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Differing African and American Perspectives: Their Impact on the Liberal Arts.

Doris Lessing once said "The longing for Africa is like a fever in the blood; it never entirely goes away." For me, it is good to be back in Africa, my spiritual home, the place where I experienced the most personal growth. Although I cannot speak for all Africans or Americans, having lived both places, I perceive differing priorities in American and African values, and that sometimes they conflict. Although humans are basically alike, differences in values, assumptions and manners often divide without anyone ever realizing what is happening. Thus, we need to be sensitive to each other.

We profess that a liberal arts education exposes students to a variety of subjects, to science, and math, to art and the humanities. The aim is to develop human beings who can think critically and logically, who can question as well as obey. However, the standard liberal arts curriculum is Eurocentric. Even if we change the texts and courses, it is generally delivered from a Eurocentric point of view, not from tyranny but from provincialism. For us to deliver a liberal arts education, we must recognize and incorporate differing perspectives.

For example, many Americans don't realize the divide between the world's haves and have-nots; they assume too many things. In 1988 the American government flew Fulbrights to Washington, D. C. for an orientation. There a doctor told us to put our under clothes in a microwave oven to kill incipient mango worms-as if microwaves were a common thing. Most Africans know America is wealthy, and consequently, Americans often seem preoccupied with trivialities. Since living in Africa, I have less sympathy for those who are "unfulfilled," and much more for those who are "not filled" with food. I know from eating rice and cassava leaf at Christmas in Sierra Leone that fulfillment can be a chicken leg, and that Americans don't know how rich they are.

Some values Americans consider unquestionably good, other peoples may perceive as irrelevant, simplistic, erroneous, even threatening. The following are a few of the differences I have noted.

1. Americans believe people have personal control over the environment-rather than in Fate or bad luck. Often we believe misfortune comes from laziness, i. e. the poor. This judgment is an unfortunate holdover from our founding Puritans who believed that God prospered His elect. Americans tend to blame individuals and not recognize that some problems are systemic, or worse, beyond anyone's or any system's control. We like to believe that we can "be anything we want to be" and that we can fix any problem, no matter what. This myth is tenable where basic survival needs are assured and individual rights are respected, but ludicrous in regions where measles and malaria routinely wipe out children and where getting food and pure water is a day's work.

The American sense of empowerment is good in that it encourages personal responsibility and leads to taking on daring projects, i. e. space exploration; it is bad in that it precludes acceptance and produces guilt even over that for that which we have no control.

For example, years ago, I gave birth to twins, a boy and a girl. The girl died. I was heartbroken and continued for twenty years to feel that her death was my fault. In 1990 I taught in the Northwest province of Cameroon, where a "mother of twins" is revered. When my students took me to a huge market, I mentioned to a young woman that I had borne twins. Excited, she told everyone, including a shopkeeper that I was favored by God as the "mother of twins." The shopkeeper yelled at a teen-aged boy who left and returned with an ancient woman. People brought me a stool, then motioned for me to sit down. From what I could understand, the woman decided I should have "twin beads." She produced many, many tiny white beads and began to string them. When the old woman hobbled toward me, and I watched her raise the necklace over my head, I blurted, "No, it isn't right. I don't deserve to be called favored by God!"

"Why?" they asked. "Aren't you mother of twins?"

"Yes, but one died; my daughter died." I replied. "I failed. Don't you understand?"

The students stared at me; one interpreted for the old woman, who replied hurriedly, shaking her head. A student translated. "She says you are mother of twins. You bore them. What happens to them afterwards is up to God."

2. Another fundamental difference between American culture and others is the treatment of time. To us, time is of utmost importance. We sometimes seem obsessed with getting things accomplished according to a predetermined schedule. African cultures have "time" like we never do. We seem cold and lonely in our preoccupations with those small machines we wear on our wrists. In African cultures, it is rude not to have time for a person. Africans are shocked at our having to "make time" for a spouse or our children. A director of the ACM program to Zimbabwe didn't realize this difference. When a colleague dropped in on him, he told the Zimbabwean he didn't have time to visit, was working on a project. The man was offended and thereafter sabotaged the program. I found this out by listening to my Zimbabwean secretary.

3. Americans highly value egalitarianism. We like to believe that all people have been "created equal" without regard to intelligence, physical condition or economic status. All people have an equal opportunity to succeed in life. We are squeamish about having domestic help and about using titles that convey rank or prestige. For example: the president of my college is called "Dick;" the CEO of my husband's company is "Aubrey." To African cultures rank, prestige and ceremony are very important. These indicate who people are and where they fit into "society." It is unthinkable not to use such titles as "Professor" and "Doctor" for they signal rank and respect. In Cameroon and Zimbabwe, students addressed me as doctor, stood up when I entered the room, carried my books, and walked to the taxi park to see that I was safely in a taxi to get home before dark. My American students in Zimbabwe repeatedly offended their host parents by calling them by their first names. African students were hesitant and embarrassed

when told by a college dean, "Call me "Ted" instead of Dean or Dr. Smith, or when asked "Why are you so formal? Why are you so dressed up?"

4. Americans encourage independence, individualism and privacy rather than interdependence and community

Americans honor individualism. The lone individual standing against the crowd is often glorified. We join groups, but feel free to leave if we disagree with them, e. g. the many Protestant denominations. Along with our emphasis on individuality is a stress on independence. We have words such as "self-reliance," "self-control," "self-criticism," self-improvement, and we take enormous pride in a "self-made man." We consider it normal for an individual to look out primarily for his own self-interests. A typical American/African misunderstanding might be reflected in an American's remark, "He wants me to get him a job. I told him to get it himself!" African culture is more communal, more openly interdependent. Privacy, the ultimate in individualism, is often seen as secretive and lonely. The group welfare counts. The community profits from the accomplishments of one or a few. If a person is bright, the village will gather money and send him/her to Europe to medical school. The new doctor's success is the village's success, and the doctor now owes the village care in return for the community's help. A typical misunderstanding occurred in my sojourn in Cameroon. A lovely young student said, "You hurt my feelings because you didn't ask me to take you to the market after I had offered three weeks before."

I replied, "Thank you, but I have to learn to do it myself."

5. THE USA values the future, whereas Africa values tradition. Americans tend to glorify the future, devalue the past and be unconscious of the present. We are good at planning and executing long term future projects, bad at preserving tradition and honoring our elderly. Products are always being "improved." A new model is better than the former one. Change is usually seen as good. In the 1992 presidential campaign, Clinton ran as the candidate for change.

African cultures strive to maintain tradition and continuity. They value the customs of the ancestors, and revere their elders, recognizing their contributions in providing continuity and a stable society. To say to Africans, "We need a change," without specifying what change or why, would be considered mad.

6. Americans often put a priority on work in contrast to the priority Africans put on human relationships.

"Don't just stand there--DO SOMETHING--is an American attitude. Similar to valuing change for change's sake, we value work and action for their own sakes. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop" goes the old Puritan proverb. Americans often believe it is futile, even sinful to daydream or to "lie around and do nothing." This value has produced staggering material wealth but also "workaholics" and people who identify themselves wholly with their professions. The opening party gambits, "What do you do?" and "Who are you with" mean "Where do you work?" and "With what company?"

Africans work hard, but, as a Nigerian friend once said to me, they don't celebrate it. They gain identity from family, tribal and religious activities as well as from work.

Before living in Cameroon and Zimbabwe, my career gave me identity. I also reasoned, "How am I going to feed my children, if I don't work?" That much was true, but I hinged my self-esteem on advancement, or at least prestige, in the marketplace. I have since shifted my focus from USA's status points to some of Africa's status points. Work is a necessary, often pleasurable, activity, but not an escape from a life or a means of measuring worth. Now I gain more self-esteem from my husband, children and grandchildren. Naturally, this is more difficult; human interactions are less controllable and less measurable than one's car or paycheck.

7. Directness and openness are values that Americans hold in the highest regard compared to implication and the use of intermediaries. Foreigners are often bothered by American bluntness. The Ambassador from Zimbabwe told me that what shocked him most about the USA was the way American strangers told him intimate details of their lives in the first twenty minutes of their acquaintance.

Other cultures hint, use symbols and intermediaries to deal with ticklish subjects, positive as well as negative. In Zimbabwe, an intermediary will often bring gifts to the parents of a prospective bride. Courtship is never mentioned, but the presentation of gifts signals intention. Acceptance of the gifts signals permission to proceed with the courtship. These different communication styles can cause misunderstanding. Once an African colleague came to me and said "Immaculate brought me some sweet cakes and told me you had quarreled. I am here find out what happened between you two."

"Why didn't she come herself? Coward!" I said.

8. Practicality and efficiency is respected more than the aesthetic and theoretical. Americans pride themselves on being pragmatic. "Will it make money?" "Will it work?" We are a "no nonsense" culture. Questions like "Is this beautiful? Enjoyable? Will this contribute to general knowledge?" are not so highly regarded. This orientation has made us materially rich but often artistically and spiritually poor. We respect rational thinking and belittle "emotional" or subjective evaluations. Other cultures that value beauty and spirituality above technical "progress" see us as soulless and unable to enjoy life. When a Peace Corps Volunteer told an American in the U.S. about spending time telling stories or reciting poetry, he remarked, "What good does that do? You can't eat it."

9. Despite lip service to the contrary, Americans privilege the material over the spiritual. They typically give higher priority to obtaining, maintaining and protecting material objects than we do to interpersonal relationships or spiritual practices. Although Americans are churchgoers, they don't discuss spiritual matters openly, and many question the existence of the spiritual. Although other cultures covet material items, they do not replace the time necessary for traditional family or religious rituals. Rather than arguing the existence of spirituality, African cultures often consider the material and the spiritual folds of one seamless garment and invest in the interplay between the two. The question is not whether, but which, prayer is effective. So, having delineated and explored some of these varying orientations, questions remain. How are we going to accommodate these cultural differences in our lives and in our teaching? Once we recognize and teach them, we can be more aware of our

ingrained biases. We can adjust for those differences in our students and in our colleagues. When an African student disappears for a relative's death celebration, I don't have to judge him a poor student. Conversely, if I ever "don't have time" for a chat because I have a work deadline, I hope a colleague will make allowances for a brash American.

Finally, if the goal of a liberal arts education is to produce better, more logical, more critical, more open-minded, more "liberal" people, then one aim is incorporation, a synthesis of opposites which could lead to innovative solutions to political, medical, economic, environmental issues. American medicine is beginning to adopt "alternative medicine," i.e. non- European, in conjunction with traditional practice. That synthesis has produced startling positive results in some chronic diseases. We also can dare to combine differing values to resolve the problems that plague our troubled globe.