AGLI Report from Kenya
Customs, Culture, and Tradition
October 9, 2009

Dear All,

A few years ago when Gladys, my wife, and I were in Bujumbura, Burundi, we were invited to dinner at the home of a Burundian couple. When we arrived we shook hands with the kids, but then during our dinner and stay, they disappeared into the back rooms. The hostess told us that this was Burundian culture. The children returned to bid us goodbye when we left.

The next night we were invited to dinner at the home of another Burundian couple. In this case the children went in and out and ate dinner with the rest of us. This couple was certainly as "Burundian" as the first couple. So which was "Burundian culture"? My first point is that culture can vary between closely connected individuals.

When I was in the Rwandan refugee camp in Tanzania I knew a young man, perhaps 25, who was married to a woman older than he was. She had three young children. This was a case of "wife inheritance." In this region it is customary that if a man dies, his wife is inherited by the oldest surviving brother. In the olden days this clearly had its benefits as no woman and her children would be left uncared for. Moreover the family would stay united and the sons would still be part of the larger family.

But then AIDS came along. If a man died of AIDS which he had given to his wife, then the brother would acquire AIDS and give it also to his first wife and so on. The result was that the adult members of whole families were being wiped out. As an anti-AIDS measure, governments and health organizations began campaigns against the practice. In Kenya there is a debate whether wife inheritance should be made illegal. In this case the custom died out quite quickly because men were afraid of marrying their brother's wife.

My second point is that customs can and do change all the time. It is a myth of the "noble savage" that "primitive" cultures do not change. All societies are in a continuing state of change.

But then the opposite of wife inheritance is wife dis-inheritance. I know of a Luhya woman who has five children between three and eighteen. When her husband died, her brother-in-laws (the oldest who would have married her under wife inheritance) threw her and the children out so that they could control her husband's land, house, and livestock. She had to return to her father's place. But she would not inherit here either as it would be her brothers who would inherit the father's property. While her daughter might get married off to men with land/home, her sons would essentially be landless and homeless, making it very difficult for them to establish a home in Kenya. Currently this woman's predicament is common in the region. In Kenya they are trying to pass a law against wife dis-inheritance, proclaiming that property belongs jointly to both husband and wife. Not

surprisingly the mostly male dominated legislature is not supportive of this position while most women's groups consider a law like this essential. My third point is that when a custom does change, the change may have its own problems.

When my mother-in-law died, she had seven surviving daughters. The traditional sign of mourning for such a close relative is for the women to shave their head. Some of the daughters did this, some didn't, and others compromised by cutting their hair short. So my fourth point is that customs, culture, tradition may or may not be followed according to the whims and wishes of particular individuals.

Let us turn to another tradition, female circumcision. Neither the Luo or Luhya in Western Kenya have ever engaged in female circumcision, but most of the rest of the groups in Kenya do. Gladys has a friend named Jacinta who has an orphanage near Nakuru in the Rift Valley. When we visited once, she was "hiding" six Masai young women so that they would not be circumcised. There is a major campaign in Kenya against female circumcision, promoted heavily by women's groups and their non-governmental organization supporters. Actions that these groups have taken include safe houses during the time of circumcision, alternative initiation rites at puberty for the young women, and outlawing the custom. Every year it seems one or more circumcisers are charged with murder when one of the young women dies because of the "cut" as they call it here.

I know of no one who defends this custom except traditional patriarchal men and the women who circumcise. Note that there is an economic advantage for the women who circumcise since they are paid in money, goats, honey, etc for their work. It can be a substantial income for them during the initiation period.

Do you agree that this is a bad custom? If so, you will then have to agree that not all "ancient, traditional" customs are good and beneficial. Moreover you will have to join forces with all the Christian missionaries who have come to Kenya because they have been unanimous in condemning this practice since they first came. No good Christian Kenyan will have his or her daughters circumcised.

Moreover, if you consider this a bad custom, what do you do about it? Should its continuation or dis-continuation be left up to the Kenyans? Should it be only left up to the Kenyans from the groups that practice the custom? Should there be laws that are enforced against it? If so, how would they be legislated and enforced?

So my fifth point is that what to do about a bad custom is not easily resolved. Adrien Niyongabo in Burundi notes that the division of people in Rwanda and Burundi into Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa is a bad custom that needs to be eradicated. Rwanda and Burundi have taken divergent methods of dealing with this. In Rwanda the use of the terms has been abolished so that everyone is now a Rwandan, while in Burundi all positions in government, army, parliament, police, etc. are defined in concrete percentages. The police, for example, are half Tutsi and half Hutu so that ethnicity remains significant. Before you like the Rwandan solution, note that this was also tried in Burundi during the

regime of President Bagaza when it was illegal to use the terms. The result was that no one would count and criticize that the minority Tutsi were the vast majority in all the institutions of the country. In other words it was a method of continued minority domination since everyone knows, even if they cannot say it out loud, who is Tutsi and who is Hutu.

My sixth point is that when a custom needs to be changed, how can it be done? Laws can lead the way, but are ineffective if people resist them.

Sharon Phelps, a council member of Friends Peace Teams, once wrote me an email wherein she noted that years ago she had helped introduce ox plowing to an area where oxen were not used for plowing or pulling. The rationale was as follows:

The local people had an interesting reaction – they raised cattle for meat and could not imagine using them to plow or for other work, because they felt it would be wrong to eat an animal after it contributed labor to the life and wealth of their families.

While this way of seeing might be difficult for an American to understand, it would be even more difficult to understand for all those Africans, including people in Kenya, who use oxen for plowing.

The seventh point is that customs and their rationale are sometimes strange only because of one's own assumptions and biases.

An eighth point is that something that may seem very difficult to you might be rather easy for an African accustomed to doing it. Most Kenyan tribes, Ugandans, Rwandans, and Burundians carry things on their head, while others (Kikuyu, Kamba, Meru, and Embu in Kenya and then some groups in South Kivu in the eastern Congo) carry things on their back with a rope that is placed on the forehead. I always wondered how the various methods developed and why one group does it one way and another group, the other way. Here is a story from my time in the Rwandan refugee camp.

One day during my period off from teaching, I went to our house and opened the wooden shutter in preparation for grading papers on the dining room table. As I did this I noticed two women talking outside the window. I knew them both; one, Muyenzi Darasa, was from our village and the other, Muyensi Juu, from the village across the road. One of the women had a 5 gallon metal tin on her head filled with water which she had just drawn from the spring. The tin would weigh about 35 pounds.

Many times I had walked to the spring with a tin to draw water. First long blades of grass are formed into a halo which is placed on the head under the tin so that the weight is distributed more evenly on the head. It took me about 10 to 15 minutes to walk uphill from the spring with the 35 pound tin on my head. I had two problems when I did this. The first was that my neck muscles were not strong enough to hold the weight for this period of time. But as I did this every three or four days my neck muscles became stronger and this no longer was a problem.

My insurmountable problem was that I couldn't balance the tin on my head without it falling. So I had to resort to holding the tin with one hand. This arm would soon get tired and I would use the other one. This also would get tired before the first arm had recovered. By the time I reached home my arms ached. Then with those tired arms I had to take the tin off my head without dropping the tin or spilling the water.

As I watched the woman outside my window, I noticed that she never once put her arm up to stabilize the tin on her head. Whenever it began to fall to one side she would deftly move her neck and head and rebalance the tin. Clearly she did this without thinking because she just continued her discussion with the neighbor.

One time when I was going to draw water, I noticed about seven children, three to seven years old, near the spring. They had a tin can and they would half fill it with water, go to a part of the path which was level for about fifty feet and see if they could balance the tin can of water on their head the length of the straightaway. When they succeeded they were all happy and excited and, when the can fell, they ran to get more water and try again. The younger children were totally unable to balance the tin, while the older children frequently succeeded. What was I doing when I was seven years old? Learning to ride a bike. A person needs to learn both of these skills when they are a child. At only 21 years of age I was already too old to learn how to balance anything on my head without holding it up with my arm.

At the end of my forty minute break, as I closed the shutter to return to class, the two women were still talking. I could never have held 35 pounds on my head for more than 40 minutes. Yet for this woman it was something that she didn't even thing think about. The point is that foreigners comment on how hard life is for Africans because they themselves would be unable to do tasks that the Africans have learned and are accustomed to doing. These seemingly hard tasks actually may not be difficult for the Africans. In other words, in order to understand the Africans condition, you cannot just interject yourself into the situation because your experiences and conditioning may be very different.

In summary we must see customs, culture, and traditions not as fixtures carved in stone but as a breathing, living entities that are open to continuous change and various interpretations by different people. Some customs may not be beneficial; yet, changes may also have their pluses and minuses. Then there is the likelihood of great variations even between close family members.

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