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Dear Parents, Pupils and Friends,

The theme for the Waldorf Teacher's Conference in April was Waldorf in Africa, Africa in Waldorf – a theme we have also grappled with as Michael Oak parents and teachers. How do I bring Africa into my classroom? How do I bring African experiences into my teaching? What will make the curriculum more African? What do I need to bring, change, add to, adapt - to make Waldorf education relevant to the African child? Even as I struggle with these questions I have tried not to stand still. With my class, I have had many opportunities to bring Africa into the classroom.

For example, in Class One our stories led us from Zimbabwe to Madagascar to the Transkei, the West Coast to Natal. In Class Two, Animal Fables were rich with tales of jackal and tortoise and the African plains. In Class Three Maths and Comprehension work came alive with stories of life in the Cape and animal homes in the African veld. In Class Four the children lived and hunted with the Bushmen and painted rock art, made clay pots with the Khoi, and sailed with Jan van Riebeeck and his men. They travelled through the Cape Peninsula from the Kramat on Signal Hill to the tip of Cape Point. In Class Five they have met the ancient Gods of Egypt. Later in the year they will travel through South Africa, with protea in hand, meeting many different people and cultures on the way.

I must be honest that after all the conferences, I still don't have a very clear picture of what it is about Africa that they need to know that is any different from the wider world that they are a part of. I do try to help them to love Africa - and as they need to love themselves and their own special place in the world, perhaps that is where it is different, where it is closer. Watching my class, as I bring different aspects of the curriculum to them, year after year, I have seen and experienced a wonderful sense of satisfaction in them. Many, if not most of the children, know deep down that they are African. But they know too, or need to know, that they are part of something much greater. I think that our biggest challenge is not to be more African or more South African, but to be bigger than all of these: to be more human. It is only through our experience of the whole that we can love the part. We need to take our place in humanity so that we can find our place at home. I would like the children in my class to develop empathy for people outside of their sphere of experience – outside of their frame of reference. It is only through this universal understanding of the world and life that they can truly find their place as Africans and appreciate who they are. That is our most profound spiritual task and we all share it, our oneness and our common destiny. Only after we recognise this can we begin to be more unique, more ourselves, whether we want to be more African, more Christian, or more Muslim or Jewish.

Parents have often asked why we do not replace the Norse Tales, the Legends of King Arthur or the Old Testament with more African stories. Quite understandably they want Michael Oak to be more of an African school, and I do agree we need to meet this challenge. But it is not either/or. With every year I have been amazed at how the curriculum has met them in so many ways whether it is the story of the Norse gods in Asgard or King Arthur at Camelot. It has been what they needed at that time. These and other stories bring out universal themes and archetypal images that help our children to see themselves as part of the larger world and to explore those larger worlds inside themselves. They are met at their current developmental phase.

I have come to realise that Africa is not just about drums and making beaded jewellery, nor is it about speaking an 'African' language. Neither is it about bringing African fairy tales and fables into the classroom or singing and dancing African songs. It is all that and more. It is about knowing and celebrating diversity, not only African diversity, and recognising the common humanity within us all and our striving to be fully human. This is the message of both Ubuntu and of Waldorf education.

Yours in Africa,

Beulah Reeler
Class 5 Teacher