

My Nigerian Culture

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As a young girl growing up in Nigeria, I played many roles at home. I had household chores and was responsible for taking care of my four younger siblings, all boys. My parents were strict and loved to discipline us; they believed in the saying “spare the rod and spoil the child.” Since I was a girl, whenever I greeted my parents or any of my elders I knelt down and said “good morning,” “good afternoon,” or “good evening.” My knees were always sore after I knelt down because of the particles on the floor. My brothers, on the other hand, prostrated instead of kneeling down. Prostrating is bending down and touching the floor with one’s right hand and with the left leg in the air.

One day after taking a shower I observed that my knees were much darker than other parts of my body, and also, that the surface of my knees appeared rough and bumpy. I decided to go ask my mother about this, but before I even got to her, I spotted her knees. They were even darker than mine. I then thought it was natural for the knees to be the darkest part of the body, for my mother’s knees were dark too.

Later that morning, as I wiped down our kerosene lanterns in preparation for the night, I saw one of my brothers coming out of his room; he looked clean and fresh; it was as if I could smell him from where I stood. His knees suddenly caught my attention: they were as shiny and smooth as the skin on his face. I called all my brothers over, lined them up and observed their knees. They were smooth and the same color as the rest of their bodies. I then knew my knees were dark and rough because I was always kneeling down.

Many questions ran through my head: “Why did females have to kneel down when greeting? Why did the males have to prostrate when greeting? What would happen if I prostrated instead? What would happen if I just greeted them standing up? Would they even notice?”

I decided to try greeting my parents standing up. As my parents came back from a village meeting that afternoon, I saw my brothers prostrating to them. I joined them in the living room and said good afternoon standing up. There was a sudden silence in the room; they both looked at me surprised. I felt a cold breeze on my neck. I thought to myself: “What am I doing?” I could hear my brothers behind me whispering in shock.

My father then explained to me that the Nigerian culture of having females kneel down and males prostrate while greeting an elderly person was done to show home training and respect. He said that both he and my mother felt disrespected and I should not repeat that kind of behavior again. I realized the

importance of the way we are supposed to greet our elders and I also explained to my brothers why they were supposed to prostrate.

Moving to America changed many things for us. Here, I have noticed that people greet each other by simply saying good morning or good afternoon with a hand shake. Some even peck each other on the cheek. While we have adapted to the American way of living in many ways, we have also brought much of our culture, like saying our prayers before eating, handing something to someone with the right hand and many more, to America. I must admit that I feel better, at least for now, not having to kneel down anymore. My knees are recovering from the bruises and the darkness is also fading away.