



## WHO'S MORE CULTURED – YOU OR ME?

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I had had it! “Amen” was barely voiced at the end of grace before kids were grabbing food while others at the table were still waiting for the main dish. Some members of our family considered everything a finger food, even spaghetti. The word “Yuk” was being uttered entirely too frequently during meals. The obvious solution – a “manners night.” I thought this would be an enticing and creative way to instill some basic table manners in our four children without preaching. I would make it fun, glamorous, appealing. It didn’t work.

My plan was to have a very formal meal – table cloth, cloth napkins, more than one fork, candles, even a little wine to make it special. I splurged and bought some lobster (my favorite food) to make the dinner enjoyable. The complaints started when I turned off the overhead light and lit the candles. “We can’t see! Turn the light back on. This is dumb!” How did I raise such gauche children? I love candlelight! It went downhill from there as two of them informed me that they didn’t like lobster and I needn’t have gone to the trouble. Maybe it was just an off night. Maybe it was bad karma. I don’t know. I decided to accept their explanation that they knew how to act when company came or when they were out in public, even though I knew it was not true. It was not worth more arguing. So much for bringing culture to my own family.

Ten years later I was thinking about culture again as Jim and I returned from a month of visiting our daughter, Heidi, in a rural village in Mali, West Africa. Certainly on first blush most westerners would consider this a very uncultured place. There was no electricity or running water. The toilet procedure is not suitable to describe on these pages. Most of the adult villagers were illiterate. The typical meal consisted of “to” which is ground millet with a baobab leaf sauce, washed down with water at the end of the meal. Every day, every meal. There was no word for lobster. Primitive is the word that many people would use for this existence. (Ten years ago I would have suggested that my kids might feel right at home.)

But given a little time and hospitality, I started to look at this “culture” a little differently. What is culture after all? Often graciousness, leisure time, or the ability to speak several languages is associated with being cultured. Certainly living in a safe environment and having unhurried, stress free time would seem to be signs of a highly developed culture. Well, that’s what I found in this tiny village of Gono in Mali.

The hospitality was overwhelming. Each time we passed someone from the village we received an elaborate greeting. Heidi taught us an abbreviated response to this and we spent the better part of one day just greeting the neighbors. Since it wasn’t rainy season, many of the people, (mostly men) had a great deal of leisure time. They would meet in the shaded tree nursery mid afternoon for the ritual tea ceremony and then take a nap. (It gets as hot as 130° so part of this is survival.) Nobody hurried because activities didn’t start at a particular time. They started when people got there. Maybe the people who were unhappy stayed away from these pale faced visitors, but we didn’t meet a person who did not shake our hand, greet us warmly, and have a constant smile on his or her face.

In a side trip we made to Kenya, greeting people was similarly important. At one point our host, a Marianist brother, took us aside and explained that we may have offended some of the people at a party because we did not go around and greet each person individually when we entered a room and repeat the process upon leaving. It was a way of acknowledging their being.

Even though only 32% of the adult population in Mali can read, most everyone speaks more than one language – their village language, their regional language, and sometimes French (the national language). In one typical gathering, I looked around our group and noticed that people were talking in five different languages, frequently translating for one another.

When Heidi first went to Africa, friends would ask about her safety. We worried about it too. Now that we've been there, we realize that she's probably safer than if she lived in Cincinnati during the riots or New York on 9-11. There didn't seem to be any crime in this small village as locks only served the purpose of keeping the animals in or out. The expectation was that if I had something and you needed it, I would give it to you. The village was obviously poor...but was it? It was Muslim...but they acted like Christians – or at least how Christians are supposed to treat each other. Was it uncultured or was it more cultured than our little corner of the world? Do you think they need a manners night?