

Honor-Shame Cultural Theory: Antecedents and Origins

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org. October 2018

Abstract

Honor-shame cultural orientation is a rising concern in missiological conversations. The concept that the gospel needs to be understood through a cultural lens of honor-shame, which shapes the interpretation, communication, and indeed content of the message, has become a growing interest in missiology. With seventy-five percent of the world’s population identifying with an honor-shame worldview, greater understanding will help impact receptivity to the gospel. This article explores the origins and antecedents of honor-shame orientation in cultural anthropology by tracing the earliest works and discussions. The article concludes with implications for further research.

Introduction

Honor-shame cultural orientation is a rising voice in missiological conversations. The concept that the gospel needs to be understood through a cultural lens of honor-shame, which shapes the interpretation, communication, and indeed content of the message, has become a growing interest in missiology (Georges & Baker, Wu, Mischke, Muller, etc.). One sign of this increase is that in June, 2017, the first honor-shame missiology conference was organized at Wheaton College to which there was a strong response, motivating plans to establish it as an annual event (Stetzer, Moreau, & Kärkkäinen 2017). Rapid acceptance of the honor-shame discussion in missiology has infiltrated ancillary areas, including evangelism, church planting, discipleship, preaching, and other areas of church life. The fact that seventy-five percent of the world’s population identifies primarily with honor-shame cultural orientation also contributes to the increased interest in exploring missiological implications more thoroughly, as cross cultural workers see the importance of connecting with their audience (Yap, 2016:207). The expanding discussion suggests that research into the origins of honor-shame culture contributes to greater understanding into how certain worldviews impact receptivity to, as well as communication and content of, the gospel.

The purpose of this article is to explore the origins of honor-shame orientation in cultural anthropology, and hence to better inform research in this field. This study contributes to the area of honor-shame research by exploring antecedents to the work of Ruth Benedict, who is widely considered the originator of this theory (Tennent 2007:79). Research into the precursors of Benedict’s work will illuminate information which is foundational and which allowed for the development of honor-shame cultural theory.

Honor-shame has roots in anthropology, providing an emerging development to mission studies that has grown over the last hundred years. Where did this school of thought emerge in order to become an influence in anthropology? What were the origins and circumstances that led to the development of honor-shame cultural theory? Such questions are significant because they explore the anthropological origins of honor-shame cultural theory and how subsequent developments have formed a foundation of the honor-shame analysis of cultures.

The article is organized chronologically with terms defined within the text, first addressing the contribution of Franz Boas in the area of cultural relativism and how his research served as the ground work for the honor-shame discussion. This consideration of Boas will be followed by considering the roles of Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, with a discussion of their contribution to the study of shame. Finally, the conclusion will address implications for communication of the gospel in honor-shame cultural orientation.

Franz Boas and Cultural Relativism

Boas's construction of the theory of cultural relativism is the antecedent to the development of honor-shame cultural orientation and serves as the beginning of a historical line of theoretical construction. Through cultural relativism, Boas established forms and images that led to thinking differently about how cultures deal with morality in their respective contexts, even though he never touched directly on honor-shame orientation. These theoretical constructions became the starting point for the conversation concerning honor-shame orientation in cultural anthropology, because they allowed space to posit different constructs of morality in culture, moving beyond the Western-oriented understanding based primarily on justice and guilt (Lienhard 2001:131–132).

The development of cultural relativism is intertwined with Boas's background as well as the social setting of the era in which he lived. In the story of modern American anthropology, Franz Boas is the undisputed father, in part because he established the four-field model that created a shift in the way studies were done within the discipline. In addition, he innovated new ways of doing research, revolutionizing how anthropology was carried out in the United States (Darnell 2017:2-3). His students filled the ranks of universities as instructors and researchers who followed in his footsteps, developing his thinking into their own theories and insights (Darnell 2017:3). These foundational characteristics of Boas's work demonstrate his innovation in the field, which he in turn passed on to many of his students.

Boas was an empiricist who recorded as much information as possible about the endangered cultures that he researched. He placed high value on arriving objectively at conclusions based on observations of the cultures he studied. Conversely, he avoided projecting generalizations from an outside, dominant culture onto the culture being researched, because he believed that doing so would impose concepts of social evolution that create barriers to understanding other cultures (Erickson and Murphy 2013:65). In a similar vein, Boas also defied the spirit of Western superiority that was prevalent in the post-Enlightenment era, especially in the area of race and ethnicity. He pointed to determinants of culture beyond race, a discussion which he used to counter both racism and eugenics (Erickson and Murphy 2013:66, 67). This willingness to speak out counter to prevailing attitudes of the era demonstrated Boas's disposition to advance cultural anthropology and to confront social and political prejudices (Erickson and Murphy 2013:68).

While Boas's contributions to the field of anthropology are wide ranging, his development of cultural relativism served to break ground for research into honor-shame cultures. What was cultural relativism in the context that Boas addressed? Today, society employs the term in many ways, such as interchanging it with moral relativism and vilifying the concept as the seed of decay in society. The term has also been generalized to so-called "relativism" in the sense that no person has any basis for judging another person (Brown et al. 2008:364). Another variation uses cultural relativism as an ethical term by establishing it as the basis for making allowances for pluralisms of various types. Contrarily, others use it as an anchor to address the dangers of such

pluralism (Brown et al. 2008:363). It is helpful to review cultural relativism as Boas developed the concept and not be bogged down by the iterations of others that have created a divergence from his original meaning (Brown et al. 2008:364). Clarity concerning how Boas thought about the concept allows a historical line to be drawn towards the conception of honor-shame cultural orientation. While some writers find it helpful to reference Boas's work with a specific nomenclature such as "Boasian cultural relativism" or "classic cultural relativism," the choice here is to use the term "cultural relativism" with the understanding of the definition which follows (Brown et al. 2008:363).

Cultural relativism as Boas developed the concept is understood to mean that all cultures are relative in their development, practices, and ethics. Judgement of cultures no longer is based on the culture of the observer, allowing observation to become unencumbered by any sense of cultural hierarchy, and spawning an atmosphere of unbiased inquiry (Fettner 2002:198). Another way to think about cultural relativism is that "... cultural behavior must be understood in relation to the culture from which it comes..." (Mead 2002:viii). For Boas, this theory served the dual purposes of correcting the school of thought that Western Europe was racially superior as well as removing an epistemology that imposed ideas of unilinear cultural evolution onto data. The placement of the theory of cultural relativism into the field of science meant that the theory was not just one cultural construct among many, but rather that it could be understood scientifically as true across cultures (Fettner 2002:199). Through this theory, Boas affirmed an ethic of tolerance for diverse beliefs, creeds, and races, moving cultural constructions away from the prejudices prevalent in that era and providing a new way in which to interpret cultural data.

This definition is a key starting point for the development of honor-shame orientation in cultural anthropology. Through cultural relativism, Boas established a theory to think differently about how cultures deal with morality in their context, even though he never touched directly on the honor-shame orientation. By positing that each culture needs to be considered on its own merits rather than comparatively, he made space in anthropology to rethink morality and how different cultures deal with issues of "sin" in their context, including how cultures define sin. This was especially revelatory in the context of an era where much of Western Europe and North America was based on Reformation principles in which the penal substitution model of atonement dominated the thinking of the church, establishing guilt as the motif for understanding sin in culture (Baker and Green 2011:166–172). Boas's establishment of cultural relativism as a viable theory to evaluate and understand cultures paved the way for alternative motifs of cultures. These alternative motifs of morality in culture led to the development of the discussion addressed in the next section.

Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict

Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict were two of the most prominent anthropologists of their era, and both were strongly influenced by Franz Boas (Lapsley 2001:1). Ruth Benedict studied under Boas, and Margaret Mead was a student of both Benedict and Boas. Benedict and Mead were in the circle of anthropologists who embraced Boas's work and built on it as a foundation for cultural theories, keeping in contact with him throughout his lifetime (Barnouw 1980:506). Ultimately, Benedict and Mead had a close collaboration in each other's lives that exceeded the academic and has been explored at length in other places (Lapsley 2001:1-8). It is clear that in the field of anthropology, they were pioneers in their thinking and in the research of honor-shame as a cultural orientation. Their exploration in this area built on Boas's work concerning

cultural relativism in the sense that they looked at each culture based on its own merits rather than through a European or American cultural lens. This approach allowed them to garner insights that otherwise might have never developed.

Part of Benedict's dissertation was religious research among Amerindian tribes, and her early focus on religion was one impetus to explore how social sanctions variously functioned in different cultures (Caffrey 1986:247–263). Benedict first broached the topic of honor-shame indirectly when she brought out the idea of internal and external structures to categorize cultures, referring to the rules and guidelines of a society as social sanctions (Benedict 2006:87–99). In *Patterns of Culture*, she used the Greek terms of *Dionysian* and *Apollonian*, in which Dionysian indicated cultures that use external signs for sanctions and Apollonian preferred more formal “laws” to determine sanctions (Wiher 2003:103). Benedict soon realized the inadequacy of using the ancient Greeks to establish comparisons, and almost immediately after publishing *Patterns of Culture* in 1934 she shifted her writing and research to explore other expressions to represent the concept of social sanctions more accurately. She did this through a series of articles and the beginnings of a book (which remained unfinished and unpublished), moving the conversation forward to explore how societies maintained sanctions to impose structure. Benedict's explorations led her to research how cultures enforced sanctions, a process that took her through the rest of the 1930s (Young 2005:77–83).

It is important to interject that the open sharing of ideas between Benedict and Mead was a well-documented practice in their professional relationship. They didn't necessarily collaborate on projects but rather shared information freely from their research, and from the theories they were developing, as well as provided input for each other (Lapsley 2001:4). It is safe to say that through their correspondence, Mead was well aware of Benedict's thoughts and research during this time and vice versa, providing a certain amount of synergy.

Mead's book *Cooperation and Competition among Primitive Peoples* was the first to explicitly address the contrasting roles of guilt versus shame culture (Mead 1961:510–516). The book was a study of thirteen different primitive people groups from around the world in which observations were made specific to their cultures (Mead 2002:11–15). Later, in writing a preface for the second edition of the book, she explained that the terms shame and guilt were used from a psychoanalytical perspective (Mead 2002:ix). Her use of those specific words was intentional in order to describe how cultures enforced sanctions in their environments. One observation that came out of the study was that only two of the thirteen cultures researched had character structures that could be loosely compared to Western European forms through their reliance on guilt as an internal control for sanctions (Mead 1961:510–512). The other cultures relied on shame, which served primarily as an external sanction (Mead 1961:511–512). Mead was the first to make a clear difference in the field of anthropology concerning the cultural distinction between guilt and shame as sanctions for behavior. In the contexts of the researched cultures, she viewed guilt and shame as negative enforcers of social sanctions through their use to prevent the commission of certain adverse behaviors or to prevent the omission of certain beneficial behaviors. Each of the cultures observed in her research either used one or the other as a dominant motivator in its context. Mead realized the variety among the cultures in how they enforced sanctions and the intensity with which different sanctions were enforced through the exploration of whether shame was personal; involved the family, extended family, or clan; and, how far the shame extended along different relational axes. Mead's findings constituted a major step in the field of anthropology because they introduced into the discussion the different

motivations (guilt and shame) and locus of those motivations (internal and external) by which cultural sanctions were enforced in people groups.

Benedict then engaged the topic in a purposeful way in her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. (Note the distinct reference in the subtitle to her earlier book.) The research that formed the basis of the book was commissioned by the United States government to help provide insights into the Japanese culture. This initiative was brought on by World War II, during which the Japanese had been found to be counter-intuitive to sensibilities of American culture, and the United States government sought insights into how to dialogue and maintain a post-war peace (Benedict 1946:1–10). She was open about the fact that her analysis was second hand, resting on interviews, literature, and other analyses of the Japanese culture. (Benedict 1946:3) Some have been critical of this factor, noting the weaknesses in such an approach (Geertz 1988:102–128). But as Benedict observed, it was not viable for her to visit Japan in the midst of the war.

Benedict addressed Japanese culture at several levels, focusing on the concept of honor. She noted the different Japanese words, concepts, and practices of honor in the culture (Benedict 1946:98–114). She pointed out that Japanese people had to understand their position in society, what is defined as social standing (Benedict 1946:43). Hierarchy was a strong factor in Japanese society and was established over a long history based on social class, caste, sex, age, family lines, and friendships (Benedict 1946:50–72). The maintenance of a well-ordered hierarchal system was of utmost important in Japanese culture so as to uphold societal values. The relationship between people and the function of relationships based on social position was the key to Benedict’s explanation of Japanese society (Benedict 1946:90–96). In this way, she used shame and honor as the organizing theme for the research material that was gathered and collated into her book (Modell 1999:198).

Benedict explained in depth the different forms that honor takes in Japanese society. The function of honor, whether it is ascribed or achieved, maintained people in right relationship with each other through clearly established social order which set expectations for behavior. Several chapters of Benedict’s book explain honor in Japanese culture with the intricacies that were involved through the various commitments that were manifest because of that honor (Benedict 1946:100–194).

As Benedict analyzed, the different types of honor operated according to social context and were balanced against other expectations in order to establish a code of conduct. While these principles historically are drawn from a number of sources, the enforcement took place through the structure of honor and shame, providing the moral code (Benedict 1946:197). Benedict developed the concept of shame robustly, contrasting it with guilt in Western societies. She explained that shame cultures depend on external sanctions to establish good behavior while guilt cultures depend on internal conviction of sin (Benedict 1946:223). For shame to be a potent sanction, it requires an audience, external (community) knowledge of behavior, and criticism of that behavior. Guilt requires none of these things (Benedict 1946:223). Honor cultures also require that the “rules” are widely understood in society and that there is a mutually supportive ethic of behavior, so that public judgement or approval is appropriately “codified,” even though that code may never be written (Benedict 1946:224). Benedict believed that human cultures could be understood clearly when unfettered by the imposition judgment from the observing

culture (Modell 1999). This was an important key to develop honor-shame as a valid cultural value in contrast to guilt.

Benedict and Mead differentiated cultures based on the relevant social controls by observing that shame cultures used external social sanctions and guilt cultures used internal social sanctions (Wiher 2003:106). They both also realized that the opposite of shame was honor, and for guilt it was innocence or rightness, but their reference to these cultural aspects was to use the negative enforcer of social controls as an identifier. These two anthropologists were key movers who identified honor-shame as a valid cultural value and fundamental to establishing correct insight into the motivation for behavior within such cultures.

Implications

Several implications flow out of this historical perspective of the anthropological development of honor-shame cultural orientation. One implication is that honor-shame does not manifest in the same way in different cultures. What might bring shame in one culture does not necessarily perform the same function across cultures. Honor-shame sanctions perform a wide spectrum of functions depending on the culture. A second implication is that honor-shame is distinctive from the guilt-innocence that is familiar to most Westerners. This distinctiveness mandates that researchers and those working cross-culturally need sensitivity to understand not only that sanctions and morality function differently but that the social forms that dictate morality are also different. Finally, Boas's cultural relativism indicates that no culture is "superior" to another, meaning that neither guilt nor shame has the upper hand in maintaining social order, but that both are legitimate cultural manifestations. This equal legitimacy indicates that shame and external sanctions are valid ways in which to establish morality and bring about social change in given contexts. The insights of these pioneers in understanding honor-shame cultural orientation helps those in missiology by recognizing that honor-shame is a key to moral complexity in many cultures that deserve to be understood within their own contexts.

In turn, these insights point to several missiological implications which deserve further exploration in communicating the gospel in honor-shame cultures. One implication is that cross cultural communicators, in order to create alignment between biblical teaching and cultural context, need to acknowledge honor-shame worldview characteristics that determine moral imperatives. Another implication is that cross cultural communicators need to become self-aware of their own cultural conceptions of moral determinants, so as to make appropriate adjustments to prevent their own worldview from obscuring the gospel message when crossing over into honor-shame cultures. Finally, church practices need to be reexamined with consideration of how honor-shame cultures explicate meaning. Doing so may mean instituting new rituals and symbols that more clearly communicate gospel meaning. These various implications should serve to expand the conversation concerning clear communication of the gospel in honor-shame cultures.

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(Note: All websites were accessed September 24, 2018.)

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