



THE PROBLEM OF MK VULNERABILITY

When a missionary's child is being emotionally damaged, it is not right to continue without making changes.

by Lynn Dixon Sidebotham

AS AN ADULT CHILD OF MISSIONARIES (MK or "missionary kid"), and as the mother of four MK children, I am fascinated by literature on missionary kids. Discussions of change, separation and loss, MK schooling, and the formation of a "Third Culture" among MKs have helped me. Yet there are few discussions regarding the effects of the receiving culture on an MK, particularly when it is a negative emotional environment.

I do not intend to minimize the Third Culture concept or the "brotherhood" of MKs. Once my husband Bruce and I were talking to another missionary couple about how our future plans could affect our children. John, who was raised in Africa half a world away from me, said to me, "We know what it's like for the kids." And, momentarily, we shared an understanding that neither my husband nor John's wife could.

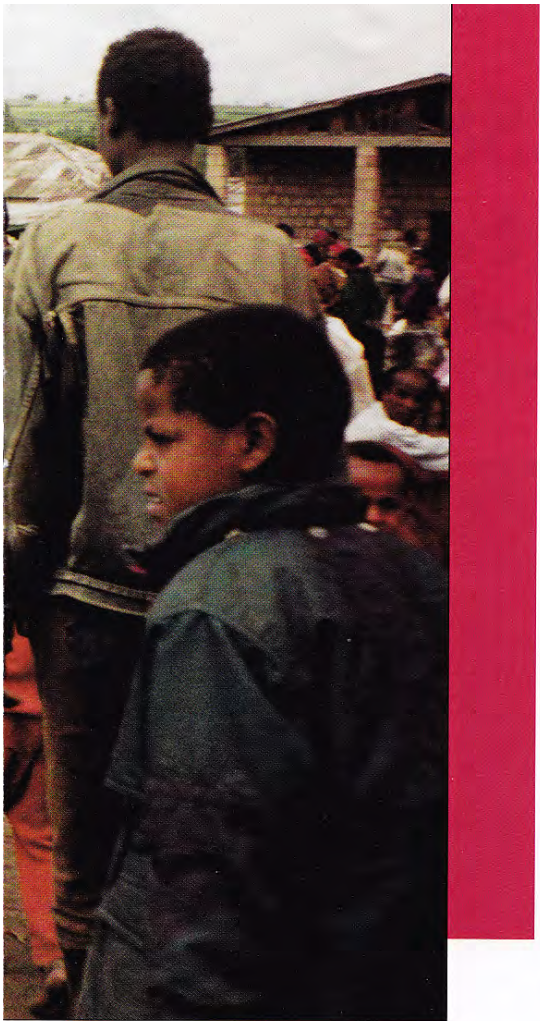
Some cultures more equal than others. Insufficient attention has been paid to the specific cultures MKs experience. The Third Culture concept—which holds that missionary kids constitute a third culture distinct from their sending and receiving cultures—may have diverted attention from the receiving culture. Perhaps a stronger psychological reason to avoid this discussion is the desire missionaries have to bond and identify. Yes, we need to identify with a culture if we are going to reach it for Christ. In doing this, we often uncritically accept the cultural anthropologists' proposition that all cultures are equal, that the receiving culture is as "good" as our own.

While acknowledging that there are many sinful elements in our own culture and that many neutral customs in a culture do not carry a moral value, I submit that cultures are *not* equally good.

Cultures with a long Christian heritage have been favorably changed by the gospel. Especially in completely unreached groups, the people are not simply in danger of spiritual damnation, but are living their lives in dysfunctional and evil cultures. In their corporate bargain with Satan, they have not received earthly happiness and stability, but a preview of hell.

The degree of subjectively-experienced evil varies from group to group. In Indonesia, for instance, MKs who grew up in the tribes generally enjoyed it. Sally, an adult MK, says, "Indonesia is my home. I am a Dani." On the other hand, many MKs like myself, who lived in urban Muslim areas, disliked the country and never felt at home. An important consideration is whether the sinful and sick aspects of that culture directly affect MKs.

This article may not be relevant to



missionaries serving in some areas. For parents of MKs like Annie, who never wanted to leave Italy, or Marilyn, who could have passed for a French teenager, dealing with the receiving culture is mostly a problem of initial adjustment. But this discussion may help those serving in areas where children face serious problems.

Emotional abuse. MKs may be exposed to emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. In places where it is hard to be white, low-level emotional — touching, poking, crowding, laughing and teasing—is like constant background radiation. Not all of this is intentional. People may not understand that your child does not want to be closely surrounded by 40 onlookers as he builds a sand castle, or be forcibly dragged away from his mom or dad for a social encounter. A child may cry when spectators throw spitballs and mud balls during the soccer game, and he may be even more indignant when people, delighted by his emotional reaction, intensify their teasing.

Some of this happens to most MKs. Parents need to be sensitive about how much a particular child can take. Richard

is shattered and cries, “Mommy, they laughed at me when I hurt myself!” Joshua, his little brother, tells off the bystanders with panache, and wins their respect.

People in the culture may have social controls based on shame and codependence. In one upper-class setting, a bratty little local boy was held out of a second-story window and threatened, laughingly, until he behaved in a socially appropriate way. People operating out of this mindset truly cannot understand why they should not tease, or tell lies, or threaten with demons and ghosts.

Physical abuse. While physical abuse is generally at a low level, it can elicit a strong emotional reaction. Martin was held down and his neck was burned by a stinging caterpillar. Another time his head was cut open by a thrown rock. Paul’s parents reported another incident of rock throwing to the local government official and were able to stop it. Paul’s little brother Doug, though, has never forgotten the fact that their dog was deliberately poisoned. Tangible physical abuse is usually easier to control, partly because nationals often agree it is bad.

Sexual abuse. Sexual abuse can especially be a problem in certain Islamic and Hindu areas. Unfortunately, some parents prefer to avoid the issue, such as the family whose three-year-old girl was allowed to go home with the helpers. (She began playing some very graphic games with her dolls.) Two parents serving in a Hindu culture refuse to let their little boy go alone to visit the neighbors, who had played with him sexually. One of my own preschoolers complained about the helpers pulling his genitals. A Christian national friend to whom I turned for advice said she was a Christian for five years before realizing there was anything wrong with masturbating a small child to calm him down. In some Muslim areas, mild sexual abuse—obscenities, and touching or pinching the bottom and breasts—is common. At one point during my adolescence, I carried a stick whenever I walked on the streets. This constant (though not severe) abuse, annoying and humiliating for a grown woman, can have a grave impact on an adolescent girl.

What can missionaries do? There are a number of options. Sometimes children need to be more sheltered. Unfortunately, this can hinder bonding, but

when the neighborhood children call, “Joshua, come to the gate and pull down your pants,” Joshua had better not play with those children. One begins to understand the rationale for the mission compound.

Boarding school can be a possibility when local conditions are too difficult. Elaina’s parents sent her to boarding school in her adolescence when the family moved to a Muslim area known for sexual harassment. When Elaina came home, she never left the house without an escort of her father or brothers.

Sometimes simply moving locally can take care of a problem. One family in a major city lived first in a neighborhood where the children were being mocked and scorned. But after moving across town, family members found that their new neighborhood was friendly and gentle.

There may be other times, however, when you will need to return your child to his home culture, or you may need to change *your* location and minister in a completely different culture. It does not depend solely on the culture, but also on the child. Some children are far more sensitive than others. I used to think that my children were almost unique in living for a long term overseas without learning the language. An expatriate teacher told me that he had seen a number of similar cases. It was interesting that he had worked in Egypt, another hostile Muslim culture. Evaluating a troubled child psychologically while on furlough may help determine the impact of a culture.

I believe going to a hostile culture is worth the risk. Nevertheless, children are God’s first vocation for parents. You may be called to the field, but you are also called to raise your children. God has given today’s parents more information about MKs and child-rearing principles than early missionaries had. We are responsible to use this knowledge. If a missionary knows his child is being damaged, it is not right to continue without making changes. As my friend John says, “You never get over it.” □

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