

From the motherland to the 'free' land

African students dispel U.S. cliches

By SERENA HOLMES
Staff Writer

Imagine people believing that you live in trees and eat insects when the truth is that you are a middle-class citizen of an established nation. Funeka Mbulawa, Roger Mouafo, Muctaru Kabba and Felix Forlemu have heard generalizations like this often.

Mbulawa, a humanities graduate student from South Africa, said several Americans have doubted her origin simply because her complexion is not a dark brown.

Forlemu, a humanities graduate student from Cameroon, said the pictures of the rural poor in some African nations are often believed to represent the entire continent.

"You never see the cities. There are cities in Africa . . . that are much, much, much more beautiful than the cities here in the United States," he said.

"We have big families, and not everybody has the privilege to be educated. So when you're starting out, the family tends to depend on you a lot."

Muctaru Kabba, student from Sierra Leone, Africa

When he visited Washington, D.C. this past year, Forlemu said he was shocked by the level of poverty that the homeless there live in. He said he understood they were only a segment of the nation.

"If somebody comes here and takes their picture (and says) 'that is the image of the United States. People live like this,' it's not fair," he said.

Many African students said if African families were like some Americans think they are, every married man in Africa would have a multitude of wives.

In the past, polygamy was widespread in Africa. It still has a place in African society today, Forlemu said. In Cameroon, polygamy is legal, but many Cameroonians are satisfied with one mate, he said.

"Our parents sort of broke that link. We, the younger generation, haven't grown (up) in such a polygamous atmosphere. We don't see why we should marry more than one wife," he said.

Marriage is highly respected in Africa, Forlemu said, and gender roles are distinct. Mouafo, an economics graduate student from Cameroon, said men in his country appear to have more authority in the home than they do in America.

He said the woman is always consulted before decisions are made that concern the family.

In South Africa, not even the traditional family unit has escaped the influence of Apartheid. Women whose husbands are either imprisoned or constantly active in the struggle now have more responsibilities, Mbulawa said.

Although these women must discipline and provide for their families now, they do not see themselves as equal substitutes for the men, she said.

Before marriage, many Africans are free to date the person of their choice, just as in America. However, some American rules of the dating game don't apply in Africa, Mbulawa said.

"At home, when you like each other, it's not a very complicated issue. It's not as complex as it is here," she said.

South Africans don't waste much time being subtle about their feelings, she said, and a dating relationship can begin within a month. Also, there is no mystery about possible skeletons in a person's closet.

"All I have to do is contact the family. The family's background is easy to find out," she said.

Unlike Americans, Cameroonians in their early teens don't hit the dating scene, Forlemu said. "In fact, at that age, they know almost nothing. About half (of the Cameroonians) date for the first time when they get to the university," he said.

Coming to America to study can also require a social life adjustment. Forlemu said some of his American friends tease him about being so serious about school.

He said the education most African students get in America is funded solely by their families. To fail and return home empty-handed would be a disgrace.

Kabba, who is from Sierra Leone, is waiting to begin his graduate program. He said most African students don't have the privilege of focusing on their own needs when they graduate.

"We have big families, and not everybody has the privilege to be educated. So when you're starting out, the family tends to depend on you a lot. You have to probably end up helping others get educated," he said.

African society is not the only thing that some non-Africans are clueless about. Many African students said they are surprised by the number of times they have given informal geography lessons to American students. By some accounts, the continent was thought to be smaller than California, Florida and even New York.

Despite the negative perceptions she has heard, Mbulawa said she has seen positive changes. "It's getting better. There's more interest in Africa. With Mandela coming here, people are more aware; they can see that we have good leaders. It's getting there; slowly but surely," she said.

Professor

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NBC taped in Columbia from Feb. 27 to Sunday. According to Love, the new crew interviewed fellow professors, students, friends and family while shooting film at the university, her home and church.

"They wanted to see what I do full-time rather than part-time and capture the work that I've been involved in all those years," Love said.

"They've shot all kinds of film," Rhett Jackson, owner of the Happy Bookseller, said. Jackson was also a Methodist delegate to the Seventh Assembly. "I think it will be great for the United Methodist Church and for the World Council," he said.

NBC began taping Love in Canberra, Australia in late January as she prepared for the Seventh Assembly of the World Council on Churches. She has been an active member of the council since 1975. NBC has also been taping various aspects of the council since 1975.

Yet NBC only recently chose Love as a featured person in the documentary. "NBC has archives of tape since 1975, and they kept noticing me cropping up in their tape," Love said. "They asked me if I would be willing to be their 'human face.'"

As an affiliate member of the Wesley United Methodist Church, Love was invited to the Fifth Assembly in Nairobi as a youth delegate in 1975. She has been a member of the council's executive and central committees and chairperson of the council's Unit of Justice and Service program since 1983, United Methodist Communications Coordinator Victoria Shearin said. This was her third assembly.

The Work Council on Churches involves more than just members of the United Methodist Church. According to the United Methodist publication the *Interpreter*, the council brings together the historic Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches and Protestant groups such as the Baptists, Lutherans and Methodists as well as younger Pentecostal bodies and independent churches around the world.

"The council has been in existence since 1948 and has been working to bring about Christian unity since then," Love said. The council is the most representative body of Christians that exists, she said.

The council has a large assembly every six to eight years with delegates from more than 300 member churches, Love said. The purpose of the assembly is to set priorities for the council while celebrating Christian unity.

This year the justice and service unit "worked to make statements on current issues of the day" during the assembly, Love said. In Australia, the unit passed eight statements for educational purposes.

"A statement is a representation of all these member churches speaking concert voices," Love said. Though the Persian Gulf War and the plight of the Australian Aboriginal people were predominant issues, the unit also discussed such topics as racism, the theology of creation and women's rights.

"The fact that there was a war of global proportions made a big difference at our meeting. The war helped illustrate in very graphic terms the importance for Christians to place an emphasis on peace with justice," Love said.

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