

UC Berkeley

LAUC-B and Library Staff Research

Title

Reaching Across Worlds: Teaching Anthropology for Christian Homeschool Families

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2jm1j5z3>

Author

Emmelhainz, Celia

Publication Date

2012-10-01



LEFT: As in many rural areas of the world, traditional lifestyles and modern amenities are mixed side by side.
RIGHT: Many rural Kazakhs still maintain large herds of sheep, goats, camels, and horses as part of their nomadic way of life.

Reaching Across Worlds:

Teaching Anthropology for Christian Homeschool Families



By Celia Emmelhainz

You may have heard other Christians talk about anthropology as a secular and hostile discipline, but there are many people of faith who work in anthropology . . .

“Salem, Meruert, ne janalik bar?” As I return home from a long day of interviews, I greet my Mongolian Kazakh host sister through the window. Her brothers and sisters run and chase the dog around the yard, reminding me of my own siblings back home. When I enter the house, I smell *boursak* (a fried bread) and *manti* (meat dumplings), which Meruert is pinching together and cooking for our evening meal. She invites me in for tea and we sit down for a chat . . .

When I lived with Meruert two years ago, I was part of an anthropological team studying the nomadic Kazakh people of Mongolia. For nearly three months, we interviewed dozens of people about how their families, religion, and economic situation had influenced them in deciding whether to migrate or stay in Mongolia. This is what cultural anthropologists do: we study how people around the world think and act and relate to each other in terms of the “culture” in which they

live. In this article, I hope to share what I’ve learned so that other homeschooling families can learn about cultures and people groups in an intentional way.

Anthropology for Homeschoolers

So why study cultural anthropology as a Christian homeschooling family?

I grew up in a large homeschooling family in rural Ohio, studying with my six siblings from third grade until college. I’ve recently finished a master’s degree in cultural anthropology, where I focused on the Kazakh peoples of Central Asia. It was partly because of my parents’ interest in learning about cultures that I became prepared to do the kind of studies I do now.

While it can be challenging to work as a Christian within the profession of anthropology, I love what I do. Through the study of culture, I have learned more about my own community, as well as how to relate to those with different beliefs while maintaining my own integrity.

You may have heard other Christians talk about anthropology as a secular and hostile discipline, but there are many people of faith who work in anthropology, and God has shown us so much wisdom in cultural anthropology that I can't imagine not exploring it!

Textbooks and Teaching

Anthropology is usually first taught at the college level, but like history, geography, and other social studies, it can easily be taught earlier. The type of complex thinking it encourages will be useful for your teenagers, and wrestling with cultural tensions can be good for homeschool students who have a heart for any type of cross-cultural situation, whether in missions, a secular college, or in working with people from other backgrounds.

Because most texts are written for college students, they are best adapted for strong middle- and high-school students. I'm critical of most introductory texts, as

they chop culture into stale categories such as trade, ritual, and gender—categories that don't reflect how unified our lives actually are! Because of this, I

Anthropologists often spend months to years immersed in another cultural group

recommend that you read John Omohundro's *How to Think like an Anthropologist*. Omohundro looks at communities holistically and asks broad questions about who we are as people and how we differ by context. Other excellent resources include Paul G. Hiebert's *Cultural Anthropology* or Jenell Williams Paris and Brian Howell's *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*.

Hiebert is more missional but also more dated, while the latter book is good at explaining theory and will give students excellent preparation for college courses. Reading these resources together with ethnographies about specific cultures (see the sidebar) could make a great year-long course of study.

Doing Fieldwork

Another essential part of teaching anthropology is learning by doing. Anthropologists often spend months to years immersed in another cultural group, living in a strange household, learning local language and beliefs, watching how families and friends interact, and participating in trade and music and social events. This is called fieldwork, and it can involve anything from observation to drawing maps and taking genealogies to interviewing others about their lives. Fieldwork also means writing daily notes about what you've seen and doing library



LEFT: In rural Mongolia, many Kazakh families milk their sheep and goats daily, turning the results into cheese and other dairy products.

LOWER LEFT: Brightly colored cloth and felt fabrics decorate the interior of this mobile house.

BELOW: Rural Mongolian Kazakh diets are heavy in meat and dairy, with multiple types of cheese, butter, and milk being consumed in a single sitting. These heavy diets are helpful in sustaining agricultural workers through lean and cold winters.





LEFT: Islam has become more popular in rural Mongolia as missionaries from Turkey and Saudi Arabia have been some of the biggest supporters of building and education among the Kazakhs. RIGHT: The author occasionally rode on horseback in order to reach more remote sites for interviews.

research to learn how others have understood the same cultural groups.

As homeschoolers, we have the freedom to do just that! At a local level, your children could observe a church you don't normally attend or a new library, sports center, or coffee shop. You could cultivate friendships with a different family or help out with a cross-cultural

ministry. If you plan to travel as a family or are living in a cross-cultural situation, this would be a great chance to incorporate reading about and practicing anthropology in your homeschool curriculum. You could always arrange

... I was part of an anthropological team studying the nomadic Kazakh people of Mongolia.

through church networks or with friends or relatives to spend time in such a cultural setting. Once in that place, anthropological handbooks can provide tips on how to watch, ask questions, and take notes about that culture.

It's also important, of course, for your budding students of culture to learn about cross-cultural ethics. While observations in public places are usually fine, it's vitally important to make sure that families or organization members are comfortable with your project before sending kids in with clipboards! A general code of ethics involves asking for full permission and letting others know how you'll use your notes *before* talking with, observing, or taking pictures of people,

and refraining from anything that could harm other people.

It is also wise to help students withhold snap judgments until you better understand another culture. As we prayerfully refrain from condemnation, we can learn to see how other peoples' choices in food, clothes, housing, and friendships make sense within their cultural context. Considered value judgments can then follow deeper knowledge and empathy for the people you're studying.

Picking a People Group

I also recommend picking a people to study: Arabs in Dubai, Russians in New York, Korean farmers, Indian entrepreneurs, or Uighur farmers in Xinjiang. Spend your year of anthropology learning all you can about these and similar people, even studying their language or meeting pen pals online. The Joshua Project or HRAF (Human Relations Area Files, Inc.) online can give you statistics about the group, and children's novels, local news online, and cultural studies can help you learn more. Using the OCM (Outline of Cultural Materials) subjects list, you can develop writing assignments that encourage your students to explore all aspects of a people's lifestyle and compare this to studies that have been written about American culture. Your local reference librarian can suggest more books or articles that concern this people group.

Online Resources for People Groups

- The Joshua Project by the U.S. Center for World Mission (www.joshuaproject.net). Provides statistics on people groups in a more complex manner than simple country=people, but see the CIA world factbook or other sources for more detailed information.
- *eHRAF World Cultures* by HRAF (www.yale.edu/hraf/collections.htm). Your local library may have a subscription, or ask for other resources.
- OCM Subjects by HRAF (www.yale.edu/hraf/collections_body_ocmshort.htm). This is a detailed checklist of cultural topics that you could use for writing assignments both about your culture and that of your people group.

Ethnographies and Other Resources to Read Together

Many anthropologists write ethnographies, books that can give a deep sense of another community. Order through interlibrary loan or browse in large bookstores to find which ones would suit your family best. You could also read historical and missionary narratives from the same region. Several ideas are listed below to get you started:

- *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* by Bronislaw Malinowski (1922; reprinted, Waveland Press, 1984)
Long but classic, so you may want to just read sections. It's a good early description of trade and travel among the boating peoples of Melanesia.
- *Guests of the Sheikh: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village* by Elizabeth Fernea (Anchor, 1995)
Lovely descriptions of Elizabeth's experiences in Iraq in the 1950s as she accompanied her husband into fieldwork in a small village. Older but beautiful description of the Middle East.
- *Return to Laughter* by Elenore Smith Bowen (Anchor, 1964)
Also a classic, as Bowen describes the challenges and joys of fieldwork in colonial Africa.

- *The Sanctified Church* by Zora Neale Hurston (Turtle Island Foundation, 1981)
Hurston is better known for her novels but writes entertainingly about African-American communities of the early twentieth century. The stereotypes she addresses may seem out of place, but the humor and liveliness of her writing are still current.
- *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* by Marjorie Shostak (Harvard University Press, 2000)
A popular read for first-year students, in which an African woman tells the story of her life. The author speaks from a feminist perspective. As this is common in anthropology, that can become part of the discussion.
- *The Red Riviera* by Kristin Ghodsee (Duke University Press, 2005)
A recent ethnography that describes how young women make their living in the modern tourist industry in Bulgaria. Ghodsee has another book about Muslims in Bulgaria.
- *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* by Catherine Wanner (Cornell University Press, 2007)
History and stories of Baptists who lived in hiding under the Soviet Union and now maintain their evangelical faith in post-Soviet Ukraine. A great discussion of conversion mixed with stories from our brothers and sisters in the Ukraine.

- *Ancestral Lines: The Maisin of Papua New Guinea and the Fate of the Rainforest* by John Barker (University of Toronto Press, 2007).
Frequently used in introductory classes, this book describes how the Maisin people create and exchange tapa cloth in light of global changes in their environment. A good all-around ethnography.
- *Write These Laws on Your Children: Inside the World of Conservative Christian Homeschooling* by Robert Kunzman (Beacon Press, 2010)
This author has interviewed and written about homeschooling families from across the U.S.; his stories could provide great discussion topics as well as comparison to stories from other countries. How does he represent us? How would you write about your homeschool community?
- *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* by Rebekah Nation (Penguin, 2006)
This anthropologist lived with college freshmen for a year while studying the modern university experience in the United States. Occasionally dry, but great discussion material for families who will soon have children entering college.

... Even rural teens in Mongolia wear trendy jackets and sneakers, carry cell phones, and dream of attending college to become teachers or businessmen.

Mongolians With Cell Phones

It's easy to find "traditional" pictures of rural Masai, Yanomamo, or Mongolian Kazakhs that depict their embroidered costumes, felted houses on the steppe, and beautiful folk songs. However, while living with Meruert, I saw that even rural teens in Mongolia wear trendy jackets and sneakers, carry cell phones, and dream of attending college to become teachers or businessmen. Communities are always more complex than they first appear, and anthropology can bring some of that complexity to your homeschool curriculum. Learning about culture gives our teens perspective about both our communities and those that are far away. Whether next door or as far as Mongolia, anthropology

encourages us form relationships with people like Meruert, learning and sharing about our studies, faith, families, and our hopes and dreams that stretch from this life into the next one. 🏠

Celia Emmelhainz

Celia Emmelhainz has a master's degree in cultural anthropology from Texas A&M University, where she studied migration and missionaries among the Kazakhs of Central Asia. A homeschool graduate, Emmelhainz now works in Central Asia as an academic librarian and is preparing articles based on her travels in Mongolia and Kazakhstan. celia.emmelhainz@gmail.com