The Kettings in Thailand

What I Have Learned As a Missionary's Kid

By Ginger Ketting

I found myself slipping into one of my other identities recently while in San Francisco's Chinatown. Every time I met an older Chinese person, I ducked my head in deference, almost scuttling by when there was a narrow passageway to maneuver. At the Lucky Creation Restaurant, I spoke respectfully to the older lady behind the counter, apologizing humbly that my friends were not yet there, and asking if I might sit at a table and wait. Again, I found my eyes glancing downward and my body language speaking Chinese. Gone was the straight Western posture, the direct eye

contact, the I-am-dignified-and-here-to-be-served attitude that I generally use when conducting business in the United States. A part of me stood aside mentally and observed the transformation with amusement and interest while the rest of me thought and acted on its own, dictated by surroundings. My upbringing as a missionary kid (MK) had kicked in once again; I am a cultural chameleon.

The transformation takes place automatically, no matter where I go. In Finland, my American friendliness and smile disappear while in public places. Who smiles at strangers in Finland, anyway? Only Americans who don't know how to discriminate between people they know or don't know, and who tell strangers far too much about themselves far too quickly. In the company of Russian friends, I find the topics of conversation turning to art, literature, and music—things that many of my American acquaintances don't talk about. The words "my darling" and "all my love" flow easily with my Russian best friend, but I would never express my friendship in such words with those who are American or Finnish. My persona changes again when I encounter Malaysians or Singaporeans—around whom I grew up—even if they've lived in the United States for a while. I am almost overcome by an irresistible urge to greet them with, "Waaaah! So nice to see you again, lah! So long time since we see each other, aah?" Southeast Asian English has such a friendly guttural lilt to it, the sound of "home" to me.

Even within the United States, my training as a cultural chameleon training comes in handy. I remember feeling at a complete loss my freshman year in a U.S. college because all the girls seemed to discuss were guys, cars, and clothes; all the guys seemed to talk about were girls, cars, and sports. I wasn't knowledgeable in any of those topics, but I could have talked knowledgeably about refugees in Southeast Asia, or about racial tensions in my home country of Malaysia, or about interesting medical cases that my parents were seeing in the mission hospital where they worked. But none of this interested my peers. For years, I made it a point to spend time catching up on American television, music, and popular culture to establish a common base for understanding comments and culture around me.

Ginger Ketting with friends in Kenya, 1999

Finding a personal identity and learning to cope independently within one's culture is a major task of adolescence and young adulthood, one that most former MKs find themselves negotiating years longer than the general population. To make it even more difficult, MKs usually give off no verbal cues (accents) or visual clues (skin color) to let others know they are different and have passed through experiences different from others. People normally tolerant and understanding of immigrants and foreigners may react to "returned" MKs with strange comments, odd glances, or blank stares when the returnees unthinkingly make comments or demonstrate approaches and attitudes perfectly appropriate in other cultures. Missionary kids are, essentially, invisible foreigners.

Since coming to the United States nearly twenty years ago, I have heard some interesting legends about MKs: they're social misfits, they go wild when suddenly freed from parental and boarding school restrictions, they're stuck up and can't deal with basic chores (like making beds and washing clothes). On the surface, the legends can be supported with the names of people we know. However, there's much more to the phenomenon of MKs. I have learned this as an MK myself and

through personal research of the subject.

A small but significant body of literature has accumulated over recent years that deals with adjustment and identity issues in the children of missionaries. Much of this research arises out of initial work done approximately 40 years ago by Ruth Useem, a sociologist at Michigan State University. Useem pioneered in the studies of returning children of overseas workers—referred to as Third Culture Kids (TCKs)—including children of missionaries, businessmen, and military employees.[1] In recent years, research specifically focused on MKs has found momentum and voice in the International Conference on Missionary Kids (ICMK), which has convened at intervals in various countries for the purpose of addressing the needs of MKs and issues that surround them. Much of the published material on missionary kids has originated in presentations given at ICMKs. David C. Pollock, a researcher and regular speaker on MK issues at ICMKs, is the executive director of Interaction, an organization that conducts seminars for TCKs and publishes a quarterly journal entitled *Interact*, which is devoted to MK education and care.

While recently giving a presentation about MK research to a group of Adventist MKs and their families, I was taken aback to look into my audience and see tears brimming in the eyes of several listeners who, for the first time, realized that there was an explanation for their personalities and approaches to life, as well as for the hurt, loneliness, and homelessness that they had experienced so deeply. MKs and their spouses spoke of being thankful for a "handle" to understand some of the dynamics in their lives.

The "handle" that emerges from recent research—which is summarized in the following section—suggests that the nature of growing up as an MK can be ambivalent, but I believe that the increasingly multicultural Adventist Church would do well to pay special heed to their experiences as it enters the twenty-first century.

Missionary Kids and Three-Dimensional Knowledge

Others have seen television reports and read newspapers and books, but MKs have been there, seeing firsthand the lives of people in other countries and experiencing the challenges of moving between various cultural settings. This experience makes MKs uniquely suited to serve as "cultural bridges" in the context of mission, diplomacy, or business. Pollock has referred to

MKs as "culture brokers" in an increasingly multicultural world.[2] MKs seem to intuitively recognize the possibilities for using this bank of cultural knowledge. I have seen MKs enter the field of international business, pastor multicultural congregations, teach in classrooms, and serve within health care contexts where cultural diversity is rich and demanding. MKs have found themselves explaining cultural mannerisms and customs on behalf of immigrants who would otherwise be judged negatively.

"Home Is Wherever I Am"

Useem and other researchers have noted that "the reported experiences of Third Culture Kids suggest that they cope rather than adjust, and, as one student of multiculture persons describes them, they become both 'a part of' and 'apart from' whatever situations they are in." Pollock has noted that TCKs have the same needs as any human beings, but that their needs are more complex because of their mobility and experience in other cultures.[3] The opportunities to live in other cultures and to travel are assets that make MKs valuable additions to organizations (and often, scintillating conversationalists and storytellers). However, although the cultural knowledge of an MK may enrich his or her ability to communicate across cultural lines, it can also translate into arrogance and impatience for those with less experience or knowledge.

Then there is the most loaded of all questions for MKs: "Where is home?" Many MKs find the concept of "home" difficult to define. To their parents, "home" was the country they left behind when they committed themselves to mission service. "Home" for an MK may have changed several times while parents transferred from one mission appointment to another, or as they fled one country because of political unrest and resettled in another. As one MK has remarked, "Home is wherever I am."

Always a Residue of Pain

A great deal of research has been done about the "culture shock" of the MK who returns to his or her homeland. Areas of adjustment include taking responsibility, getting a job for the first time, and learning the values and cultural ways of conducting relationships. MKs accustomed to small family-like groups in mission schools often find adjustment to American dating relationships frightening. In addition, they find Ameri-

cans more affluent, materialistic, and wasteful.[4] Research by K. A. F. Jordan focuses on the adaptation of Third Culture Kids as they enter college in the United States, noting that they do not fully adapt to their new setting; rather, they make "integrative adjustments." Likewise, E. M. Stringham has found that family dynamics following reentry are characterized by declines in family cohesiveness, increased dependence of wives on their husbands for emotional support, and "interpersonal tensions consequent to children's adaptations to their home culture." Furthermore, children adopted home culture values more quickly than did their parents.[5]

Seeking Security in Relationships

Mobility makes the life of an MK even more complex. Instead of attaching to a place, MKs tend to seek rootedness in relationships. Yet, as an MK, I have found myself dealing with confusion and sometimes revulsion at the cultural ways of relationships in the United States. Why does someone ask me, "How are you doing?" then continue without waiting for an answer? When someone says, "We'll have to get together for lunch sometime," why are they taken aback when I suggest a specific day? Doesn't anyone ever mean anything friendly in this country? And what about dating? which works differently in the United States— and with a great deal more pressure and stress—than where I come from. I've had a few people back off after I said something "weird." How can I know when I might sabotage myself at the beginning of a friendship with an innocent but culturally incorrect comment? Are new friendships really worth the effort anyway when I have not finished grieving the loss of old friends from MK boarding school? What if I enter a college setting? Won't I just have to say goodbye again in a short time?

There are many reasons for MKs to feel insecure in relationships.

Coping with Loneliness

Loneliness is inevitable with MKs. It is impossible to say goodbye to a large group of friends and family, to begin anew in a new culture, and not feel isolated and lonely. Loneliness for family can create some unusual ways of thinking and coping. It's not unusual for an MK in college to considering "stopping out" to go back and be with family for a while, or conversely, to put on a backpack and start traveling the world. Researchers

have noticed that some MKs tend to join cult-like organizations in search of a close family unit with strong structures like those on mission stations.[6]

The pain of separation abides in the lives of MKs. It can work several ways. MKs may create deep friendships almost immediately, almost as if they're grabbing quickly for relationships, afraid that they might lose time building connections before saying goodbye. Grief from separations can also eventually affect their willingness to create new relationships, making it safer for them to simply build surface acquaintances, expecting to move on sometime. In some cases, there may also be a sense that moving away is an option or an "out" if relationships aren't satisfying; if I don't find what I'm looking for here, nothing can make me stay and make it work.

Adjusting to One's "Home" Culture

The immediate issue with which MKs deal is one of fitting into a new culture. It seems that MKs, who are skilled at taking characteristics of other cultures, would use the same skills to adjust to a "homeland." However, adapting to the "home" culture doesn't seem to happen so easily for returning missionaries. With whom does an MK fit in after returning? In one study of MKs, only 7 percent of those studied reported feeling "at home" in the United States, whereas 74 percent said that they felt most comfortable with "internationally oriented people" who have lived overseas.[7] I personally remember seeking out Asian students or other former missionaries during the first few years after moving to the United States for college, feeling most comfortable with the topics, foods, and camaraderie shared in those groups.

Latent Adolescent Rebellion

J. Powell has noted that a "latent rebellion" can be seen among MKs in response to cultural pressures. According to Powell, "In counseling adult MKs in their thirties and even early forties I've seen them express a tremendous surge of anger at the church, at the missionary community, or sometimes at specific people."[8] What feeds this anger? One factor might be that MKs have always stood out as representatives of an alien culture, nation, and religious group. After growing up with a large degree of independence and social status that puts them in the society of businessmen, diplomats, and politicians, MKs find it difficult to adjust to being individuals who don't stand out in the crowd.

Uncertain Identities

MKs must also deal with creating their own identity in a world whose cultural contexts continually change. The typically adolescent developmental questions of "Who am I?" "Where do I fit in?" and "How am I significant in this world?" take on a different flavor and are processed differently as the MK moves during adolescence to a new country and culture. In my own research, I compared identity formation in MKs to that of immigrants and individuals who had grown up in one culture their entire lives. I found that adult MKs—even in their thirties—were much more unwilling to commit to an identity in the areas of politics, ideology, career, and relationships than those who had remained geographically stable. For example, one can ask MKs if they are committed to a certain type of friend, political or spiritual ideology, or career and get the answers "No," or "It depends." When asked, "It depends on what?" an MK will typically answer, "It depends on where I am," or "on whom I am with."[9]

Adventism is currently in a state of flux. Not only is the Church growing faster and larger outside North America, its face within North America is also changing. The challenges of "Why can't we all just get along?" have only just begun now that the era of colonial Adventism is over. How can an increasingly diverse and multicultural church body communicate effectively when culture so often gets in the way? Is there a way of isolating a transcendent form of Adventism, unaffected by cultural norms and practices, that will unite people across cultural and national lines? I don't think so. I think that culture will continue to make our lives colorful, lively, and challenging. We must continue to be astute observers of which parts of our religion are cultural add-ons, and which parts are Truth with a capital "T."

Despite its complexity and ambivalence, however, the experience of the MK can help. Writing about issues that affect MKs, Ted Ward has stated, "One of my propositions is that the missionary kid of the nineties will be the prototype of the Christian of the twenty-first century."[10] MKs have acquired their personal "three-dimensional" knowledge because of experiences in their formative years. Could MKs, adept from childhood at being "cultural chameleons," teach lessons about how Adventism and culture interact, and provide a glimpse of the Adventist of the next generation? I believe so.

I believe that MKs can give us clues as to the "look" of the future Adventist. MKs have seen the world and been in contact with people of many cultures. They know how to move in and out of various cultures and usually know the characteristics of at least several peoples and countries. The same can be said about the Adventist of the future as the world becomes more accessible through travel and modern communications. MKs tend to move often, becoming people who are at home anywhere, yet often don't know how to answer the question, "Where is home?" The loneliness and unresolved grief experienced by MKs having to say goodbye repeatedly is the heritage of any Adventist young person who must move often.[11]

Many strengths in MKs will also show up in Adventists of the future, particularly among those capable of negotiating leadership roles. MKs generally have what one of my students calls a "built-in cheese-o-meter." In other words, they can spot a passing cultural approach at a distance
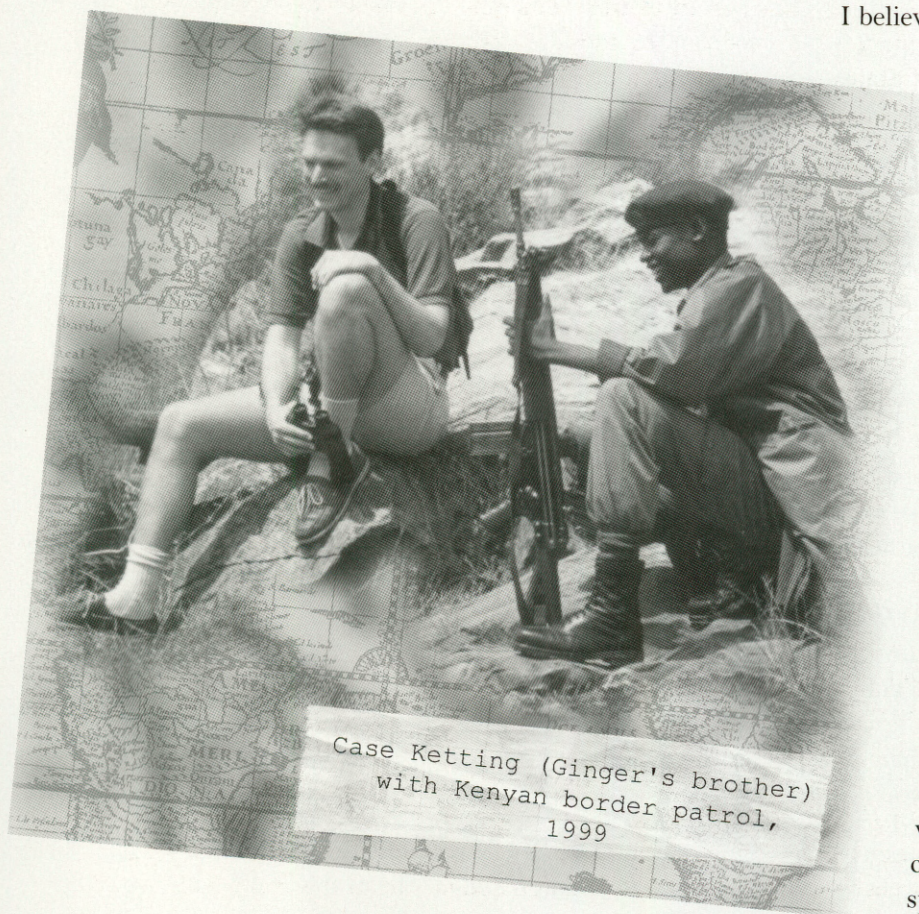
Case Ketting (Ginger's brother) with Kenyan border patrol, 1999

and know whether it will work across diverse situations. MKs know whether or not to panic about new approaches or customs in the Church and to evaluate them in terms of the last great apostasy.[12] This "cheese-o-meter" provides a sense of stability and a secure identity in the life of most MKs. Hopefully, Adventists of the future will have enough culturally diverse experiences to pick up on this skill as well; if so, our Church as a body will benefit.

MKs also have the strength of having learned to value other countries and cultures. They have seen firsthand the heights and depths of life in various cultures, the strengths and weaknesses of systems and societies. My MK friends and I have seen people living in garbage dumps and filthy streets, people for whom health care is not even a wistful dream. We have personally lived through riots and wars, evacuations and shellings, benevolent and not-so-benevolent governments. We have seen that life can be very cheap and death very near. We have also seen goodness and kindness in people who don't even know Christ. We have found that societies that don't rush so fast are a good thing. We have seen that bigger is not necessarily better. And we have considered a picture of Christ that comes wrapped in brown skin and dark eyes, speaking a language other than English.

Seeing and understanding a three-dimensional world puts an MK in the interesting position of being able to weather cultural challenges that would put a born-and-raised-in-one-place person up on the ear. A typical MK does not assume that what works in one culture will transfer to another, although she may resort to the known as a starting point in the absence of other options. In a new environment, she has learned to head for the corner of a new room or find a new vantage point; to observe first, then to take on customs and ways of communication, as needed, to fit in. She can explain how cultural issues can affect communication or contribute to interpersonal or interchurch friction. She has also developed flexibility as a way of life because she has learned from youth that one must always be willing to adapt.

I believe that any leader in the Adventist Church of the next generation must understand cultural issues in order to be effective. The Church will need cultural chameleons in the future, Adventists who recognize the strength of culture, know its power over their lives and spiritual beliefs, yet who can also can stand aside from culture often enough to keep seeking the unity inherent in that idealistic and ever-elusive transcendent Christianity.

Notes and References

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4. E. Danielson, *Missionary Kid—MK* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library); E. MacNeill, "Home Is Where I Hang My Hat," *The Japan Christian Quarterly* 42 (1976): 88-91; E. Bakker, "Understanding MKs: Why Their Actions (Sometimes) Don't Fit," in P. Echerd and A. Arathoon, eds., *Understanding and Nurturing the Missionary Family* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library).

5. K. A. F. Jordan, "The Adaptation Process of Third Culture Dependent Youth as They Re-enter The United States and Enter College" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1981); E. M. Stringham, "The Reacculturation of Missionary Families" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1990).

6. Ray Downs, "A Look at the Third Culture Child," *The Japan Christian Quarterly* 42 (1976): 66-71.

7. Useem and Downie, "Third Culture Kids."

8. J. Powell, "Adjustment Disorders," in Echerd and Arathoon, *Understanding and Nurturing the Missionary Family*, 149-54.

9. G. Ketting, "Identity Status Following a Cross-Cultural Move During Adolescence" (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1997).

10. Ward, "The MK's Advantage: Three Cultural Contexts," in Bowers, *Raising Resilient MKs*.

11. And yet, doesn't it perpetuate that great Adventist motivator and comforter, which states that "my home is in heaven, and that is just around the corner"?

12. I have not lost a moment of sleep over celebration churches or praise music, nor have I worried about dress or Sabbath recreational issues. These are all chalk-uppable to cultural dynamics.

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