

# FIELDWORK CONNECTIONS

THE FABRIC OF ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLABORATION  
IN CHINA AND AMERICA

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WITH A CONTRIBUTION BY BAMO QUBUMO

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The next day, we went to the Golden Gate Bridge, a forest park, a sea-side park, and other places, plucking the string of tourism really hard. Perhaps spending a little over ten days looking at the flowers from horse-back didn't give us a basis for evaluating America from head to toe, but still, from our direct observation we could comprehend the profundity of the Yi saying *Zze li kur zze, bburma li hie jjo x ddur* (Digestion goes on in the intestines; the health results are visible in the muscles and skin). One can't help saying that America's good social ethics, habits of cleanliness, urban construction, and environmental preservation all stem from the deeper levels of her culture.

After the conclusion of the International Yi Studies Conference in Seattle, Muga's and my relationship continued to strengthen, and our interest in cooperation continued to increase. At the end of 1994, we made a preliminary decision on two plans for cooperation. One was to conduct comprehensive research on the ethnic groups in the southern part of the Yalong River watershed; the second was to prepare to mount an exhibit in Seattle of Liangshan Yi clothing, lacquerware, and other materials. The first project never got funded; the second, through Muga's efforts, came to realization.

SEATTLE FIRST FREE METHODIST CHURCH, 1996–97

BAMO AYI

“**N**ow we're going to Queen Anne, to see a landlady called Amber. Amber is a single woman, a member of a Protestant church.” It was the third day after my arrival in Seattle. Professor Harrell was explaining things to me while driving the van he had purchased especially to take his Chinese friends around. We were looking at rooms for rent.

In September 1996, through Professor Harrell's nomination, I had been fortunate to receive support from the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China and the China Studies Program of the University of Washington to come to the anthropology department at the University, then chaired by Professor Harrell, as a visiting scholar for one year. Even though my primary motive for coming to America was to conduct research with Professor Harrell on bilingual education and Nuosu-language textbooks used in Liangshan Prefecture in Sichuan and to audit Chinese culture and comparative religion classes at the UW, part of my goal was to better understand American churches and their members. Of course, the best way to understand religion would be to live in a church member's home. So two months before I came to America, I asked Steve to help me find a landlord who was a church member.

A few days later I moved to Queen Anne and became Amber's tenant. My American home was the attic room of a gray house, a spacious bedroom with an entryway. On the windowsill, a flowering plant whose name I couldn't recall gave off a sweet fragrance. On the wall next to the window hung an old Chinese landscape painting. There was a finely worked paperweight on the desk, whose design resembled an old Chinese "hundred child picture," showing children in Chinese-style silk clothing playing. I felt a ripple of warmth, and also a bit of puzzlement: Where had Amber gotten ahold of these Chinese things? It looked like the landlady had put some real thought toward welcoming her tenant from China.

"Ayi, dinner!" came Amber's voice from the corridor.

"Let's say a prayer," Amber said, after her son Jason and I sat down at the table. Watching Amber beside me out of the corner of my eye, I could see her sitting up straight, both eyes closed, saying grace before the meal. I sat as if fixed in place by the somber atmosphere, and didn't dare move, didn't even dare exhale, but inside I was completely satisfied, inwardly celebrating my choice of landlady and my choice not only to live in one of her rooms and eat the food she cooked but also to become her companion. Even eating had its religious aspect. I perked up my ears and listened to Amber's soft but clear recitation. She was thanking God, thanking God for bringing Ayi into her life, thanking God for the abundant food.

I peeked at Jason across the table; he appeared wooden, unmoving. I guessed that he might be saying a silent prayer. There are many kinds of prayers, some spoken and some silent. On my first day in Amber's house, I had already begun my American fieldwork.

Amber was fifty-three years old, and had been divorced from her husband for five years. She had a pair of children. Her son Jason was thirty-three, unmarried, and worked in an old car restoration shop; he paid monthly rent just like me. Her daughter Gwendolyn, not yet thirty, was a construction worker and a single mother; she lived with her twelve-year-old daughter Katrina in a rented house. Amber worked two jobs: She cooked and found shelter for the homeless at Operation Nightwatch, and cooked lunch in a public elementary school cafeteria. Her earnings from the two jobs were still not sufficient for her, and rent was

undoubtedly an important part of her monthly income. I hadn't been living at Amber's very long when her old friend Cheryl also moved in and became another paying tenant.

Before I had moved into Amber's house, Steve had spoken to her about his hope that she would help me to learn about religion, but wouldn't try to get me to join her church; he had told her that my interest was strictly in research. Steve had shown considerable foresight in announcing this publicly and bringing everyone into agreement at the beginning. Amber had already consulted with her pastor, Mark, about letting a non-believing Chinese scholar participate in church activities and do research, but I didn't learn that until later. I had never imagined that Amber would be so earnest about my research, and that a church member could have such self-discipline as to ask for such permission.

On the first Sunday, I impatiently asked if I could go to church with Amber. Her church was called the Seattle First Free Methodist Church (FFMC). The church was at the foot of Queen Anne Hill, one street away from and facing Seattle Pacific University (SPU), a church-supported college, and many of the FFMC members came from the faculty, students, and staff of the University, so that the relationship between the University and the church was particularly close.

From where we lived, it was only five minutes by car, along steep streets, to the church. First we attended Sunday school in the SPU music department auditorium. We went to the old folks' class, called the Homebuilder Class. As we entered, the chair of the meeting was leading everyone in a prayer. After that, he asked if there were any announcements. Amber pulled me to my feet and introduced her new tenant, making sure to announce that I was interested in religion and was conducting fieldwork, and wittily pointing out to group, "We are her field."

The speaker that day was Eugene Lemicio, a professor of religious studies at SPU, who gave a lecture entitled "The nature and characteristics of the early church," one of a series of lectures on church history. What was surprising to me was that he had to say a prayer before the talk. He asked God to help everyone to understand the content of the talk, to help everyone to grow in their spiritual life. How could God help people understand a lecture? I, who had spent half a lifetime as a teacher and student, couldn't make any sense of it at all.

Coming out of the auditorium, I went with the flow of people into the church. The worship program began with beautiful music. There is a proverb that says “Those who know observe how something is done; those who don’t know observe the fun.” In the beginning, because of the language and cultural barriers, I was honestly just observing the fun. After the hour-long worship service, I was most interested in two things: the music and the offering. At least half of the service was conducted against the background of beautiful music and the singing of hymns. If someone like me with poor English rushed in and didn’t think for a minute, she would certainly think she was in a concert. With music played that well, I thought, people might come to the church service just to hear the music. Later on, I learned that the First Free Methodist Church of Seattle was known up and down the West Coast for its music—because they were seriously interested in the musical education of their members, and because of the help of the excellent music department at SPU. Amber was extremely proud of her church choir.

The other thing that had attracted my attention during the service had been the passing of the bamboo offering basket. Because it was my first time attending church, I kept my eyes wide open and my ears alert, fearing that I might miss something or do something wrong. When I discovered that people were passing a little bamboo basket and putting envelopes or cash into it, I suddenly realized that it was the offering, and nervously reached for my purse. At that point Amber had softly said to me, “No, you’re not a church member; you don’t have to give money.” I had known that a church’s existence depended on its members’ contributions, but I hadn’t known that they were collected in that way. In Chinese Buddhist or Daoist temples, the contribution box is fixed in one place, and people decide for themselves whether or not to contribute. But at Amber’s church, the collection is conducted in public, the basket passes through everybody’s hands, and it seems as if it would be very hard to pass it on without adding a little bit.

The first few times I went to church, the offering basket troubled me. Making an offering wouldn’t do, because I wasn’t a church member, and not making an offering wouldn’t do either, because I came to church almost every Sunday, and I benefited from the service of the church, in both senses of the word. Every time the basket came around,

I felt nervous. After about two months, however, I decided that I would put in a few dollars every time the basket came by, since I had come to like the church, the service, the music, and the sermons, as well as the new friends I had made there. I not only thought that I ought to make offerings, I wanted to make offerings. When Amber saw me putting bills into the offering basket, I could tell from her pleased expression that she was thinking that I was beginning to accept her God. Amber never tried to persuade me to join the church, even though I had the feeling that she was trying to covertly. I never dared to ask Amber about the offerings or the way they were used; I didn’t want her to think that I was investigating church secrets.

On Sunday, January 19, 1997, the topic of the sermon was “money.” Pastor Mark and two other members conducted a dialogue that was almost a skit on the Protestant Church’s ideas about money. The Order of Worship announced the financial figures for the church for the preceding year, and the projected budget for the following year. Every member was advised to go home and make his or her own budget and to plan the use of income wisely, and was urged to make offerings to God and the church.

When we got back from church, Amber curled up on the couch and figured her budget according to the church’s teachings. In a half year of contact, Amber had seldom avoided any subject with me. Her earnings from Operation Nightwatch, the school cafeteria, and the three rented rooms added up to \$28,000. Amber planned to give \$280 per month (\$70 per week) to Methodist missionary activities in South Africa and to Operation Nightwatch, and \$20 per month to a girl in South Africa whose education she was sponsoring. Amber explained that when one wrote a check to the church, one had only to indicate a program, and the church would put the money into the budget for that program, according to the member’s wishes. Out of curiosity, I asked Amber if the church leaders might use the money for private purposes or waste it. Amber said, “On this point, you can rest assured.” She used Pastor Mark as an example. Pastor Mark kept only a portion of the salary the church paid him to live on, and returned the rest to the church. He lived in a small house and drove a small car. He was trustworthy, and intelligent and wise, and capable of spending money where it ought to be



16.1 Ayi with Bible teachers Hugh and Frid Nutley (left), English teachers Ken and Bonnie Peterson (right), and international students, Seattle First Free Methodist Church, 1996.

spent. I always thought of tithes as taxes, but Amber held to the idea that offerings were completely voluntary. Later, her son Jason said that, on the contrary, a tithe of 10 percent was the unwritten rule of every church; that was one reason he did not believe or to go to church.

In addition to attending Sunday school and church services, I also went to an English class and a Bible class for international students held by the church. We had classes every Friday evening from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m.; we studied English the first hour, and the Bible the second hour. Ken and Bonnie, the English teachers, taught English at several colleges in Tianjin and Beijing, and could speak a little Chinese (fig. 16.1). (When they later took positions teaching English at a college in Xuzhou in 1998–99, I entertained them in Beijing.) The teachers of the Bible class were called Hugh and Frid. Hugh was very conscientious in his teaching. In order to get us to understand the relationship between God and humans, he used the analogy of a father and his children, which I thought was very interesting. If the children were obedient, it was a reward for the father; if they were rebellious, it was a reprimand and a punishment

for the father. When I told Amber that I thought that Hugh’s Christianity had an obvious tendency toward *paterfamilias*, she said that Hugh would certainly talk about God’s forgiveness and mercy. One time, Hugh asked everybody in the class, “If you unexpectedly received a million dollars, how would you spend it?” The students’ answers were all over the place: some would buy a big house, some would travel around the world, some would contribute it all to the church. At the time, I thought that Hugh would certainly have a lofty, inspiring answer to his question; when I heard him say that he would give the money to his grandson to go to the best university, I was at first disappointed, and then I felt that he was honest and lovable. Through this experience, I discovered that I myself had unknowingly begun to conform to the Christian mold—in fact, church members lived in the real world, and there were all different kinds of them.

In China, when I had gone to observe a Buddhist or Daoist temple, I had imitated others and clasped my hands and closed my eyes to pray for something I wanted, but I had never believed it, and didn’t count it as real prayer. I had never imagined that a preacher in an American church would pray for me, with the entire congregation as witnesses, all helping with the prayer. It happened on Sunday, February 2, 1997. A few days earlier, I had gotten a phone call saying that my daughter had gone into the hospital and was about to have surgery; since then, I had been constantly disturbed and uneasy. During the service that Sunday, Amber passed me a note: “Would you mind putting Asa’s hospital stay into the program for prayers today?” According to the order of worship, at a time near the final benediction, the minister would lead the congregation in praying for a few people who had special needs. Perhaps because I didn’t want to refuse Amber’s good intentions, or because I wanted to have the experience myself, or because I really hoped the prayer would have an effect, I nodded to Amber. At prayer time, Amber and I walked to the front of the church and knelt together with seven or eight others who had requested prayers on a bench for that purpose next to the altar. When it was my turn, I told the assistant pastor, Bonnie, simply, “My daughter’s name is Asa; she is six years old; she has already gone into the hospital, and is about to be operated on.” “Ayi’s daughter and husband are in Beijing,” Amber added. The newly

hired assistant minister, David, put his hands on my shoulders, and Bonnie put her hands on my head and led everyone in a prayer for Asa, asking God to protect Asa's safety during the surgery and to give her a quick recovery. From behind me came a chorus of believers' prayers. I was deeply moved, and my eyes filled with tears. The prayers expressed good wishes, and I so hoped that those good wishes would become reality. After the service was over, believers whom I knew and some whom I didn't know surrounded me and comforted me, one after another, saying that they would continue to pray for Asa. Hugh and Frid, and Bonnie and Ken telephoned to ask how Asa was doing, and Bonnie put Asa's name on her list of people to pray for.

Of all of the activities I took part in at the First Free Methodist Church, the most casual, the most unstructured, the most fun was the women's group. The group's meetings took place every Thursday evening at the house of the organizer, Soph. There were eight or nine women at the most, and sometimes only four or five. The main topics in the discussions were children, husbands, and friends; books, movies, clothes and cooking were also discussed. The activities ranged from telling stories or jokes to doing handicrafts to exchanging presents to having birthday parties. When we got together, we shared joys and happiness and also troubles and sadness. I remember one woman, Gene, talking about her eldest son's return from the Vietnam War; he was mired in self-deprecation, self-accusation, and self-hate. Relatives didn't dare mention the war in his presence, but recently her son had told her that during the war, he had killed unarmed peasants while they were working in the fields. Gene was very worried and sad about her son's mental state. Upon hearing Gene's story, Becky, a nurse who worked in a hospital, said that she wanted to take Gene's son to a specialized psychiatric clinic at the University of Washington hospital to have him looked at. Soph suggested that Gene should encourage her son to take part in church activities, and thus help him to solve his problems through faith.

One thing that surprised me about the group was that these American women were extremely interested in cultures that they knew nothing about; as soon as I joined the group, China and the Yi became frequent topics of conversation. One time, when I was talking about the traditional Yi ways of dealing with those who broke clan rules, one

woman, Cindy, simply couldn't understand why Yi society didn't have forgiveness or tolerance. I told her that if Yi society was forgiving and tolerant, the society would be shaken, it would fall apart. Cindy's culture shock was a result of using Christian ideas to look at the rest of the world.

At the farewell party that the group organized for me before I went back to China, Soph spoke, saying that my stay had been a new experience for the group, not only because I had shared the joy of stories about China and about the Yi, thereby ridding the group of many misconceptions and adding to their knowledge, but also because of the time I led the group on an adventure to a black church. "Adventure" was her word. It happened like this: I once suggested to Soph and Amber that they should organize a trip to a prayer meeting for the recovery of drug addicts at a black church. Even though Soph and Amber were enlightened believers, organizing group members to go to another church, particularly a black church, was something they had never done before. I thought I would just try, and didn't really expect we would do it, but I soon received a notice that they had decided to do it as a group activity.

On March 20, 1997, group leader Soph took Amber, Cindy, Cheryl, and me—five of us in all—to the Mt. Zion Baptist Church. As soon as I walked into the black church, I felt a new and unfamiliar feeling. I felt quite excited, and leapt to the front of the group, all the way to the second row (the first row being occupied by seven or eight young black people, the recovering addicts who were being prayed for) because I wanted to get the best seat so I could observe better. I pulled Soph over to the front without saying anything. The prayer meeting began; that day's preacher was a famous black author and missionary, the Reverend Dr. Arlene Churn. Her preaching was very lively; in contrast to Pastor Mark, with his set delivery and relatively calm voice, she waved her arms and strode about the podium, sometimes with her eyes closed, beseeching the Lord, sometimes looking heavenward, thanking Jesus. The believers in the audience responded excitedly, calling out "Yes!" "Right!" and "Amen!" A large number of people sang the hymns (there were probably seventy or eighty people in the choir), accompanied only by a few simple percussion and electronic instruments. In addition to having a strong rock-and-roll flavor, the hymn singing there also had an African

rhythm to it. The black congregation all seemed to be unself-consciously joining in the music, clapping, adding extra parts, joining in with the choir. In the choir loft, in the pulpit, and in the audience, the entire church was rocking and soaring with the music, and the music and the singing were extraordinarily contagious. When the prayer meeting was over, the tearful youngsters in the first row came back and greeted and shook hands with those of us sitting in the second.

In the car on the way home, I discovered that everyone was deep in thought. Cindy, quite moved, said "That prayer meeting was great; I wish I were a black person—if I were, I would definitely belong to that church." I pursued her thought. "Why do you have to be black to go there; we went, didn't we?" Cindy said, "But I still felt unnatural." Soph complained about my dragging everyone to the front, saying, "You just about took us to the front row." They had been meaning to sit at the very back. Soph said that the thing that had scared her the most was when the young black people in the front row had turned around and faced us four white ladies (leaving me out) and made us particularly uncomfortable with ourselves. "But I didn't think about color," I said. "It would be great if we could get that black Ph.D. preacher to come to 'our' church sometime." Amber immediately replied, "Even though Dr. Churn's preaching really moved people, and her sermon was rich in emotion, it lacked depth. Faith is the head plus the heart. Otherwise, once the emotion is gone, the faith would just wither. Today the recovering addicts were overcome with tears, but if they don't have rational belief to hold on to, just wait and see, their recovery will be temporary." Cheryl didn't agree; she said that she really liked that kind of preaching, and the lively and warm atmosphere of the black people's prayer meeting. Some sermons needed to be simple, others incisive; some needed to be lively, others profound; it depended on the audience; Mark's sermons were suited to the believers of the First Free Methodist Church, because most of them were intellectuals; if he took his sermons to that black church, they wouldn't necessarily be welcomed.

I remember the first time I called the church "our church." When I spoke to Steve and to friends at the university, I would call it "my landlady Amber's church." After half a year, at the time of our "adventure" to the black church, I blurted out "our church," indicating my change

in identity; it had been an unconscious process. From that time on, I began to use "our church" with Amber and friends from the church, but as a matter of participating in the church's activities, having friends in the church, and liking the preaching and the music. It had nothing to do with believing in Jesus or God. "If the speaker doesn't mean it, then it's nonsense to the listener." On the twenty-third of March, Cheryl and I were chatting. "I was really happy when I heard you say 'our church,'" she told me. "Are you planning to become a church member before you go back to China?" I curtly replied, "No, I don't plan on joining the church." She said, "This is a hope of mine, that you will be able to join the church before you leave America." I was quiet for a minute, pondering how I could explain myself to Cheryl, but I quickly gave up the effort. I knew that she wanted to "save" me, and I had already answered her. Cheryl was sad, and went to the living room to speak with Amber.

Upstairs by myself, I guessed that they were discussing whether or not I would become a believer. This made me somewhat confused. Cheryl knew my attitude toward joining the church. Even though she had never discussed it with me directly, she had frequently broached the subject indirectly. One time, during a deep discussion about salvation, the hereafter, and eternal life, she talked about faith being the core question, and asked me, "Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe in God?" I changed the direction of the conversation, and said instead, "In our homeland, Yi people worship ancestors, and believe in ghosts and spirits; they have never heard that there's a God, or of Jesus, so they can't even talk about believing or not believing—will they ever be able to be saved? Will they ever be able to go to Heaven?" Without pausing at all, Cheryl answered, "If you don't believe in God and don't believe in Jesus, then of course you can't be saved." "Your God is unfair," I replied. "Not knowing is not a sin." This seemed to stump her. Several days later, Cheryl came upstairs specifically to tell me, "If God's gospel has never been transmitted to your homeland, God couldn't, just because of that, not care about your Yi people; even though they worship idols and believe in many gods, they can still get God's forgiveness and salvation, and after they die, they can go to heaven and be together with God and have eternal life. But those who heard God's gospel and refused his message would forever be unable to enter heaven

and have eternal life.” Right then, I understood the cleverness and sharpness of Cheryl’s discourse.

Shortly after Cheryl had moved to Queen Anne, she took the church’s membership class. I wanted to go with her, but she said that it was impossible; the membership class was for those who were already believers and had decided to become church members. But I never gave up. The membership class did not run on a regular schedule; whenever there were people who wanted to join, a class could be organized. On the third of March, 1997, the Order of Worship gave notice that the church was about to run another membership class. The theme of the training was “How to be a member of the Free Methodist Church and a Christian.” I immediately told Amber that the membership training class was very important for understanding the church, and that I would really like to audit it. When the service was over, Amber said that she would ask Mark whether he would allow me to join in. She was probably afraid that if I had gone directly to ask Mark publicly, it would have put him in a difficult position. Not five minutes later, Amber came back all sunny and told me that Mark had agreed. I jumped up happily, thanking Amber and sighing to her that Mark really was an open-minded pastor.

Amber said that she was thinking of reviewing her religious knowledge, so we went to the class together. It began with self-introductions. From these, I learned that Mark’s parents had both been missionaries, and that in 1940 they had been ready to go to China to proselytize, but that it had not happened, and they had ended up going to India. Mark had been born in India, and was baptized into the Baptist Church at the age of twelve. In India he had attended a boarding school run by British people, but had returned to America for higher education. He had joined the Methodist Church in 1982. Mark’s class was divided into two time periods, in which he discussed four main subjects: the conditions for being a Christian, the history of the Methodist Church, the basic beliefs of the Methodist Church, and the structure and function of the church. To accompany his explanations, Mark passed out materials. The one I liked best was “Our Family Tree,” a historical record of the Methodist Church, which used an anthropological genealogy chart to trace the important people and events of that church, from its founding by John Wesley (1703–1791) up through 1977.

A lot of the things that Mark explained were things that I would not have been able to learn in my year of observation and experience. For example, in his talks, Mark compared the Protestant Church (of which the Methodists are a denomination) with the Catholic Church, arguing with the Catholic doctrine of placing the pope’s authority on par with that of the Bible, and disapproving of the Catholic Church’s determination of the special powers and roles of priests. I’m afraid that the detail and strength of his impressions of the factional struggles within Christianity were difficult for an outsider to understand. I asked Mark about a few of these questions, such as the difference between Baptists and Methodists. His answer was that the Baptists place more emphasis on emotion and faith, while the Methodists place more emphasis on rationality and wisdom. I regret that Mark was so busy with his church affairs, and that I didn’t have more time to discuss religion with him. But, in all honesty, no matter how much Amber and Soph said he was fair-minded and egalitarian, not stern and distant like some ministers, and however much he encouraged me to speak with him, deep down I was always a little bit afraid of him.

I’m sure that Amber joined the membership class to review her knowledge of the church, and not just to accompany me. Amber is a believer who never gives up her religious quest. Her grandfather was a missionary, and her father was a professor of economics at Seattle Pacific University and a devout believer. According to Amber, they were “God’s men.” But Amber had been a religious rebel in her youth; she had investigated Buddhism from Asia and the Mormon Church from her native America. After flitting about for over ten years, in 1985 she returned to her original church, the First Free Methodist Church. Amber told me that even though she had come full circle, and had established her belief in Jesus and in God, she still had questions, and she was still looking for answers; spiritual growth was a lifelong project. Daily morning prayer was something that she would not be budged from. Reading the Bible, praying, reading religious books, keeping personal notes—Amber was diligent and determined. I once kidded her, “Amber, if you were writing a doctoral dissertation, it would have come out a long time ago.” Actually, when talking with her, I felt that she was not a blind believer; she had done rigorous research.



I remember attending a dinner at the Seventh-day Adventist Church one Saturday. I was a little bit bothered by the fact that the Adventists paid so much attention to the diet and were so picky about nutrition, and when I returned, I discussed it with Amber. This began one of Amber's "comparative religion" sessions. According to Amber the Seventh-day Adventist Church placed its focus on bodily nourishment and thus lost sight of something more important: the growth and elevation of the spirit. The Baptist Church placed its focus on the rite of baptism, but in reality baptism is only a form, and to place too much emphasis on form was not the same as having firm belief in and sincere loyalty to God. Catholics were always going to worship the Blessed Mother, and how could there be any good in approaching God and Jesus through the Blessed Mother? God had a calling for everybody. It was impossible that Mary was different from everyone else just because she had given birth to Jesus. Amber felt that her own church could understand God from all angles, and didn't "select the sesame seed and lose the watermelon." This made her feel very fortunate.

After I had lived with Amber for two or three months, I gradually realized that, except when she invited guests to a formal dinner on Sunday, she didn't pray to thank God for food. During the first few months of my stay she had prayed—perhaps to proclaim that she was a believer or to let the woman who had come to research religion feel what it was like—but after we began to understand each other, saying grace had become unimportant. She didn't need to keep up appearances. After I realized that, I gradually left off basing my research on such external manifestations as saying grace before meals.

In comparison to Amber, Cheryl was much more open to other religions. She accompanied me to Greek and Finnish churches, a mosque, and a Tibetan Buddhist temple. I remember that Greek Orthodox church, whose interior was filled with icons of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. Cheryl commented that Christians are always criticizing other religions' worship of idols, but that Christians also have idols. I could see that she was speaking critically, but her loyalty was still clear. Unlike Amber, Cheryl identified with Christianity in general, but was also curious about other religions.

Our visit to the mosque was not terribly happy for Cheryl. At break-

fast on Saturday, July 19, I told Cheryl that I would like to see a mosque. Cheryl suggested that we call first. She said that Islamic mosques didn't welcome visitors as Christian churches did, which allowed you to just go in. So I called the Islamic mosque. I got an answering machine. Luckily, I called a second number, the Evergreen Islamic Institute. They told me that I was welcome to visit at 2:00 p.m. I looked up the address, and it was far away. Cheryl volunteered to drive me, and told me to put on something long-sleeved, since women were not allowed to go into the mosque uncovered.

At 1:50 p.m., Cheryl and I drove up in front of a simple little mosque, a gray building with a basketball court outside the front door. We were received by a middle-aged man named Khalid Ridha, who spoke with us on a bench outside the mosque. Khalid Ridha was very articulate; he introduced himself as a Kurd who had emigrated from Kurdistan to America seventeen years earlier. I asked him if he was used to America, and if he felt that there was religious freedom here. He said that America was a good place to live, and that although the people were prejudiced against Islam as a religion (for example, it was difficult for a woman wearing a headscarf to find a job), compared to where he had come from, it was much freer. He drew the analogy that American religious freedom was sweet water, but that the water still had a bitter taste. He said that there are 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, 6 million of them in America. But he felt the figure was not accurate, because American society was prejudiced against Muslims, so that many believers did not publicly admit their religion. Because Muslims had a high fertility rate and a lot of children, the number of believers was rising rapidly; he guessed that there were probably 10 million Muslims in the United States. In the Seattle area, there were seven mosques and 27,000 believers, including not only Middle Easterners but also quite a few blacks and a few American whites. What he was saying was that Muslims are a diverse community.

I asked about seeing the mosque. As we were walking toward the mosque, I took out my camera, thinking to ask Cheryl to take a picture of me and Khalid Ridha with the mosque as background. He cleverly deflected my interest, pointing to a one-story building next to the basketball court and saying that that was their daycare. Khalid Ridha led a group of cute four- and five-year-old children from the building; most



16.2 Bamo Ayi and preschool girls, Evergreen Islamic Institute, Seattle, 1997.

of the girls were wearing headscarves (fig. 16.2). As they were lining up for a picture, a little girl turned around and asked innocently, “Why do you want to have your picture taken with us?” I said, “Because you are so pretty and so cute.”

Cheryl and I did as Khalid Ridha did, and took off our shoes when we entered the mosque. He said that a mosque is a sacred place, and one cannot bring in the dirt from outside; it appeared that taking off one’s shoes was more than good hygiene. The inside of the mosque was divided by a wooden door, separating the men’s and women’s worshipping places. Khalid Ridha told us that that was a tradition, a custom, and not, as people thought, a prejudice against women. He said that the mosque had formerly been a church; it had been bought by the Islamic congregation because it faced precisely toward Mecca. I picked up a Qur’an from a rack next to me, and noticed that it had Arabic and English on facing pages. I asked Khalid Ridha what language they used in their prayer services. He said that they used only Arabic for prayers, but that the sermons were in English. I’m pretty sure that Khalid Ridha

did not know that Cheryl was a Christian; if he had, he may not have made the following comparison between Islam and Christianity:

The Bible was not put together until 300 years after Jesus died. How many of the apostles’ recollections and memories were accurate? How much of it really came from Jesus’ sayings? How much of it really accords with God’s will? It is difficult to say. Also, with so many editions of the Bible, which ones are real? But our Qur’an only has one edition, the word of God as recorded by Muhammad, so it is the most reliable. All Muslims in the world read out of one Qur’an.

I looked at Cheryl, who was standing there silently. I thought, luckily it’s Cheryl who came with me today, and not Amber, or else there would definitely be a shouting match. Khalid Ridha continued, comparing Jesus and Muhammad. I wanted to hear it. He said:

We recognize Jesus, but not as the Son of God, like the Christians do; he was the son of people, the son of Mary; he was nothing but a prophet. Islam believes in only one God, one true spirit, and even though Muhammad was the greatest of the prophets, he was only a prophet. Christians, who believe in Jesus in addition to God, are actually polytheists.

After listening this far, I felt that what he was saying must have been trying Cheryl’s patience, so I quickly told Khalid Ridha that we had to leave, and thanked him for his hospitality and his explanations.

But Khalid Ridha was deep in his discourse, and as we walked out of the mosque, he accompanied us to our car, continuing, “The contributions of Muslims to American society are greater than Americans can conceive—particularly in the area of social ethics, in the area of rescuing people from lives of crime, we have done a lot of work.” I immediately saw a point that I could make, and said that Cheryl and I were also helping the homeless; in fact, we needed to leave right then to go downtown to Operation Nightwatch, since it was already time to cook soup. “But you need to be careful. . . there are drugs and alcohol there; it’s very dangerous,” he said with concern, closing the conversation. Cheryl started the car, I said “good-bye” and “thank you” one more time,



16.3 Cheryl Lee, Bamo Ayi, and Amber Joy at Operation Night-watch, Seattle, 1997.

and we drove off (fig. 16.3). Cheryl drove without saying anything. I felt a little sorry to have put her through a difficult hour and a half. I decided not to have her go with me to any more mosques.

The next afternoon, Jamil from the Islamic mosque returned my call, and arranged to meet me on Tuesday. I noticed that Islamic believers really weren't as difficult to approach as Cheryl had thought; as soon as we made contact, we had an appointment. On Tuesday afternoon I took the bus to the mosque and waited by the front door for a half hour without seeing anyone. Then an Arabic-looking man walked by, and I approached him for help. He said there was someone named Jamil, and asked me to come to his house to wait; his house was right next door. His wife, Monica, enthusiastically poured tea, and we easily struck up a conversation. Monica had eight children, the oldest was twenty-one, and the youngest, four; they had come to Seattle five years earlier because of her husband's business. In heavily South-Asian-accented English she told me that because there were so many children in the family, she needed to do housework and watch the children, so she had not learned English well. But in order to get American citizenship, she had to study English so that she could take the naturalization test. Her brother was married recently, but she hadn't been able to attend; without U.S. citizenship, she might have had trouble coming back. She brought out the book that she was studying for me to look at: *Voices of Freedom: English and Civics for the U.S. Citizenship Exam*. There was a picture of the Statue

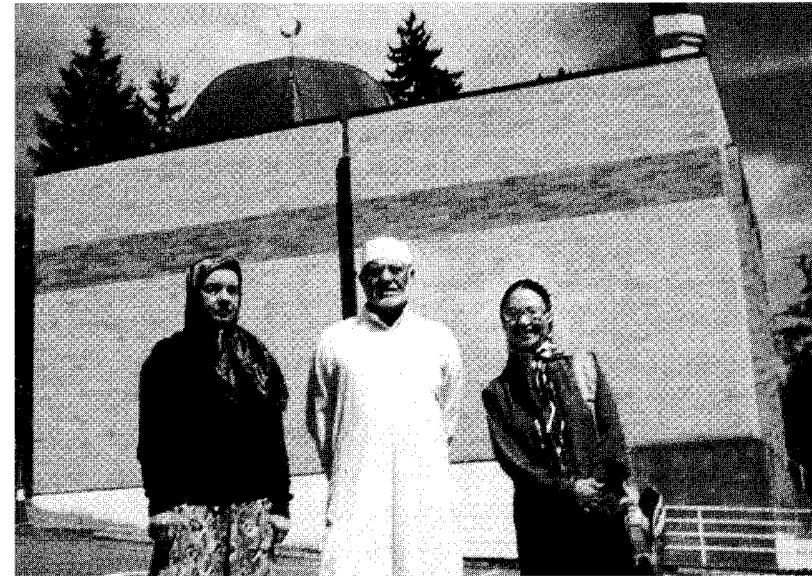
of Liberty on the cover, and the contents included U.S. maps, U.S. geography, states and capitals, religion, the flag, government organizations, Congress, the president, the Supreme Court, and so on. She said that she went to citizenship class twice every week; the students in the class came from all over the world, including some from China.

After a little while, three of her daughters and two of her sons came home; the daughters were all wearing scarves. The beautiful, twenty-one-year-old oldest daughter was a first-year student at a community college; she was studying computers. She said that she had begun to like America, because, in comparison with women in Pakistan, the women there had a much easier life, without such strict restrictions. With regard to fertility, she told us that her mother was one of eight children, and her father one of eleven; her mother had given birth to ten, of whom two had died and eight were left. She explained that abortion was strictly forbidden in Pakistan, so women gave birth to children until they couldn't give birth anymore; their burden was very heavy. The reasons were, first, that Allah did not allow the murder of living things, and a fetus was a living thing, and second, that Pakistan had been fighting wars since the 1940s, and had lost a lot of people, so they needed to increase their population. Her eight-year-old little brother told me that he didn't like America, and when I asked him why, he said he just didn't like it. This little boy had come to America when he was only three, and should not have had any memory of Pakistan, I thought. I told Monica that I couldn't wait for Jamil to arrive, but that I would be back for prayers on Friday. She warned me that I couldn't go in by the main door, but needed to use the side door to go upstairs to the women's worship hall.

On Friday afternoon, I put on a scarf that I had borrowed from Amber and went to the mosque; using the side door, I went upstairs to the women's worship hall, which was full of women and children. They were mostly Arabs, with a few blacks and whites. I had arrived half an hour late, and the prayers had already started. I sat in the front row, hoping to be able to see what was going on in the big room below. Through the square-patterned grate, I noticed that I could see only the clergy who were leading the service; the other men were not in my field of view, but I could hear the resonant voices of the worshippers. The mullah lead-

ing the service was wearing a turban, and looked a little bit like Yasir Arafat. I performed the complicated bodily motions of praying according to what the women beside me were doing; when I first started, I didn't have the order right, and was a bit clumsy of hand and foot. There was a cacophony upstairs, a mixture of prayers, crying, and the admonitions of mothers. But I could distinguish that the language being used for prayers below was Arabic, and that the English translation was given section by section, unlike the sentence-by-sentence translation given at the Sakya Tibetan Monastery in Seattle. The translator was an Arab with a heavy accent. I could not hear clearly or understand. The service at the Islamic mosque, like that at the Tibetan monastery, was very simple—nothing more than prostrations, prayers, and a sermon.

When the service was over, I met Jamil, wearing a white cap and robe, and his American wife, wearing a scarf. Jamil was about sixty, and very enthusiastic. As soon as he saw me, he told me that he had been to China, and that the white cap he was wearing had been given to him by a Chinese Muslim. I asked him if he were the imam, and he said that I could call him that. Anyone who was knowledgeable and could lead prayers could be an imam. He explained that a mosque of that size had only one full-time caretaker; everyone else was a volunteer. Jamil proudly told me that the mosque was Seattle's largest, built in 1981. He said that Seattle had eight mosques (which didn't agree with Khalid Ridha), of which two were converted churches and six had been built as mosques. There were believers of every race, not just Arab, because Allah was the God of all races, all over the world. With regard to the language used for the prayers, Jamil said that it was required to use Arabic to read the Qur'an, because it was originally written in Arabic, and so one could not use any other language in its place. But in exegesis, one could use an English translation. The mosque was a Sunni mosque. Jamil said that the Qur'an was one book, and that Muslims were one family. I asked him how many people had been at prayers that day, and he said that it was difficult to count, but that he guessed there had been more than 600. Jamil had come to the United States in 1947, and before retiring had been an engineer at Boeing; he had six children. He had prepared for me two books that he had written: one was on the Hajj, or Pilgrimage to Mecca. It was a guide to the route of the pilgrimage, the



16.4 Bamo Ayi with Imam Jamil and his wife, Islamic Mosque, Seattle, 1997.

process, the clothing, the restrictions, the places, and so on. The other book was entitled *Islam: The Perfect Way of Life*. Before saying good-bye, I had my picture taken next to the mosque with Jamil and his wife. In the heat of summer, his wife and I were both wearing scarves (fig. 16.4).

At the end of 1996, Amber and Gwendolyn had hatched a plan to buy a house together, and, after many prayer sessions and a half-year of busyness, on May 1, 1997, everybody finally moved to Shoreline, a suburb of Seattle. The new home was a long way from the university, and I had to change buses twice; it took three hours for a round-trip. But I had become fond of Amber, and I didn't want to look for another landlady. I also still needed to go to church and understand religion. Cheryl and Jason also moved with us, but this time Jason became a tenant of his sister Gwendolyn downstairs. Catty-corner from the house was a little gray church, with a sign saying that it was the Seattle Christian Assembly. When I went past, I saw a lot of Chinese-speaking people going in and out, which tempted me to do something I had long wanted to do—visit a Chinese people's church. Because I was away on two trips, it wasn't until Sunday, July 7, that I got Amber to go to church there with me.

The church was small, but it was packed with people. A tall, middle-aged woman, seeing that we were new faces, helped us find two places in the crowd. I thought that we had been lucky to come during communion, but after I had gone a few times, I discovered that the church emphasized communion, which was the first event in the service each Sunday. The entire service was focused on Jesus—thanking Jesus for washing away the sins of humanity with his own blood, thanking Jesus for interceding between people and God. The service was conducted in Standard Chinese, with the sermon being translated into English. There was no choir, only a piano accompanist and someone at the side leading the singing.

Because it was just after Independence Day, the title of the sermon was “Freedom and God.” It began with the story of Grandfather Zeng, a member who had just passed his citizenship test at the age of ninety-one, after many years of effort. The minister said,

America is a free country, and God has opened the door of saving grace, allowing everyone to have the good fortune of becoming Americans. But this free country is full of materialism, sex, violence, and sin. If we use our freedom carelessly, we will encounter danger and be damaged, even to the point that we may exterminate ourselves. If we don't have God's love, if we leave God's embrace, the free country may become the most unfree of places. Only if you believe in God and allow God to be your protector can you achieve true freedom, only the Gospel is an eternally free country.

The English translation of the service was very well done. Amber praised the sermon, saying that the minister was able to take advantage of the timing of Independence Day, cleverly moving from Grandpa Zeng's citizenship to the main topic of the sermon; he was undoubtedly an experienced minister who had graduated from seminary. Actually, the minister, whose name was Zeng Jincai, had gotten a computer degree and had worked at a very influential computer company in Washington State. Later on, following God's call, he had given up his high-salaried position to become an impoverished minister. Pastor Zeng's wife was called Yingmei; it was she who had shown us to our seats. Yingmei had been a dominating basketball player, a famous member of the national

team in Taiwan. She was now retired, taking care of her husband and children, and helping him run the church. I was invited to their house for dinner. I didn't think that the athlete Yingmei would cook an excellent meal; but it was the most elaborate and tasty Chinese dinner I had eaten since I arrived in America.

The year passed quickly, and it was time to go home. I went to church to say good-bye to Mark, and to thank him for letting me participate in church activities—particularly his church membership class—and to thank him and his parishioners for a year of caring. Mark said, “It seems like you are already a member of our church; when you leave, we will miss you.” After Amber and I had said all our good-byes in the church offices and were ready to get in the car, Mark hurried out of the church with a book in his hand. He told me that it was a book he had just written, called *Spirituality in a Mixed-up Age*. It was an advance copy that he had just received; I was the first person to get a copy. On the way home from church, Amber and I went to Pastor Zeng's church to say good-bye to him and Yingmei.

On the morning of September 30, 1997, in the waiting room of Sea-Tac Airport, as I was saying a reluctant good-bye to Steve after the announcement came to board the plane, an out-of-breath Pastor Zeng suddenly appeared in front of us. He handed me several books on Christianity and a couple of presents for my daughter, and said a special prayer for my trip. He prayed to the Lord for my safe journey and to help me to come soon to believe in the Lord. Taking with me Pastor Zeng's blessing and Steve's friendship, I left Seattle and America.