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Cultural Variability: An Interview with Oreoluwa Tejiri Onafowokan

Louisiana is known as the melting pot of the United States because of its cultural diversity and unique communities. The state is home to many beautiful flora and fauna, along with gorgeous bodies of water such as the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. There are copious reasons as to why so many people make the decision to find a career and live here. Whether they're from a different state or a different country all together, each person gives Louisiana its signature individuality.

It's common to meet people from different cultures on a college campus. At Southeastern Louisiana University, I've met so many amazing people who come from all walks of life. Most of my friends were born and raised in America, specifically in Hammond, or regions beyond that like Baton Rouge and New Orleans. However, there are a select few who are either from out of state or from a different country. In my Biology class, I met Oreoluwa Tejiri Onafowokan, one of the sweetest and gorgeous girls I've ever met. She's a junior attending Southeastern, and she's majoring in political science. Tejiri is from Lagos, Nigeria's largest city. This beautiful metropolis is known for its incredible impact on African commerce, and attracts large amounts of tourism with its stunning coastal beaches, fanciful nightlife, and most importantly the National Museum Lagos, which houses many Nigerian art and craftworks. The most common languages spoken in Lagos are Yoruba, Igbo, and Awori.

From what Tejiri explained, Nigerian people are quite similar to Americans, however there are vast differences. “Nigerians are very big on respect,” Tejiri explained, “It’s not just saying yes sir or no sir, but your actions. You always treat your elders with the most respect because their life is defined by experiences we have not gone through yet.” People living in the south can relate to what Tejiri says about being extremely formal. Southern hospitality goes far beyond words, expanding into polite gestures and genuine kindness. However, Nigerians take it a step further. For them, it’s more than what Americans normally experience, especially with family. Tejiri went into great detail talking about her mother and their relationship, “My mom and I have always been best friends, and I respect her greatly. When I’m looking for advice, I always go to my mom. We’ve always been very close, almost joined by the hip.” When I asked my American friends this same question, a lot of them stated that they can ask their parents for some advice, but not all. Many college-age Americans rely on their friends for advice and support. Tejiri added, “Family is always close. Even when we fight, we have each other’s back.”

After learning about her family, I wanted to know more about relationship dynamics and the communication within them, specifically with gender roles. In the southern United States, gender roles tend to appear more traditionally. The same can be said for Nigeria. “Today, there’s not really a lot of gender inequality,” she said, “There’s still traditional views of the man providing, and the woman running the house. Today, men are stepping into the house, but they still tend to provide the most financially. This tends to happen a lot in the cities, but in rural areas, they’re still very traditional.” Modernity is slowly creeping into the southern states, as well as Nigeria. Despite the fact that the culture evolves, stereotypes still remain even when people break gender roles.

Involving family and friends, Tejiri explains that American culture tends to value personal space less than Nigerian culture. This includes not only physical touch, but sharing a space as well. Tejiri stated, “Americans are more open to sleeping with someone before they’re married. I know this because my roommate invited a boy over to our dorm without telling me. Romance culture is very loose from what I can tell.” She also explained that while Nigerians love to talk, they still need to be in their personal bubble and their personal space on their own. With this being said, personal space is a prominent value in Nigerian culture, and it all ties in with the idea of respecting others.

Living in a shared space with others, especially on a college campus, is a common occurrence in the United States. The ability to share a space becomes more difficult when people are not communicating with each other or respecting each other's boundaries. The idea of sharing a space while attending a university is a crucial part of the college experience. Tejiri explained that in Nigeria, education is extremely important, possibly more important than it is here in the United States. “If you live in the city, education is a huge deal,” she explained, “however, if you are not educated, that does not take away your value as a person.” Since Tejiri moved to the United States, she observed that it’s still easy to find decently-paying jobs, even without a college degree. In spite of this, she explained that there are certain stereotypes that highly-educated Americans view blue-collar workers as inferior. Tejiri said that from what she understands, that stereotype does not hold as true in Nigeria. She explained, “Education status does not matter when it comes to who you are as a person. Like I said, your value still holds no matter what education you have because being intelligent comes in many forms.” Tejiri also added that some Americans believe in this stereotype, and it shows their true colors. Concluding her chat on education, she said, “People like this still exist in Nigeria, but to me, there’s less of

them. Most of the people I meet are good.” It’s important to remember that stereotypes exist in every culture, and no individual is left behind when it comes to the silent judgment of others.

As stated earlier, Louisiana, along with other states spanning across the south, can be identified by their striking southern hospitality. This primarily shows among interactions with strangers. For example, in the south, it’s more common for a stranger to hold the door open for someone, or pick up something that someone dropped on the ground. According to my natively-northern friends, this doesn’t happen often. One of my friends even explained that when he was walking into a store, the person in front of him shut the door in his face. However, he explained that this microculture is prominent in more northern states, and southern states behave in the opposite way. However, even though this report is on international cultures, observing microcultures can also add insight to cultural variability. Tejiri shared what it’s like interacting with strangers in Nigeria, “Small talk is not normal in Nigeria, but we love to talk to people we are close to. Like I said earlier, actions speak louder than words. Think of southern hospitality gestures without most of the talking.” From what she explained, the people in Nigeria are very polite, even with tourists and strangers. They want people who aren’t familiar with the culture to feel included and comfortable, and they express this by polite gestures. However, although Tejiri stated that most Nigerians love talking, when it comes to strangers, research has shown that they use communication techniques that avoid conflict, similarly to Asian cultures. The only difference is that Nigerians seem to talk more.

In any culture, disrespect is not tolerated, but it’s defined in different ways. In Nigeria, respect is honored to a more extreme degree than America. As stated previously, respect for elders and people of a higher social status is most important in Nigerian culture. Tejiri explained in great detail what she finds disrespectful about American culture. I included her insight

because I wanted to hear how she feels about our culture as well, rather than relying on only explaining her culture. The idea of cultural variability is to understand culture on a micro level. Everyone's culture, values, and beliefs change on a daily basis, and most of the time it's not noticeable. This doesn't just apply on a verbal level, but through nonverbal communication as well. With this being said, most natives can easily tell when a person is not from the area. Tejiri didn't have too many experiences with tourists in Nigeria, but rather, she explained how she felt having a culture shock in America. "Obviously classes are different," she explained, "but students act differently in class. Calling people by their first names, especially teachers, is very rude in my culture. Even if you are very close to them, when you are in that kind of setting, you always refer to them as sir or ma'am." She also added, "I don't like when other students pack up before the teacher is done speaking or teaching. That is very rude, and would be frowned upon greatly in Nigeria." For the most part, Nigerians seem to share similar values with Americans, however respect is a much bigger concern for them. The idea of cultural variability shows greatly in the aspect of communicating respect to others, whether it be verbally or through actions.

One of the last things Tejiri discussed was creating connections and friendships. She explained that making friends in America was very easy, as people are quite nice. The way people treat their friends, however, is what she has some thoughts on. She explained, "Americans don't understand the idea of being humble. If I'm having an argument with my friend, I'd rather correct her at home when no one is around, rather than in front of a bunch of people, especially other people she knows." What she stated is true. Coming from someone who's lived in America her entire life, I can safely say that I've experienced a lot of instances like that. Americans can be a little too honest for their own good, especially at the worst times. It seems that Americans don't

have a decent grasp of humbleness or humility. While this behavior isn't necessarily frowned upon in Nigerian culture, it's still an aspect of American culture that she is not used to.

During the process of the interview and writing this report, I can safely say that I've increased my knowledge of international cultures. However, I'm not done learning yet, and I don't think I ever will be. There's so many new discoveries to be made in the world of culture and diversity. Tejiri's insight on life outside of America has only driven my passion to travel even further. Before the interview came to a close, Tejiri explained her personal thoughts on Americans. "Individuality is very common here, yet Americans create a community for each other, rather than falling into one by chance. Everyone here is more self-centered. Being like that is not taught in Nigeria." she explained. This is very true. Anyone who's ever attended elementary school in America has the words "be yourself" drilled into their heads. Individuality is a big deal in America, because everyone wants to stand out from the crowd and be different. However, not every country shares that same view, and that's where most Americans experience culture shock when they travel out of the country. Before I left the interview, Tejiri said something I found special, "Nigerians here are like brothers and sisters. We always stick up for each other, no matter what." When I left, I thought about what she said, and it got me thinking about the people I've met in my lifetime. My heart ached for American communities to be as closely-knit as those Tejiri talked about. I began yearning for that sense of connection and belonging, and I realized that I'm not alone in this desire. However, this is where community building comes in with our culture. I realized that Tejiri's observations were scarily true, and I thought about it for the rest of the day. It's alarming how accurate she was with describing not only my native culture, but hers as well. I find her to be a very intelligent, brave, and kind girl

who sees the world through rose-colored glasses. She's incredibly funny and has the biggest heart, and if I could talk to her again, I'd do it in a heartbeat.