CROSS CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

by Patsy Graves*

Out of an agonizing search for words and phrases that would properly introduce this subject, I came across a few paragraphs that said so perfectly what I sought in vain to express that I have taken the liberty to quote the relevant material in full. The material is from "The United States and Africa," a report of the proceedings of the 13th American Assembly, which convened in May 1958 to discuss political, social, economic, and cultural relationships with the countries of Africa.

The American Assembly is a program of conferences which brings together business, labor, farm groups, the professions, political parties, government, and the academic community. These meetings develop recommendations on issues of national concern. It is a non-partisan public service designed to throw light on problems confronting citizens of the United States. It was established in 1950 by former President Eisenhower, who was then president of Columbia University.

Understanding Cultures

Under the topic, "Culture and Changing Values in Africa," Dr. Walter Goldschmidt, anthropologist and sociologist at the University of California, wrote the following, and I wish to use it as a prelude to a discussion of cross cultural understanding.

If we are to understand the future of a people, we must appreciate its past; if we are to see the emergent patterns of life, we must know the cultural forces shaping that existence. For the way of life of a people in any time and place is built out of past customs adapted to present circumstances and needs. These ways of life are what the anthropologist calls "culture."

Before we can look at the culture of Africa, we must pause to consider what the term means -- for it is central... to any constructive attitude toward the continent of Africa.

As anthropologists use the term, all peoples have culture, for culture is their customary way of doing things. It includes all aspects of life: the way they make things, the manner in which they wrest a livelihood from the soil, the way they organize their society, the way they look at the world about them, even the attitudes and sentiments and feelings they share. The important points about culture are that these things are shared by the group, that they are learned and are not biologically inherited modes of behavior, and that they are passed down from one generation to the next.

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Furthermore, we have come to realize that there is kind of internal consistency to culture, that each part affects every other, and that all are tied into a whole which, under normal circumstances, makes and integrated and patterned way of life. Most important of all, each person is shaped by the culture in which he is raised, so that what he is, what he thinks and feels, what he does, are products of his culture. This is no mysterious process -- though it is a subtle one -- but takes place through gradual conditioning to the circumstances around him. Moreover, not only is the individual shaped by his culture, but he feels that his own culture is the right, the inevitable way of doing things. How else can he feel since as infant and as child his elders and betters have taught him these cultural assumptions? Culture, then, is not merely a set of customs; it is a way of life. And each person has his own way of life.

Although Dr. Goldschmidt was talking specifically about African culture, he said that his definition referred to the "way of life of a people in any time and place." He could very well have been talking about the expatriate who goes to Africa as an advisor or teacher or consultant or specialist. (Another of the unresolved problems in international relations is the proper name for the foreign expert.) The African who requests assistance and the expatriate who goes to give the assistance are each products of his culture. How do we lessen the impact, how do we bridge the gaps between these cultures in order that the two worlds can find a meeting point for mutually rewarding interchange? This, it seems to me, is the core of the problem in cross cultural understanding.

The burden, of course, is upon the expatriate. The first step toward cross cultural understanding is to have more than a perfunctory knowledge of the culture with which you hope to understand and work. There is no substitute for this kind of home work. It is as important as having a valid visa, or a smallpox shot, or a malarial suppressive. It is as important as all the other impediments with which we usually burden ourselves, often needlessly, as we pack our intellectual and material belongings for a tour of duty in a foreign land.

The Yoruba Culture

As one example of the depth and range of an African culture let us look at a few facts about the Yorubas, the African tribe largely making up the 12 million people living in the Western Region of Nigeria. What is known of ancient Yoruba life comes to us in much the same way as history is acquired about the dim and distant past of any people -- through legends and stories of early rulers who became gods, through stories of rulers who did not become gods, accounts written by travellers, mostly Europeans, who visited Yorubaland, and through recent written records.
The written accounts of early Yoruba history are bewildering mixtures of the rise and fall of kingdoms, of wars and battles and sieges. The constant taking and losing of important towns seems to have been the central preoccupation of the rival forces. Surviving are several important cities in the Western Region that we know today and the descendants of the more important ruling houses who still engage in verbal battles over the rights of succession. At first glance, these systems may seem completely out of tune with modern times. But closer examination reveals that they are great unifying and controlling forces. Whether you personally approve the system of chiefs, headmen, rulers or obas as they are called, you must realize that this is one of the more obvious manifestations of ancient culture that is meaningful to the people. Above all, the system is the avenue through which people are reached and as such is important to the dissemination of knowledge.

As a practitioner in the field of home economics, I find most useful for my purposes Dr. Goldschmidt's definition of culture as the customary way of doing things. It is my life's work to train people who can help others to change or modify customary ways of doing things as a means of achieving a higher standard of living. If you prefer a definition of culture that includes contributions to the arts, there are tangible evidences in this regard in the discovery in this century of pieces of sculpture at an important Yoruba center, the city of Ife, site of the new regional university being assisted by the University of Wisconsin.

Some of these ancient art pieces are of bronze and some are of terracotta. The workmanship is very fine and the men who did them were evidently very talented. The original idea was that these pieces were very old indeed, say 3,000 years. The present theory is that they were made after 1000 A.D., probably between 1400 or 1500 or thereabouts.

There are legendary stories of good and bad Yoruba kings that are probably as true and as false as any legend of this type. My favorite king is Sango, who is said to have started the custom of placing tribal marks on faces as a trick to recapture an important town. He persuaded a rival king and his chiefs that scarifying the face would increase their good looks. While they were sore from the wounds he attacked and captured the town.

The custom of tribal markings has come down through the ages and even today field workers employed by our home economics section reports to us whether or not new babies are given tribal markings. It is significant that in training field workers we never discussed the subject of tribal markings. What we did talk about was proper feeding of the expectant mother, of the necessity of regular attendance at clinics, of boiling water, and of taking other health precautions. In developing a general awareness of the importance of sanitation measures, our workers went to battle on the subject of tribal markings on their own accord. This has strengthened my belief in the necessity of teaching people broad principles and letting them make their own applications.
The same legendary King Sango who became a god fought many victorious battles, but his own end came by his too successful attempts to attract lightning. I do not know what influence this had on the experiments of one Mr. Benjamin Franklin, but King Sango's house was struck by lightning as he was conducting experiments from the top of a hill. His wives, children, and property were destroyed, and in his grief he abdicated the throne, wandered about in the desert, and finally hanged himself on a shea butter tree. He became the legendary god of thunder and lightning and as such is still worshipped in remote parts of Nigeria as well as Brazil.

There is a considerable body of literature on Yoruba history for anyone who takes the trouble to seek it out. A small volume by C.R. Niven, *A Short History of the Yoruba Peoples*, will give a clear picture of the legendary and historical kings from earliest times to the present. And of what value is all this to the expatriate working in Yorubaland?

The heart and center of Yorubaland is Ibadan, largest city in Africa south of the Sahara and site of the great federal university of the same name. Ibadan began its existence as an army camp and is an historical center of paramount importance. The greatest amount will be received from Ibadan and from Yorubaland if the traveller takes the greatest amount with him to Ibadan and to Yorubaland in terms of knowledge, awareness, and perception. This, then, is the first hurdle to cross cultural understanding, a realization that each culture has an ancient past of which it is proud and deep rooted customs by which it lives and has its being. A realization that even though Africa may be a new-comer on the world political scene, it is by no means a recent arrival on earth.

If we can return to Professor Goldschmidt's reminder that culture includes all aspects of life and that these things are shared by the group, are learned, and are passed down from one generation to the next, we come face to face with the accumulated experience of the ages as we approach any situation in African life. The oral tradition is still the most meaningful for the masses of people. The praise singer and the story teller are still part of the African scene. The legends and myths and feelings and ways of doing things as handed down from father to son and from mother to daughter are still deeply rooted in the fabric of life. They must be approached with reserve and caution and with proper respect if cross cultural understanding is to be achieved.

And all of this is of special importance to the home economist. The teaching and practice of home economics, whose main concern is with the family unit, is in both a privileged and a somewhat delicate situation. If there are more opportunities to achieve cultural understanding in certain areas of home economics there are also more pitfalls to be avoided. Yoruba society, for example, is a very formal and mannered society. Probably going back to the fact that ancient kingdoms were made up of stratified layers of society in which relationships were delicately balanced, there is not even today a free and easy, informal, hail-fellow-well-met give and take among Yorubas peoples. This is not true among themselves and is certainly not true with outsiders.
In meeting a group of Yoruba women, protocol demands that the eldest woman be greeted first and the next eldest next, and so on down the line. Among a similar group of American women, all of whom are desperately holding on to youth, no one would wish to be singled out as the eldest or the next eldest. Endless examples of this kind could be cited, but I would like to close out on this matter of approaches to cross cultural understanding by saying that from the person of genuine good will who is without a scintilla of condenscension and who is free from the taint of patronizing others and who is appreciative of the depth and breadth of a tribe's culture, small breeches of etiquette and protocol will be quickly forgiven or overlooked. Conversely, the person who is doing the world, himself, his government, and Africa a deep personal favor by being in Africa at all--such a person can do nothing right and has failed before he has begun. Before knowing African history or culture, it will be well to know thyself.

Insights from Nigerian Home Economics Conference

I want to share with you now a recent experience in Nigeria that is relevant to the concerns of this conference. In May, 75 or so persons gathered in Northern Nigeria for a UNICEF-assisted national conference on home economics. The main objectives of the conference were to explore and examine the place of home economics in the national life of Nigeria and to make recommendations for its future development. The findings of that conference will have far reaching effects on the development of home economics in higher education within Nigeria and are perhaps relevant for other countries as well.

The conference was made up of representatives from education, extension service, nutrition, public health, nursing, social welfare, community development, economic planning, agriculture, and other allied fields. Observers were invited from private organizations, both national and international.

The conference was under preparation for nearly a year, and planning committees were organized in each of the four regions of Nigeria and the federal territory. Happily, there was a consensus that these regional committees should remain intact and that a permanent national committee should remain in force. These are to be known as regional and national committees on family life, certainly a very meaningful term in the African context.

There were several closely related, strongly recurring themes in that conference as revealed by the talks presented and the discussions following.

First, it was emphasized that some form of preparation for home and family life should permeate the entire educational system. It was noted that increased emphasis should be placed on the primary grades, because primary education represents the total educational experience for the largest number of Nigerian boys and girls. Primary education is free. Education thereafter becomes very expensive and is enjoyed by only the favored few.
Second, it was emphasized that this can only be achieved by the immediate development of a corps of trained teachers in home economics. Thus it was recognized that each region should provide for this preparation in at least one teacher training institution. The question of how the home economics graduate will be used when she returns home is, of course, paramount. Many things happen, but in Nigeria at least, it can be safely predicted that the need for teachers to train teachers will substantially increase in the immediate future.

Also stressed was the development of home economics teaching taking into account the rich natural resources of Nigeria and their use -- and the necessity of finding ways to use these resources for the betterment of living. The phrase, "We starve in the midst of plenty," is often heard. In the development of higher education in home economics, the necessity for basic research should be one of the first consideration. This is not to say that teaching programs must wait for research. Some work has been done in the past, and considerable work is being done now, particularly in the area of nutrition. While taking advantage of what is available, it is necessary to plan for investigation in other areas.

There was repeated reference to the desirability of teaching a brand of home economics in Nigeria recognizing the values of Nigerians, widely varying as these values may be. There is no area more deeply felt or more potentially explosive than the subject of family composition--or in other words the question of polygamy versus monogamy. Needless to say, there are families of all types and I have found that some teachers of home economics in Nigeria are becoming concerned as to the way of approaching problems presented by the students. There are those who feel it is impossible rationally to approach the subject of family relationships in their teaching. They need and want help in this area. And I will state flatly that any expatriate home economist who goes in with rigid, intolerant ideas on the subject is going to find herself in a cross cultural impasse of no mean proportions. Those in the business of preparing African women to cope with the basic problems of family life in a developing society must search very hard for perspective on such knotty problems as family composition. We must help the future teacher of home economics to arrive at a working philosophy about these matters that will enable her to walk her own cross cultural tightrope between the old and the new. This is an awesome responsibility and, in my opinion, far more important than the development of skills in the various areas of home economics.

I have referred to the 75 or so conferees at the national conferences on home economics in Nigeria without previously mentioning that at least half were men. It is of greatest importance that men should play decisive roles in the development of home economics education. Men and women do not live in tight compartments in Nigeria. In our work in villages we cannot get rid of men. Even lessons on baby care attract men's rapt attention. Women in Nigeria occupy important posts in the government and in the various professions, but as in America it is still a man's world, and the help and sympathy and concern of men will advance the cause of home economics at a much faster rate.
Our Nigerian conference brought high ranking men from education, government and allied fields who, it is believed, left the meeting on the side of home economics and who will, it is hoped exert influence in the proper places in giving home economics education a boost toward higher status.

One final thought coming out of the Nigerian conference seems particularly relevant to the purposes of this meeting. There was an overwhelming consensus that home economics in Nigeria has a large contribution to make in enriching and improving the lives of people on all social and economic levels. To those unacquainted with Africa, the tendency is to think only in terms of poverty and disadvantage, of disease and disability, and of all the ills besetting mankind. And of these negative aspects, there are more than enough. But there is another, brighter side of the coin.

There are rich and poor Nigerians. There are those who live in mud huts and those who live in marble palaces. There is also an emerging middle class that is neither rich nor poor. But, most importantly, Nigerian society is on the move in all aspects of development. The establishment of universities and a general increase in educational opportunities on all levels will mean a growing number of educated men and women. Strides toward industrialization and the modernization of agriculture will in time raise the economic level of the masses.

**The Educated Woman's Role**

In an open, fluid, and rapidly developing society, the role of the educated woman is crucial. It is through her influence that improved economic status is translated into higher standards of living. She sets the tone of society and sees that human and social values are not forgotten in the feverish pace of economic and political advancement. The traditional concerns of home economics education have been with values and standards in personal, family and community living. Our task is to assist the African woman to acquire the type of education that will help her to preserve the best of her own culture while infusing and adapting improvement and change.

Those of us working in the field are often asked, "What kind of education will fit the needs of that country?" The basic assumption seems wrong to me. Of course a country will have its own particular needs, but in a rapidly developing society needs and directions and thrusts are ever changing. What will truly fit the needs of an African country (or perhaps of any country) is a hard core of broadly educated men and women whose minds have been quickened, awakened, and stretched -- who have been motivated to recognize problems and to search for answers.

No education extant in the world can precisely prepare anyone for a bush village in Africa or a poverty pocket in Appalachia, but it can prepare people who want to see the pockets eliminated and the bush brought to light. That is the main task, as I see it, and one worthy of your best efforts and mine.