some ethnographic articles about Kouya life and culture. You can find some of them here, if you are interested.

Now, I am not suggesting that Brits seeking to reach other Brits with the gospel need to write ethnographic articles. However, I do think that it's important that those involved in mission in the UK spend some time thinking and learning about British culture. In truth, most of us know less about our own culture than we think we do. Let me briefly highlight a few reasons for this:

- We are living through a time when culture is changing very rapidly and it is almost impossible to keep up.
- Many Christians have limited contact with wider British culture, because they do not socialise a great deal outside of their church circles.
- Actually, very few people anywhere (not just Brits) really understand their own culture; they can explain what they do, but not why they do it.

There are various things that people involved in mission need to know.

- Demographics: how many people live in your area? What is the age profile? What is the economic profile? What immigrant populations are present and what religious background do they come from?
- What sort of social attitudes are common in the area? What newspapers do people read? Who do they vote for and why?
- What are people concerned about? Jobs? Pensions? Immigration? Why?
- What are the main topics of conversation? Football? Kids? Soap operas? Strictly?

In our training for language work we talked a lot about being participant-observers; the need to take part in local life and to observe and try to understand what was going on. If you are on mission in the UK, you need to be a participant-observer in British culture. That means meeting where people gather; the school gate or the pub say, and participating in British cultural life by, for example, watching the odd soap or reading a popular newspaper. You need to know what makes the people around you tick and why and you won't find that out if you don't share your life with them.

The first reason to know about this stuff is that it opens up the opportunity to talk to people about things that matter to them. If you have nothing in common with people, it's really hard to strike up a conversation - so learn about the stuff that matters to them. Otherwise, I realise that this doesn't

sound like rocket science, but it does lay the foundation for the next few articles. There are some things you just can't do if you don't have a good understanding of the community you are trying to reach.

By the way, if you want a really good resource on understanding English culture (it applies to the other home nations to some extent, too), Kate Fox' bookÂ Watching the EnglishÂ is absolutely brilliant. Put it on your Christmas wish list!

So what can mission partners or mission agencies contribute to this? To be honest, beyond emphasising the need to understand communities, they probably don't have a lot to add. Mission partners who have been away from the UK for an extended time will understand British culture even less than those who live here permanently - though they possibly don't realise it. However, mission partners do have something to contribute; people who have been out of the country for a decade or so are in a good position to observe changes in society which people who are based here might miss. Don't ask your missionary friends to tell you all about British culture, but do ask them what has changed since they last lived here; they may well have noticed things that you have missed altogether.

**Posts In This Series**

- Introduction:Â I believe that the skills and experience of cross-cultural missionaries are crucial to the future of the church in the UK: the start of a blog series....
- Go:Â When push comes to shove, there is one basic difference between long-term, cross-cultural missionaries and the average church member. ...
- Study:Â How well do we understand the culture that surrounds us?...
- Contextualise:Â When Paul spoke to a Jewish audience, he started off with the story of the Jewish nation, when speaking to Greeks, he worked from inscriptions on statues and Greek poetry. ...
- Serve:Â If you just preach the word but donâ€™t do the deeds then you are not credible, if you just do the deeds without preaching the word then you are not audible....
- Don't Look Down: Looking down on a class of people, and holding them in contempt for their reading habits, has far more to do with liberal, middle-class prejudice than it has to do with Christianity.Â  ...
- Speak:Â To a newcomer, a phrase such as "we will now enter into a time of worship" conveys far more background information about the person using it than it does about what is going to happen next in the service. ...
- Religion:Â Learn from people who have been there and done that....
- Stories:Â Taking one of Jesus' amazingly creative parables and turning it into an alliterated, three-point, logical sermon has to be the ultimate in literate processing. ...
- Pray:Â It would be easy - very easy - for a Western rationalist to dismiss all of this. I'm a biologist, I know what causes diseases! ...