

RECONSTRUCTING CENTRAL ASIAN HONOR CODES VIA ORALITY

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Abstract

Orality can be an effective strategy in Christian education and disciple-making for reconstructing cultural honor codes so that Christians live and evaluate life according to God's code of honor. The introduction analyzes the effectiveness of a parable to transform worldview meta-narratives, and thus reorient notions of honorableness and shamefulness. Then, we assess two oral strategies – an evangelistic narrative and a disciple-making approach – specifically contextualized for honor-shame dynamics in Central Asia. The conclusion suggests two ways to further develop biblical narratives for honor-shame contexts.

Keywords: honor, shame, honor code, narrative, orality, Central Asia

A ministry colleague, Kent, got in a taxi to travel between two Central Asian cities. In the car with him were the (male) driver, and two other men. Then a young girl was placed in the final seat by her father, who instructed the driver to take care of her until the final destination. As they drove along, the three men began talking about the various women in their lives, which naturally made the young gal uncomfortable.

Then they addressed her, “Come to my house. I will feed you. It will be a relaxing time.” They began discussing among themselves how good it would be to stop the car and spend time with the girl. She was visibly uncomfortable. Turning to Kent, proud of their manly intentions, they asked, “So what do you think? Do you like that idea?”

Kent replied, “Well you could do that if you want to. It’s your choice. But it reminds me of a riddle.”

“Oh yeah, what riddle?” they responded. And Kent told them this...

“So he walks out of his house onto the street. As he’s walking along confidently, he looks over and he says to himself, ‘Wow, she looks good. I think I’ll have her.’ So he goes over and does his thing with her. He keeps strutting down the street, and he sees another and says ‘Mmm, I like her. I think I’ll have her too.’ So he goes over and fulfills his desires with her. Then he sees some food laying there, so takes some for himself. Then a third time her sees a good looking one, takes her, and then carries on. Who is he?”

At this point the three men are glowing in anticipation, naturally thinking, “Wow, what a real man to exert such power!”

“He is a dog!” Immediately the car was silent. “So, you can choose what you do and how you live. As for me, God created me a man, and I’m choosing to live like one.” There was no more salacious talk.

This incident succinctly illustrates three primary features of the Central Asian honor code: patronage, gender roles, and hospitality. Patronage—the provision of material goods in exchange for loyalty and respect—was the social arrangement proposed to the young female. Fulfilling social expectations of ‘manliness’ caused the men to seek honor through female conquest. Hospitality—the gracious display of generosity towards outsiders to formalize new relational identity—was behind the men’s offer of a “local resource” to Kent. Patronage, gender expectations, and hospitality are central channels for the acquisition and maintenance of honor in

Central Asian culture, even to the minimization of Islamic piousness (i.e. Middle East) and social harmony (i.e., East Asia).

Reconstructing Honor Codes Via Orality

At the surface rhetorical level, Kent's engaging parable with a shocking conclusion captured the listeners' interest. But more fundamental was how that parable functioned to redefine the listener's basic worldview meta-narrative. The parable of a dog rewrote the assumed narrative of honorability and shamefulness; new attributions of worth were created. In light of the prominence of honor and shame values in Central Asian worldview, orality techniques must ultimately reconstruct notions of honor and shame by effectively relocating listeners as characters in an alternative plotline. The dog parable successfully removes womanizing behavior from cultural discourses attributing glory and dominance for behavior commonly associated with a royal harem, and relocates salacious talk into an alternative discourse of scavenging canines, a debasing and shaming reassessment (cf. 1 Sam. 17:43; 24:14; 2 Sam. 9:8; 16:9). Humans perceive, interpret and normalize life through narrative lenses (Wright, 1992: 38ff). As a result, honor codes are grounded in implicit worldview meta-narratives, which orality methods can effectively modify and subvert.

Orality, a common cultural feature of collectivistic, honor-shame societies, must not merely communicate theological concepts, but overturn prevailing worldview narratives for interpreting life. Stories can effectively illustrate ideas, but best serve to reroute paths to honor and shame amidst Christian witness and theological education. Effective Christian narratives align human attributions of worth (i.e., what and who is honorable and shameful) with God's eternal code of honor.

Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants in the vineyard (Mark 12:1-11) functions precisely in this manner by reformulating the narrative of salvation-history. Jesus redefines Israel from an elect nation with privileged status (i.e. honor) to ungrateful servants requiring expelling (i.e. shame). The parable is hardly a moral lesson on stewardship; rather, it reconstructs who is honorable and shameful (Wright, 1992).¹

Moral change in collectivistic societies occurs only as social conceptions of honor and shame transform, not through judicial rulings or political legislation (Appiah, 2011). In relation to Christian fruit-bearing, this indicates that disciple-making involves reconstructing Christians' honor code. If the goal of Christian education entails replacing sinful misplacements of honor, orientating one's affections to honor God, and rewriting prevailing honor codes, then oral narratives help construct worldviews. Christian education seeks to transform Christians' code of honor so their ascriptions of value parallel God's. In sum, orality, properly utilized, redefines honor and shame by reshaping one's worldview narrative.²

Summary: Orality → New Worldview Meta-narrative → New Honor Code → Honoring Life

¹ Jesus' vine and branch imagery in John 15 is similarly misinterpreted as illustration a theological concept regarding individual spirituality. By claiming to be the Yahweh's *true* vine through whom God's kingdom would be realized, Jesus challenged a fundamental Jewish narrative regarding herself (cf. Ps 80, Is 5), and invited the disciples to adopt a new metanarrative and honor code regarding ethnic Israel to guide behavior during their impending distress.

² Unfortunately, a primary indication of effectiveness in transforming an honor code is hostile resistance – "When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him" (12:12a). Several Central Asians warned Kent he was rather fortunate the fellow passengers did not respond violently.

Ministry Efforts in Central Asia

Our team working in CP and BAM experimented with multiple forms of non-formal theological education for worldview (re-)formation among Central Asians. Our objective was to address the culturally prominent values of honor and shame. The objective of our theological education was not merely “What does the Bible say *about honor and shame?*” but the more encompassing question of “What does the Bible say *is honorable and shameful?*” This question ultimately leads to “*Who* does the Bible say is honorable and shameful?” a question of who are God’s people (cf. Mt 5-7; Rom 9-11). Here are two examples.

In an effort to contextualize the Biblical story for a national CP team, I prepared a 1-hour didactic study of salvation-history in the language of honor and shame, employing primarily the dynamics of defilement, purity and ethnic incorporation as emphasized by the New Perspective on Paul. The theological content resonated with the national believers, even prompting one believer to ask in tears, “Why has nobody told me this. I’ve told my sister that God forgives her, but she always says her shame is too great for God to accept her.” To disseminate those theological concepts orally, our team formulated an evangelistic narrative of salvation-history in the language of honor and shame entitled “*Back to God’s Honorable Village.*”³ The resulting 15-minute story employing indigenous symbols for honor and shame became our primary evangelistic tool. The central theological theme presents listeners with the choice of selecting prevailing cultural honor or God’s eternal honor. Because of the nominal nature of Islam in Central Asia, we embedded the narrative in primarily cultural (contra religious) constructs.

After 6 years of usage, I offer the following analysis of *Back to God’s Village.*⁴ Non-believers cognitive understanding of salvation was aided, but that did not consistently induce biblical salvation – a reorientation of affections resulting from spiritual regeneration (John 3:5-8; Heb 6:4ff). One may comprehend the eternal honor God offers, but remain unwilling to relinquish current status or jeopardize family reputation to accept adoption into God’s family. The reality was not unique to our situation – “Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear for the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue, for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God (John 12:42-43).” As we trained believers to retell the narrative, it unexpectedly functioned as a foundational worldview narrative for their personal maturation and ethical formation. While evangelistic in intent, believers ultimately used the narrative to inform their own behavior and decisions by locating themselves within the narrative’s plot as an active agent of honor reception.

Another exploration of theological education for learners with oral/narrative preference and honor-shame orientation was in the arena of discipleship content. Our team recognized certain issues perennially hindering Christians’ personal and corporate maturation: marriage/singleness, persecution, offense/bitterness, ethnocentrism, and materialism. Upon reflection, we concluded misguided notions of honorableness and shamefulness in each of these spheres prompted believers to make imprudent choices. To deconstruct prevailing cultural attributions of worth, we created discipleship lessons that included a contemporary case study

³ “*Back to God’s Village*” is a short whiteboard cartoon based on that narrative, available on [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U727cx) (shortlink: <http://tiny.cc/u727cx>). Full text available at <http://honorshame.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Gospel-Story-Back-to-Gods-Honorable-Village.pdf>.

⁴ These comments reflect upon the story’s narrative effectiveness in reconstructing Central Asian honor codes; further socio-cultural reflections are available in Georges (2011): 304-05.

highlighting the cultural dynamic and a biblical narrative offering an alternative code of honor (Elliott, 1994; Appiah, 2011).

For example, the core concept for materialism was “God’s honor frees us from coveting materials goods as status symbols.” The contemporary case study stated,

“Nurbek was a top student in his university class as an English major. After several failed attempts to visit America after graduation, he found a job teaching English in his hometown for \$140/mo. Though he enjoyed working as an English teacher, he could not afford a car, a wedding, or a house. Relatives in the village asked when he would become a man. Explain Nurbek’s inner sentiments and public reputation.”

We read the story of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:28-37), then discussed what the story teaches about the relationship between honor and material possessions in God’s kingdom. Through case studies and biblical narratives, we sought to disciple believers to act in a manner honorable in God’s eyes (Elliott, 1994).

Future Explorations

Looking forward, some areas requiring missiological development emerge from the nexus of orality and honor-shame dynamics. The first would be developing a usable document recounting biblical examples of people whom God has redeemed from shame unto honor (Laniak, 1998).⁵ Such a reference document would provide Christian workers with a core set of biblical narratives addressing contextual concerns of honor and shame. Moreover this would help compliment legal-based nations of salvation history dominant in Western theology (i.e., Firm Foundations, McIlwain, 1991) with a contextual soteriology in which Yawheh works to remove the threat of shame and restore honor for His people. Effective implementation of orality for Christian ministry utilizes biblical stories to recast the grander scriptural drama into the cultural language of honor and shame.

Secondly, a set of stories specifically geared towards helping reconstruct Christians’ honor code for a range of situations commonly encountered in honor-shame societies must be developed. Here are two examples of how biblical narratives address specific honor-shame dynamics.

When a Central Asian assumed a new leadership role with Cru, he recounted how God used the story of Eli’s sons who were ultimately shamed for abusing authority for social distinction (1 Sam 2:12-36) to reshape his cultural notions of leadership (authoritarianism, nepotism, personal gain, etc.). To the leaders, God clearly illustrated “Those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.”

Secondly, when a group of Christian ladies inside a housing compound in Africa heard the gunfire of approaching rebels, they remembered how Abigail averted disaster by honoring David with a generous feast. They likewise experienced God’s salvation by preparing a full table for the opponents bent on their destruction (1 Sam 25)– “Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from avenging (i.e., restoring eroded honor through violence) myself with my own hand.” Because Christians in honor-shame cultures face social circumstances unanswered by Western Christians, missionary educators could craft a set of biblical stories for defining honorable conduct to navigate various ethical quandaries.

⁵ C.f. the style of International Association for Refugee’s [“Refugees in the Bible.”](#)

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