

The Form – Meaning Correlation – Illustrations
By Robert Strauss, DMiss

Because Kraft¹ introduces this subject in the anthropological/missiological literature, I will refer to his definitions for the terms.² Kraft argues that *form* refers to any cultural element – a material object, a word, an idea, or a ritual. Cultural forms are always relative. The term *function* refers to the intended purpose of that form in a society. For example, a cell phone is intended to be used as a communication device. The term *meaning* refers to what the forms are intended to convey denotatively and connotatively.³ The term *usage* refers to what people do with the form. For example, although a cell phone is intended to be used as a communication device, someone may use it as a status symbol.

There is difficulty in always making clear distinctions between function, meaning, and usage. Sometimes the definitions of these three categories cross over or intersect. For example, when a handshake is used to congratulate someone for an accomplishment, is the congratulation a function of the handshake or is it the meaning of the handshake, or is it the usage? On some occasions, it is difficult to differentiate. Kraft states that he uses the term *meaning* to sometimes include all three – function, meaning, and usage (1997:137). In fact, Kraft argues that the form / meaning distinction is only possible conceptually (1997:145), but at the same time they are always separable conceptually (1997:147).⁴

¹ Taken from Charles H. Kraft, 1979 *Christianity in Culture*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, pp. 64 – 80. (Also see Downs 1975; Luzbetak 1963; Nida 1960; Nida and Reyrburn 1981; Hiebert 1985)

² Kraft notes that the first use of these terms and their distinct designations was by Ralph Linton in "The Study of Man," written in 1936 and published by Appleton Century Croft Publishers.

³ Denotative refers to the literal explicit meaning assigned by culture to a form. For example, the word "red" refers to a specific color (different from purple and orange). This specific color designation is the denotative meaning. Connotative refers to the ideas, feelings, and values associated with the word "red." For example, "red" may also be used in the expressions, "red neck," "to be in the red," and "take a red-eye."

⁴ Hiebert says that *symbols* are the form and meaning linked (1985:142). He uses the terms "symbol" and "form" interchangeably. Hiebert argues that Western cultures tend to separate form and meaning, but that traditional cultures tend to equate them. He does agree with Kraft that a distinction is warranted. Hiebert identifies several symbols where

Kraft makes the following summary statements about the form / meaning correlation (1997:140 – 144):

1. Communication is made possible because people have shared meaning in cultural forms.
2. The same form in another culture will have at least some different meanings.⁵
3. The same meaning in another culture is often represented by different forms.
4. In cross-cultural communication if one uses an inappropriate form, the meaning will be wrong.⁶

For the cross-cultural Christian worker, whether an expatriate in an overseas context or a believer in a host society, there are key questions that must be asked. What should the cross-cultural Christian worker do with the Palestinian cultural forms of foot washing, water baptism, communion, location of church meetings, content of church meetings, and other New Testament activities? What about the cultural forms that are already in a host society, like ancestor veneration, witchcraft, animal sacrifices, taboos, and other rituals? Can these forms be incorporated into the New Testament church?

What are appropriate cultural forms for supracultural biblical principles? When is an old form acceptable? When is an old function permissible? When should new meaning be given to old forms? Should all the religious forms in a host society be replaced by forms from the Bible (Hebrew, Greek, Roman culture)? What happens when old meanings come back or never leave existing cultural forms? What is syncretism?

The following chart illustrates the complexity of form, function, and meaning in the process of communicating cross-culturally and in the quest to contextualize the message of the Gospel and the reality of Christian living. I have provided a column that analyzes the combinations of old and new forms, functions, and meanings.

form and meaning would be difficult to separate – the cross in Christianity, the city of Mecca in Islam, a child's cry, an adult's laughter, and an injured person's groans.

⁵ This second statement proves that a distinction between form and meaning is possible conceptually.

⁶ Hiebert argues that the separation of form and meaning is attributable to the epistemological shift from positivism to critical realism (1989:105).

Form	Function	Meaning	Description of Culture Change
New	New	New	Cultural Change
New	New	Old	Syncretism
New	Old	New	Indigenization
New	Old	Old	Syncretism
Old	Old	New	Transformational Change
Old	New	Old	Functional Adaptation
Old	Old	Old	Cultural Continuity
Old	New	New	Transformational Change

Table 1
 (Adapted from presentation submitted to Dr. Tom Steffen by Bob Strauss for a paper on the Ancient Near East Cosmologies in View of Genesis 1 – 11)

This thinking it through paper will move beyond the previous assignment that introduced this chart with its descriptive designations. As was suggested in that assignment's assessment, I will seek to provide illustrations for each of the categories listed above. Some of these illustrations will be from Western cultures and others will be from traditional cultures with which my organization has contact.

I have included some edited copy from the first assignment in order to review the context for the illustrations and to make this a stand-alone paper that I can use in the future. A copy of the first assignment was given to several of my Worldview Resource Group colleagues for their comments and considerations. The form-meaning correlation is proving to be a valuable tool in cross-cultural ministry. I am grateful for the contribution Dr. Kraft and others have made to missiology.

Form	Function	Meaning	Description of Culture Change	Illustration
New	New	New	Cultural Change	<p>The Worldview Resource Group trainers have extensive experience in societies that practice primitive religions. In these host societies, during which their entire existence has used oral communication, these expatriate missionaries introduced the competency skills of reading and writing. Literacy materials include primers, Bible lessons, cultural stories, instructional manuals, and Scripture portions. These new forms serve a somewhat new function in that communication is preserved in perhaps a more accurate format. In these traditional cultures, this new form does not replace orality, but adds another dimension to communication.</p> <p>The first generation Christians in the Bisorio tribe in Papua New Guinea have not had the liberty to use their old songs and drums in their Christian worship services. The expatriate missionary has encouraged them to do so, amending the old form with a new meaning. The Bisorio elders have said that they and the people do not feel their conscience will permit them to use the old forms – drums and melody. They expressed that their old singing contained so much showboating and self-exaltation that they now feel it would be inappropriate to use this form in relation to God. Perhaps the next generation will sense more liberty. The missionary feels that this situation is an illustration of the principles from Romans 14 where some have the liberty, but others do not for conscience sake.</p>
New	New	Old	Syncretism ⁷	<p>In some ritualistic societies, it has been difficult to make the distinction between rituals that have symbolic meaning and rituals that in and of themselves are efficacious. In these societies, the rite of Christian baptism can be confusing. If the Bible presents water baptism as a symbol of identification with Christ and the church, it may be difficult for ritualists to understand that the meaning of the activity is symbolic. The ritual itself may be viewed as having efficacy in salvation. This is an example of a new form and function, but old meaning is subtly attached.</p>

⁷ Syncretism may be defined as the combining of different forms and beliefs. Traditional customs in a society may obscure the truth as revealed in the Bible – Rom. 1:18 – 20. This blending of Christian and non-Christian elements is syncretism.

New	Old	New	Indigenization	<p>There are cultures that practice giving as a form of economic exchange. In these cultures, there may be a variety of motives for giving and it may take place in several formats. When “giving” is introduced as a function of the New Testament church, the format may change and the meaning may be different, but the old function is the same.</p>
New	Old	Old	Syncretism	<p>In the Kafe tribe in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, an expatriate missionary and a PNG national were working together in a ministry of evangelism and discipleship with the Kafe people. During Phase One of the chronological Bible teaching, the national missionary was performing rituals to the ancestral spirits, as well as praying to God, for assistance in the ministry. This activity was being done in secret because the national missionary was embarrassed. He knew the expatriate would not approve, but the national believed the ancestral spirits would play a significant role in the success of the tribal church plant. The national’s “ritual of prayer” appeared to be Christian, but in his mind and heart, he was predominately thinking of the ancestors and what he perceived to be their influence on the living.</p> <p>In the Western Oceanic cultures, the “cargo cult” is a formidable cultural norm that permeates every aspect of the society. After 40 years of a Christian presence in the Western Dani, Dr. Doug Hayward argues that “cargoism” is still a dominant cultural theme. Cargoism has to do with host societies being preoccupied with the mystical acquisition of foreign goods and treasures. Rituals are performed that are believed to be effective in bringing “cargo” to them. A Worldview Resource Group co-founder, Mark Zook, faced this dilemma in PNG with the Mouk people. Attention was given to issues related to economic exchange and motivation. What would belief in God produce economically? Would it close the gap between the Mouk people and Western societies? Mark and his colleagues taught that it would not. For the Western Dani, the outward forms of Christianity were evident, but underneath was a mindset dominated by cargoism.</p>
Old	Old	New	Transformational Change	<p>The Bisorio tribal men in the Sepik River region of Papua New Guinea are great orators. In fact, status is achieved in the community by virtue of the skill developed in oration. Before the Gospel, exciting stories would be told of the hunts for wild animals. The storyteller would be in the middle of a circle with other men, women, and children gathered around. The story would be told with great dramatization. Voice inflection was critical and even subtle facial expressions were part of the communication process. [For</p>

				the expatriate missionaries, learning language was only part of the process of communication. These missionaries also learned the competency skill of storytelling like the Bisorio.] As new Christians, the Bisorio utilized this important skill of storytelling to share the Gospel of grace with other Bisorio people. As they learned more of the Bible story, their stories likewise improved in content and drama. Here an old form and function were used with a new message and a different meaning.
Old	New	Old	Functional Adaptation	Dr. Tom Steffen tells the story of using a Chinese chopstick as a pointer for overhead transparencies in a classroom setting. His Chinese students finally found the courage to inform him that his choice of a pointer was inappropriate. The new functional adaptation for the chopstick seemed gross to the Chinese students. This example shows the difficulty in adapting an old form for a new function.
Old	Old	Old	Cultural Continuity	The Da'an of West Kalimantan in Indonesia were not interested in the electric generator, electrical wiring throughout the village, or the electrical switches and outlets installed by the Indonesian government. All the government had asked the Da'an elders to do was provide the diesel fuel to run the generator. If they would make this provision, the whole village would have electricity – lights for the evenings, outlets for appliances, and whatever else the people would like. No system of economic exchange was created. No research was done relative to real need. The Da'an saw absolutely no benefit in electricity and so all the new equipment and supplies are sitting idle to this day. The people use fires for cooking and oil lanterns for evening light. This is working well for them and they sense no need for change.
Old	New	New	Transformational Change	The Loko tribe on the island of New Britain used their drums for music in the Christian church service. Once used to summon the spirit world, now these instruments are being used to lead worship to God. The songs that are written are indigenous to the culture. Songs had always been part of their art and culture. Here an old form has a new function and a new meaning.

Table 2
The Form-Meaning Correlation with Real-World Illustrations

Missiologists have observed that syncretism often occurs when the church planter is not alert to the distinction between high and low religions. High religions offer answers to cosmic questions (e.g. origins, purpose, destiny, ultimate reality, and truth). High religions

have written texts and are often institutionalized. Examples of high religions are Judaism and Islam.

Low religions are concerned with the affairs of daily life – things like the surety of a good crop, why there is a drought, how to explain the death of a child, and how to manage good fortune and calamity. Low religions answer existential questions. A central concern of low religions is success in daily living and how to control this process. Typically, the process of control involves rituals that relate to gods, spirits, ancestors, and impersonal spiritual forces. Control is more important than truth. The key question is not “how,” but “why” and “why now?”

When high religion forms and functions are introduced into low religion contexts (without clearly addressing meaning) syncretism is likely to occur. An imperative for the cross-cultural Christian worker is both to teach at a worldview level that addresses low religion areas of meaning and to provide answers to existential questions. This, among other reasons, is why missiologists today stress a holistic approach to church planting.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hiebert, Paul G.

- 1985 *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- 1989 *Form and Meaning in Contextualization of the Gospel*. *In The Word Among Us – Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing.
- 1999 *Understanding Folk Religion*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

Kraft, Charles H.

- 1979 *Christianity in Culture – A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- 1997 *Anthropology in Christian Witness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.