

**September 16, 2006**

### **Culture Shock Progress**

In training to go to China, we learned about the stages of culture shock. First you live in euphoria of being in a new place, then after some weeks or months you enter the doldrums of accepting the harsh aspects of life there. Ideally you work past that second phase into a third phase, a sort of equilibrium of accepting some things and working to change others.

Well, we're about due for the second doldrums stage. I realized today, though, that anyone going overseas should time their trip so that spring comes just about the time they're entering the doldrums stage.

Spring has come here. The world turns greener by the day, flowers open, my garden has lettuce and a billion weeds, and silly birds with floppy tails appear (Betsy tells us these "widow birds" are a sure sign of spring). It's hard to be too pessimistic in spring.

And we're not too pessimistic. I understand enough Zulu to have some idea what people are talking about, we have a few deepening friendships, and someone is repairing our leaky roof today in time for the rainy season.

I am, on the other hand, sometimes entirely overwhelmed by the task before me of preparing two years of financial information for an audit. Our predecessor Betsy invented record systems as she went, and while the information we need is usually "in there somewhere," we're discovering it isn't in a format very fit for accounting. So here I come, with only about one year of college accounting classes, and volunteer to sort everything out. I'm in way over my head, but gradually digging a way out.

### **Snakes and Ceremonies**

Yesterday two activities of note happened. First, Adam killed a potentially deadly snake by stomping on it with his boot and stabbing it with a kitchen knife. The good news is this is the first poisonous snake we've seen, and the snakes here aren't aggressive, and our dogs spot them to alert us. Still, it gave us a renewed sense of God's protection.

Second, I interviewed a young woman in preparation for a Northwestern newspaper article. In a week or so you can read more in the article, but what likely won't fit into the article is all I've heard lately about ceremonies around here.

On the night of the September full moon (September 7, I think), there's a tradition here of sending all the virgins to dance before the chief. My Zulu friend tells me that the chief will likely choose one to add to his several wives.

“But oh!” she shook her head, “You hope that’s not you!” I found it strange that all these girls go off to dance, but nobody wants to get chosen by a chief with a bunch of wives already, who loves you for a night and leaves you to bicker with the rest of his wives.

I learned that many of the wonderful ladies who take loans from us also have the job of checking the young women to make sure they’re virgins. We saw them going off to the chief’s dance, dressed in their finest and giddy for a party. Betsy told me that there’s a law forbidding virginity testing. Some say the law protects the rights of minors, but to the sweet ladies who do the testing, I suppose the tradition offers some hope of preventing the spread of AIDS. They feel if the tradition dies, it’s one more lost tradition leaving Zulu culture that much more frazzled.

AIDS, I’m learning, is usually considered by the whites to be a disease caused by the sinful customs of the blacks. But when you ask the blacks, you find evidence that their own traditions might have curtailed AIDS if they hadn’t been stripped of these customs through years of oppression.

For example, in traditional Zulu culture, a man pays *lobola*, or a bride price, before he gets married. That means he waits until he’s mature enough to earn money or have livestock. That means he values his wife, he honors his wife’s family, and once he gets a wife he sticks with her until he might have money to buy a second wife, which traditionally is thought of as a safeguard against promiscuity.

These days *lobola* is so expensive no one can afford it. Fathers feel they have invested in their daughters by paying for their education (something women traditionally didn’t receive), so they want their money back, and take it as an insult if they get less than the equivalent of ten cows—the going *lobola*.

Men can’t find money unless they work in cities. Most people make the choice not to wait for the impossibly high cost of marriage. If they do marry, usually the man works most of the year in a city, where he finds girlfriends, prostitutes, and AIDS.

At the same time, men are stripped of roles of manhood. A traditional Zulu boy would practice skills he would use in life—raising livestock, political discussions with leaders of the community, and hunting or warfare. These days a boy goes to school as long as his parents can afford, he graduates, and finds he can’t get a job no matter how much school he has had. He has no way to support a family, no way to feel he’s worth something. Livestock are less valuable now to the Zulu, with huge white farms all around. Political decisions belong to the elite few, and a Zulu man’s only chance to prove his worth through hunting or warfare would be to steal or fight.

For better and for worse, the culture here has changed to a hybrid of Western and African, of post-apartheid freedom and lasting apartheid harm. In every culture there is Good and Bad, and the two seem particularly at war here to claim their ground as cultures mix and settle. The issue here isn’t so much what mix of traditional Zulu or other “modern” traditions wins. What I’m here to see is how Good will fit into the mix.