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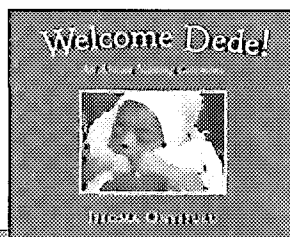
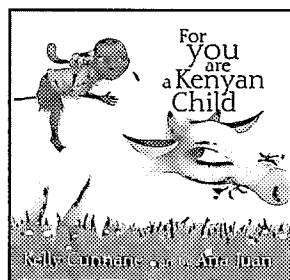
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Another Look at African Cultures through Picture Books

by Dorothy N. Bowen

I realized how difficult it is to describe what life is like for a child growing up in Africa when I was asked to make a presentation to two 6th grade classes. In the course of the presentation, I said, "Africa is not a country." I had to smile to myself as I saw the shocked look on the face of a little girl sitting right in front of me. Her mouth dropped open and I knew that she thought I had made a very great error. That is a common

misperception about Africa, the continent, made up of more than 50 individual nations and at least 800 distinct cultures. It is impossible to overemphasize the diversity of such a vast continent that covers an area greater than the United States, China, Japan, and Europe combined.



Recently, many picture book authors have attempted to paint word pictures that portray life in many of these African cultures while illustrators have created accompanying pictures. Both have tried to help children living in America identify in some way with the life being described. Cummins's book *For You Are a Kenyan Child* puts it this way:

Imagine you live in a small Kenyan village, where the sun rises over tall trees filled with doves. You wake to the sound of a rooster's crow, instead of an alarm clock and the school bus. Your afternoon snack is a tasty bug plucked from the sky, instead of an apple. And rather than kicking a soccer ball across a field, you kick a homemade ball of rags down a dusty road. But despite this, things aren't that different for a Kenyan child than they would be for an American kid, are they? With so much going on around you, it's just as easy to forget what your mama asked you to do! (dust jacket)

This article will take a look at some of these recently published picture books about Africa. Each one describes some aspect of life in an African country and examines both the similarities and the differences between these cultures and the cultures of the children we see in our classrooms every day. Perhaps, we will find that the differences are not as great as we expect them to be.

There are customs in many parts of Africa which an American child would find quite unusual. These differing customs begin with the naming of a newborn baby. Onyefulu, a West African writer, has written the book *Welcome Dede! An African Naming Ceremony* on this custom in Ghana. The book is told from Amarlai's viewpoint who has a new cousin

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and thinks she needs a name other than “baby.” He knows, however, that in his part of Ghana a child is not named until she is eight days old, and the name she is given must be very carefully chosen. The story tells how that might be done. For example, Amarlai’s mother’s name is Ayeley because she is the first daughter, and his own name means he is the fifth son. Finally, the day comes and the ceremony begins. It is a ceremony of prayer and a tiny bit of corn wine is dropped on the baby’s tongue. Grandfather then says, “Your name is Dede.” That is just the beginning of the celebration with gift giving and partying.

In another book, *One Big Family*, Onyefulu writes that in Eastern Nigeria the time a child is born determines the *ogbo*, or age group, he or she will belong to for the rest of his or her life. Every child, together with all of the other children born within a five-year period, share with each other in times of joy and in times of sorrow.

Childhood and village life is also unique depending on the part of Africa where a child grows up. Diakit , in the book *I Lost My Tooth in Africa*, describes how losing a tooth in Mali brings a chicken instead of cash. The Chamberlins, in the book *Mama*

Panya’s Pancakes: A Village Tale from Kenya, weave a tale that demonstrates that even a simple meal of pancakes can grow into a village event in Kenya.

Ebele’s Favourite: A Book of African Games by Onyefulu illustrates how games can bring the children of a West African village together. These games, not unique to Nigeria and Senegal, are quite distinctive to that part of the world. For example the story tells about *Ncho*, a counting game that requires seeds and a beautifully carved board.

Celebrations which in themselves are common to many parts of the world are acculturated by the African setting where they take place. For example, Johnston, in the book *A Kenya Christmas*, depicts how Kenyan culture sometimes makes the celebration

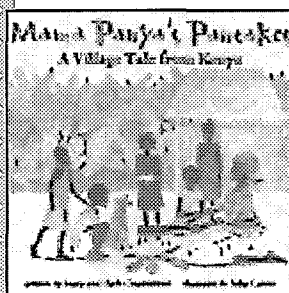
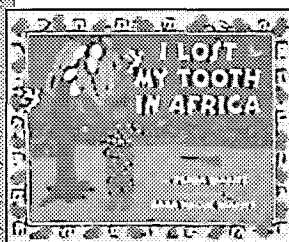
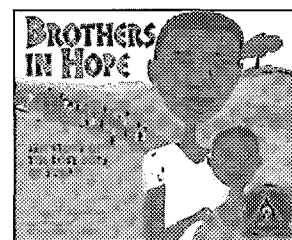
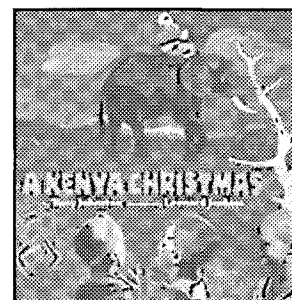
of Christmas its own. Every December Juma’s aunt Aida comes to Nairobi to visit, and one particular year she seeks to fulfill Juma’s wish to see Father Christmas. On Christmas Eve, when the people gather together to eat *mandazis* (African doughnuts) and *chapatis* (African bread), Father Christmas arrives riding an elephant! This is a truly Kenyan Christmas!

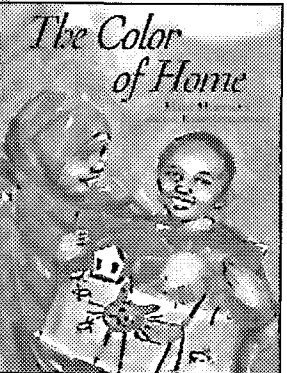
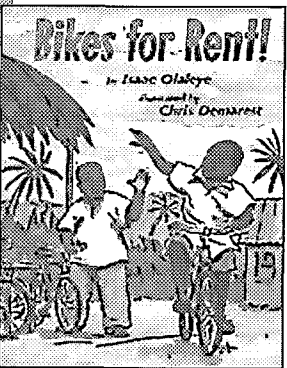
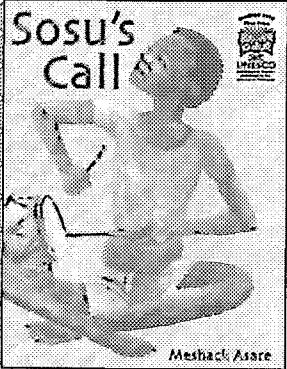
Wedding customs also differ around the world. In recent years, two picture books have been published on wedding customs in Africa. Onyefulu’s story, *Here Comes Our Bride!*

An African Wedding Story, comes from Nigeria and gives us a look at the discussion between the families, the presentation of gifts to the bride’s family, and the ceremony itself. The preparations for a wedding in the Kikuyu culture of Kenya are told by the younger sister of the bride. A bride price of cows, sheep, and goats is given and sister Wangari is carried off to cheers and songs from the crowd and then taken to her new home. The songs and celebration last for eight days, and when Wambui goes to bed that night she thinks about her sister who is no longer sharing a room with her.

A recently published story of southern Sudan, *Brothers in Hope*, gives us a window into a life that few American children can relate to. When Garang was eight years old he began to tend some calves of his own. One day everything in his life changed when his village was attacked. His animals were killed and his family disappeared. He joined the “Lost Boys of Sudan,” and life was very difficult as they walked along the road to the refugee camp in Ethiopia. Later his journey took him to Kakuma camp in Kenya and finally to a more promising life in the United States. Gurang and thousands of other Lost Boys have now settled in the United States.

Now, let’s look at picture books that demonstrate the commonalities between children growing up in North America and those growing up in various parts of Africa. Little Karoo in South Africa, in Daly’s book *Once Upon a Time*, struggles to learn to





read just as a child might do in any part of the world. Encouragement from Auntie Anna builds her confidence and her reading skills. Sosu, in *Sosu's Call* by Asare, deals with a disability in a situation not at all unique to Ghana. However, his village does not offer assistance to a child like Sosu until one day when he is instrumental in saving his village from a serious disaster. As a result, he becomes a hero and gains the attention of an aid group which provides him with a wheelchair.

Children around the world will identify with Lateef, a Nigerian boy, who wants to learn to ride a bicycle in the book *Bikes for Rent* by Olaleye. Every child who has had to move and change schools will understand Hassan's difficulty with adjusting to his new school when he moves from Somalia in Hoffman's *The Color of Home*.

Two books, *Can You Hear the Sea?* by Cumberbatch and *Gugu's House* by Stock focus on the universal topic of the love between grandparents and grandchildren. Cumberbatch's book takes place in West Africa, and Stock's book takes place in the grassy plains of Zimbabwe. Though they are worlds apart, both stories tell about the happy

event of visiting grandparents.

A conversation between a Masai boy and his father is related in Joosse's book *Papa, Do You Love Me?*. The father's answer is the same as would come from a father in any part of the world, "I'll care for you, love you, and teach you. Always. Because I am your papa, and you are my Tender Heart." And Ama, a young Kenyan who is seeking *The Most Important Gift of All*, asks the weaverbird, the lion, and the giraffe until she discovers the answer. Her gift to her baby brother will be the gift of her love. Stories such

as these make African culture quite accessible to the children in our American classrooms.

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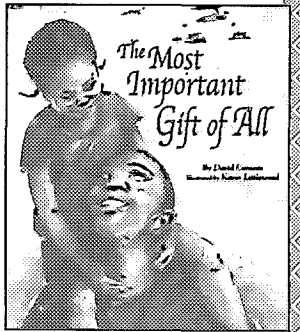
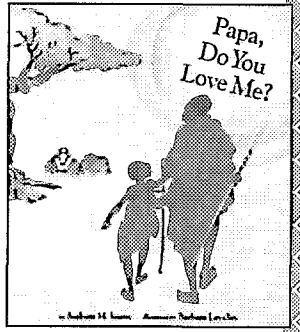
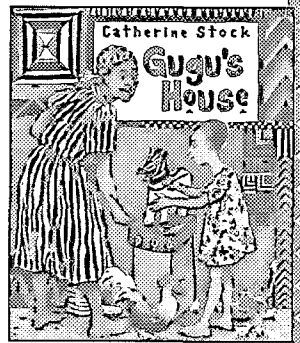
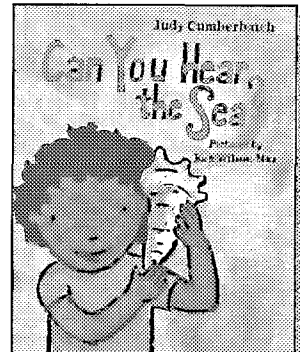
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