Korean American Catholicism
Eric Hovey

EVOKE

About the Ethnographer
My name is Eric S. Hovey and I am a Sophomore in Anthropology (Class 2009) and a Philosophy minor. I have no Korean relatives or relations, but have found this to be one of my most intellectually stimulating and interesting classes.

My future plans are to serve as a Marine Corps officer following graduation, though I may or may not return to the civilian world to pursue further graduate anthropology studies. If so, I am still debating between specializing in Ethnography or Archaeology, as I find both areas equally fascinating.

Anyone interested in the subject of Korean American Catholicism should feel free to contact me at ehovey2@uiuc.edu.

"A Document"

Files:
iLAB Assignment 1.doc (Sun 01/28/2007 20:04)
Eric Hovey iLAB#1.doc (Mon 01/29/2007 15:02)

EXPLORE

Question
What questions is your inquiry contingent upon?
"An Early Question"

Files:
iLab Assignment 2.doc (Tue 02/06/2007 0:42)

Plan
How will you go about answering your inquiry?
In light of our class readings dealing with the powerful ties between Korean Americans and their kin back in the homeland (a la Korean coverage of the L.A. Riots, Korean adoptee reunification efforts, etc.), I have decided to expand the focus of my research. Essentially I want to gain as much information as possible on the role, if any, that the Catholic Church in Korea plays in U.S. affairs.

If it turns out that there is a substantial relationship between Korean Catholic Organizations such as the "Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea" (CBCK) and groups here in the U.S., then this could have broad implications for my research. Basically, it would lend credence to the idea that local Catholic organizations in the Urbana-Champaign area increase their outreach towards Korean American Catholics.
Any voice(s) from Korea, especially at the Bishop level, would be very instrumental in getting local Churches, such as St. John's, to increase their Korean Catholic correspondence.

"An Initial Plan"

Files:
iLab Assignment 4.doc (Mon 02/19/2007 22:47)

OBSERVE
What observations, or findings are you encountering in your research?
It has occurred to me (in light of my iLAB comments) that I have begun to focus too narrowly on the subject of Korean American Catholics here at the University of Illinois, causing me to take a few steps back and reevaluate my research direction. Furthermore, in light of my foot injury making travel about campus for interviews difficult at best, I have decided on a new approach for the time being: gathering information about the Korean Catholic Church's influence on stateside affairs.

Accordingly, I have sent a message to the CBCK (Catholic Bishop's Conference of Korea - http://www.cbck.or.kr/front/eng/cbck/) requesting both information on the matter and a local liaison if possible. It is my intent to find some individual/organization that I can directly network with and gain insight into local Korean Catholic affairs. This will be critical to my larger goal too of helping Korean American Catholics on campus to having a greater voice at St. John's.

Files:
Letter to Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea.doc (Tue 04/03/2007 20:28)

Interview w/"Harold"

Files:
Observation-Interview.doc (Wed 03/07/2007 20:00)
Ericobservation-interviewna.doc (Tue 03/13/2007 5:36)

"Observations"

Files:
iLab Assignment 3.doc (Mon 02/12/2007 8:38)

DISCUSS
Discuss your inquiry, taking care to separate speculation from fact or data
Research Proposal
In many ways this will be the bulk of my current iLAB project, as I have only recently been out of my cast and able to walk again—that is to say, now I can actually go out and conduct ethnographic research/observations with ease. I have been fortunate too, in that recently I have been turned on to some excellent outside research articles that have helped me to redirect my ground research here in Champaign. First though I will discuss
my project in light of some articles from class, starting with the first two Kim and Chong articles from April 3, 2007 on Religion.

With regards to the Kim article, I was most interested in her initial assertion about the 3 main reasons for religious ethnic group division: desire for community, ‘homophily,’ and desire for majority status. Even though her research was concerned with the Evangelical Church, I was curious to see if these types of criterion were readily applicable to Korean American Catholics (KAC’s). My current findings thus far suggest that of the above reasons, it is likely that only the first two can be said to be readily applicable to Korean American Catholics because of their unique “minority within a minority status.” Essentially, whereas Evangelicals hold powerful sway over the American political landscape (particularly in the south) and the majority of Christian Koreans are Evangelicals/Protestant, Catholics are not nearly as numerous nor politically powerful. Thus, it is unlikely that KAC’s would form ethnic Churches to gain majority status, as they are already in a position of being a marginalized minority within a marginalized (religious) minority.

With this in mind the Chong piece (which I really liked because of how it dealt with Chicago Churches) was very useful in reinforcing some of the points that the Kim article made, and that matched my data and readings. Mainly, there is the reoccurring idea that “social” and “cultural” reasons are the most important reasons for attending an all Korean Church. My one major dislike with Chong’s findings was it seemed to generalize oftentimes, “traditional” Korean values as stereotypically Asian notions of submissiveness, humility, group behaviors, and chastity (vs. American “traditional” values of liberty, free speech, individualism, etc.). It seems that ethnographic literature on Asian Americans oftentimes makes too broad assertions and does not make enough allowances for individual differences within the larger ethnographic group. What I mean by this, is that just because someone is a KAC does not mean they are necessarily humble or quiet, and from there, does not necessarily explain that they identify with the Catholic faith to further their “traditional” Korean beliefs. However, in light of the CBS news specials/articles I posted earlier, as well as conversations with Korean American individuals, it seems there could be a correlation. Traditional Catholic values do put a large emphasis on individuals being chaste until marriage, humble, and submissive (in regards to doctrinal values), so it is possible that KAC’s form ethnic groups to better regulate cultural and religious harmony. Really though, I just want to avoid jumping to conclusions about why so many KAC’s form ethnic congregations, with the obvious (and possibly oversimplified) answer that it is to be with other people similar to them in belief and race.

I feel that one of the main reasons for my hesitation about the Korean traditional values/Catholic values correlation stems from our readings concerning Korean American Adoptees. In particular, I am fond of Eleana Kim’s referencing of the notion that one’s ethnic identity is “‘something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation, by each individual and that it is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control.’” What precious little material that exists about the unique situation of KAC’s generally tries to use broad examples of either Korean values, immigrant values in general, or otherwise large sweeping explanations. Kim’s work with
adoptees then, serves as a crucial reminder that everyone’s experiences are different and that while group behaviors are important in discussing KAC’s, individual motivations should not be left by the wayside.

Lastly, I wanted to tie my research to Jung Sun Park’s work on Korean American Youth because of one very interesting statistic I came across in the CBS documentary. Across all ethnic categories, while KAC’s account for a mere 2% of the Catholic population, they account for 12% of all seminarians. Obviously then, KAC youth are not only participating in Church as a means for ‘homophily’ or merely there immigrant parent’s wishes, but because they take the faith very seriously. When one ties this phenomenon to Park’s documentation of how active Korean youth are on the internet and with regards to globalized pop culture, it makes for an interesting mix. Furthermore, it is important to note that two of the contacts I was able to get a hold of via the internet were those affiliated with the Korean WYD (World Youth Day) Delegation. The event, sponsored by the former Pope John Paul II, is a transnational gathering of Catholic youth every 4 years in a predetermined city. It attracts millions of Catholics from around the globe every time it is held, and was part of a larger plan to put greater emphasis on youth participation and leadership within the Church. Thus, my research will have to take into account the role of KAC youth, what motivates them at home and abroad, and how their disproportionate amounts in a shrinking U.S. priesthood environment will affect American Catholicism in its entirety.

For purposes of my iLAB project, however, the real question I aim to answer is where do KAC’s fit into our campus community, both as Catholics and Korean Americans? Are they Korean first, Catholic first, KAC first, or perhaps neither attribute factors into how they perceive themselves as students at U of I (though I highly doubt that)? Now that I am able to begin traveling sans bus/crutches, I feel that I can actively begin to answer these questions. As an EUI intern, I propose a roughly 4 week summer project that will involve visiting and interviewing both the St. Mary’s Korean Student Association, and the leadership at St. John’s Catholic Church. It is only fitting that since my research has indicated that KAC’s are a small, but increasingly influential group (more so among the U.S. Catholic minority), they should not be relegated to marginal status within the U of I Catholic community at large. Also, since much of my early research trying to link active Korean involvement with KAC affairs has turned up fruitless, it seems only prudent for a sort of 3rd party intervention on my behalf. If KAC’s are left on the periphery of University affairs and the main Catholic community is none the wiser, it is up to someone else to bridge the gap. It is my hope that I can help make a difference in this respect and would be a classic example of active anthropological work improving people’s lives.


REFLECT
Link
Connect with other resources and materials.
Excellent website that has the latest statistics concerning the Catholic population in the U.S.: of particular note is the rising population but shrinking number of priests.

http://cara.georgetown.edu/bulletin/index.htm

Finally, after initially contacting the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea (CBCK) and later a WYD (World Youth Day) Korean Catholic website, I have been able to make some progress in learning about Korean American Catholicism. The latter group put me in touch with a man, Joe Kim, who is currently studying to be a Korean priest in the U.S.

While he himself was not familiar with any Midwestern or Illinois points of contact within the Korean Catholic Church, he was nonetheless able to tune me in to some excellent articles on the subject. I will discuss the findings later in my research:

http://wyd.koreancatholics.com/ - the initial WYD website

CBS Articles on Asian (though mostly Korean) American Catholicism, the first contains video links to a TV special that was conducted:


After my interview with "Harold," I decided to find out more about St. Mary's: evidently they have a KCSA (Korean Catholic Student Association) organization, so I provided the link http://www.stmary-kcsa.org/.

...the only problem is that the page is entirely in Korean, so I will likely have to visit the Church in person in order to find out more information.

Implications
Could your findings have broader implications beyond this inquiry?
Recommendations:
While it is not really the University’s purview to delve into religious affairs, I do think that St. John’s Catholic Church, which is currently undergoing a multi-million dollar expansion project and is the largest Catholic Church in the area, should take a more
active role in welcoming Korean Catholics. From Mexican and South American immigrants to those from Asia and abroad, the face of the Catholic Church in the U.S. is changing rapidly. What concerns me is that by virtue of our school’s predominately Caucasian undergraduate population, St. John’s is being insulated from the effects of Catholicism’s changing demography. While they have made progress with the addition of a Spanish Mass, I have yet to ever hear a mass that addresses the issue of diversity and much less read in the newsletter any type of serious outreach to Catholic minorities. My ultimate goal is to change this fact and try to establish more of a link between the biggest Church here on campus and minority Catholics, especially Korean Catholics. It is unacceptable that under their home website only one “Related Campus Group” is listed (Illini Collegians for Life), when the smaller St. Mary’s has an entire Korean Catholic Student Association. In short, the time is now for St. John’s to start reaching out to minorities in earnest.

OTHER
A space for other notes, findings, comments, etc.
Research Reflections:
Ultimately, I have mixed feelings about my iLAB project. In terms of its relation to the class it is an excellent idea: for an undergraduate student to be able to mix ethnographic reading and analysis with actual fieldwork is an amazing opportunity, one that I am glad to have been a part of. Really my only real problem has been that on account of my foot injury, I have been seriously handicapped (forgive the pun) in the types of research I had initially planned.

Where I had seen myself going about campus interviewing people and “getting my hands dirty” so to speak, I found myself largely sidelined for almost two months. This forced me to conduct a lot of research at home and play e-mail tag, when I would rather have had more physical campus interaction type research. However, what I see as the real beauty of iLAB’s is that my story does not have to end there.

Now that I am no longer on crutches, I plan to continue my stalled class project over the summer as an EUI intern. This fact alone has kept me motivated throughout the semester, especially during the times when I looked at what I had for my project and came up blank. Basically, I took solace in the fact that while for the last two months my actual fieldwork on campus was suffering, I was able to build a better foundational understanding of KAC’s in the meantime.

To me, that is the best part of having an iLAB for the University of Illinois. If next year I find that I have some new information concerning my old project, I can go ahead and update it at my leisure so future generations can benefit. It is my hope then, that I can continue to build off of the base learning I have currently established in this class, and end up with a tremendous final product over the summer.