



CHURCH ETHNOGRAPHIES: A WEST TEXAS CASE STUDY

[This teaching activity, written by anthropologist Gordon J. Bronitsky, first appeared in the winter 1991 issue of *AnthroNotes*, vol. 13, no. 2.]

Religion often guides human behavior, regulates interactions between human beings and their environment, and even guides specific social ends. Because religion is a complex blend of behaviors, material items, beliefs, and people, studying churches can be an ideal setting for the study of the total integration of culture, a setting in which students can bring their own knowledge and background into play.

At the University of Texas of the Permian Basin, I assigned my undergraduate students to research projects focusing on individual churches encompassing a wide range of socioeconomic and ethnic groups present in the region. In order to gain an idea of regular church practice, students attended an assigned church for at least three Sunday morning services and also interviewed the minister. It was essential that students first asked consent of the minister before attending services, and that each student made clear his or her role as a student observer rather than as a potential church member.

In order to introduce students to techniques of participant observation, I gave the class a basic framework of observations to make. This framework included:

- 1) the physical layout and material culture of the service;
- 2) the human dimension of the service, including the number and ethnic identity of people attending, the relative proportions of male and female participants, young and old, majority and minority groups, and the clustering of groups by age or sex; and
- 3) the service itself, including the kinds of music and musicians, the specialized personnel, time of day, and the style of audience participation. Finally, questions were offered for interviewing the minister, such as asking his or her reasons for becoming a minister and his or her education and training.

Students carefully recorded observations in a "field diary," gathering data from which they could fill out the questionnaire. Next students used their data as the basis for writing a church ethnography, a descriptive narrative essay of both the church and the community of which it was a part. Since the entire class was studying various churches within a single denomination (Baptist), I distributed all the ethnographies to the class to read and discuss. Were there differences among these churches? If not, why not? If there were differences, what were they? What factors accounted for these differences? Such questions enabled the students to incorporate knowledge acquired through participant observation as well as their own background knowledge as members of the general society.

The project, focusing on churches, congregants, and small communities, contributed to student education in several ways. By assigning students to churches other than their own, they were introduced to different ethnic groups and social classes. Many students were simply unaware of minority communities beyond brief encounters. In this West Texas Baptist project, one female white student initially refused to attend services at the black church to which she had been assigned until she could persuade her boyfriend to accompany her. The classroom discussion that resulted did more to clarify the nature of stereotypes and ethnic and class distinctions in our society than all the reading the students had done. Similarly, I assigned a black student to attend a wealthy, white Baptist congregation. Her discussion of her feelings and her perception of the congregants' feelings was firmly in the tradition of some of the best of humanistic introspective anthropology.

The project also contributed to the students' understanding of how anthropologists actually work. Despite our best efforts, anthropology is all too often perceived as the study of exotics, "them," rather than "us". This project showed students that anthropology is indeed relevant to our own society and that certain problems pertain to fieldwork regardless of the particular society under study. Students had problems with "nothing to see" at first and then "too much to record," as they became accustomed to the ways of "their" church and then had to decide what was important to observe. In so doing, they came to realize the role of their own perceptions and biases in "objective" observation. Students came to grips, albeit in a small way, with problems of culture shock. Even Baptist students found it difficult at first to understand why church members did certain rituals in different and therefore "wrong" ways. Students from more formal church backgrounds found the spontaneity of lower-income churches "primitive" and "not real religion." And, at the end of the semester, a few students even had to face the dilemma of "going native," of identifying too closely with "their" new culture. In one instance, a white student from a fundamentalist background, a devout member of his own church, had to come to grips with this problem when members of an Hispanic Baptist church invited him to join their church. Although he (and all students) had made it clear from the beginning of his study that he was there as an observer, rather than as a potential convert, the members of this particular church and the student had established such rapport that it seemed only natural for church members to consider him a fellow congregant.

Finally, some students learned that creativity can be an integral part of the social sciences. All too often, students learn only from reading textbooks in which information is presented in predigested categories or from experiments in which the result is a foregone conclusion. In addition to the problems mentioned above, some students found that aspects of "their" church were intriguing enough to lead to further research and observation. One education major examined the goals and values reflected in the Christian school system at "her" church, and compared them to those in public schools. Another student, interested in bilingual education, studied the role of Spanish in the Hispanic church to which she was assigned. In particular, she looked at the specific occasions in which Spanish was used, in which only English was used, and in which either language might be used, and realized that Spanish was used exclusively in prayers directed to God for personal favors.

Of course, not all students gained equally from the church observation exercise. Some were content to do the bare minimum; others left with the same prejudices about others with which they came in. Still others never saw what anthropology was all about. Nonetheless, feedback from students in the form of evaluations and informal conversations indicated that for many of them, anthropology had come alive in a way textbooks alone could not do for them. Many had struggled with the question of what to observe,

and how to get along with "others," and what it felt like to be different, to be (in a very small way) in a minority. The students had struggled with the fieldwork process and realized that it could demand of them the precision of accounting, the rigor of the "hard sciences," and as much creativity as they could muster.

Questionnaire

(Editor's Note: The questionnaire below was developed for college students living in the midst of a heavily Baptist population. The entire class studied different churches, but all were within the Baptist denomination. Hence, this questionnaire would have to be modified if used with a class studying churches, temples, or other religious institutions in other than the Baptist tradition.)

- I. Identification Information (church name, denomination, status with regard to a larger denomination, location, number of members, average attendance at weekly service, paid staff/volunteers)

- II. Material Culture Variables (predominant male and female dress, printed program, musical instruments, choir robes, choir seating, collection posting, building exterior and interior, windows, style of seating, speaking platform, sound system, flowers, flag, other decorations, church layout, crosses and other religious symbols)

- III. Ethnic/Class Variables (socioeconomic status, major ethnic groups present, ethnicity of minister, language used in church, language used by congregants)

- IV. Behavioral Variables (age/gender of most people at the service; style of service, use of "amens", hand clapping, interjections etc; sermon -- spontaneous or planned; collection--who does it and how; child care --is it provided, how, where, when?)

- V. Ministerial Variables (full-time or part-time, ethnicity, age, education, call to preach, age at call, relatives in ministry, dress, demeanor and voice, view of own role within congregation)