

Sharing ideas strengthen ties Spirituality unites Africans worldwide

Most African students who come to study in the United States leave their homes with the idea that they will quickly adapt to the American culture, because there are many blacks in America. When they arrive, they find out that the brotherhood they hoped and expected is not automatically established. Moreover, we Africans tend to blame our failure to make relationships with African-Americans on them. We often show our frustration and disappointment with lines such as: "They are so condescending, and they do not know anything about Africa — Like all other Americans, they think we live on trees and run around naked beside snakes, elephants and giraffes."

Somehow the African student expects the African-American to have an innate knowledge of our history, geography, society, and even our great politicians. After all, in high school, we learned about African-American history and we memorized Martin Luther King's, "I Have a Dream" speech.

On the other hand, many African-Americans are very disappointed when they first meet people from Africa; they, like us, expect and hope for a natural bond to be established, and are very disappointed when they see that Africans do not automatically rush to

embrace their lost brothers and sisters. They get the feeling that we do not like them, and that we prefer to establish relationships with whites. And they also may feel frustrated that Africans often do not identify with their struggle in America.

The fact is, there are differences. No one can expect two groups living in different ecological, political, and economical environments to remain the same, because they were once one people in the past. These differences are translated in behavioral differences that are highly visible and the cause of the initial frustration seen in both sides, a frustration heightened by the fact that expectations were so great on each side to begin with. Often each group stops there and we buy into stereotypes. But the ties between the two groups are emotional and spiritual.

In "Black Writers in French," Lilyan Kesteloot shows how what she calls the Harlem Renaissance, influenced the African poets which started the decolonization movement in Paris. The American writers of the Harlem Renaissance "made a very deep impression on French Negro writers by claiming to represent an entire race, launching a cry with which all blacks identified." They are Langston Hughes, Claude

McKay, Jean Toomer, and Countee Cullen on one side, and Léopold Sédar, Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas on the other side. The American writers insisted that they were African by essence and made a point to acknowledge their heritage.

Last weekend, when I attended the Big Eight Conference on Black Student Government, I realized how these ties between Africans and African-Americans are still present. Most of the speakers at the conference made references to their African heritage and insisted that it be remembered, because the values which helped the blacks in America survive the slavery experience, were deeply rooted in African traditions.

Marcia Gillepsie reminded her audience that the strength of the African family, as well as the spirituality of their ancestors, helped sustain them. Beyond the speeches, it was fascinating to me to see the black fraternity and sororities' step shows. I sat there and was very surprised to see these young women and men execute steps and dances that took me right back home, because they undeniably had African roots.

Being in an environment where virtually everyone was black also took me back to my first year in the United States, when I attended a black university. And with no surprise, those were the times that I experienced less culture-shock. My transfer to UNL was the time when I really started living the life of a foreign student. The first semester was not easy. I remember that I had a hard time having relationships with the women that I lived with, and slowly, I pulled myself away from the group.

For Christmas in 1986, one of the women who had been nice to me,



Damon Lee/DN

Kedidia Mossi, a native of Niger, talks about ways that African-American students and native African students can unite to represent their cultures.

gave me a little plaque that said, contacts with people who had similar backgrounds as me. Now I think that I have a full experience of "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Being in an all black community, one may not experience this. My father, of course, understood that part of the experience being in a foreign country was to be with people who were different, and he encouraged me to challenge myself by not limiting my America, and I feel comfortable

intermingling with the different ethnic groups living here.

I believe, though, that African nationals studying in the United States should make an effort to develop a special relationship with African-Americans, because of the many things shared by the two groups.

The future leaders of the decolonization movements in Africa and the leaders of the black liberation movements in the 1920s and 1930s in America, have kept close contact and shared their ideas to strengthen each other in their struggle.

Today, also, the leaders of tomorrow's Africa must not neglect what we can draw from the experience of a people who are looking for ways to improve their communities. It is also significant to notice that the Civil Rights movements in the 1960s in America, and the independence movements in Africa, were going on at the same time.

Conferences such as the Big Eight Conference on Black Student Government, which target African-Americans, and the All African Student Conference, which targets African nationals, should find a way to join their audiences. Also, African-American students should participate actively in exchange programs with African universities and institutions and take a keen interest in development issues in Africa.

It will be an enriching and spiritually rewarding experience, and will also strengthen ties between the young generation of Africans all over the world — a tie which was promoted by the African-American writers in the 1920s and 1930s.

Kedidia Mossi is a graduate student studying French literature, and a Diversions contributor.

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