Tanzanian Internship Reflection

Immediately upon arriving at the Janada Batchelor Foundation for Children campus after 36 hours of travelling to Kitongo, Tanzania, I felt tremendous annoyance at the relentless mosquitoes that bit through my clothes. It was quickly followed by hugs from throngs of delighted young girls coming up and introducing themselves. As we all walked up to our lodgings, the sheer enthusiasm they were projecting seemed at odds with the time of the night (it was almost midnight), but it was the kind of warm reception most of the young girls at JBFC offered to numerous volunteers that regularly come to this secluded area in rural Tanzania.

My first impressions of the campus broadened the next morning as I learned about the four pillars of JBFC; refuge, community development, permaculture, and education. JBFC’s three administrators take on many different responsibilities including managing the staff that run the school, the volunteer programs, the permaculture garden and on-campus restaurant called Papa’s. It was quite impressive to see how individuals that had such limited internet, had infrequent electricity due to their solar energy grid, and limited resources for additional employees ran an organization that has successfully grown in scope and capacity over 10 years. The internship program, which appears to have been hastily formed out of the general rubric of the existing high school volunteer program, focused on increased familiarity with the inner-workings of JBFC through volunteer rotations before our personal projects. My project was to develop curricula for atmospheric sciences, astronomy and marine biology for three grade levels.
Even so, beyond the rigid daily schedules, I wanted to explore the human dynamics on the campus because my intuition was directing me towards analysis of this system rather than integration. Two weeks into meeting Chris Gates, the founder of JBFC, I was able to piece together the personal journey that led him to founding this home. Through multiple interactions with the Tanzanian staff and locals, my interest started to drift towards understanding how a slightly paternalistic relationship developed between Mr. Gates’ organization and the young girls. In addition, my fellow interns and I regularly discussed how that dynamic has enculturated certain American attitudes in the way the organization is run and how the girls are raised. These became apparent through cultural exchanges in the program where interns socialized with the girls, learned the basics of Swahili and got involved in leading creative projects.

Nevertheless, the amount of structured cultural education that interns and volunteers are exposed to is somewhat disharmonious to the unstructured interactions that would take place in a play area with the young girls. As a long-term intern, I drew close to the girls. During my time there, the administrators and our internship supervisors were disappointingly lax with our work progress, allowing me to socialize with the staff at the restaurant and greet with the Masaii warriors on campus when I finished my personal quota for the project. I distinctly valued learning about the lives of the young girls that have lived at and grown up in JBFC, some for over 6 years. I had many meaningful conversations around the issue of Africanness and, as an Ethiopian, those interactions still affect my current personal identity and gender principles. Despite their ebullient curiosity and endless play, in talking to the young girls at JBFC, you get the sense that they carry deep traumas from broken homes and lives.
Imma, a 16 year old JBFC veteran, and I developed a sisterly affection and she became my guide into the workings and undercurrents of JBFC. She told me about the different ethnic and social boundaries that shape the community of Kitongo. She taught me Swahili phrases and I taught her phrases in my own native tongue, we sang American pop music together and the other girls chimed in. In an afternoon Intern Swahili lesson on the patio of a three bedroom “guest house” where we were staying, Imma called us out on globalization as an explanation for why she knew slang translations from Swahili to English and stopped me cold.

I found it rare to have a person on the receiving end of American cultural globalization point it out to Americans when it was usually the other way around. That was just one of many revelations that propelled my fellow interns and me to critically assess the impact of having more than 50 volunteers stream through this campus every summer while the girls get to leave only a few times a year. The sheer number of unchaperoned conversations being held, topics explored amongst teenagers from very wealthy schools (mostly private schools in wealthy cities) and these girls were significant. Even more significant was the deep separation anxiety felt by these children, some of them not even teenagers, when volunteers would leave at the end of their two weeks. The few instances of brusque and distancing behaviours I observed in the older girls, even Imma initially, showed that it could be avoidance in response to such emotional ties.

The longer I stayed at my internship, observing the daily goings on and understanding the NGO’s framework, my perspective on such kinds of aid work sharpened and grew more polarized. The cultural and sociological aspects of Tanzanian culture jarred with the westernized, goal–driven attitude I had imported to successfully accomplish my project and I experienced the need for assimilation and integration.
Though JBFC pushes for operating within the culture and community, it was too understaffed and disorganized to discern the indirect influence its program was having on these girls’ identities. Even as I left and bid goodbye to Imma, I was doubly struck by how painful the separation was and internally lamented that I wasn’t the first and wouldn’t be the last person Imma would have to see leave.