

# Cultural Encounters:

**Kenya,  
East Africa,  
Summer  
1993:**

Judith DeGroat and Eve Stoddard, St. Lawrence faculty members, are living with rural hostesses of different ethnic backgrounds—one Ugandan, one Luyia—two miles from each other. The wives of both families have had encounters, not always smooth, with a Luo midwife. Five women, four cultural roots—all find unity in varying experiences of childbirth. Or, as DeGroat puts it, “We got to a common point that was defined by our differences.”

That, says DeGroat, was for her a “defining moment” in her Cultural Encounters experience. Cultural Encounters is a three-year-old faculty enrichment program that asks faculty from several disciplines to “come together across their disciplines and find common ground,” says DeGroat, an assistant professor of history. Its purpose, according to Grant Cornwell '79, associate dean of the first year and associate professor of philosophy, is for the faculty to “talk seriously about multiculturalism and internationalizing the curriculum, instead of just adding a course or two.

## *Preparing Students for the **Real** Real World*

By Neal S. Burdick '72 and  
Lisa M. Cania M'82

We read a lot, write papers for each other and travel,” he says.

“Misunderstanding and pain are often part of cultural encounters,” wrote Dana Professor of Religious Studies Tom Coburn in a seminar paper. That applies to the internal encounters as well as the external ones. According to Stoddard, associate professor of English, director of international education and coordinator of the Cultural Encounters

program, “One of the big lessons we learned early on is that disciplinary differences are as great as cultural differences. And they’re very similar to them.”

The result of the faculty’s work will be more intercultural courses that will provide students, regardless of their major, the opportunity to prepare for and make the most of international study. Sample areas of study ask, What happens when people of different cultures “encounter” one another? Must one culture dominate? Are cultures co-mingled? How do cultures borrow from one another?

But can faculty ask of their students what they themselves have not experienced? The 22 faculty currently involved (see sidebar) think not. Thus their travels, for the purpose of confronting cultures head-on, to Kenya in 1993 and India in 1994.

In Kenya, Associate Professor of Economics Robert Blewett studied how encounters with Western colonialism have hampered the pastoral economies of the Maasai. Blewett credits his experience there with giving him a better understanding of the results of the clash between culture and ideology. He uses his perspective in his new course African Economies. “I talk about the clash of business cultures,” he explains.

“Businesses in Africa have implicit contracts, which are not the same as explicit contracts among Western firms. When Western firms try to operate in Africa, or deal with more traditional African entrepreneurs, a clash of business cultures occurs.”

Cultural Encounters evolved in the early 1990s, when a group of faculty, desiring to study the intersection of Western and non-Western cultures, sought grants from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Faculty who later joined the project have broadened the scope of the discussion.

Two themes run through their scholarship, according to Stoddard. The first, she says, deals with the objectivity of knowledge. Faculty

### Cultural Encounters Members 1994-95

Patricia Alden, English and African Studies  
Margaret Kent Bass, English and Caribbean and Latin American Studies  
Thomas Berger, English  
Robert Blewett, Economics and African Studies  
Thomas Coburn, Religious Studies and Asian Studies  
Grant Cornwell, Philosophy and First-Year Program  
Judith DeGroat, History and Gender Studies  
Michael Farley, Music and African Studies  
Kirk Fuoss, Speech and Theatre  
Steven Horwitz, Economics  
Richard Jensefth, English and University Writing Program  
Karen Kleeh-Tolley, Sociology  
Valerie Lehr, Gender Studies and Government

Celia Nyamweru, Anthropology and African Studies  
Stephen Papsion, Sociology  
Ansil Ramsay, Government and Asian Studies  
Catherine Shradly, Geology  
Sarah Stevens, Economics and Asian Studies  
Eve Stoddard, English and International Education  
Elizabeth Van de Water, Psychology  
Susan Ward, English  
Steven White, Modern Languages and Literatures and Caribbean and Latin American Studies

In addition, Roy Caldwell of modern languages, David Hornung of biology, Dorothy Limouze of fine arts, Laura O'Shaughnessy of government and Bruce Weiner of English have been involved in the pilot program.

examine whether Western culture, characterized by reliance on technology and its implied objectivity, has imposed a belief that knowledge is real rather than subject to the values and systems of the culture in which it is sought.

Stoddard admits that the faculty from the sciences do not readily find a place for cultural encounters—or Cultural Encounters—because they deal primarily with “objective” knowledge. Three science professors are part of the program, though: David Hornung of biology, Cathy Shrary of geology and Elizabeth Van de Water of psychology.

Hornung and Shrary are teaming up for a senior seminar on cross-cultural views of health and medicine this spring. Both went to India last summer and “spent a lot of time learning about Hindu methods of healing,” says Stoddard.

The second theme pervading faculty inquiry is that of cultural relativism: whether or not it’s legitimate to judge the practices of other cultures. Are there cultural absolutes? What behaviors, if any, are absolutely right and absolutely wrong?

“It becomes troubling to see students returning from other cultures and saying ‘that’s just the way they do things there’ and not questioning at all. A lot of students think you can simultaneously be a cultural relativist and a believer in human rights. Those two don’t go together,” says

Stoddard. “We want to help students who have experienced other cultures realize that in any culture there exists stratification. We want to open up the issue of evaluation and having a respectful criticism of what you see in other cultures.”

Stoddard gives an example of how this theme translates to a syllabus. In a course she recently taught, students examined cross-cultural practices of beautifying the human body. They considered Western behaviors such as plastic surgery and dieting on the same level as female circumcision in Africa or other practices in the Middle East. Students were asked to see what these practices have in common and to question the defense of one practice over the criticism of another.

While the faculty are still developing the curriculum that will result from the program, several recent or current new courses realize the group’s themes and goals (see box). Eventually, the faculty hope, about 50 students in each class will elect the Cultural Encounters route as an alternate to the course distribution system. Students would still major in a field of their choice, but would take Cultural Encounters courses in place of distribution choices.

## Some Cultural Encounters Courses:

- Environmental Perception and Indigenous Knowledge
- Introduction to Caribbean Culture
- Introduction to International Literature
- Cultural Constructions of the Female Body and Sexuality
- Global Shakespeare: Intercultural Appropriations
- Innocents Abroad: Americans in Europe
- The Museum as Cultural Crossroads
- Fundamentalism as Cultural Encounter
- Ethnic American Writers and Their Origins
- Cultural Encounters in the Americas: The U.S. and Puerto Rico.

Still a matter of debate among the faculty, this proposal, says Cornwell, “would allow students to have an understanding of culture, and how their own identity, and that of others, has been constructed by social forces. The Cultural Encounters track would be good for those who want a cohesive course of study that bears down on a set of issues from multi-disciplinary perspectives. It would make sense, say, for a government major and African studies minor, or for an environmental studies/biology double major interested in global understandings.”

Cultural encounters happen all the time. When four Cultural Encounters professors met with members of the University relations division—St. Lawrence’s fund-raisers, alumni personnel, magazine staff and others—to explain the program, we realized we were witnessing, indeed experiencing, a cultural encounter of our own. Professors have a common language of scholarship and pedagogy, yet they experience tensions among themselves when scientists compare their way of seeking knowledge to the philosopher’s or artist’s or social scientist’s. Administrators have a different vocabulary, way of working, even perception of reality. None of us is right or wrong.

And that’s the way today’s world is. We need scientists and artists, philosophers and historians, teachers and managers, and we need to listen to them all. If our students can discover this, they will be better prepared for life after college. **SIL**

*In Kenya during the Cultural Encounters trip there in 1993, Assistant Professor of Music Michael Farley applies modern technology to preserving the music of a Maasai singing group.*



*In collaborating on this article, writer Lisa Cania and interviewer/editor Neal Burdick experienced a cultural encounter in deciding how it should start.*