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ANTH 101 - Cultural Diversity

28-Jul-08

Extra Credit

An African Christ Rise

Commentary

I will start with some background information about the recent widow. My African neighbor Eugenia Bangai has been a friend of my family for over two years now. Over the past year we have been getting used to her different customs and traditions. The first cultural difference we found was when it came to food. Food in general seems to be of much more importance to Eugenia and she informed us that the ability to make food was of high importance to African people. Eugenia made many African dishes for my family and shared them with my family often. Her ideas of sharing and personal property seemed culturally different to us also. For example, it wasn't until the fourth month of knowing her that Eugenia started to knock on our front door before opening it. Overall Eugenia is a wonderful friendly person, and although I use her as a model to understand other people of her culture, if many people of her culture are like her, then they are people I would like to meet and call my friends.

Eugenia invited us to the 40 day Christ raise for her husband, Aiah Bangai, and sent us an invitation in the mail. The Christ Rise was to be held on the 15th of June 2008 at 2:00pm located on the corner of Grant Ave and Sue Pam Dr.

Description

My wife and I arrived on time only to see, except for two people, that we were the only ones there. We were confused until one of Eugenia's friends working in the kitchen told us only half jokingly that the time printed in the invitation was BMT, which she informed us meant "black man time." As time progressed we noticed that there were a lot of people attending the Christ Rise at many different periods in the day, as though the time printed was only one suggested time to arrive out of many. Almost all of the people who arrived were African in decent and many, like Eugenia, were raised in Sierra Leone. The Christ Rise went on for some time. My wife and I had to leave at 5:00 pm but the Christ Rise services looked as though they were going to continue for some time.

Throughout the service I noticed that many of the guests wore bright multicolored robes and hats (if they could be called hats). The people who wore this attire were men, while the woman wore the same styled clothing but in dress form. I assumed this clothing style comes from Africa, as many of the representations of African people I have seen on television wear this same apparel. In opposition to my preconceived notions, many of the African men wore suits and ties to the funeral, others wore jeans and polo shirts.

Because my wife and I arrived so early, we mostly got to meet the women cooking and making other preparations in the kitchen for the Christ Rise. My wife and I helped for three hours cooking and preparing food. Food seemed to be of great

importance to these African women as they went to great trouble to make sure that it was prepared correctly. There were a lot of guests who also brought food. I helped carry in four large tubs of food in addition to the large amount already present. I also helped by putting the food into large food containers from which people could serve themselves. In all, there were three tables full of food and much left over to fill the food containers when they were emptied. I felt a sense of companionship and caring as I saw how everyone made sure that the people in attendance were fed. It was especially kind how guests walked the food line with my wife and me, explaining each dish, and what was in it. There were times when someone would tell us, "You wouldn't like that."

While most of us were preparing food, an African woman began to sing a song in her native language which virtually all the women around her took up and started singing in unison. I remember feeling a sense of awe at seeing all the women sing this song so passionately. Many of them adapted the lyrics as they were singing to provide a type of counter-point to the song. The song felt real, and very down to earth.

At about four-thirty the Christ Rise finally started. The opening prayer lasted for about five minutes and consisted of much talk about the life that Aiah had lead and the many people there that day. The prayer lasted for so long that my wife and I can't remember most of it. Half way through the prayer though the speaker started singing. It felt very weird hearing a song in the middle of a prayer. I am LDS, (Mormon) so we have our songs disconnected from our prayers.

My wife and I were the only guests that were white. The rest of the guests responded to the laid-back atmosphere as if they went to celebrations like this all the time. They seemed unsurprised at the late start and the impromptu singing. I felt uneasy and taken aback at times with these two cultural events that seemed very foreign to me. In fact, at that time I thought that we were attending Aiah's *funeral*. This is because in North American culture we only go to events involving a person's death once. I only learned latter on that this was one of many celebrations.

Eugenia told me later on that this 40 day Christ rise is very important to their culture. In fact they have many celebrations involving death which occur on regular intervals. For example a 40 day Christ rise, a one year, five year, and even a 10 year celebration, all time measured from the death of the loved one. She told me that the 10 year celebration is important because it is the time that the loved one can be put into a crypt. Before this ten year mark, community members visit their dead often and have many occasions to think about and celebrate them.