

Should My Tribal Past Shape Delia's Future?

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Recently, my 18-year-old daughter, Delia, left for Princeton University to start her college career. Friends worried about the distance between Princeton and our home in California. I reminded them that I, too, had attended college far from my home and family. The distance hadn't hurt me; rather, I became stronger because of it.

In 1974 I traveled to New York for my college education. My home country, Nigeria, was for all intents and purposes as far away as Mars. Back then, it was virtually impossible to reach my family by phone; we could communicate only through snail post and, in an emergency, via telegraph. It wasn't until six years later, after I had completed both my undergraduate and graduate degrees, that I went home for the first time.

I reassure my friends that if I, a tribal African girl, could survive the psychological and cultural rigors of attending college in this country, my American-born-and-bred daughter will conquer Princeton. What does worry me is how much of her family's beliefs will be left in the Delia who emerges four years from now.

I'm a member of the Ibo tribe of Nigeria, and although I've lived in the United States most of my adult life, my consciousness remains fixed on the time and place of my upbringing. On the surface, I'm as American as everyone else. My husband, who was also raised in Nigeria, and I are both professionals. We live in the suburbs and go to PTA meetings. In my private life, my Iboness--the customs that rigidly dictate how the men and women of my tribe live their lives--continues to influence the choices I make. I see these American and Ibo aspects of my life as distinct; I separate them perfectly, and there are no blurrings. Except for maybe one: Delia.

When I left Nigeria at 18, I had no doubts about who and what I was. I was a woman. I was *only* a woman.

All my life my mother told me that a woman takes as much in life as she's given; if she's educated, it's only so that she can better cater to her husband and children. When I was Delia's age, I knew with absolute certainty that I would marry the Ibo man my family approved for me and bear his children. I understood that receiving a good education and being comfortable in both the Western and the traditional worlds would raise the bride price my prospective husband would pay my family. My role was to be a great asset to my husband, no matter what business he was engaged in.

I understood all of that clearly; I was, after all, raised within the

context of child brides, polygamy, clitorectomies and arranged marriages. But then I married and had my own daughter, and all my certainty, all my resolve to maintain my Ibo beliefs, collapsed in a big heap at my feet.

First, my daughter's ties to Ibo womanhood are only as strong as the link--meaning me. Therein lies the problem. I haven't been half the teacher to my daughter that my mother was to me.

I've struggled daily with how best to raise my daughter. Every decision involving Delia is a tug of war between Ibo and American traditions. I've vacillated between trying to turn her into the kind of woman her grandmothers would be proud of and letting her be the modern, independent woman she wants to be. Each time Delia scores an academic or athletic victory, I start to applaud her, but my cheers get stuck in my throat as I hear both her grandmothers' voices warning, "She's only a woman." I know in my heart that her achievements will not matter to her relatives; they will judge her by the kind of man she marries, and the children--preferably male--that she bears.

At 18, Delia knows very little about the rules that govern the lives of Ibo women. She knows just enough about housekeeping to survive. She will most likely not consider my feelings in choosing her spouse. She is not the selflessly loyal daughter that I was to my mother.

I wonder about the implications for people like me, women from traditional cultures raising American-born daughters. Should we limit their opportunities to keep them loyal to our beliefs and our pasts, or should we encourage our daughters to avail themselves of all experiences, even at the risk of rejecting who and what we are?

Maybe what I feel is what parents all over the world feel: that I could have done a better job of instilling my beliefs in my child. Now, it's too late.

Or perhaps I've always known that Delia is her own person with her own life to lead.

Delia called the other night from Princeton. She's coming home soon, and I'm infected by her excitement. But I wonder: will I know the young woman who steps off the plane?