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When Traditions Change

When culture is deeply rooted in traditional norms and customs, change becomes danger. Growing up as an orphan in the Democratic Republic of Congo, my family was my safety. My school system was part of my culture's tradition. The languages that I spoke determined my identity. These major aspects of my life were rooted in my Congolese culture, the thought of them changing brought fear.

The first five years of my life my safety was being with my parents. After their death, I found myself in danger without knowing what would happen to me and what my future held. Suddenly, my brother and I went to live with my uncle and his family. I had found safety again. Although they took care of us, we knew we were not completely part of their family. The Congolese tradition treats relatives as more of a slave than family. Despite this, at the age of 12, I had a sense of stability in my life. I was safe and I was happy. One dark night, our house was ambushed by government assassins. Shots were fired and my cousin was killed during the raid. After witnessing the death of my two-year-old cousin that night, we were forced to leave my country. This launched my family into the long journey to come to America. For me, America was danger. Along the way, I lost other family members. I was left alone with only my brother. When we arrived in the United States, we were sent to Chicago. We stayed at a shelter with other immigrant kids. The shelter children became my family until again we were moved to a distant relative's home in Chicago. For a few months, things were stable again. In September of

2019, we found ourselves in the foster care system. As a Congolese, I did not understand what that was. In my country, if relatives are not willing to take care of you, you become homeless. But, here in America things are different. I was in foster care for a year. I was always worried; I knew it would not take long until we moved again. In 2020, my fear of moving again became a reality, the current family that we were with told us that it was time for us to find a new family. In just weeks, my brother and I moved in with this new family. Little did I know that they would be my forever family. My family asked if I wanted to be adopted, and a year later I found my stability and safety again.

In my culture our language is our identity. What you speak reflects where you have come from. I grew up speaking Lingala and French in Kinshasa, the capital city of Congo. I had to learn French because it was what we spoke in school. At home, we spoke Lingala. After we left my country in 2018, we went to South Africa, and I was introduced to English. I did not want to learn English. English was hard and I only learned a few words during our time in South Africa. We boarded a cargo ship and headed across the Atlantic Ocean. Our ship found its port in Brazil and for the next few months, that was our home. I started school and I learned Portuguese. It was not hard to learn since I already knew two languages. However, it was time to leave again. This time we went through Spanish speaking countries. Once again, I was facing the danger of a new language. I did not know how to communicate, and the only way for me to feel safe again was to learn Spanish. Spanish was similar to Portuguese, and I picked it up quickly. We traveled through Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. Soon it was time to enter the United States. Again, I had to learn a new language so

that I could communicate. Out of necessity, I learned English. With these languages, I have found a new identity and safety. It does not matter whether I am still in the United States, Brazil, or Mexico, with language, I can communicate and find safety.

In Congolese culture, school is particularly important. Most children do not have the privilege of studying. I was blessed to attend school and I was one of the top students in my class! My placement in education was my security. After moving to the United States, I was faced with an unknown education system. In Congo, I was supposed to start high school at the age of 13 and choose a career. My dream was to be a doctor. However, in America, because of my age, I would have to repeat eighth grade. It was devastating, but I had no choice. It was difficult to understand what the teachers said, or the conversations around me. School was and is still challenging for me as I continue to learn the language. Thankfully, I was able to get help from my teachers, and education began to feel safe again.

Although culture is deeply rooted in traditional norms and customs, we can learn to face the changes and danger by learning new cultures and languages. With better communication and understanding, we can incorporate elements of our own culture into our daily lives, while embracing aspects of the new culture. Whether we learn about how families function in cultures or education systems, we will have a sense of belonging. We can develop a new identity and find stability in the dangers we face. Although, finding safety and tradition in a new culture can be challenging; I can now say, it is achievable.