

Who is an African? by Garba Diallo, Director, Crossing Borders, Denmark

As the cradle of life and the starting journey of humanity everybody can claim to be African. Even the racist Apartheid architects called themselves and their language Afrikaan while they oppressed the black South Africans. The Arab countries of North Africa are full members of the various African continental and regional organisations, while they create exclusive only Arab organisations like the UMA (union of the Maghreb Arab established in 1990). What about the Asians of East Africa? To what extent do the Europeans of southern Africa, the Arabs/Berbers of North Africa and the Asians of East Africa are and do feel African like the black Africans of the continent and in Diaspora do? Although all these communities share Africa as their home, it is better to let the various individuals and communities define who they are and where they belong most. I will therefore focus this article only on the black African community.

Who feels it knows it

If you are truly African, the question “who is an African” is not so relevant. Those who feel it, know it. Being born or having one’s roots in the mother continent does not make one truly African. One has to feel African. For the good or the bad, truly Africans have no problem feeling African. Wherever they go, they are reminded and treated as such by the sheer colour of their black skin. They can always see this at every move they make. The presently dominant western political, economic, cultural and social structure does single out, marginalize, exclude and discriminate against Africans. This happens inside Africa and everywhere else. It is only in Africa where the heads of state speak to the “nation” in foreign language, the local police curses citizens in foreign jargons and handcuff them with imported handcuffs. At African border crossings foreigners are more welcomed, often with a smile, while the locals get brutalised. When Africans go abroad they receive the same or even worse treatment. This has developed a collective sense of exclusion in the contemporary African psychology. The system is not here to serve Africans, like the rest of the world, but to brutalise them.

Unity in diversity

For the truly African, the concept of unity in humanity and diversity in culture can still be taken for granted. The term NTU as the root of Bantu, humanity includes all human beings, black, red, white and yellow. This means from the truly African worldview, there is only one race with many cultures and beliefs. The concept of race was constructed by the ideologues of slave pirates and colonial exploiters to justify their misdeeds. Accepting diversity and religious pluralism makes it possible to have a catholic president in a 95% Muslim country (Sengor in Senegal) and alternating Christian and Muslim presidents in Cameroon (Aijo vs Biya) and Tanzania (Nyerere vs Ali Mwanyi). Apart from the intercommunal violence in Nigeria, there have not been violent conflicts between African communities due to religion. The conflict in Sudan has primarily to do with the Arab nationalism that denies diversity in countries like the Sudan and Mauritania. As such, Africans have never roamed around the globe with the claim of having a universal ideology for which they are ready to kill whole humanity for the sake of bringing the whole world under their God.

Time is life, not money

From the truly African perspective, time is life, not money. As the joke goes, the Europeans have the clock to worship while the Africans have the time to live eternally. This is why the ancient

Africans built the pyramids and mummified their aristocracy. Traditionally Africans do not celebrate their birthdays each and every year. They focus on the key moments of life according to which Africans remember and celebrate only the core occasions of a person's life: birth, name giving, initiation, marriage, making the transition to the spirits of the ancestors. Through this dynamic approach to time, a social contract is made between the living, the living dead and those to be born with an organic division of roles. The livings are supposed to remember and offer in honour of the living dead. The living dead are supposed to protect the livings and provide them with good health and well-being while those yet to be born are to replace, revitalise and sustain human life on earth. On this, a Ghanaian chief said "the land belongs to few people who are living right now, many who have passed away and countless yet to be born. Another dynamic aspect of the African character is freedom from the shackles of holy books/scripts to kill and die for. This makes the African oral tradition timeless and adaptable to changing time and space. Africans have a more friendly and peaceful relation with time. African storytelling can always be adapted to the time and space to meet the present needs of the audience. Thus if you come to an appointment very late, greets everybody warmly and joins the crowd without any sign of stress or apologising, you are truly African.

If you are African, you will always remain African

One of the core aspects of being African is to be territorial. No matter how far Africans go and how long they stay away, psychologically they never leave Africa or abandon their African family, friends and age group. They will always keep in mind going back; they will send money (if you are in doubt, just visit the Western Union around the corner) to their mothers and other relatives. In fact the more Africans stay away, the more African they become. In 1985, I spent a bout two months in the Rynkyby neighbourhood of Stockholm with some African comrades. They were mostly young men, each with a Swedish or Finnish girl friend or wife. Many of them were only speaking Swedish and English with American/Jamaican accent, wearing tight jeans and walking like African Americans and yelling hey man to one another. I thought that in a matter of few years, those guys would be lost and become neither European nor African. I was so surprised when I returned for a visit ten years later in 1995. From far away, I could smell African food, incense and see Africans strolling around in comfortable, colourful African outfits like in an African village. The Scandinavian women had been replaced by African women and Swedish and English languages with African languages. The Swedish culture and society was suddenly getting richer.

The African Saint Claus is she

In my language Fulani, there is a proverb that says "an old person can see far away thing which a young person cannot see even when standing on the roof of the house". This demonstrates the African acknowledgement of and respect for old people and their life experience. For truly African, old people are living libraries that store the memory of the community. Respecting, honouring and helping old people is an essential part of the African mentality. Africans do not therefore look at old women as witches while old men are seen as Saint Clauses. Throughout black Africa, the St. Claus is she.

I am because we are

Scarifying one's individual interest for the sake of the community is typically African. It is common for Africans to marry someone without affection, just for the sake of the family and community. Whether they like it or not, Africans are often expected to marry and have children, with the opposite sex. Africans do not associate sex with sin, their attitudes and behaviours are not governed

by the alleged original sin and chronic bad conscience with the associated sense of permanent guilt. Perhaps, because of these socio-biological obligations to the community, homosexuality is not always accepted in African communities. Another aspect of African mentality is community welfare that “justifies” corruption within the so called modern system. African civil servants, who steal from the state coffer, not normally invest the stolen money for personal wealth accumulation, but redistribute it in the community. As the late Okot wrote in one of his remarkable books, even after death an African individual cannot be free from the social obligations”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that the African identity has been moulded by two core factors. The seemingly perennial factor is rooted in the African philosophy according to which there is life and vital energy in everything with the potential for good and harm. Based on this belief, the universe is inhabited by visible, material and invisible spiritual beings. Between the two is a grey area through which relations have to be managed carefully. This is because, Africans have no illusion that the universe is divided into good versus bad and that the former will prevail over the latter. It is not either or but both. Another element of this approach to life is the African community spirit that gives primary to the collective over the individual. This is called Ubuntu or African positive humanism that says “I am because we are, we are therefore I am”. The other core aspect of the African personality is the historical experience that the African has gone through under foreign slavery, colonialism, genocides and their legacy. This tragic experience has shaken and distorted self perception, confidence and put blinkers in the hearts and minds of many Africans, particularly the so-called elites. It is yet to be healed and closed.