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Value of Global and Cultural Diversity

Understanding separate cultures is a valuable skill to have as an individual, however, it is a crucial skill to obtain and demonstrate as a historian. Comprehending different cultures than one’s own is an essential skill for a historian who wants to display perspective to their audience. Many of the questions on the events we cover as historians can be answered if the cultures represented within these events are well known and easily explained by those who present them. It is impossible to fully educate a subject if the educator does not have a grasp of the cultural influences that surround the history they are trying to teach.

Much of my research into the Congo Crisis would be empty and incomplete without the background knowledge of the various cultures that take play within the Congo. There are well over two-hundred ethnic groups in the Congo, which played a major role in the crisis itself. Once the crisis had begun, some political leaders used their ethnic background to legitimize their claims to leadership in elections are annexations. One such leader, Moise Tshombe, used his noble heritage from the Lunda ethnicity as a claim over the Katanga province of the Congo, which heightened the chaos of the Congo Crisis because of Tshombe’s control over a large portion of land and natural resources. Not only did this cause chaos because of these reasons, but because his control over Katanga delegitimized the leadership of President Kasavubu and Prime Minister Lumumba, who were already struggling to gain control over the country and quell the riots that were occurring across the country.

My perspective was significantly broadened by the study abroad trip to South Africa in the summer of 2023. I came away with a vast knowledge of South African history after the trip, and I am extremely thankful for the experience that I gained as a result. Much of the trip was based around interpreting cultures, monuments, and battlefields within the country, and my perspective on the history had changed. One of the most drastic changes to my perspective was in how I viewed the battle of Isandlwana and the battle of Roark’s Drift.

In films like *Zulu Dawn*, the battle of Isandlwana depicts the Zulu as savage and ferocious warriors that struck fear into unsuspecting British forces. However, the Zulu only engaged in conflict with the British after a British military officer, Lord Chalceford, rescinded the peace agreement between the Zulu and the British. This initial peace agreement came during the Boer War, in which the British fought against the Dutch settlers, Voortrekkers, who had begun resettling in Zulu territory during the conflict. The peace agreement was broken after a Zulu chief had one of his wives brought back into Zulu territory after she had fled. Once she was returned to Zulu territory, she was executed. Lord Chalceford was appalled by this and labeled the Zulu as savages that could not be trusted as a neighborly society. The problem within this history is that Chalceford was unaware of the Zulu culture and its rules. Although it is gruesome, Zulu culture at that time dictated that unfaithful wives could be executed by their husbands. The Zulu chief’s wife had been having an affair and ran away once she was discovered, until she was captured and brought back.

Another instance of the British having little perspective on the culture of the Zulu came at the Battle of Isandlwana itself. After the Zulu had successfully defeated the British, the Zulu cut open the torsos of the fallen British troops and cut off their beards at the chin. British military men who went to retrieve or bury the fallen were startled when they saw the condition of the dead British soldiers. The Zulu were again labeled as savages and now cannibals because of what the British soldiers had seen, however, in Zulu culture it is customary that when a Zulu kills another warrior, he cuts open the torso of his opponent as a sign respect and so that his opponent’s soul can leave his body and go to heaven. The collection of the British soldiers’ beards was also a sign of respect, like a trophy won in battle from a formidable foe.

In conclusion, a historian needs to understand and value the many cultures within the area that they study. So much history has been written by the victors of war and they have shaped history into their perspective. Having knowledge of differing cultures can quite literally change history itself. The more perspective a historian has on the events that they study, the more effective and accurate the historian can be when delivering lessons or presentations on those subjects. As a historian, I value the information that can be accumulated from studying the diverse cultures within my focus and research because it allows me to procure a more whole truth.



Photo of the battlefield of Isandlwana that I took while in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa.