

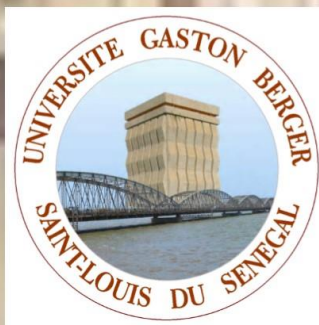


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Under the Palaver Tree

The International Bazaar at Lehigh University (Pennsylvania, Usa): A Space
for Cross-Cultural Dialog and Diversity in Academia
(André KONE)
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Abstract

This paper depicts the International Bazaar, a cultural show that takes place, every year, on campus, at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, USA. It is organized by the Office of International Students and Scholars (O.I.S.S.), in partnership with their American colleagues. As a Lehigh alumnus, who took an active part in the 20th International Bazaar, the author wants to share this unique experience with his prospective readers and enable the Malian educational decision-makers, at higher education level, to draw their inspiration from this framework of exchange. In fact, Mali is a country of cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity. Its unity was seriously affected by the security crisis that shook the country in 2012. The purpose of this article is to explain how the example of the International Bazaar can contribute to the promotion of cross-cultural dialog, diversity, togetherness, and mutual understanding between students from different backgrounds in Malian universities. In fact, if these students learn to better know each other, it will permit them to fight against cultural and ethnic prejudices, stereotypes, and even to fight against religious fundamentalism, so as to favor a living together in Mali, a country rich in its diversity.

Key words: International Bazaar, diversity, cross-cultural, dialog, togetherness, mutual understanding.

Résumé

Cet article décrit le « Carrefour International », une foire culturelle qui a lieu chaque année sur le Campus de l'Université de Lehigh, en Pennsylvanie, aux Etats Unis d'Amérique. Il est organisé par le Bureau des Etudiants et Chercheurs Internationaux, en collaboration avec leurs collègues américains. Ancien étudiant de Lehigh, ayant activement participé à la 20ème édition de cet espace, l'auteur veut partager cette expérience unique avec ses potentiels lecteurs et permettre ainsi aux décideurs du système éducatif malien, au niveau de l'enseignement supérieur, de s'inspirer de ce cadre d'échange. En effet, le Mali est un pays de diversité culturelle, religieuse et ethnique. Son unité a été fortement ébranlée par la crise sécuritaire de 2012. L'objectif

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de cet article est de faire connaître l'expérience du Carrefour International aux niveaux des universités du Mali dans le but de promouvoir le dialogue interculturel, la diversité, l'unité et la compréhension réciproque entre les étudiants de divers horizons. Si les étudiants apprennent à échanger et à mieux se connaître, cela leur permettra de lutter contre les préjugés culturels et ethniques, les stéréotypes et même contre le fondamentalisme religieux pour aboutir au vivre ensemble dans un Mali riche de sa diversité.

Mots et expressions clés : Carrefour International, diversité, interculturel, dialogue, unité, compréhension mutuelle.

1. Introduction

Every year, the Office of International Students and Scholars (O.I.S.S.) of Lehigh University, in collaboration with the Association of International Students, hosts a big and exciting event called the International Bazaar. The name International Bazaar is a misnomer, because many American students are involved in its planning. The International Bazaar is a cultural event that brings together, on campus, students with different cultures, and who use this formal space to celebrate diversity. Bill Hunter (see *The Morning Call*, Circulation: 130, 360), the director of O.I.S.S. rightly stated the purpose of the Bazaar in press: "It is a coming together of all races, creeds, and nationalities for one tremendous celebration of diversity." In fact, the International Bazaar is intended to bring about a better understanding between people with different cultural backgrounds, while they are pursuing their education at Lehigh University.

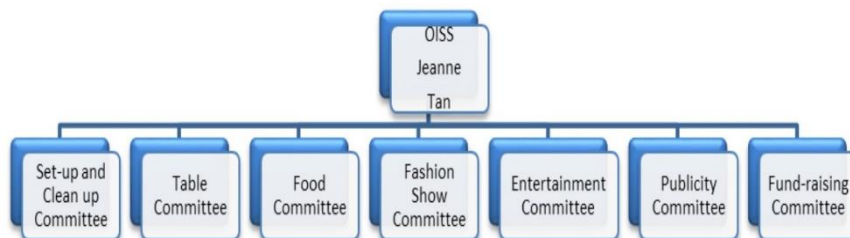
Lehigh's student population is growing steadily. Today, it consists of 5,080 undergraduate and 1,979 graduate students¹. An important number of these students comes from foreign countries; therefore, they have different cultures and home traditions. It was a compelling necessity, in a globalizing world, to find an arena, for these students to promote a cross-cultural understanding between themselves and with the Lehigh community.

An important outcome of the International Bazaar is the opportunity it gives people to have fun during the Spring Break (the 20th International Bazaar in which I took part was held in April 2007, the 28th edition took place on April 12, 2015, and the 30th International Bazaar was celebrated on April 23, 2017). This is a good thing for

¹ This information was taken from Lehigh University website.

students, as having fun during such period of the academic year will relieve them from the psychological pressure inherent to class-work.

International Bazaar is a student-run program. The O.I.S.S. plays a role of facilitator, and is represented by Jeanne Tan, its Foreign Student Advisor. There are seven committees with 1-2 leadership positions, and 4-5 members per committee. For example, the Table Committee has one chairperson plus two members; the Entertainment Committee has two chairpersons plus 4 members. The structure of International Bazaar is simple. It can be represented in the following table:



The main clients of International Bazaar are Lehigh University students, the Administration personnel of Lehigh University, and also communities of the Lehigh Valley², such as students' parents. Each of these groups has a specific interest in the Bazaar. For example, some parents will come to see their children's interactions and performance with foreign students; others will come to buy and taste exotic food prepared by foreign students.

The budget of International Bazaar was estimated to about US \$ 4,500 to 5,000 in 2005, and it kept increasing every year. This money is collected by the Fundraising Committee and comes from sponsors. The total amount may vary from one year to another, depending on the capacity of the chair(s) to raise funds. Sponsors may also make different contributions, depending on the state of their businesses.

The representative of O.I.S.S. supervises and monitors the work of the 7 committees. Each committee functions semi-autonomously. The chairperson(s) coordinate(s) the specific activities each committee has to carry out. However, some activities may overlap. In such a case, the concerned committees work hand in hand. For example,

² The Lehigh Valley is a metropolitan region consisting of Carbon, Lehigh, and Northampton Counties in Pennsylvania, and of Warren County in New Jersey, USA.

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the Fashion Show and Entertainment Committees work in close collaboration. Students who have skills and competences in various fields put their know-how at the service of different committees.

The International Bazaar is a kaleidoscope of students' know-how, of colors, dance, food that representatives of different continents, and/or countries showcase. The role of the committees is to insure a good preparation of the events, products, services, and activities. More specifically, the committees carry out the following work:

The Set-up and Clean-up Committee

This committee is responsible for procuring volunteers to set-up at the beginning of the four-hour-ceremony, and to clean-up when the ceremony finishes: makes sure tables and chairs are set up correctly, makes sure that the booths that need special equipment are well equipped. Members of this group must help groups or individual people as they arrive on the site of the ceremony. They must insure that there are enough volunteers willing to periodically walk around the site to clean up trash, and empty the trash bins. At the end of the ceremony, they will help groups tear down. Finally, they will take down the tables, and return the flags to their original places.

The Table Committee

The Table Committee is charged to create a table set-up design for the site of the Bazaar, organize floor plan, and deal with closet management. Its members are also charged to reserve tables, chairs, trash cans, and linens. The table Committee will work closely with the Food Committee.

The Food Committee

The Food Committee is responsible for working on food proposals and identifying sites and facilities where students can cook their national food in compliance with the required regulations. This is an innovation, because students used to prepare food Off-Campus, and bring it the day of the Bazaar. Members of the Food Committee must make sure that all tables are provided with food and organize chafing dishes

and stenos to be distributed. They will work closely with groups reserving the equipment for the event. (Poor expression)

The Fashion Show Committee

The Fashion Show Committee is charged to monitor the fashion show activity: its preparation, rehearsals, and final presentation. It must closely work with the students' associations so as to identify volunteers willing to take part in the show. Members of the Fashion Show Committee must look for the equipment that will be used for the performances. They must organize the flow of the fashion show (who will first go? what song to play?).

The Entertainment Committee

The main function of this committee is to provide the participants with fun. It will contact the students' associations on campus to identify volunteers willing to make some performances, find out what equipment is needed for the different presentations and performances. The committee members will figure out who will introduce the groups. They must also select music from countries of the participant students.

Performances will be a critical moment during the Bazaar. For a good preparation of the various groups, members of this committee will work closely with these groups, collect the names of the groups and what they will perform for the program, determine the duration of each performance, and make sure rooms are available for changing outfit and decor.

The Publicity Committee

This committee plays a big role in the organizational process. Its members must be imaginative in creating flyers and in designing posters. They must send e-mails to the Bazaar partners and carry out an effective advertising campaign. They must also make good decisions about colors and designs. The activities of the Publicity Committee go beyond the University Campus, as the Bazaar is an attraction for the

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residents of the Lehigh Valley. Therefore, the members of this committee will lead their activities at two levels: on-campus and off-campus.

- a) **On-Campus:** members of the committee will put some ads in the students' newspaper, *Brown and White*³. They will mail flyers to all gryphon to put in halls, put up flyers in the University buildings, and also outside, on campus postings.

- b) **Off-Campus:** members of the committee will contact Lehigh Television and Radio Stations. They must send a news release to media such as the *Morning Call*⁴ and *Easton Express*⁵. Finally, they must take flyers to restaurants and stores that are situated in the University vicinity; but also to restaurants and stores located in the main streets of Bethlehem, Easton, and Allentown.

The Fundraising Committee

Members of the Fundraising Committee are charged to find financial resources for the International Bazaar. To reach their goals, they will work on fundraising issues with some partners, collaborate with the Dean of Students, pay for the DJ, in case the Entertainment Committee has recruited one, contact Graduate Student Life for support, identify potential sponsors for the Bazaar, and send messages to companies for donations.

2. Assessment of organizational readiness

As I have mentioned earlier, the year 2007 marks the 20th anniversary of International Bazaar. For over two decades, the event has brought together

³ Lehigh University students' newspaper

⁴ A daily newspaper based in Allentown, in Pennsylvania, USA.

⁵ A daily newspaper based in Easton, in Pennsylvania, USA.

more and more people to celebrate diversity. Participants in it come together to share their home cultures and traditions with the Lehigh Valley.

International Bazaar has the characteristics of a learning organization, as they are described by Senge (1990, P.3): “places where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.” Such a definition applies to International Bazaar, which is a creation of international students, who wanted to share their home cultures and their life experiences with others. From the preparatory phase to the final product, that is the Bazaar itself, students learn from each other by exchanging ideas, sharing pieces of advice, food, home culture, and information. From the first edition on, the organizers of International Bazaar have been able to improve the product by diversifying the scope of actions, getting more and more people involved in it. This became possible, because, as the organizers and participants were getting a better understanding and knowledge of what the Bazaar meant, from one edition to another, they were taking more and more interest in it.

According to Chris Argyris (2000) “organizational learning is a process of detecting and correcting errors.” International Bazaar has successfully integrated such philosophy in its actions. Every year, the organizers get some feedback from, and review the past Bazaars. In light of this, they preserve the positive elements and get rid of the weaknesses. As a result, new editions are always better prepared than the previous ones.

The good performance of International Bazaar is also related to the increasing number of students that come each year to Lehigh University. New students often arrive with new information, new perspectives, and new knowledge and skills. When they come from countries which were not represented at Lehigh, they bring new experiences, colors, and cultures, which will have a positive impact on the Bazaar of the year in question.

In a nutshell, International Bazaar is a learning organization providing learning opportunities. Students get enrichments from each other; learn from

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past experiences to improve the actions of the Bazaar. Every participant contributes to its success.

International Bazaar was instituted thirty years ago. It has a solid background and a rich history. This experience represents its strength. In fact, evaluators, for example, can use the Bazaar's past to make decisions. They will be able to identify, then answer a series of questions concerning its failures and successes, the way the organizers worked. There are data (facts, figures, pictures, and feedback), resource people that are available, and evaluators can use them to carry out their work. (Are there documented outcomes of the Bazaar? For example, surveys about the usefulness of the Bazaar? What is its role in strengthening cultural diversity and awareness of other cultures? You merely describe the event but fail to convince me on its effectiveness and how it can help students in Mali connect and eliminate barriers between them).

International Bazaar was also designed to be a response to the divides, and misunderstandings that prevailed on campus. In fact, the foreign students and their American classmates lived in "different worlds". Interactions did not exist between them. Even worse, during the break times, or vacations, the domestic students used to travel home, which added to the loneliness and feelings of isolation of the foreign students. They reported their feelings to the Office of International Students and Scholars, which helped them set up the International Bazaar.

Over time, the Bazaar involved more and more people, and today, it is one of the most popular events of the Lehigh Valley. People come from Easton, Allentown, and other places to taste Mexican, Korean, Chinese and other countries' food, but also watch the performances of students from more than twenty countries. In 2006, the year Lehigh University celebrated the 19th anniversary of International bazaar. The advertisement read:

- Bridging the Gaps
- International dances
- Music
- International Cuisine
- Fashion Show and much more!

Conclusion

The year 2007 marked the 20th anniversary of the Bazaar. It had matured, with three main activities: Entertainment, Fashion Show, and Food Exhibition. Surprisingly, cultural misunderstandings still persisted on the Campus. *The Brown and White*, Lehigh University students' newspaper (Vol. 114, No. 31) published some students' feelings:

Nayla Raad, a graduate student, co-founder of the *Movement*⁶, confessed:

If you talk to underrepresented students on Campus, I bet you most of them will say they have tried hard to interact with someone of a different race, but their reactions have been hostile, and disinterested, and it is exhausting to constantly have to approach people and prove to them that you are not what they think you are.

She added in the same issue:

I was not invited to Christmas because they (her American friends) assumed I was Muslim and did not celebrate Christmas; I am actually Christian. That is how I was raised. But even if I was Muslim, it does not mean I cannot celebrate Christmas (PP. 1-3).

One event that particularly revolted Lehigh Community was the discovery of a deer (skinned) head near the UMOJA House⁷, on Campus. Actually, UMOJA means “unity” in Swahili, a language spoken by large communities in Africa. Today, students are worried about the hatred and tensions that, at times, mark their life on Campus. It is hard not to agree with Raad and with all those who are expressing their concerns about such situations. The objective of International Bazaar is to fight misunderstandings, whatever their forms. The Fashion Show and Entertainment programs are relevant to that end. They are designed to foster cross-cultural understanding between students representing various continents and regions of the worlds.

If implemented in Malian universities, the initiators can learn from and correct the shortcomings of the many editions of Lehigh University's International Bazaar. Some studies can then, after a few editions, seek to

⁶ The Movement is a students' association on Campus at Lehigh University.

⁷ Houses on Campus have exotic and famous names. UMOJA House is one of them.

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determine the effectiveness of its activities in fostering a cross-cultural understanding between Malian students. More specifically, they can focus on the Entertainment and Fashion Show committees' activities, which are the main attractions of the Bazaar. In fact, these activities represent ideal spaces where students can show their home cultures through games, sport, music and dances, and clothes, etc. Culture is a good vehicle of people's conceptions of the world, of their ways of thinking. Through the two activities, students will learn from and better understand each other.

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