Caught between tradition and modernity

by Deb Schneider

[This article expresses the opinions of the author and not of Sister Namibia.]

As part of a programme with the Centre for Global Education in conjunction with the University of Namibia I spent two weeks with a family in Uukwaluudhi. There were several contradictions at work within my family and the community that were embodied in the two sisters with whom I lived.

My family was comprised of three women and several children. My meme was an elderly woman of about sixty years. She had two daughters, one aged twenty-seven and the other aged twenty-nine.

Nangula, the eldest daughter, was a traditional woman, working at home and in the fields, caring for the children and performing her domestic duties. Her role within the home had been prescribed to her by her age and birth position. Her younger sister, Helena, was a teacher and had the opportunity to leave the community in order to train as a teacher. Compared to Nangula, she had much more freedom to develop her life.

When I first arrived at the house, it was assumed by both me and the family that I would spend most of...

Above: Meme Emilia (facing the camera) and a cousin of her weave baskets at the homestead.
Left: Deb in the family's mahangu field.
my time with Helena because she spoke better English. Nangula was portrayed as the “bad guy”, both by me and by Helena. There was an assumption that because of who I was and where I came from, I would not connect with Nangula. This stemmed on my part from my preconceptions about the African family in a rural setting. I figured that a typical rural woman would never accept me and that we could never find the common ground in which to learn from each other. I was a typical Westerner, albeit a liberal one. My attitude was to change over time.

Helena did not attend church, did not work in the fields as much as Nangula and Meme Emilia. She was granted this freedom by way of being the youngest daughter. She would often covet my belongings, my clothing and my flashlight. The things she said and did showed that she looked down on Owambo culture. When I gave my family presents that I had brought from the States, Helena assumed the position of receiver and maintained control over the gifts, hoarding those that were intended for everyone.

Nangula approached me as one of the family, embracing me and my learning. Through spending more time with Nangula, it became obvious to me that despite our language barrier, she was making an effort to bring Owambo culture to me. She would engage me in traditional activities like making baskets, working in the fields, and cooking.

Helena, on the other hand, viewed me as a tool through which she could become more modern and more westernized. She wanted to learn songs in English, she wanted me to practise English with her, and was hesitant to teach me Oshiwambo. To me, Nangula represented the reason that I was in Uukwaluudhi. She was bringing Owambo culture and tradition to a level that was accessible to me, showing and sharing while I valued and respected. She was not searching for my approval.

The conflict of modernity and tradition had a strong presence in the homestead. The different approaches of the two sisters - to me as well as to their culture - began to shape my visit. I got confused when I realized that I was unable to fit into a role that either sister expected from me. I found that there was no category into which I could comfortably fit; I am not the traditional woman which Nangula represents but neither am I the modern figure that Helena expected.

A resolution of the problems that I encountered during my home stay is not possible. Approaching the issues on a personal and individual level was very therapeutic and made the situations and politics involved more meaningful for me.

My concept of the Ithana family shifted during my stay, as did my perceptions of rural life and traditional living. I have recognized the power involved in defining concepts such as ‘tradition’, ‘modernity’ and ‘culture’. I have also realized that as much as a person’s role within the family and the community depends on those concepts, her grace and beauty does not.

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**Dictionary**

**contradictions** - If there is a contradiction in something, it has features that are different from each other and so make it confusing or more difficult to understand.

**embody** (past tense: embodied) - Given a concrete form, be expressed in.

**prescribed** - If duties or actions have been prescribed, it means they have been laid down or formulated by others or something other than by the person/s who are supposed to carry those duties or actions out.

**assumption** - If you make an assumption, you imagine that something is true, sometimes wrongly.

**preconceptions** - Beliefs or ideas that you have about something before you have had enough information to form a fair opinion about it.

**albeit** - also although.

**covet** - Desire something that belongs to another person.

**assume a position** - take on a position.

**hoard** - If you hoard things, you save or store them, often in secret and often without needing them.

**therapeutic** - If something is therapeutic, it helps you to feel happier and more relaxed.

**perception** - Understanding or opinion of a matter.