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The Other Side of Africa

During our discussion with Dr. Ngom in class, he told us about the meaning of NOOKOO BOK? and how it is a response to “thank you.” It is similar to saying “you’re welcome,” but it is much more meaningful. Nooko Bok, he explained, means essentially “we share everything. The good and the bad, we share it together.”

There is so much beauty in that phrase, a phrase that nothing in English can parallel. I came across another of these phrases in an unexpected place: *Cosmopolitan* Magazine. Cosmopolitan’s April “Cosmo Guy” this year was Trevor Noah, the South African native who recently took Jon Stewart’s place on The Daily Show. In his interview, he teaches the Cosmo readers a new Zulu word: “Sawubona.” It means “hello,” he states, “but it’s so powerful because it means, ‘I see you as a human being…you’re a part of my world.’” (Mosely, 46)

Another African phrase I came across is “Ubuntu.” I have heard of this phrase a couple times previously, and in an article from Michigan State University Professor Janis Brinn, she writes that there are numerous definitions, such as “I am because we are,” “everyone is part of the whole,” “the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity,” and others. She found her favorite definition provided to her by a tour guide in South Africa: “In the heartbeat of people.” It seems paradoxical that a culture so war-trodden is filled with loving phrases such as these. When we look at Africa, putting all the war aside for a moment, we see these communities rooted in kindness and respect. What else are we missing when we view Africa only as it relates to poverty, famine, and war? We feel sorry for Africa, but what if there are reasons to envy its culture? There have been moments in the books we have read, and in the discussions we have had where a glimpse some of the wonderful bits of African culture and lifestyle. There is so much sadness in Africa, but every country on that continent has something unique and special that they offer to the world. They have strong communities, festivals stemming from ancient traditions, and stories that have lived on for generations. They have things that we in the United States do not, and I think a lot of Americans may be ignorant to this fact.

We saw proof that Africa has positively influenced those who have travelled there when we Skyped with Kris Holloway. After returning from Mali she moved to a smaller town where she could raise her children in a place that, like Mali, has a close-knit community. She used a midwife for childbirth because of her time spent in Mali. Her life is still today so enriched because of her trip 26 years ago to Africa. I emailed Kris and asked her what aspects of Mali she missed; things that she did not see in the United States. One thing she mentioned was how the Malians lived so close to the earth. They were “so in tune with the earth and nature, knowing all the plants and animals.” Another aspect she missed when she came back to America was how in Mali, people did not consume more than they needed. Everything was reused and recycled. They even made flip-flops out of old car tires! Upon researching this trend online, I was able to find one online store that makes and sells flip flops out of recycled rubber, but I personally have not seen anyone in my area following this trend, probably because we have so many other options.

Although it will get most of the consequences from our contributions to global warming, <Can you explain this a little more?> Africa has countries with quite small carbon footprints, as their use of resources does not have a heavy impact on the earth, which is something Westerners really could learn from if we wish to minimize the effects of global warming on our planet. The same goes for living close to earth. When Kris mentioned this, I immediately thought of Wangari Maathai from Unbowed. On page 45 she writes,

“About two hundred yards from the fig tree there was a stream named Kanungu, with water so clean and fresh that we drank it straight from the stream. As a child, I used to visit the point where the water bubbled up from the belly of the earth to form a stream. I imagine that very few people are lucky enough to see the source of a river…When it rained the silver drops of water would dance on the broad fronds above me and cascade to the ground. We also used these leaves to fetch water from the river and drink it. The water looked so clean and fresh against the sparkling green leaves.”

What people unfortunately may not realize is that this beauty is not only ornamental, but functional as well. The Holy Fig that sat in Maathai’s yard was not a “nuisance” as those who lived there after her seemed to think. They did not know that with chopping down the fig tree would lead to

stream ceasing to flow. Maathai talks of how the tree was important (as all are) to the stabilization of the land.

The U.S. has an abundance of natural beautybut unlike many in Africa, we rarely rely on it to sustain ourselves. In a book titled *First Find Your Child a Good Mother: The Construction of Self in Two African Communities*, author Paul Riesman discusses how self-sufficient the Africans he observed were in the country of Burkina Faso. “If both the FulBe and the RiimaayBe are pretty much self-sufficient in their food production, what do they need money for?” (Riesman, 126) The answer was taxes. As I read material like this, I begin comparing Africa to the United States and I can better appreciate how Africa's tradition of sustainability would benefit America. In reading Riesman’s book**,** I imagine an America in which we provide all our citizens both the education and assistance to increasingly develop sustainable lifestyles using these traditional African models. Depending on the climate in which we live, Americans have the potential to produce more of our own food from things that we grow, utilizing the earth in our own communities. Could certain current health ailments and the obesity epidemic see a downward trend?

Another interesting point made in Riesman’s book that goes back to the idea of tight-knit communities was that, in the African tribes he observed, there was no such idea as individualism in society. He writes that, “The Western interpretation presupposes the idea that the individual is the basic unit of society…From the Fulani point of view however…there is no word in their language that means the same thing.” They consider all who live together in their camp, village, or quarter of the town to be their relatives. “There is an underlying ‘we-ness.” Riesman mentions the Robert Frost quote “home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” In the tribes he observed, this idea was reversed, in the sense that the tribe, “Rather than emphasize the family as people to rely on in time of trouble, the Fulani see the creation and maintenance of a family as both the main goal of life and the expression of success.”

As the case may be, this is not true of all of Africa, but Kris Holloway reinforces the observations of Riesman in my emails with her. She writes of how old and young, men and women all celebrate and dance together. It isn’t segregated by age or gender. She says there is humor all the time, every day! I know that often people use humor as a tactic for coping with problems, and perhaps some of the reason there is so much humor is because ever since colonization people turned to humor to help cope with the tragedy they faced. In America, I seem to encounter many serious people every day but only a few that use humor in everything they do. Maybe I am looking in the wrong places, but after watching documentaries and emailing with Kris Holloway, I get the feeling that humor is a tool that is used more in Africa than here. They say laughter is the best medicine, so I will be taking a tip from the African culture and laughing about my problems more often.

Kris remembers how life in Mali was slow enough to say hello and greet people, not whisk by without talking. And how strangers were welcomed, given a bed and a meal. All of this is so different from customs people seem to practice with strangers in the United States; even from childhood we’re taught, “Don’t talk to strangers.” The warning is well intended, but perhaps we could begin looking at opportunities to model for today’s children that, using good judgment, we all benefit by caring for each other, welcoming what we have to offer to those who are needy in various ways. Even more phenomenal to me is how people with different religious backgrounds, Christian and Muslim being the prevalent religions in Mali’s case, all got along well, with no hatred and fighting as is common in much of the world. In other parts of Africa, as well as the rest of the world, this is not so.

It seems to me as I’ve studied parts of African culture that most aspect of life on that continent have a communal vibe to it. Riesman writes of a game they play in Burkina Faso, similar to tic-tac-toe, called “Dilly.” Even though there is only one winner and one loser, anyone who is hanging out nearby is allowed to participate in taking turns in the game. This conjured up some memories for me of the elementary school classrooms I have worked in, with children yelling at each other that, “It’s my turn to play!” and, “You can’t play with us!” Having role models who show their children the joys of a communal upbringing might inspire children not to be so greedy and exclusive. Perhaps the children of Africa, not taught the “American Dream” of individual success, flourish into happier people, living fuller lives with more of a sense of love for those around them. At Western’s library, I found books in a series about cultures and customs in each African country. There were only four out of many, but I decided I could compare and contrast these books to one another, and see what differences and similarities the cultures of Liberia, Cameroon, Senegal, and the Central African Republic had. As it turns out, they are all more similar than different. Eric Ross, author of the series’ book on Senegal writes of the Senegalese, “Individuals have a strong sense of community” and, “Senegal’s community life and street culture are festive and celebratory.” (Ross, 117) From the Cameroon book: “Among the most important and widespread social customs in Cameroon are ceremonies and rites that celebrate various aspects of life…and activities that promote nationalism in an effort to create a national identity and build a united and peaceful country.” “Cameroons are generally very friendly and outgoing. Salutations that communicate warmth and a sincere sense of caring are very common.” (Mbaku, 171) Friends there often hold hands, even two men, casually and without any sexual connotation. In Culture and Customs of the Central African Republic, author Jaqueline Woodfork writes, “One of the most significant aspects of social relations is that the community’s needs are paramount. A popular saying in CAR is, ‘If you don’t live in a group, you will disappear.’” (Woodfork, 132) From the book about Liberia: “There is a tendency for Liberians to get involved in the lives of their neighbors, friends, and close kin. It is the norm to ask after the welfare of a neighbor or friend in a casual encounter on the road. In this case, it is also expected that one will freely divulge one’s personal problems and implicitly solicit advice on solutions to practical issues.” (Olukoju, 111)

A documentary I recently watched called “African Election,” documenting the 2008 presidential election in Ghana, I saw something that is rare in the U.S. I saw hundreds of people who were proud to be a part of what they referred to as, “Mother Ghana.” They had such pride in their country. Then, on an African website, I found a poem by an anonymous writer. While the whole poem is absolutely worth reading, I will write bits of it here. “Whether good or bad, Africa is my home and there is no place like home. I love Africa because there is no place like Africa. Even in my second life if God should give me the opportunity to choose where I live, I would choose Africa. Why? Because I love Africa and there is no doubt Africa loves me. Some people don’t understand. Some people think they know, but they do not know. Some people think they know all about Africa but the truth is that none of them knows Africa the way I do. I know Africa and Africa knows me.”

This poem really struck a chord in me, because with all the horrors the people of Africa have been through, they continue to have such pride in their homeland. In another documentary I watched about the journey of the Lost Boys of Sudan, “God Grew Tired of Us,” I noticed the same thing. Even though their homeland was being destroyed by war, every one of those boys mentioned how much they missed Africa, referring to it numerous times as their “Mother Homeland.” The things they missed most about Africa? They missed the beauty of it, the simplicity, they missed the community, saying how Americans just are not friendly to others, and how they were working all the time and never had a moment to sit and be with each other. The “American Dream” turned out to be a bit of a letdown for them. Some people shown in the film did not understand. One woman said to the boys, “You much more freedom here, huh!” The boys politely nodded in agreement, but looking back to the glorious times the boys sang and danced and laughed together at the African refugee camp, the fact that this woman thought they had more freedom in America, working round the clock to pay their bills with no time for anything else, the woman’s comment understandingly became entirely laughable. Perhaps they were safer now, but at what cost?

When research is conducted about African countries, one must sift through countless negative readings, because so much of Africa’s history has been ruination since colonialism. While people tend to focus on war and poverty in Africa, and understandably so, they miss the things that make Africa and its people so extraordinary. In the U.S. the term “community” tends to refer to people in close location to each other, such as a neighborhood, or belonging to a church. In Africa, a community means so much more. It means loving one another and putting the group’s needs before one’s own. It means taking pride in where one comes from. It means festivals and rituals and singing and dancing. It means laughing together. It means “Nooko Bok” and “Sawubona” and “Ubuntu.” My research directed me towards investigating how accurate the portrayals of African communities were, because I had this image in my head of this cheerful community laughing as they casually work, singing songs and passing the day away with a peaceful air, in a beautiful lush green environment. I wondered if people took as much pride in their country as did the people from the film “Ghana Election.” If people everywhere were as friendly as they were to Kris in Mali, if the land that the Lost Boys of Sudan were missing was really as majestic as they made it out to be. I discovered that, while there are imminent stressors daily, such as finding enough food to survive, running away from war, and trying to stay healthy in a disease-ridden place, the people of Africa (on the whole, from what I read) have so much spirit. At the end of the film, “God Grew Tired of Us,” one boy was reunited after years away from his mother. When his mom got into the airport in the United States, she sang and cheered and whooped as loud as she could. She did not care that other people were listening to her, possibly even making fun of her. She was rejoicing, and she would let no one stop that. Africa is so special because its people are not ashamed, maybe because they know that their suffering is not a fault of their own. The strong community bonds I have read about and have been told about are inspiring. The information I have gained while researching this paper leave me with a tremendous feeling of appreciation for Africa.

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