I’d always felt it. This fiery desire to be connected to my ancestral roots. As an African-American daughter of Caribbean immigrants, raised in an all-white Orange County suburb, I had to dig pretty deep to find them. Though round-about, my ancestors undoubtedly stretch back to Africa. Africa. The Motherland. The Cradle. The Birth of Civilization. To many African-Americans, Africa represents who we were before the slave ships, cotton fields, freedom marches, bus boycotts, and the many civil rights heroes that give us a reason to celebrate Black History Month. But what of the culture we left behind over 400 years ago? Are there still similarities between Africans and African-Americans today? To find the answers, I took a trip to the California African American Museum with several international students from Africa who were just as curious about my culture as I was about theirs.

400 Degrees of Separation
The African & African-American Connection
by Deborah J. Burke

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Defining an Identity at Home and Abroad
by Julia Kelson

For many international LGBT students, defining sexual identity can be an especially challenging struggle. Many of these students come from countries with conservative attitudes toward sexuality and often feel torn between a new found sexual liberation in the U.S. and the expectations of their friends, family, and cultures back home.

Take Cassandra Yee*, an Environmental Studies major from the Philippines. When she told her parents she was a lesbian, her mother literally collapsed on the floor. “It took two years, countless arguments, tears and heartache [for my parents] to finally accept who I am. They [still] don’t support me 100%,” she says.
MEET THE OIS STAFF

1 Ariel Suarez - Immigration Advisor
2 Cecilia Melendres - Immigration Specialist/Fellowship Officer
3 Becky Peterson - International Student Advisor
4 Anne Kaufman - Assistant Director
5 Esther Lee - Associate Director
6 Sumaiya Mamun - Senior Immigration Advisor
7 Tony Tambasca - Executive Director
8 Robyn Heiman - Immigration Advisor
9 Judy Hartwich - Senior Associate Director
10 Natalie Badashian - Information Specialist
11 Trevin Barnes - Information Specialist
12 Quyen Le - SEVIS Coordinator

Photos: Nathan Carter
THE CALIFORNIA AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTS MUSEUM

Our group of USC students hailed from Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Uganda. They were diverse, excited, and shared their opinions easily. Our tour guide narrated the African-American journey through art and artifacts as we walked through the museum. As we observed a metal re-creation of a slave ship illustrating the middle passage – quite a familiar sight to me – our group listened in silent horror as our guide retold the shocking details of the middle passage. I expected everyone to be as connected to the story as I was, but to my surprise Chijoke Ejimuda (CJ), a Nigerian engineering masters student explained what was obvious for the group; many details of this tragic part of the African-American story were new to them.

THE AFRICAN & AFRICAN-AMERICAN DISCONNECT

As we sat down at a local pizzeria, I asked if they felt any similarities between African and African-American cultures today: “I lived with a lot of African-Americans and I came to America expecting conversations similar to those in Africa. [But we’re] worlds apart. Might as well be a different race,” said Nduku Ngomba, a Kenyan sophomore majoring in biology. The group agreed, and was quick to confirm that they were just as different from each other. As they expressed the many unique cultures within Africa itself, I realized how easily it was for me to group all Africans together, while expecting them to know the deep diversities and intricacies of my African-American culture. I knew this “grouping” was influenced by the portrayal of Africa in the media.

We’ve all seen the commercials: skinny African children with flies on their faces and pot bellies that paint a singular image of Africa screaming: Poverty! War! AIDS! The students at the table laughed at the radical ignorance of this perception. Their Africa was beautiful, multi-cultural, wealthy, political, and full of opportunity. They were quick to point out African stereotypes they’ve heard – with the most famous being that Africa is One. Big. Country. “Africa is NOT one big country!” said Ben Stillerman, a white graduate film student from South Africa.

Ben feels the need to dilute these biased portrayals. “Africa has not really expressed itself internationally. I want to be a voice for Africa, rather than some American film a guy on National Geographic. That’s a bridge that could be formed.” Ironically, just as my perception of Africans was influenced by the media, their perception of African-Americans was also significantly media-influenced. They had seen movies and heard hip-hop songs depicting the urban legends of African-American culture. Surrounded by USC’s urban neighborhood, some of them thought that African-Americans only came from this type of socio-economic background. I shared with them that African-Americans inhabited every type of wealth status in this country, just as they did back home.

KEEP CALM AND REMEMBER YOUR ROOTS

A unique point of both connection and disconnection for us was in the name “African-American.” Many of the African students at the table questioned why African-Americans called themselves that name – given that they were not from the African continent. I explained that African-Americans claimed the entire continent of Africa because slavery destroyed much of their heritage and connection to their individual tribes and countries. Claiming the whole continent gave them a sense of belonging to the motherland, even if most African-Americans did not know their exact country of origin.

CONNECTING WITH THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY AT USC

Speaking of belonging, I asked the group if they felt connected to the African-American community here at USC. To my surprise, many of them expressed difficulty in establishing friendships with African-Americans. Moses Mpanga, a Ugandan business leader passionate about Pan-Africanism, felt this way while he attended a historically black college in Texas. “I went to an all-black school [but] I felt discriminated against,” said Moses, “I never felt at home.” Nduku chimed in, “You have to work hard to penetrate.”

In contrast, Nompumelelo Matjila, a South African sophomore majoring in business, had a different take: “Most of my friends are African-Americans,” she said. Victor Ewubor, a Nigerian engineering graduate student, appreciated how some African-Americans strive to connect to the motherland through holiday celebration. “500 years is a long time. Things erode. But somehow, there is a struggle to keep in tune with their roots. Some celebrate Kwanza. I feel some [connection] ‘Hey brotha!’ Could be a cousin, you know?” Others chimed in that they found once African-Americans opened up, they really opened up; some would do anything to know more about Africans. Perhaps that openness comes from the burning desire many African-Americans feel to be connected to their original roots – even if that connection can be more imagined than real.

REBUILDING A UNIQUE BOND

“There is a lot to learn about each other,” said Larry Duke, a Nigerian law student. Seeing positive images of Africans and African-Americans in the media will help us move past oversimplifications, stereotypes, groupings, and myths. This is critical to building bridges. Although the black diaspora is too diverse to group all Africans and African-Americans together, we remain deeply connected. Our roots stretch back to the motherland. Through knowledge, respect, openness and mutual understanding, Africans and African-Americans can honor their pasts, celebrate their differences, and start afresh at building a unique bond based on our richly interwoven legacy.

By the end of our cross-cultural exchange, I felt connected to my new friends and to the land of my roots. As we sat together, we were all excited about the incredible stories there were yet to share.
Trojan Global Intergenerational Friends Program

by Deborah J. Burke

The USC retiree community in collaboration with the International Student Assembly and the USC Emeriti Center just launched an exciting new networking program: TGIF. No, not Thank Goodness It’s Friday, but the Trojan Global International Friends Program! TGIF assists international students in gaining an understanding of American culture while they pursue their education. It also connects students with amazing faculty mentors to guide them along the way.

At their inaugural networking event in Spring 2013, students conversed with retired faculty who offered advice on creating a new life in the United States. Faculty such as the former Director of the Humanities Audio Visual Center, Dr. David Tool, who worked in China for over 10 years, mingled with students eager to build relationships with seasoned faculty. Dr. Tool believes that international students need to learn both how to get a good job, and how to survive the pitfalls of life abroad. “I felt that as their teacher I should teach them life’s lessons.” As Dr. Tool illustrates, TGIF represents a holistic approach to education; conversation, mentorship and friendship.

“TGIF represents a holistic approach to education; conversation, mentorship and friendship.”

Shiyao Wu, from Wuxi City, China, is a physics major who dreams of developing a cross-cultural business for Chinese teenagers. Freshly arrived to America, he went to the TGIF event to help make new friends. “I feel lonely sometimes. So I attended TGIF to talk to students from different parts of the world.” Communicating with the USC retiree community was a special benefit because he was able to share the culture shock of American life. “I gained friendship with other international students, [a] connection with some outstanding USC retirees, and I did not feel lonely in such a warm Trojan Family.” Shiyao was really impacted by Dr. Tool’s travels. Dr. Tool showed him how to encompass the “spirit and attitude” of becoming a bridge between Chinese and western cultures. Says Dr. Tool, “In China there is a saying: ‘A teacher for a day, a father forever.’”

Ji Zhao, a doctorate student obtaining her Ph.D. in Urban Education Policy, was also impacted by the event. She received advice from Dr. David Marsh, former Associate Dean and the Robert A. Naslund Professor of Curriculum Theory. She also engaged in networking activities and discovered the USC Language Academy. “[This seems like] something I will participate in the future,” she says. Like Shiayo, Ji felt the same warm sense of community.

TGIF crosses the intergenerational and international divide in an exciting way to help students connect with faculty, discover professional mentors, and make new friends in the Trojan family.

Thank goodness for the Trojan Global International Friends Program!
I stand in the middle of a crowded bazaar in Kazakhstan, surrounded by hundreds, if not thousands of shoppers shouting in Kazakh and Russian. My blonde hair and blue eyes set me apart from the old Asian women shoving their way through the packed aisles. Usually, I fearfully avoid trips here, but I’m down to my last light bulb and the bazaar is the only place that sells them. So, here we go… As I try to barter with the vendor, the locals break out into heavy laughter. My cheeks burn red with embarrassment. No one believes that a white girl can speak Kazakh! I’m so out of place, I want to run out of there as fast as lightning. But, of course, the ground is coated with ice, and falling flat on my face would be a none too graceful exit. Instead, I gingerly waddle to the streets outside.

Volunteering with the Peace Corps to teach English in Kazakhstan was the most terrifying experience of my life. For a year and a half, I learned how to survive in a fantastically strange culture. At first, I felt totally displaced; but, out of that displacement came a greater understanding of my true identity. I discovered what it took to create a new home in a community that was extremely different from my own: courage and outreach, even when it is uncomfortable.

I began creating my community of Kazakh friends by first reaching out to my students. After school, I held dance clubs in our tiny classroom. Once we held the first one, the kids begged me every day to host others! Then when I came home, I worked elbow-to-elbow with my host mom every night to cook dinner. The carrots I chopped were too thick and the noodles I rolled were too thin. Even still, she was overjoyed that I volunteered to help. Overcoming my fear of ridicule, I practiced my Kazakh on the streets. I was thanked simply for attempting to speak the local language. After months of this, the love and encouragement I received made me feel like I could finally call Kazakhstan my new home.

Then disaster struck. Rising threats against Americans forced our team to evacuate. I was heartbroken. This grand adventure had suddenly been ripped out of my life. Shipped back to New York City, I felt that strange sense of displacement again – but this time in the U.S. I remember standing in the middle of a Duane Reade store, staring at 15 variations of razors, marveling at the ease, the convenience, the boring blandness of life here. Where were the rich smells, the clamoring sounds, the vibrant spirit of the bazaar? I found myself longing for that exhilarating yet challenging life I left behind.

I searched for any trace of Kazakhstan in America. Obsessively, I scoured the travel sections in bookstores to find any Kazakhstani literature, but to no avail. It was as if the country did not exist. My move to West Hollywood for USC finally struck a balance between my two worlds. When I saw banners lining the streets advertising a Kazakh film festival, I signed up immediately. At the festival, I heard Kazakh spoken for the first time in nine months and I nearly cried. Then, lo and behold, at USC, I found a small group of Kazakhstani students!

Eagerly, I reached out to the students on Facebook to show them the same hospitality I had received in their country. But to my surprise, nobody answered. I found myself an outsider (again!) trying to fit into their tight-knit group. So, I tried a different route – I wrote to them in Kazakh. Now, that got me some answers!

One student agreed to meet me briefly. As we walked, we compared life in Kazakhstan to life in the U.S. She admitted that during her first year here she also felt displaced, but now she viewed the U.S. as home – much like how I now view Kazakhstan. I’ve continued making friends, and with every person I meet it becomes more possible for my Kazakhstan life to live on in the States.

Stepping on that plane to Kazakhstan was one of the scariest moments of my life. It took all of my courage. But once I lowered my barriers and allowed the experience to shape me, it became one of the greatest moments of my life. Ultimately, I learned that with a little outreach and a lot of chutzpah, I can create a home in any corner of the world.

Kaycie Ellingson hails from California and is pursuing an MA in Journalism.
A Deaf Woman's Journey Advocating for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing

by Manako Yabe

Born Deaf

I was born with profound deafness. My parents and grandparents are hearing, making my brother and I the first deaf generation in our family. I was raised using cued speech, oral speech, and lip-reading. I attended Japanese mainstream schools with no accommodations – as was popular in Japanese society – where I wore my hearing aids and sat in the front row of class. But I rarely participated in class discussions or student activities because I was unable to fully understand what my teachers and classmates were saying. I pretended to laugh when my classmates laughed, but I was often excluded from joining group discussions. This isolation left me feeling extremely alone and caused me to lose my self-confidence. Seeking better education for my brother and me, my parents moved us to Atlanta, Georgia, and later to London. This move changed my life. It set me on my journey to make higher education institutions more accessible to deaf students through increasing universal design awareness.

Discovering My Deaf Identity at CSUN

In Japan, London and later the U.S., I discovered my passion for international social welfare and education. As a result, I acquired five languages: Japanese, English, American Sign Language, British Sign Language, and Japanese Sign Language. Seeking to obtain equal communication access, I majored in Deaf Studies at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), and received my first interpreting and note-taking services in mainstream classes. My eyes were opened! I could finally understand what my professors and classmates discussed – even why they laughed! I felt like a caged bird that had finally been set free. Exhilarating experiences like joining the Deaf CSUNians, winning the Miss Deaf CSUN pageant, and becoming the first international deaf student to be honored as a Presidential Scholar shaped my hidden leadership skills and increased my self-confidence tremendously.

Communication Barriers in USC's Higher Education: Lack of Universal Design Awareness

When I enrolled at USC to earn my Masters in Social Work, I found that it was challenging to be a deaf student. Being one of only 10 deaf students (and the only international student to use American Sign Language), I often faced a cultural conflict between the hearing community and the deaf community regarding myths and stereotypes about deaf people. Not only that, but I felt a universal design-friendly environment was lacking on campus. There was no captioning access on televisions or on online videos. Bicycles blocked the access to building entrances, making it dangerous for people with visual impairments or limited physical abilities. Student service offices, such as Disability, Cashier, and Admissions, were often located on the 2nd or 3rd floor, but not on the 1st floor. Many buildings, such as libraries, had ramps, but also had non-automatic doors, and people with wheelchairs or with injured legs had to walk a long way to enter.

At last year's commencement ceremony, I observed many international families and elderly people unable to understand the commencement speech because of a lack of captioning. I wanted my own graduation to be different: a wonderful time when all of our friends and family could enjoy watching the students' faces on captioned jumbotrons without limitations. From that moment on, closed-captioning became my passion!

Why is Closed-Captioning Important?

The benefits of closed captioning appeal to individuals who are hearing, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (including international families), deaf or hard of hearing, and senior citizens with hearing loss. Because USC has such a large international population, it is reasonable to believe that the addition of captioning on the jumbotrons would make a jumbo difference! I investigated the university's accessibility issues, but USC's de-centralization and few research findings made it very challenging to tackle. So, I conducted my own independent research.

Success! Closed-Captioning at USC's 130th Commencement!

After much investigation, I proposed having captioned jumbotrons at USC's 130th commencement ceremony so that all of our Trojan families would be able to enjoy watching their students. Not only did USC implement the captioning at my graduation, but I received the Dean's Award for Excellence & Innovation! Being deaf in a hearing community and an international student in America has taught me deep compassion for those who face the challenges of exclusion and isolation. I am committed to empowering deaf students and am now developing even more innovative opportunities to increase communication awareness across campus to create a universal design-friendly environment. With these improvements, we can truly have a campus without any limitations.
Defining an Identity at Home and Abroad continued from page 1

Partial acceptance came at a high price, one with which Cassandra still grapples. She could return home to parents who reject her sexuality, or stay in the U.S. with her American girlfriend thousands of miles away from home. As close as Cassandra is to her family, she doesn’t want to go back into hiding. “When you go back, you go back into that shell. Leading a double life can rip you apart,” she says. Cassandra explains that her parents only tolerate her sexuality because she is their only daughter, “but they still can’t stomach it when I cut my hair too short or mention my girlfriend.” Cassandra wants to see Filipino culture become more accepting of homosexuality, but she says she does not expect it to happen any time soon.

Family is not the only obstacle international LGBT students face. School and work environments can be just as hostile. Wei Huang* is a civil engineering Ph.D. student from Beijing. Like Cassandra, he sought acceptance, but this time from his university in China. He supported his peers’ attempt to create a welcoming community in the form of a LGBT student association. The attempt, however, was denied by the university for being too dangerous. While some parts of China are becoming more accepting, “LGBT student associations in Beijing are very rare,” he says. Fear of history repeating itself concerns Wei as he enters his profession. He believes his field is known for its intolerance towards homosexuality. With graduation nearing, he worries about what will happen next. “I would like to become an [engineering] professor in the U.S., but ever since I came here there has been a disappointment in the amount of acceptance.” While he feels much more accepted in the U.S. than in China, he struggles with the idea that he might not feel welcome in the professional world no matter where he lives and works.

Intolerance also haunted Phillip Talong*, a junior majoring in chemical engineering. Phillip was teased relentlessly by his peers about being gay. His sexual identity was treated “like a joke. It’s very painful,” he says. As much as he loves the Philippines, it was only after coming to the U.S. that he felt, “more respect for LGBT issues. [Here] it’s not the only thing that defines a person.”

Vincent Vigil, the Director of USC’s LGBT Resource Center, works hard to create an accepting environment that allows these students to define their true selves. “The majority of students join [the center] to find support because they’re coming out,” he says. In his experience, students from East Asia and Southeast Asia need the most support when coming to terms with their sexual identities. Since homosexuality is much more tolerated in the U.S., being “out” is a new experience for them. “There’s a whole new gay community here – in LA, in California, in the U.S.,” he says. “It creates a lot of comfort.”

While the resource center fosters discussion and acceptance, many international students are still surprised by just how open Americans are regarding LGBT issues. “We display our LGBT identities more than they do in other countries,” Vincent says. “Here, we’re very loud about it. It’s definitely a culture shock.”

Still, as liberated as attitudes can be in the U.S., it is by no means all perfect and accepting. Xiaofan Shu, a sophomore from Shenzhen, China who studies Business Administration, often feels an unspoken discomfort and disapproval from his fellow USC students when he walks through his dorm halls. Those feelings come across loud and clear in what he calls ‘the look.’ Ironically, he never experienced this look in China.

Whether it be with a look, teasing, or censorship, many USC international LGBT students struggle against difficult challenges as they navigate their sexual and cultural identity. Yet, even in the face of intolerance, they forge new paths to define exactly who they want to be.

*Some names have been changed at the request of those interviewed.

Julia Kelson is a senior majoring in Public Relations. She is originally from Colorado.
Holi, also known as the Festival of Colours, is an exciting Hindu festival that marks the victory of good over evil, and ushers in the spring harvest—the season of love! A myriad of dazzling colours like red, yellow, green and magenta, are splashed everywhere as throngs of people gather in the streets. Children throw water balloons at passer-bys, elderly smear each other with a colourful powder called “gulal,” and, in some places, boys build pyramids in hopes of being crowned “Holi King.” Everywhere, well-wishers throw worry to the wind and earnestly shout, “Happy Holi!” as fun, frolic and endless pranks fill the air.

Holi is a festival that defies social caste systems by uniting rich and poor. All kinds of people greet each other in the streets, going from house to house singing folk songs. At each stop, they savor traditional foods such as gujiya, a sweet dumpling, and thandai, a spiced milk beverage. On the eve of Holi, burning bonfires, dancing to drums, reveling in Bollywood songs and getting intoxicated on bhang (a drink made with the buds of cannabis) are all part of the celebration. Dating back to the 7th century, this celebration is rooted in the legends of Indian history.

According to legend, Holi became the Festival of Colours to commemorate Lord Krishna, a reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, who is considered to be the greatest prankster of all time. He enjoyed playing harmless pranks on the village girls, or gopis, and drenching them in water and a myriad of colours. Krishna’s love for the gopis went down in history as the epitome of eternal love. Therefore, drenching loved ones in scented water and colourful powder is symbolic of undying love for one another. So watch out!

Holi’s celebration of colours, high spirits, and love truly captures the vibrant culture of India.

Ruchika Sachdeva is a published writer from New Delhi, India. Her husband, Ashish Sachdeva, is a PhD student at USC.