

Janet's Story

Janet grew up in a small, central African village until she went to school in England at age 18. She's lived in the United States for five years and understands the different lifestyles and their influences on her body.

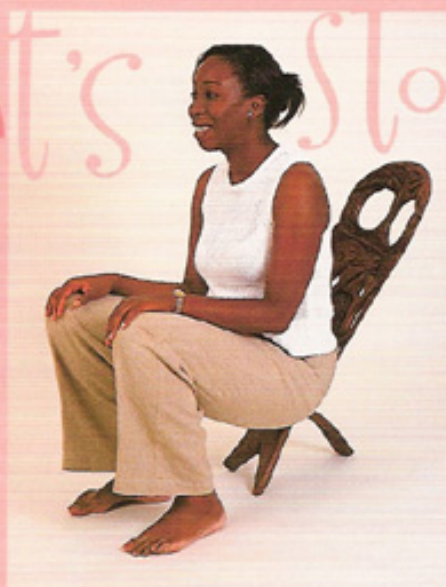
In the village in Malawi where she grew up, all transport was on foot and "modern facilities" were absent. She showed me that her people bend deeply from the hips with a very straight spine. They carry heavy items on their heads and backs rather than in the front of their bodies since it's easier.

"When I went home for my first visit after moving to America, my mother and friends said they noticed a change in my posture."

"My mother would scold, saying: 'You are not walking or sitting straight. It is because of the cars!'"

Janet gained quite a bit of weight in America because she walked less. When I asked if she held her stomach in tightly (the common concept in our culture for good posture) she seemed shocked. "Why would I?" I explained that it represented good posture in the U.S., and that holding the pelvis in a position that contracted the abdominals and buttocks was thought to "protect the back."

"No, we do not," she quickly replied. "I thought you just knew naturally how to move. No one taught us how, we just did as



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our parents and grandparents did."

Unfortunately, so do we, but our role models have unwittingly led us astray.

It was amusing to her when she found out that Americans worked on the way they walked or their posture.

She learned to carry items on her head when she was eight. This was part of a ceremony where she carried a clay pot on her head, symbolizing a young girl coming into her womanhood. When she was learning, her grandmother told her to "let the pot be a part of you" which made it easy to carry.

It is customary for the women of the village to gather firewood. They might spend a day traveling to find a tree to cut down, then walk miles home with up to 50 pieces on their head.

"Women do all the washing in the lake, a five-minute walk from where they live. It's normal for them to bend over for long periods of time doing washing, then to carry water home. As the women get older they don't stop doing the chores. My grandmother's 80 years old and still does her share."

Janet said that in their culture, people did not complain about what life had dealt them as they believed that all things, including movement, had meaning. She told me she never recalled her people complaining of back or joint pain.