

HONOR AND
SHAME IN
LATIN AMERICAN
CULTURE



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The role of honor and shame in Asia and Africa has been well established.¹ Yet a “blind spot” regarding the centrality of honor and shame in Latin American culture undermines our presentation of the gospel and our preparation of church leaders in Western-oriented, theological seminaries and Bible schools.

ARE HONOR AND SHAME DYNAMICS CENTRAL TO LATIN AMERICAN CULTURE?

Consider the following, in which the association with honor and shame is mine, although I rely heavily on Eugene Nida² and Marvin Mayers³ observations as well as my own 30+ years as a missionary.

IN LATIN AMERICAN CULTURE:

1. The bullfight is not a sport, but an art form in which evil (as expressed by this tremendous power of nature—the bull) meets God’s supreme creation—man! The bull is strong and beautiful, both respected and feared. He represents the problems each spectator brings to the arena. In contrast El Matador, the bullfighter, is less than athletic in appearance. Often slight of build and dressed in pastel colors covered in gold and silver sequins, he represents the weaknesses and vulnerability of all those watching. Standing in the stead of the spectators, he cannot shrink from the fight. He does not have to be the most expert, but he must not show cowardice. To do so would bring shame on those he represents!
2. Society is structured in a strata-rank system,⁴ with certain expectations for those with a higher position on the social ladder (e.g., keeping shoes shined, the car clean, and having sufficient maids). Failure to meet such expectations brings shame, as does associating with one who does not “behave his status.”
3. Appropriate dress plays an important role in gaining access to government officials and other persons of importance. “You dress up to the highest status possible for you.” To make a request of an official, I wore a dark suit, a white shirt, a tie, and had my shoes shined! To dress below my ascribed status would show a lack of respect (honor) to the official, resulting in my visit being rejected or delayed for hours.
4. When a father wants to name godparents for his child, he will carefully consider every angle before approaching the couple he has selected. If they agree, all is well and the father is honored by their acceptance. However if there is hesitancy or refusal he will incur shame.
5. Whenever the male’s machismo (manliness) is ignored or undermined the result is shame, and some form of retaliation may follow to restore lost honor.
6. Within the family unit, the father is the authority, and tasks which diminish his prestige are to be avoided. In a restaurant an upper class family sat at a nearby table, and the bow on the little girl’s dress came untied as she was bouncing around. She approached her father, but he immediately sent her to her mother—not because he was incapable of tying the bow but because doing so would have meant a loss of prestige before those of us in the restaurant.
7. The wife is likewise affected by the shame/honor continuum. Her husband can be involved in numerous extramarital sexual affairs and she is expected to remain quiet. To confront him would bring shame to both him and her. By her actions (i.e., fulfilling the expectations associated with her role) she also plays a key role in maintaining the honor

(or shame) of her family and extended family, maintaining her reputation and the reputation of those associated with her. As such her reputation is a major concern for her husband, and is protected with all diligence. Woe to anyone who soils her reputation!

8. A death in the family also carries potential for family honor or shame, and preparations are elaborate. The type of food served, the processions, the rituals, the dress—all are scripted to honor the memory of the love one who has died. To do less brings shame upon the family.

9. Exposure of weakness or failure is avoided as shameful, and society is designed to support the person who is trying to avoid the appearance of weakness and cover for the one who is experiencing shame. Idioms reflects this in phrases like *se perdió* (it lost itself) or *se cayó* (it dropped itself)—responses that blame the object rather than the person who lost it or dropped it. If uninterrupted and smooth reading is an expectation of one's social position, a person with poor oral reading skills will not read in public. To do so would bring him shame. A person reprimanded (shamed) in public may be driven to seek retribution, and a family in financial straits may seek money from a relative or employer to maintain the perception of financial stability.

10. One's state in life is a matter of shame or honor. In stark contrast to the North American sentiment "to be born poor is no disgrace," the very poor in Latin America believe "nacer pobre es un delito" (to be born poor is a crime). In one village we visited an elderly Quechua woman cried over her "shame" at not being able to receive us in a manner worthy of our perceived status. She was born poor, and was ashamed of her poverty in the presence of her visitors.

11. The church too is influenced by honor/shame dynamics. Popular Roman Catholicism posits that the spirit can maintain its honor even when the flesh is involved in sin. So the thief can use stolen money for a candle to burn before his patron saint, and the prostitute can place money she just earned before a statue of the Virgin Mary.

12. Historically the power of honor and shame is seen in the young *mestizo* born of the Spanish Conquistador and an Indian wife. The boy idealizes the father who brought him status and honor, even though he was never present, yet because of her lowly status he is ashamed of the Indian mother who loved him and provided for all his needs.

From my own experience:

- A man I had gotten to know came to my office and explained that his wife was sick and he needed to purchase medicine but he didn't have the money. He asked to "borrow" one hundred pesos. I gave him the money, fully aware it would never be paid back. To have asked for a gift would have brought him shame, so he worded the request to maintain his dignity and honor even though both of us understood what he really meant.

- A young Indian girl became our house helper and came to know Christ. In the shuffle of coming forward to receive communion, she was left sitting at one end of a pew with three "churchgoers" at the other end. These three perceived her status as lower than theirs, and just sitting on the same row as someone with a lower status caused the three to feel such shame that they felt compelled to move to another row that was already full, leaving her alone.
- All day I struggled to communicate to the young Quechua seminary students how rich their culture is in stories and customs that provide "bridges" for sharing the gospel. Finally, one young man explained in Spanish that his parents had sternly warned him to never speak the Quechua language or discuss Quechua ways in the presence of others. To do so would bring shame not only upon the young man but also to his family. I saw his Quechua cultural heritage as helpful, but through his honor/shame lens he saw it as hurtful and to be avoided.

Understanding honor and shame in Latin culture is significant for both evangelism and theological education. I close with these questions for you to ponder:

- If honor and shame play a more significant role than previously realized, how should the message of the Gospel be reframed to speak more directly to the values of Latin culture?
- Might the gospel be better understood and embraced in Latin America as Christ restoring our honor and removing the shame of those who have "sinned and fallen short of the glory of God"?
- How should the centrality of honor and shame in both Latin and Muslim cultures influence how we train Latin American missionaries to Muslim lands?
- How should awareness of honor and shame influence our training of Latin American pastors? 

Adapted from Beyond Literate Western Contexts: Honor & Shame and Assessment of Orality Preference, Samuel E. Chiang & Grant Lovejoy editors (2015 in cooperation with Capstone Enterprises)

¹ See <http://WernerMischke.org/resources>

² *Understanding Latin America: With Special Reference to religious Values and Movements* by Eugene A. Nida (William Carey Library Publishers: 1974)

³ *A Look at Latin American Lifestyles*, 2nd edition (International Museum of Cultures Publication) by Marvin K. Mayers (Summer Institute of Linguistics: 1982)

⁴ As opposed to a caste or class system. In strata-rank systems, every person perceives everyone else in the system as either above or below himself.

Adapted from Beyond Literate Western Contexts: Honor