

A Portable Identity

A Woman's Guide to Maintaining a Sense of Self While Moving Overseas

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Chapter 4

The Impact of the Foreign Culture on Your Identity

Your first encounter with the new culture occurs after you've just flown many hours. You're short on sleep, and still feel raw from the leave-taking process in your home country. You're not in the best condition to step into a new environment. In fact, you're probably in one of the worst conditions possible in terms of your threshold for tolerance.

Debra:

I remember that we arrived in Bangkok in the middle of the night. Our plane was late and rain poured down as we landed. It was hot and humid, and my clothes stuck to me. I was tired. Our sponsor from the embassy met us. She spoke fluent Thai and quickly got us through the airport and customs. I remember listening to all the people speaking Thai. This amazed and amused me. At some level I felt like I was in a dream and perhaps when I woke up, I'd be back in my world where everyone looked familiar and would be speaking English. At another level, I guess the reality of being in Thailand finally hit me.

As we drove into Bangkok in the embassy van, our sponsor told us that instead of taking us to a hotel, she'd take us to our temporary housing, a two-bedroom apartment. This was the first we learned about the change in plans. We arrived at about 3:30 a.m. She gave us an embassy welcome kit that included bed, kitchen and bath linens, some kitchen and cooking utensils, and a few things we could use until our air shipment arrived. She had put a few basic food items in the refrigerator so we could have something to eat in the morning and to hold us over until we could get to the market. She had even made the bed for us. Then she left with instructions for us to be at the embassy by 9:00 a.m. the next morning to begin our check-in procedures.

I remember being very tired but I roamed the apartment exploring our temporary home. It felt odd. The floors were cold and the walls were bare. I eventually went to bed, but I lay there wide awake. When I got up to go to the bathroom I saw something squirming across the floor. It looked like a snake! I screamed, ran, and jumped back into bed. My husband cornered it and said it resembled a small lizard. I pleaded with him to kill it. Brad said he thought it was harmless, but I knew I couldn't sleep with it on the loose. Again I pleaded with Brad to kill it. He

reluctantly agreed, found a shoe, and hit it until it was dead. I examined the dead carcass and felt relieved and ashamed. It was so little. My fear had made my husband end its life.

The next morning at the embassy I inquired about the creature we encountered the night before. They told us it was a harmless gecko, actually beneficial because it eats mosquitoes. Although I had read a lot about Thailand before we arrived, nowhere had I learned about geckos. I was not prepared for meeting my first gecko in the middle of the night. After I learned that geckos were harmless, I felt even more ashamed that I had pleaded with Brad to kill it out of my own ignorance and fear.

We were at the embassy that first day much longer than we had planned. Although we were exhausted from our travel, the lack of sleep the night before, and our long day at the embassy, we decided to get more groceries at the commissary since it was a four day Thai holiday weekend. After completing our shopping, we were each loaded down with bags full of groceries. We walked out the front gate of the embassy to hail a taxi. It was hot, humid, and the fumes from the cars made it difficult to breathe. The taxis either whizzed by us, or after stopping to inquire where we lived, the drivers refused to take us home because it was too far for them to go to get back in time for shift change (even though it was only about three miles away). For over an hour, our attempts to hail a taxi were unsuccessful. As we stood on the sidewalk in front of the embassy with our frozen food melting and sweat dripping down each of us, my husband and I got in an argument about what to do. Brad decided to ask an embassy guard about the situation. The guard explained that Thai taxi drivers rent their vehicles for the day, and if they don't return the taxis on time, they are charged an additional days rent. The guard suggested that we might have better luck getting a taxi outside the back gate of the embassy. We lugged our groceries and our sweat drenched selves to the street behind the embassy, but our attempts to get a taxi were still unsuccessful. Eventually we went back to the commissary and requested that our bags of groceries be kept in the cooler while we tried to find someone in Brad's office who could give us a ride home. Several hours later, we finally made it back to our apartment.

Charise:

I remember walking out from the baggage claim area of the Bangkok airport and meeting my husband's new supervisor. He had come, at midnight, to greet us and help us to our hotel. He and my husband began chatting casually as if it were a normal hour to meet for conversation. I tried to be polite with my daughter clinging onto me. The Thai people tended to stare at her, smile, laugh, and make cooing sounds as if she were an adorable teddy bear. I just wanted to get out of the airport as fast as possible into the dark night; to sink into the darkness and disappear into sleep. I kept my desire in check, waiting patiently as if I were standing on a mountain of willpower. I sensed I was supposed to follow the rhythm of my husband and his boss. I felt obliged. I also felt distant, outside of their interaction.

I realize now that I started to become an outsider the night we arrived. I knew I was on my own, and naive about the ways of this new country. I'd have to figure out my own way to break into some sense of belonging here. Otherwise, I might as well sit on my suitcases and wait a few years for the flight back home.

☞Exercise: Reflections☞

In this section, we'd like you to recall your thoughts and feelings about your first encounter with the foreign country.

What do you remember about your arrival overseas?

Does anything stand out as you recall your arrival?

What do you feel is significant about this memory?

Entering the Cultural Maze

After you arrive in a foreign country, you face many questions about your living arrangements. You must decide (or it may be decided for you) where to live, where to purchase things, where to go for various services, and so on. Even with guidance, you're bound to wander, stumble, take a wrong turn, or underestimate the amount of time it takes to accomplish things. You've now entered a cultural maze. As you attempt to find your way, larger questions loom. How will you live here? How will you handle feelings of frustration, helplessness, incompetence, wonder, curiosity, disgust, or any other of a wide range of feelings? Will you retreat, hide, engage, play, or fight your way through each day? What do your emotions and your actions say about you? How are you behaving in this new and foreign land? How does your behavior define *you*?

The purpose of this chapter is to look at how your identity is further affected by living within a foreign culture. The reason for focusing on the culture is to increase your understanding of what happens to you, and your sense of self when you take up residence in an unfamiliar culture. We'll focus on the interaction between the culture that you've internalized from your homeland and the external culture you encounter overseas. We'll discuss what an internalized sense of culture is, and help to clarify what this means to you. We'll then return to the fundamental question of who you are separate from your sense of place; separate from your home, your community, your country, and your culture.