

Cultural dilemmas of the African in Europe

Speech by **Baffour Ankomah**, editor, *New African* magazine.

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Last month, somebody I didn't know sent me one of those universal emails, the type they send to everybody, talking about the philosophies and cultures of various peoples and countries. And it was all about cows.

According to this email, in "traditional capitalism", things work this way:

You have two cows. You sell one and buy a bull. Your herd multiplies, and the economy grows. You sell them and retire on the income.

But give the same two cows to the Americans:

They sell one, and force the other to produce the milk of four cows. And then they are surprised when the cow drops dead.

In France:

You give them the same two cows. They go on strike because they want three cows.

Give the same two cows to the Japanese:

They redesign them so that the cows are now one-tenth the size of an ordinary cow and produce 20 times the milk.

They then create clever cow cartoon images called "Cowkimon" and market them worldwide.

You give the same two cows to the Germans:

They re-engineer them so the cows live for 100 years, eat once a month, and milk themselves.

Give the same two cows to the British:

And both cows become mad.

What about the Africans or black people?

Whoever sent me the email was clever. He didn't include any entries for Africans or black people. I said God

bless his heart, I would have asked my two cows to chase him down the road until he showed some respect.

You see, this simple case of two cows and the different treatment they get from different people and different cultures, proves that we cannot all behave the same, or if you like culture cannot be globalised, because we come from different backgrounds.

The world is now in danger of becoming a place where if something is accepted in the West, it automatically becomes globalised irrespective of the norms and sensibilities of the different cultures and peoples of the world.

One of the greatest sins Europe committed against Africa was to try to wipe out the African cultures during the colonial period.

It was a wicked thing for the European to have put into the African mind that unless we lived and behaved like the European, we were not human or civilised. This

horrible attempt at social engineering was so successful in Africa that even today, the "civilised" African is the one who has moved furthest away from his culture and nearest to the European culture.

It is a sad affair. And it is so ingrained in our psyche that it affects our whole being, the way we live, the way we think, the way we do things.

Sometimes I like to thank God that, in Africa, the European did not completely wipe us out physically as they did to the natives of North and South America, and Australia and New Zealand, and elsewhere.

I have often asked myself why people who considered themselves "Christian" and "civilised", the best human species on earth at the time, had to resort to wanton killing or wholesale genocide, when they encountered natives of the areas they were emigrating to.

Imagine what Europeans would do today, if we, the immigrants in Europe, who now appear not welcome anywhere

in Europe, tried to wipe out the natives we met in Europe, or even their culture!

Even when we haven't thought about any such despicable thing, we are still made to feel unwelcome as Europe continues to elect rightwing politicians who hate immigrants, and who make immigrants feel even more hated in Europe. Today, immigration is back at the top of the European agenda. So where did globalisation go? We can have globalisation of industry, but not globalisation of movement and travel?

Thank God, in Africa, as I have already said, we were a bit fortunate that the Europeans did not wipe us out physically as they did to the natives of these other places.

But I don't know which is better - being wiped out physically and lying in your grave, or being wiped out spiritually and mentally and becoming a walking dead?

For, that is what the Europeans did to us in Africa - we were wiped out spiritually and mentally. Our religion was demeaned and killed off, to be human we had to change our names for European ones, we even had to think and write in European languages So, although we are physically here, we are like a hollow shell, like the walking dead.

That notwithstanding, we are fortunate to still have remnants of our cultures intact, and this is where the problem lies when the African comes to Europe. We get a clash of cultures.

For example, while the European may find nothing wrong with a little boy using his left hand to receive something from his father, it is an absolute taboo in Ghana where I come from, for a child to do so.

While it is okay for a British boy to call his father by his first name, it is not a done thing in Africa.

So we arrive in Europe with this cultural background, and sometimes we do get mental scares when we see things that

are never done in our cultures being done openly in the streets of Europe.

I remember my first day in Paris in 1985 and seeing a man and a woman kissing on the platform of a crowded Metro station.

"What?!", I said. "Don't they have bedrooms? How can they do this here?"

You see, in my country Ghana, these things are (or were) reserved for the bedroom. Never in public. Today, I hear, Ghana has changed, thanks to globalisation. But in my days in Ghana, if anybody was seen kissing in the street - I mean, it won't even cross your mind to do it!

But it is perfectly acceptable in Europe to kiss and fondle in plain view of a crowded train station. Ah, my mother would have given me a good whacking if I did that.

So the African in Europe is caught up in this clash of cultures. And some of us are able to handle it better than others.

Those who can't, find themselves in a lot of trouble. For example, they try to mix up the two cultures, and as a result, we do get a lot of broken marriages within the African community. In London, the problem is get worse by the day. In fact, London, is a bad place to have an African wife, I don't know about Prague. But it is sad to see how many African marriages break up in London - because of the clash of cultures.

The way out

So, what is the way out? Should the Africans throw away their culture when they come to Europe and live like the European? Is it what is now fashionably called "assimilation" and "integration"?

Did the Europeans throw their culture away when they came to Africa? Did they "assimilate" or "integrate"? Of

course not. Only a few even bothered to learn and speak our native languages?

In the main, they had their own schools, their own clubs, their own golf courses, their own everything.

Can the African do the same in Europe?

Or put the other way, what is it that makes the African so compromising when it comes to cultural matters? Why do we so easily, even now, throw our hands in the air and accept to be called Peter Annan instead of Kofi Annan, or Julie Mensah instead of Akua Mansa?

Why is it that millions of Africans in Europe and elsewhere do not speak their native languages with their children? But the Europeans in Africa speak their native languages with their children? Why?

Ladies and Gentlemen, please let's chew over this.

Thank you.