

Jon Woods, Winter Term 2006: Teaching English in Kenya

I went to Kenya for my Winter Term project in which I spent my time teaching English and American Football at Lamu Boys Primary School. I also had daily tutoring in the Swahili language along with my volunteer work at the primary school. Dr. Athman Lali, the chairperson of SIT Africa, organized my wonderful stay, which included one-on-one interactions with the SIT crew. My trip had a big impact on my life and it taught me always to be receptive to others' ways of life. While I was in Kenya, I kept a daily journal of all the culture happenings I was being exposed to and how I dealt with them. Writing in my daily journal helped me cope with the culture adjustments.

Perhaps the biggest cultural adjustment for me concerned the dining practices. In America I was accustomed to eating at tables and using utensils. In Kenya, I ate most meals from the same serving dish as my dining partners. We ate with our hands, particularly our right hands only. Additionally, for most of my stay I had to become accustomed to eating on top of mats on the floor. At first I recall feeling extremely self-conscious with these type of eating behaviors due to my sloppy mannerisms. Over time I grew to love these cultural dining practices because I enjoyed the unity between man and man, and man and food. By sharing food directly with my dining partners I felt a particular closeness to them in the spirit of the meal. Now that I am aware of the purposes of eating with the hands I better appreciate the idea of digestion beginning with the hands. As a biology major, this makes perfect sense.

Growing up in America I was constantly exposed to women inside and outside my home. During my trip to Kenya I was immersed in a large Muslim community where the attire and activity of women are very conservative compared to the United States. I could not help but notice that there was a much smaller ratio of women to men in the communities; the women I did see were fully clothed in traditional head scarves and buibuis (veils). During my stay I learned to admire the culture and religious respect for females' personal privacy of body and self. Now I have a different view of how women should be dressed all over the world, possibly covering their bodies more and leaving questions to one's own imagination. I am no longer necessarily attracted to women that are fully exposed as I was in the past.

After returning from Kenya I realize that there are some wonderful cultural practices performed all over the world that I will not be able to experience in America. I hope that, with more opportunities to travel not only back to East Africa but throughout the world, that I can continue to experience other cultures and continue to grow as a human being.

