

## **A Moment in Cultural: Reflections on a Time with the Sabines**

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As with most new experiences, my expectations were misleading. This is a mistake I've continued to make over the years, and I think in the end the benefit to having misleading expectations is that you quickly lose any reference point from which to view the experience and instead are forced to appreciate it through the native people. I spent the practicum section of my semester abroad on the slopes of Mt. Elgon with my good friend and fellow Greenville student Chris. The plan was to spend a month living among the Sabinu people in a small, isolated, mountainous village called Mengya, doing research for Food for the Hungry. The focus of our research was, essentially, to improve Food for the Hungry's methods of dealing with poverty in the area, as part of the UN's millennium goals. These are ambitious goals, and if all goes according to plan abject poverty will end worldwide by 2015. The voluble pragmatist Bono, (and a host of others) thinks that this is the generation that will stand by holding the water, watching the fire burn. I came face to face with poverty while in Mengya and I must say that Bono is the more realistic of the two.



*n FHI staff member explains scholastic distribution to CDP children*

to understand the basic needs of humanity in their rawest form. They're simple: clean water so that families don't get sick and die. Better irrigation systems so that the family will harvest enough to survive the whole year. A little more than 60 cents a day so the kids can keep going to school. My days were spent traveling around Piswa, the parish Mengya is located in, talking to the parents whose children are in FHI's Child Development Program. I had to work with a translator, so I knew that my asking the question already changed the answer. I could only hope my good friend Cherop Moses would understand the gist of what I was trying to say and would provide me with the gist of what the interviewee was saying. The problems that the community faces now are indirectly related to cattle rustling, which is the main reason they are up on the mountain. So, with the effects of cattle raiding in mind, I decided to study the progress, potential, and aptitude of CDP in Piswa by studying the livelihood of the parents. CDP is intended to alleviate economic pressure on parents by paying for school fees, thus freeing up the parents to save enough money to send their children to secondary school and hopefully university. What I discovered was that because of the extreme poverty in the area, CDP was only a mid-term plan, not the long-term plan envisioned by its creators. Most parents were simply not able to save while their children were in the program so that when the children are done with their seven years in the program, they will return to where they were before Food for the Hungry arrived in the area, with little impact and change from the few years they spent at school. If the goal is to put the child through school, which is something so basic and arbitrary back in the west that we can't

To live in a place like Mengya is

imagine not having that option, then some drastic changes in the area are needed. The problems were numerous. First, there was not enough water to irrigate the land. Second, most families did not have enough land to generate the kind of income necessary to put a child through secondary, much less university education. Third, erosion; the constant abuse on the land from the elements and from repeated use due to scarcity is causing decay at an alarming rate. Fourth, widows and women in polygamous marriages worked as “casual laborers,” meaning they would hire themselves, and in many cases their children, out to farmers with large amounts of land and work a 5-7 hour shift for the equivalent of 60 cents a day. Obviously with that kind of income, saving money for a university education is an abstract luxury “casual laborers” can not spend time planning for or thinking about. The situation appears hopeless.

Although the cattle rustlers appeared to be the root cause of the poverty in Piswa, I found, after a little more study, that the lives the Sabiny people led down on the plains was not much better. Because of the time of day that I conducted my interviews, a majority of my interviewees were the women in the household, and most of them told me they preferred to live where they were. The main reason they spoke of was that their old tradition of sedentary cattle keepers, shared negative similarities with cattle raiding pastoralist tribes like the Karamojong in that the number of cattle a man possessed was directly proportional to his social status. This meant that the determining factor for spending money was dependant on the amount of cows the head of the house owned, and if the loss of social status was greater then the benefit of going to

school or receiving medical attention, or buying more seed, then the family suffered while the father maintained his status. Also, on the plains below Mt. Elgon, there was a great deal of insecurity due to the sporadic Karamojong raids, whereas the places people chose to live on the mountain was usually much further then any walking Karamojong warrior cared to travel. So the mountain provided security from raids and introduced the people to the more stable and steady farming lifestyle.



*Looking over the lower plains into Karamoja land*

The questions I had to deal with were at first attempts to articulate the visible needs before me: what does this community need in order to develop? What crops, equipment, animals, entrepreneurial skills, and social services would benefit the community most? Those questions though, only scratched the surface and the answers were easy to come by. After my first day of interviews, however, there was a whole other myriad of questions concerning the meaning of poverty I’d never been asked; some I may be able to answer, others I might never know, but I will forever be thankful that I was in a place that forced me to grapple with the discomfort of poverty. First: what *is* poverty, and, at a seemingly polar opposite, what is wealth? Because I now know it is a whole lot more then living on less then a dollar a day. Who should have the

authority to decide what the end result of development looks like? What is the role of Religion in the process of eradicating all forms of poverty? How can we expect a country like Uganda, which has only been independent for around 50 years, to suddenly catch up on the 500 years of socio-economic development that's happened and continues to happen in Europe and North America? I realized very quickly how multifaceted and deeply complex the process of development is. I struggled with the notion that development brings an end to a lifestyle that people have always known, and that development means globalization and globalization means individual culture is moved to museums. With a more holistic understanding of poverty, the question I continue to ask is, is what we bring them better than what they previously had? We bring them a means to operate in our world, a world that, we claim, is full of choices, but we don't give them the basic choice of whether or not they want to be a part of our world. Have Ugandans always considered themselves to be poor, or is that a label we force on them and now they accept that definition for their own lives, creating a need a dependency on money and outside help?



*A "casual laborer" working in a wheat field*

However, the harshness of the older style of living and the arguments for the benefits of development became

clear when I continued to talk to the people about their reasons for living in Mengya. Almost all their answers were the same: we're here because the cattle rustlers stole all our cattle and farming possessions, burnt our homes and destroyed our crops. It was dispiriting to listen to day after day, and the resolution to the problem again sets the "old" versus the "new." Cattle raiding is as old as the domestication of cattle some 6000 years ago in Southwest Asia. Throughout history it has formed an integral part to many pastoralist cultures throughout the world. In East Africa, three tribes that continue to practice it in full are the Maasai and Pokot of Kenya, and the Karamojong of Uganda. For these tribes, the cow is the bases of their livelihood; they depend on them for meat, milk, and blood in their diets, shelter, clothing, and adornment, prestige, social status, wealth and influence. Raiding is the main means of acquiring more cattle, and is also a rite of passage for young men, as well as the method of acquiring bride wealth. The Cattle rustling cultures in east Africa believe that to die during a raid is the most honorable death a man could wish for. They incorporate raiding into their religion with the belief that God has given them all the cattle of the Earth, and it is their divine right and sacred duty to reclaim them. This may seem silly, but truth be told, when I look at how important a cow is to the culture, and how the people literally depend on it to live, I see there worship and belief in the cattle to almost be justifiably sacred. Unfortunately, cattle rustling tribes like the Karamojong have begun to illegally acquire weapons, and their older and less violent tradition of bows and arrows has been replaced by guns and steal. Now, the raiders plunder and pillage, destroying all the possessions of their

victims, mutilating, raping, and killing the men, women, and children. Again, the debate of what should be preserved in a culture made it's presence known, as it is the incorporation of modern weapons that makes cattle rustling such a deadly cultural tradition. Yet the beauty and history of the Karamojong culture is something that I would like to see last for a long time, but with the denunciation of nomadic cultures like theirs by the modernization, I'm afraid that they, like so many other African, Asian, North and South American, and Australian will also be forced to adapt and adjust to the inevitable change, by giving up most of what they have now.

As mentioned before, the visible needs can be addressed and, I think, should be addressed by the international community. But the fact is, with NGO's working with the people their lives will be forever changed, and whether that is good or bad is yet to be determined. I'm not opposed to bringing health care, education, farming techniques to these communities. But knowing that these same things that can help them operate in an increasingly smaller and technologically based world will be the same things that bring and end to their culture as it has always been. Thankfully while there I was reading some books on the development of cultures, which made change and development less unsympathetic than I had previously thought. What gives me comfort is knowing that throughout history and pre-history, cultures have always been developing and have always had to adjust to the surrounding cultures, and to watch the Sabinu culture in Mengya remodel itself according to change is to understand history in a more personal way. During my stay in Piswa I realized the impermanence of culture, and how

reflexive we are to new ways of living. This remains clear though: we are all developing in one way or another, and no one has the answer for what the best way forward is. We all struggle with our individual poverty, and I think it is the ability to understand this that is key to seeing Africa in the light that our histories are different, but our desires for the future are fundamentally the same and we're all trying to adjust and understand the direction we as humans are headed in. To say one culture is better, or more advanced than another, is to misunderstand the definition of better or developed, and to impose one's own definitions on another culture is to assume that one has all the answers. And no one culture or movement has the answers. Eradicating poverty isn't as simple as Bono and the UN make it out to be. What I think is imperative to the success of globalization (if that really is what's best) is that we stop thinking of the "third world" cultures as the ones that need to "catch-up." Instead we should understand that our fellow humans make mistakes, have good ideas, view the world with their own unique eye, and in that way cross-cultural involvement accepts the premise that whether or not we like it, a new open-minded understanding towards other cultures is necessary for all our futures and for the preservation of distinct cultures.

