

ISFM 2013: Dancing with Diaspora

Mission from the Diaspora

by Chong H. Kim

Human migration is a reality that stretches back to the very dawn of history. Recent decades, however, have witnessed the unprecedented emigration of people from the global South to destinations often associated with former colonial relationships. In modern times, the largest migratory movement has been from the Asia-Pacific region to the USA and Canada. And it is here that diaspora and my own story intersect.¹

A few years ago I wrote a related article entitled, “Is There a Place for Biculturals in Missions?”² I do not intend to repeat that earlier paper, but rather will attempt to build and expand upon the make-up of diaspora with a particular emphasis on mission *from* the diaspora. I will also consider *why* and *how* self-awareness is critical as we reflect on and envision a maturing mission movement from the diaspora. Finally, I will draw at various points upon my personal journey as the son of an immigrant. Let me begin there.

Among the Diaspora

I came to the States from South Korea in 1977 at the tender age of 14, right in the middle of my teenage years. As was true for so many immigrants from Korea to the US at that time, economic considerations played heavily into my parents’ decision to finally move to this side of the Pacific. Despite pouring everything he had—and then some—into his new business, that venture failed spectacularly.

For nearly two years after coming to America, I went through culture shock—a term with which I was unfamiliar at the time. A teenager in a new country, my days were filled with wonder and wildness. What followed for me was a long period of profound confusion, specifically in the area of my identity. (I would argue, as an aside, that unless one has experienced a similar sense of confusion, one cannot claim to be a true bicultural.)

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Chong Kim founded the Korean American Center for World Mission in 1989 and served as its director from 1991 to 2003. He subsequently founded (and currently is co-director of) Band Barnabas, a structure that equips and sends biculturals to work among the least reached peoples of Asia. Finally, Chong serves as one of the three general directors of the Frontier Mission Fellowship.

At age 29, I had the opportunity to visit Korea for the first time since moving to the US some 15 years earlier. Even though I had lived my twenties in America, I always considered myself more Korean than American. As soon as I landed in Korea, I quickly discovered that I was far more American than Korean—and for this I was unprepared.

My eventual theological landing point—and my spiritual longing—can be summed up echoing Paul’s words: my “citizenship is in heaven.”³ I was to live my life as an alien and a stranger. To borrow a line from Michael Card’s song, “Joy in the Journey,” I was one “who belonged to eternity stranded in [human] time” and place, wrapped in my cultural identity.

The sociological application of the concept of “liminality,” which can be defined simply as the state of being in-between, is worth pondering as we try to understand the realities of diaspora. For example, what I see as our modern obsession with well-delineated boundaries does not help us to understand the ambiguous state of liminality. Yet it does exist. The field of depth psychology (which is admittedly outside my expertise) recognizes the need for this liminal state as a necessary step in the process of individuation and self-realization.

Since my first visit back to Korea at age 29 (and many subsequent visits), I have become “at home” with my confused, in-between state of liminality. At the same time, I feel right at home in both Korean and American cultures. The odd thing is that it is possible to feel *both* “in-between-ness” and “right-at-home-ness” within two cultures. One might even say that I “found myself” in the liminal application of depth psychology!

Assimilation and Identity among the Diaspora

Let us step back a moment and try to better understand the characteristics of diaspora. Although I am looking

at diaspora community through my Korean American lens, applications can be made to other diaspora communities. In this connection, I would like to cite the fine work of Kitano and Daniels.⁴ One observation that emerges from the diagram below (see figure 1) is that not all diasporas are the same—a wide spectrum exists. The distance between Cell A and Cell D can be as great as that between “white” Americans and Koreans who have just arrived in the United States.

This simple matrix helps us see how assimilation and ethnic identity interrelate across different segments of the diaspora. Assimilation would include:

- integration into schools, work places and social groupings of the majority culture
- identification with the majority
- marital assimilation.

Their use of ethnic identity simply focuses on the retention of ethnic ways.

Now, I usually like to do two things with this grid when I present to an audience. First, I try to apply it to a specific part of the diaspora so that we

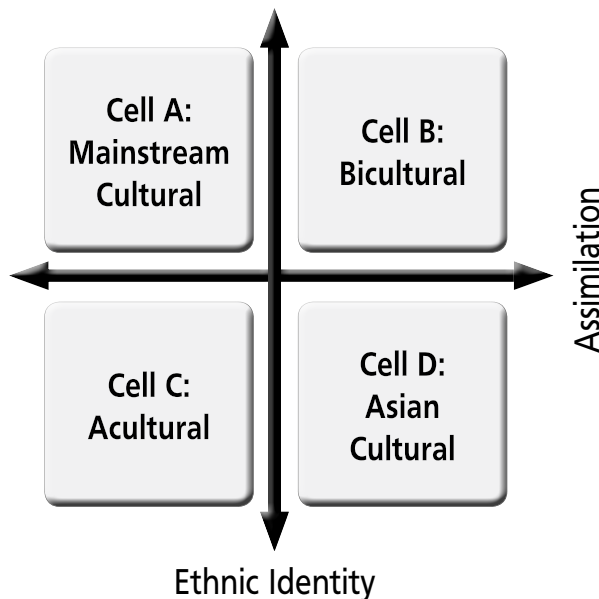
can get a better understanding of the range of assimilation and identities among that particular diaspora. Secondly, I like to break into small groups for discussion over a series of questions. At this juncture, I want to introduce the work of Jeanette Yep, who has done a great job of breaking down the different characteristics of the Asian-American diaspora.

Ethnic Identity/Assimilation Grid Applied to Asian Americans⁵

Cell A—High assimilation, low ethnic identity

- more (dominant culture) American than ethnic
- feel completely “at home” in the dominant culture
- are assimilated and accepted
- third+ generation of Asian Americans and also Asian Americans who may have grown up isolated from other Asians
- in friendship and social patterns, these people relate to a high number of non-Asians
- high rate of “out-marriage”

Figure 1. Ethnic Identity/Assimilation Grid



(From Harry Kitano and Roger Daniels, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*, 2000)

Cell B—High assimilation, high ethnic identity

- in friendship patterns, membership in organizations etc., these people show a bicultural perspective
- move back and forth between American and Asian cultures easily
- are interested in keeping their ethnic heritage alive and are quite knowledgeable about it
- can serve as bridge people between cultures

Cell C—Low assimilation, low ethnic identity

- can feel estranged, disenchanted and disillusioned
- aren't at home in any of the two cultures in which they find themselves
- can include some Eurasian or mixed race people

Cell D—Low assimilation, high ethnic identity

- can include newly arrived immigrants
- identify more closely to the ethnic community than the American one and tend to live with fellow Cell D types
- are culturally more ethnic than American

Another way to look at this whole matter of assimilation and identity is to stretch it across a continuum, which is what Gail Law does in something she calls a “Dynamic Bicultural Continuum Model.”⁶ (see figure 2) Both this continuum and the cell model of Kitano and Daniels give us perspectives on diaspora, but their significance is hard to capture unless we have a good dose of interaction. So I usually recommend that we break into smaller groups to discuss a few questions that help us integrate these tools into our

thinking. Here are three questions I would have us consider:

1. Can you think of diaspora people around you and guess which quadrant they may belong to? Why do you place them there? What characterizes them?
2. Suppose you are trying to plant communities of believers among them. What strategies would you employ based on who they are and what they are like?
3. Suppose you are trying to mobilize from the diaspora communities around you. What strategies would you employ to prepare, equip, and send them to their own peoples back home and to the nations?

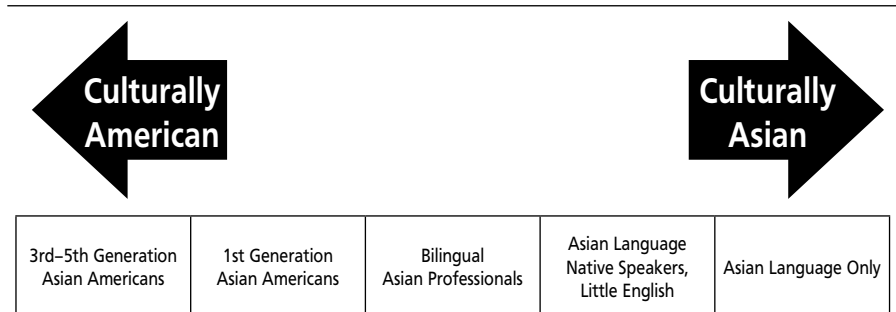
A Macroscopic Look at Mission from the Diaspora

This third question is a good segue into our subject of “mission from diaspora.” Note that I use the term “diaspora missiology” to include “mission to diaspora”, “mission from diaspora,” and “mission as diaspora”—all three combined.⁷ All three of these diaspora mission orientations require sensitivity to the ethnic identity/assimilation grid and the bicultural continuum model (above). However, depending on which *mission* you are looking at, you come out with different strategies and methodologies.

Mission *from* diaspora is fundamentally different from mission *as* diaspora.⁸ One of the best examples of mission *as* diaspora would be the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). According to the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches, approximately seven percent of Filipinos working overseas are evangelical Christians.⁹ Seven percent of the total eight million Filipinos working outside of their homeland¹⁰ represents 560,000 workers who can potentially serve in “mission as diaspora.” Seizing the opportunity, the Filipino International Network (FIN) was launched in response to the need for a coordinated global effort to motivate, equip, and mobilize Christian OFWs to help fulfill the Great Commission.¹¹

When thinking about “mission from diaspora,” it is important to affirm that all diaspora people can be used by God to reach *those just like them and beyond*,¹² wherever they may be on the grid or across the continuum culturally. That people might have more potential to reach others who are most like them is an important missiological concept. Someone who has experienced refugee living firsthand in one country will most likely be able to gain a hearing from (and establish trust among) other refugees whom they are trying to reach. I see myself easily connecting with people who are like me, whether they are from here or some other part of the world. It is not uncommon for us to discover similar shared feelings and vocabulary. Diaspora creates resonance. I’ve heard numerous

Figure 2. Dynamic Bicultural Continuum



(See Marcia Wang et al., *Planting Asian American Chapters*, 2012)

Ethnic identities, when not idolized or taken to an extreme, are gifts from God to the body of Christ and to the lost world.

times that native American Indians naturally resonate with Koreans or Korean Americans who also understand what it means to be “ruled” by others.

One beautiful and strategic implication for all diaspora communities worldwide is that those who have left their home can become an effective *bridge and vehicle both for reaching their own people back home as well as elsewhere*. Although this is not a new concept, it does merit a brief mention. As Miriam Adeney reminds us:

Ethnic churches are a good place to begin global mission work too. We can partner with international Christians who live in our own cities—students, businessmen, temporary visitors, refugees, immigrants. Many represent relatively “unreached” peoples. Many regularly return to their homeland to help dig wells, set up clinics, teach in Bible schools, publish hymnbooks and training textbooks, etc. We can pray with them, help them grow to maturity as Christ’s disciples, and reach out together to their peoples.¹³

There are implications here both for mission *to* and *from* diaspora contexts. One can imagine a specific people proceeding through a full cycle, starting with mission *to* diaspora and finally resulting in mission *from* diaspora. Some mission agencies and some US churches have recognized the need and have begun to field teams to certain American cities and neighborhoods. They hope that these new disciples will in turn reach out to their own peoples who are still considered unreached back home. Yemeni Arabs in central California, Somalis in the Twin Cities, and the huge Muslim presence in Dearborn, Michigan all represent great potential case studies in how the vision and development of mission *to* diaspora might lead to mission *from* diaspora.

One other group, Korean Americans (of which I am a part) has had a different outcome. Mission to the Korean American diaspora flourished to the point that they became more Christianized (percentage-wise) than the Koreans in Korea. The Korean American diaspora community has seen a big surge in cross-cultural missions since the 1990s. One major difference between the Korean Americans and other diaspora communities (who were still considered unreached) was that the Korean Americans did not go back to their homeland; they went elsewhere.

Ethnic identities, when not idolized or taken to an extreme, are gifts from God to the body of Christ and to the lost world. Since there is no such thing as static ethnicity, we can accept that fast-changing diaspora ethnic identities are all within the boundary of God’s design and plan. God certainly isn’t “surprised” by changing ethnicity. He knew a Hebrew baby would enter the palace of the Pharaoh and grow up in Egypt for the first 40 years of his life. He knew that Jesus would appear in a Mediterranean world shaped by Hellenistic culture and Roman rule, a world teeming with ethnicities. In this sense, Acts 17:26 reflects our ongoing drama in a context of rapid change,

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

I believe that our ethnic identity is, in some way, also part of what it means to bear God’s image. Who we are as human beings created in God’s image includes our own ethnic and cultural makeup *in its changing form*. Thus, there are no “accidents” in God’s eyes nor is one group superior to another. We cannot be naïve in thinking that the rest of the world believes this and

therefore will offer no resistance. Most cross-cultural problems in missions today might disappear if we really believed and practiced the truth that all are created in God’s image and that there are no “class” distinctions.

Self-Awareness

I want to suggest that self-awareness is crucial as we wrestle with the potential of mission from diaspora. Pursuing self-awareness in the context of changing ethnic identity and assimilation is a fundamental process that we can ill afford to ignore. How are we to understand who we are in the context of change? Knowing *whose* we are (or *to whom we belong*) becomes a crucial starting point for understanding *who we are*—knowing whose we are anchors us (and who we are) in the context of life’s furious changes. If we embrace St. Teresa of Avila’s assertion that “almost all problems in the spiritual life stem from a lack of self-knowledge,” one can imagine the missiological ramifications of this in the diaspora context. On a fundamental level, if we ourselves are not self-aware, it is unlikely that we can help others become self-aware. What’s likely to take place instead is that others will, with our (usually unintentional) help, become like us. We know that this is not what should happen. To the degree that we ourselves are self-aware,¹⁴ we will be in a better place to help fellow disciples of Jesus develop an awareness of who they are, and thus help them discover how to follow him authentically in their own cultural contexts. I believe that the more we become “self-aware,” the more we become “other-aware.”

I fully recognize that instilling self-awareness can be a tricky endeavor, especially in the liminality and change of diaspora peoples. Unpacking and understanding self-awareness must take place in different (but related) contexts: ethnic, cultural, relational, as well as personal. In other words, we are a product of who we are based on our personalities, and our ethnic and

cultural make up, both in nature and nurture. Quite frankly, I've witnessed enough "self-unaware" Korean American cross-cultural workers who are experiencing hardships and difficulties on the field. Their struggle with ethnic and cultural issues has driven me to this important matter of self-awareness.

One of the interesting dynamics I experience personally when I travel overseas is that people don't see me as an "American." They are not "satisfied" until I tell them I was born in Korea. Seizing on this fact, they quickly point out that as far as they are concerned, I am Korean—a Korean living in America. I can insist that I am American and not Korean, but where does that get me? I've actually experienced that I can go farther and deeper in building a relationship with them as a Korean living in America than as an American. What is the missiological significance of this? For one, the gospel I live out and share won't be perceived as American or carry the baggage of American Christianity.

I need to make myself clear: I am not promoting the idea that all diaspora people need to move to Cell B and become bicultural. What I am promoting is the need for all diaspora people to understand where they are and who they are, and to feel at home in that understanding—even in the face of life's pressures and expectations. Wherever diaspora people are, I believe they need to come to a place where they are self-aware and secure enough to flex in who they need to become in order to win others to Christ.

I would like to borrow from Adrian Van Kaam's thinking at this point.¹⁵ Van Kaam talks about *initial* originality and *historical* originality. Initial originality is "like a unique mark each man receives at birth . . . It is his latent ability to be himself in his own way." He describes historical originality as "an originality which [each man has] developed during his life history up to this moment." In my mind, this historical originality relates directly to our discussion of diaspora peoples. There is a personal originality

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that is shaped through time by changing cultural forces. Van Kaam makes the case that this "originality shines through not in *what* he does but in the *way* he does it, not in the customs he *has* but in the way he *lives* them." Van Kaam's phrase "the way he does it or the way he lives them" refers, I believe, to the combination of who you are culturally as well as who you are personally. I believe this originality is vital for mission from diaspora.

Pursuing self-awareness is ultimately about loving ourselves as part of the Great Commandment. When we love ourselves, we are in a better place to love our neighbor. Thus, the more we become "self-aware," the more we will become "other aware." What does it mean for us to love our neighbors as ourselves missiologically, more specifically in the context of diaspora missiology? My ongoing reflection leads me to think that loving others mean giving them freedom to be who they are created to be without forcing them to be like us and empowering them to love God in their own ways. Loving others is about empowering them to love God with *their* own heart, soul, mind, and strength.

I believe biblical faith can exist only as "translated" into a culture even if the particular culture, in this case diaspora cultures, is changing fast. Developing and equipping diaspora believers to be original, so that they in turn help other diaspora communities to be original, is an important task at hand. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ This is highlighted in chapter six of *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* by Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, New York-London: Guildford Press, 2009.

² "Is There a Place for Biculturals in Missions?" in *International Journal for Frontier Missiology*, Winter 2006 (23:4).

³ See Philippians 3:20. Hebrews 11:13-16 is also a great supporting text that expresses the longing for a better country—a heavenly one.

⁴ Kitano, Harry and Roger Daniels, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*.

⁵ Jeanette Yep, drawing on Kitano and Daniels. In Marcia J. Wang et al., *Planting Asian American Churches*, 2012. See <http://cms.intervarsity.org/mx/item/10362/download>.

⁶ Gail Law's chart is reproduced in Marcia Wang et al., *Planting Asian American Churches*, 2012. See <http://cms.intervarsity.org/mx/item/10362/download>.

⁷ Enoch Wan's approach in diaspora missiology is focused on mission to diaspora.

⁸ I am sticking with mission as diaspora terminology for consistency sake even though technically diaspora as mission captures it better.

⁹ Rev. Efraim Tendero, Bishop and General Secretary of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches (PCEC) reported during the FIN Global Consultation in Singapore (July 20, 2002) that approximately seven percent of the OFWs living outside their homeland are Evangelical Christians.

¹⁰ Enoch Wan and Sadiri Joy Tira. *The Filipino Experience In Diaspora Missions: A Case Study Of Mission Initiatives From The Majority World Churches*. Evangelical Missiological Society—Northwest, Portland, Oregon. (April 5, 2008)

¹¹ Wan and Tira.

¹² I say beyond, of course, because God can use anybody to impact anybody. But even in this context, people with a higher cultural sensitivity of diaspora communities will go farther than those who are largely from a mono-cultural background.

¹³ *Mission Frontiers*, May-June 2010 issue.

¹⁴ This is not to say that we will get to a place of full self-awareness.

¹⁵ Adrian Van Kaam was a Dutch Catholic priest, a college professor, and a prolific writer on formative spirituality. He also founded the Institute of Formative Spirituality at Duquesne University. I am referring to his book, *Living Creatively: How to Discover Your Sources of Originality and Self-Motivation*. Dimension Books: Denville, New Jersey. 1972.