

The Iceberg

by
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Photo from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iceberg>

According to David Pollock in “The Third Culture Kid Experience”, cultural change and transition affects a person the most during the first 18 years, because the person is still developing in his / her personality. Kohl's iceberg illustration explains this phenomenon of “not belonging.” (Pollock, p. 40- 41)

L. Robert Kohls suggests we look at culture as a kind of iceberg, with one part clearly visible above the surface of the water, and another, much larger part, hidden below (the line represents water level). The part above the water can be identified as the surface culture, and includes behavior, words, customs, and traditions. Underneath the water, where no one can see, is the deep culture, and it consists of beliefs, values, assumptions, and thought processes. Above is a representation of Kohls' culture iceberg.

In this description, Kohl distinguishes between “surface culture” and “deep culture”. Many TCKs have learned to adapt and change their surface culture to blend into the culture around them. However, deep down inside, they know that they do not completely belong. This is because their deep culture will always contain elements of culture from each place where they have lived, from age 0 to 18.

For example, a TCK who is born in Africa and lives there until age twelve, and then relocates to Taiwan with his / her parents, can learn to adjust on the surface. Within one year's time, he / she can be speaking Mandarin and acting like a Taiwanese local person. However, deep down inside, there are still elements of Africa that will always be a part of him / her. Thus, his / her African upbringing becomes a permanent part of his / her identity.

The issue is compounded for TCKs who move multiple times before age eighteen, especially if they attend local instead of international schools. For each place they live in, they pick up a culture that will become a part of their identity. Thus a TCK who grew up in Africa, Hong Kong, and U.S.A., will have a deep sense of belonging to each culture, while at the same time feel that he / she does not fully belong to any of them.

As adults, many TCKs still look for a sense of “settled ness” that will allow their deep culture to be made known to the people around them. After a while, it becomes tiring to always function and relate to people on the surface culture level. Many TCKs feel that people do not completely understand them. This is a normal feeling, considering their deep culture mix.

Many people have labeled TCKs as unstable. In a quest to look for their deep cultural belonging, TCKs may feel a strong urge to revisit every place they have grown up in. However, having visited all these places, their deep cultural problem is still not resolved. They still don't feel like they belong. When they describe this to their non-TCK friends, they are quickly misunderstood and labeled. So, many of them remain silent and do not discuss it. Some TCKs use their learned skills to blend in quickly. Others may move back and forth a few times before they finally settle in one place. The journey of discovery is lonely, often lacking in spiritual and emotional support. Settling in one church, even their parents' home church, can be equally hard at times.

I believe that the quest of TCKs looking for their cultural identity is a deeply spiritual quest. I believe that a person's deep culture encompasses the spiritual life of an individual. The beliefs, values, assumptions, and thought processes of a certain group of people, in fact describe the spiritual DNA of a culture. That is why it is so important to come to terms with one's deep culture. TCKs have a massive challenge ahead of them. This challenge is to process every single "deep culture" element in them and decide which ones they will keep and which ones they will let go. Once they figure out which deep culture elements they will keep, they have only completed half of the process. The next step is to find a way to put these elements together in a completed "puzzle" so that they have a workable deep culture identity. This workable identity is formally known as the "third culture", thus the name Third Culture Kids.

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Deep Culture Integration

Deep culture integration is a slow and painful process. Many TCKs have expressed the desire just to blend into the culture around them and not engage in the process. On the surface, this seem to be the best solution, especially if the TCK is not ready to engage in the pain of deep culture integration. This is understandable. However, sooner or later, the lack of integration will make itself known in the form of a certain "unsettled ness." I am also strongly convinced that there is no way TCKs can come to the fullness of their identity in Christ until they engage in the process of deep culture integration. Until then, the person remains culturally fragmented on the inside. In essence, TCKs who choose not to engage in deep culture integration are trying to be monocultural when in fact they cannot and will never be. For better or for worse, their identity has been permanently affected by more than one culture. It is for better, if they are willing to engage in deep culture integration.

On the other hand, TCKs who are going through the process of deep culture integration will come across as unconventional and even rude at times. The quieter ones will withdraw and refuse to interact socially. Friends and mentors of TCKs must bear in mind that these TCKs are going through a very important season of identity formation, and need as much encouragement and understanding as possible. Moreover, friends and mentors must refrain from treating this process as an emotional problem that must be fixed and gotten over as soon as possible. In fact, the TCK is going through one of the most important stages in their life and spiritual development.

Cultural Icebergs

Just as in the days of the ice age, when icebergs were moving along the surface of the earth and affecting the very boundaries of continents, so we are living in a day and age when the boundaries of cultures are being shifted right before our very eyes. This time, the source of the shift is not physical icebergs but cultural icebergs in the form of TCKs moving from continent to continent!

God deliberately desires for cultures to collide with one another, in order to get rid of racism and ethnic pride in the body of Christ. God has given TCKs the privilege and challenge to stimulate the church. Never before in history has there been a more exciting time as now to be alive as a TCK