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Africa Is Not a Country: Teaching African Culture through Picture Books

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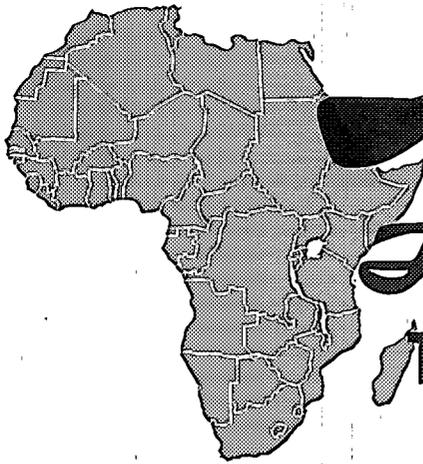


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Africa

Is Not a Country

Teaching African Culture through Picture Books

by Dorothy Bowen

When you hear a news report from Nigeria, Sudan, Kenya, or South Africa, what comes to your mind? Is it a part of the world that interests you? Do you listen intently to what follows? Do you view Africa as one big country or are you aware of the many languages, cultures, and countries that are there? Or do you just turn off until the next news item comes up?

Africa is made up of fifty-three nations and covers an area greater than the United States, China, Japan, and Europe combined. It is estimated that more than 800 languages are spoken in Africa. Some fifty African languages have more than half a million speakers each, but many others are spoken by relatively few people (*Columbia Encyclopedia* 2001). If this is the case, due to the fact that language and culture are so closely related, we can no doubt conclude that there are at least 800 different cultures on the continent as well. There

are those who say that one cannot truly understand a culture without learning that culture's mode of communication.

How can we communicate these concepts to the children in our classrooms? How can we instill in them some level of understanding of and



appreciation for this great continent and its many diverse cultures? During the past ten years or so, there have been several quality picture books published that give us a glimpse into one or more aspects of one of the many cultures in Africa. Some of these books do an excellent job through text and illustra-

tions, giving us windows into what life is like in some African countries. Let's examine some of them.

In the introduction to their book so aptly titled *Africa Is Not a Country*, Margy Burns Knight and Mark Melnicove state:

If you drew a picture of Africa's

landscapes on a large pie and cut it into ten equal pieces, only one piece would contain all of its rain forests. Four pieces would represent the deserts; another four would be mostly grass, farmland, and trees. The final piece would hold all of the mountains and cities of this beautiful, vibrant continent, where several hundred million children wake up every morning.

They then go on to give us a brief glimpse into an event that might be representative of life in each of these countries. We see Kip and Arangi running to school in the highlands of Kenya, a country that has produced some of the world's fastest runners. We also see a family in Algeria sitting on the floor eating couscous, their national dish. The book demonstrates that Africa's cultures are widely diverse and the illustrations show us that its peoples come in many hues as well. This would be an excellent book to begin a journey across the cultures of Africa.

A few books give us a glimpse into the history that helped to form these cultures. For example, Grifalconi's *The Village that Vanished* is a story of how a village in Cameroon might have escaped being taken away into slavery. A much more contemporary story *The Day Gogo Went to Vote* is the account of a South African grandmother who votes for the first time in her life in that country's first free elections in April 1994.

These elections marked the end of

the separation of the cultures which has forever changed this beautiful country.

Karen Lynn Williams's book *When Africa Was Home* helps us to understand a southern African culture from the point of view of an American child. Peter lives in Malawi with his parents who are serving in the Peace Corps. He is totally at home with his African nanny and his playmates. He loves to run barefoot and he loves the local greeting which enquires, "How have you slept?" conveying the idea that if you haven't slept well, neither have I—a greeting that demonstrates so vividly the importance the culture places on community, and being inextricably part of a group. When Peter's father talks to him about going "home" to America, Peter thinks, "That's not my home." When he reaches America, he misses that no one stops to ask how he has slept. He misses the sense of community that he knew back home in Malawi.

After having said that there are many cultures in Africa and there is no such thing as an "African culture," one cannot help but see commonalities in the African picture books. One example of this is the need to pay for school fees. It is a good thing for American children to read about how precious an education is and how hard a child is willing to work in order to earn enough to go to school. Page McBrier's *Beatrice's Goat* shows this so well. Beatrice lives in a small village in Uganda. She loves to

stand in the trees and watch the children in school. "Oh, how she longed to be a schoolgirl! How she yearned to sit on one of the benches and figure sums on a small



slate chalkboard...." But she knew she could never save enough money to pay for fees, books, and uniforms. Then an aid program gives a goat to her family completely changing their

situation. Beatrice's dream of going to school comes true after she has worked hard to raise the goat.

Stuve-Bodeen describes Bernardi's life in Tanzania with his grandfather, Babu, who makes toys. Bernardi takes them to the market to sell, but there is never enough left over to pay for school fees. Then a tourist is willing to pay a large amount for the music box that Babu made especially for Bernardi. Although Bernardi's first thought is to purchase the soccer ball he dreams of owning, he takes his earnings home to Babu, who uses the money to send Bernardi to school.

Sandoval tells a similar story of Abdul, a boy in the West African country of Sierra Leone. Abdul sells oranges in order to raise his school fees. Abdul and his mother dance around the money box when they have raised enough for him to go to school. "Now he could go to school again. He would listen to the teacher. He would learn everything and he would teach it all to Maryama

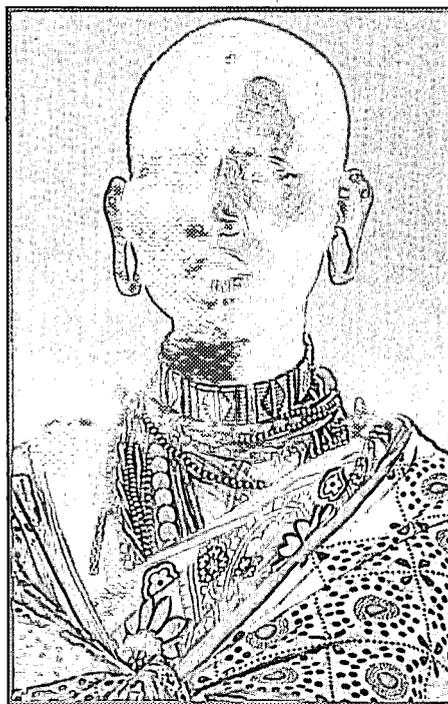
(Abdul's sister)." Laurie Halse Anderson, in her book *Ndito Runs*, shows us what happens once a child in Kenya has the privilege of going to school. How does she get there? She "races through the morning to school." It's a beautiful picture of what Ndito sees, smells, and ex-

periences "through her Africa, across her Kenya, over her highlands to school."

Another common picture in these books is the creativity of children

who, because of little cash income, invent their own toys. One of the best is Stuve-Bodeen's Tanzanian story *Elizabeth's Doll*. Elizabeth has a new baby brother named Obedi and,

as she watches Mama care for him, she wants her own baby. Having no doll, she finds a rock that is "just the right size to hold." She names it Eva and does all the things for Eva that Mama does for Obedi—bathes her, burps her, and changes her. Several of the illustrations in Isadora's *At the Crossroads* show the inventiveness of South African children as they use trash cans and



sticks for drums and find pleasure in simply a discarded wheel that is pushed around with a stick.

Of all the picture books depicting African culture, none surpasses Virginia Kroll's *Masai and I*. The Masai are an East African tribe that have held on tenaciously to their traditional culture. Kroll tells their story from the point of view of an African American girl who studies Masai culture in school. She totally identifies with these people, and each double-page spread depicts first how life is in her culture and then how it would be if she were Masai. For example, she lives in an apartment building and does not know many of the others living in their building, but she thinks, "If I were Masai, I would have no neighbors who were strangers living in apartments up and down the halls. Our huts would sit in a circle around a large animal pen called a kraal, and everyone would know everyone else." Nancy Carpenter's illustrations do a wonderful job of showing what her life would be if she a Masai. One of the best examples is when she is preparing to go out and looks in the bathroom mirror. A Masai girl her own

age, also preparing for a celebration, looks back at her through the mirror.

Several of the picture books give a glimpse into eating customs and diet. For example, in *Beatrice's Goat* we see the children eating bananas and breakfast porridge and drinking milk. Sandoval shows Maryama and her mother grinding the family's food by using a mortar and pestle. Later we see the family eating a meal prepared by Abdul's grandmother. It is a "special supper" consisting of fu-fu, vegetable stew, and fish! Ann Grifalconi's book, *The Village of Round and Square Houses* set in Cameroon, not only shows the preparation of the cassava root to make fu-fu, but we also see the custom of the children serving the food to family members in order of age—first to Gran'ma, then to Uncle Domo, and finally to Mama, a custom showing respect for elders. The children are last.

Many of the books depict the market place where much of the socialization as well as the purchasing of daily needs takes place. We see East African markets in *Kele's Secret* and *My Rows and Piles of Coins* and Sandoval's *Be Patient, Abdul* shows us a market in Sierra Leone.

How might these books be used with kids in the classroom? Vivian Yenika-Agbaw states, "Children should... realize that because society is complex, there is no formula for portraying life in Africa in texts. It then becomes each reader's social responsibility to negotiate personal meanings from existing texts..." (244). How might this be accomplished? Following are some suggestions. As you read the books you will think of many more.

Suggested classroom activities to use with these books:

- Select a country that you have

read about in one of these books or in a group of the books from one part of Africa. Do further research on that country. Then create a picture book on that country. Pattern your book after Kroll's *Masai and I*.

- Try to imagine what it would be like to have to raise one's own money to pay school fees. What would be some of the tasks the children in your class could do to earn money?

- Do further research on the Internet to learn more about a contemporary African culture.

Africa for Kids. <http://pbskids.org/Africa>
AfricaOnline.com - Africa Kids Only. <http://www.africaonline.com/site/africa/kids.jsp>



Africa: Resources for Elementary Teachers. http://www.coe.ohio-state.edu/merryfield/global_resources/modules/AFElementary.htm
LookSmart - Directory - Africa for Kids. <http://search.looksmart.com/p/browse/us1/us317837/us317922/us903629/us904097/us904168/>
ProTeacher! Africa Lesson Plans for Elementary School. <http://www.proteacher.com/090062.shtml>
Teacher's Guides for

Africa - History for Kids! <http://www.historyforkids.org/teachers/guides/africaguide.htm>

Zoom School: Africa. <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/school/Africa/>

Writing prompts

- If I had to make my own toys...
- If my home did not have indoor running water and electricity...
- If my family moved to (name a specific African country)...
- Write a journal entry on your first impressions of an African country you are visiting.

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