

# **Editorial — “Where Do You Come From and When Are You Going Back to Your Country?”**

## **A Diasporan Reflection on Identity Crises of African Immigrants in Germany**

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### **Abstract**

What is identity really? What gives a person identity? Is it birthplace, colour, gender or legal papers that prove who a person is? Can identity be acquired by integration? These are some of the questions that this paper seeks to answer in the context of African immigrants in Germany. It is also important to note that most of the immigrants have a lot of unanswered questions in relation to identity. This paper is motivated by the conditions of Afro-Germans who have learnt to live with the following questions: 1) “Where do you come from or Woher kommen Sie?” 2) “When are you going back to Africa or Wann werden Sie zuruck zu Ihrem Land?” These two questions will guide this paper in its reflection on the identity crises of African immigrants in Germany. Empirical data was gathered through random and unstructured interviews with thirteen Afro-Germans in Bayern. The paper also makes use of secondary literature obtained from newspapers, published journals and academic texts that deal with immigrants.

### **Introduction**

The term ‘identity’ has been defined and understood in multiple ways. Dictionary definitions of identity are not always clear and have not, unfortunately, caught up with modern contexts. Yet the concept of ‘identity’ has been at the centre of debate in political science, social science, international relations, comparative politics, religious studies, cultural studies, theology, history and the humanities. In comparative politics, ‘identity’ plays a central role in work on nationalism and ethnic conflict. In international relations, the idea of ‘state identity’ is at the heart of constructivist critiques of realism and analyses of state sovereignty. And in political theory, questions of ‘identity’ mark numerous arguments on gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity and culture in relation to liberalism and its alternatives. James D. Fearon is right to note that

Identity is a complicated and (sic) unclear concept that nonetheless plays a central role in ongoing debates in political science especially when it comes to issues like: nationality, race, ethnic, gender, sexuality, religious, culture, and state identities.

James D. Fearon further regards ‘identity’ as referring to either (a) a social category defined by membership rules and expected behaviours or (b) socially distinguishing features in which a person takes a special pride. Identity has generally been associated with the following social categories of life: dignity, pride and honor. The concept of ‘identity’ has a double sense that touches on communal and individual dignity. When society and individual fail to bring a sense of belonging, pride and self-esteem, it produces identity crises. According to Erikson, an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. Francis Mading Deng argues:

Identity is of little consequence in most modern, democratic, and pluralistic countries or societies where discrimination on the basis of race, skin colour, national origin, religion, or gender is forbidden by law. Stated in positive terms, democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms also imply that an individual’s identity is accommodated through tolerance for diversity. But in some countries or societies these elements of identity are important factors in the sense of belonging to the nation and participation in the political, economic and social process.

However, Francis Mading Deng’s understanding of identity becomes problematic when related to the **Norwegian mass-murderer, Anders Behring Breivik, who** killed 76 people accusing Norway’s governing Labour Party of failing the country on immigration. Immigrant identity issues have always been an issue in Europe. There are certain features that help give a person identity, which include: country of origin, culture, language, colour, food eaten and access to resources.

## Culture and Identity Formation

Culture shapes people and in most cases culture is a system of knowledge shared by the community. Culture creates the identity of a people. Ralph Linton states that:

The culture of a society is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation.

In Clyde Kluckhohn’s elegant phrase, culture is a ‘design for living’ held by members of a particular society. Peoples’ behaviour and actions are based on guidelines which are learned and shared by all members. These guidelines help the society to operate effectively and form the identity of the society. Stuart Hall argued that identity comes from belonging to a certain culture. Therefore one needs to belong to a certain culture in order to be part of the group. The definition of culture varies from society to society. Most societies in Europe and the Americas are regarded as ‘multi-cultural’ societies where cultures are purported to exist side by side. However, is it always the case that by belonging to a

certain culture one becomes part of the community, or that cultures can exist side by side? This paper is interested in looking at the identity crises of Afro-Germans. The experience of Arabs in Germany will also be discussed where their experience is similar to that of Afro-Germans so as to further clarify the context of Afro-Germans.

Demographically, Germany has a population of 82 million people and of this figure; 15-20 percent are of immigrant background. This then puts the immigrant demographic figure at around 12-16 million people. Research carried out in 2008 found that 18.4 percent of Germans of any age group and 30 percent of German children had at least one parent born abroad. The median age for Germans with at least one parent born abroad was 33.8 years, while that for Germans who had two parents born in Germany was 44.6 years. In the year 2000 there were around 300,000 Afro-Germans and 150,000 African nationals in Germany. The growing number of immigrants in Germany has led to debates on ‘identity’ and ‘integration’. This was also noted by Rita Süßmuth, the former president of the German Parliament that ‘Germany is virtually an immigration country’. Süßmuth’s claim was disputed by the general secretary of the Germany Christian Social Union who declared that ‘Germany was not an immigration country’; a statement regarded as signaling and confirming an anti-immigrant position.

The claims and counter-claims on whether Germany is an immigrant country or not has led to questions like: Who is considered an immigrant in Germany? When does one become a German citizen? Important to note is that in German statistics a person who has at least one parent born abroad will be counted as a person with an immigrant background. This statistical category has led German-citizenship holders with foreign ancestry to experience identity crises. Even though Afro-Germans know Germany as home, they are not defined as German. Sadly, where their great-grandfathers originated from has long been forgotten. They cannot trace their family history as American President Barack Obama was able to do. When they came to Germany, they were integrated into the system. Nowadays, immigrants learn the Deutsch language and culture before settling down. There are still debates on African immigrants’ lack of identity and culture. African immigrants find it difficult to fit into the culture of host European countries, particularly Germany. As much as they try to be part of their new society, they often confront cultural obstacles that become setbacks to their integration. One Susan Chando claimed that:

I do not understand how one can integrate when one is not truly welcome to integrate.  
We are always made to feel that we have overstayed our welcome even if we have  
chosen Germany as our permanent home.

As a result of the challenges, most immigrants will continue to occupy a Third-Way culture, between German and African cultures. The challenges lead African immigrants in Germany to experience an identity crisis despite possessing the relevant legal papers.

## Language and identity

Language gives belonging to a people. Language is a cultural package that narrates the history of a people, the power struggles, their colonisation, invasions, wars, racism, slavery and conquest. Most nations today value their language and formulate language curricula to preserve their culture as well as to help immigrants study and fit into their system of life, as shown below.



However, the challenge still remains for children born to African immigrants in Germany. They learn the German language and culture at school but at home adjust to their African culture. Proposals have been made by Christian Lindner, chairman of governing coalition partners the Free Democrats (FDP) that ‘students must speak a common language whenever on school grounds so as to help stop certain groups becoming isolated’. We would argue otherwise because, in our view, speaking a common language will not help unless mainstream society’s perception of foreigners changes. Christian Lindner thinks that the problem of integration can be solved by speaking *Deutsch*, which cannot be true as long as the attitude of broader society remains uncorrected. The research study entitled: “*Die Mitte in der Krise-Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2010* or *The Mainstream in the Crisis Right-Wing Extremist Attitudes in Germany*,” showed that older and less-educated Germans were most likely to be intolerant. This study, like the FES, observed that the right-wing extremist views were in ‘worrying amounts in the German mainstream society’. The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, once declared the death of multiculturalism in Germany. The German leader is quoted saying:

It had been an illusion to think that Germans and foreign workers could live happily side by side. In the beginning of the 60s our country called the foreign workers to

come to Germany and now they live in our country. We kidded ourselves for a while that they wouldn't stay, but that's not the reality. But this concept has failed, and failed utterly.

Unfortunately the Chancellor did not elaborate on the nature and causes of the failure of integration. It is important to note that multiculturalism can't be dead but the possible explanation is that it never lived or existed in the first place or that the mechanisms that were put in place to make multiculturalism function are malfunctioning. Successful integration and pride in one's identity and respect in mainstream society is important. There are, however, some African immigrants that have resisted being integrated into German society because they want to maintain their own closed family culture. This was confirmed by Yahya Mayunni who said that:

Germany is a wonderful place full of amazing people. African immigrants must stop working the victim card by first introspecting themselves and see where they fall short in integrating themselves to the German society. It's not difficult at all since I worked here for the past twenty years. I found some Germans to be very friendly possibly because I first said to myself that, 'Germany is a fantastic place to be'.

The German government, to some extent, is trying its best to integrate immigrants but there needs to be more consciousness raising and more done to change the attitude of broader society towards immigrants in general and to Afro-Germans in particular.

At times, the effort by the German government bears less fruit because of the German media. The media contributes to stereotyping immigrants and anyone with immigrant ancestors. There was once a debate in Germany about the singing of the National Anthem during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. The German World Cup soccer legend, Franz Beckenbauer, (once a player as well as coach) was quoted in the German tabloid *Bild-Zeitung* saying:

All of them should sing the anthem. It can't be that the fans in the stands or those watching at home to sing along but those on the field don't.

Franz Beckenbauer did not specify who was singing and who was not singing but his statement unleashed a flurry of debate as the German media and web forums — most prominently, the *Bild*, (Germany's largest daily) — singled out the players who didn't sing as mostly those with foreign names. The 2010 Germany coach, Jog Löw, added to the controversy by saying 'Our boys identify totally with the national team and Germany, but one also has to consider their *heritage*'. Franz Beckenbauer and Jog Löw lead us to ask the following question: What do foreign names and heritage have to do with singing or not singing the national anthem? The media in this case gave the general impression that those with foreign names and heritage were naturally unpatriotic. Unfortunately, there is a lack of consideration for the great number of immigrants who make determined efforts to fit into German society but still find it very difficult to be accepted.

## When Are You Going Back to Your Country?

When one is born in a foreign land as third generation or more, one's identity is already socially constructed as linked to immigrant ancestors. In most cases, immigrants' identities are socially constructed based on religion, dress, language, food and education. Documentation on its own seems to have failed in changing the attitudes towards the identity of Afro-Germans. Most Afro-Germans suffer identity crises because society constantly reminds them that they are Africans and not Germans. The following questions are common with African immigrants: Where did your forefathers come from? When are you going back? Do you know your relatives there? All such questions add up to the fact that Afro-Germans are always defined and identified with their ancestral roots. It does not matter that the ancestral roots have long been buried and forgotten. Mark from Mozambique says:

I have been in Germany for 23 years and I have renounced my Mozambican identity. But I am still considered a foreigner. At work everyone sees me as a foreigner even if I can speak Deutsch well. I am married to a German wife.

The above statements by Mark show how society contributes to identity. Popular culture creates a social ladder where certain colours are always placed outside mainstream society. Immigrants who are already accepted, naturalized and integrated are officially called Germans, but there is always the question about where they originally come from? If their parents were born in Germany, the pyramid goes back to the immigrant ancestors? The result is that one is denied German identity without a full historical background. If the culture and cultural values are unclear to Afro-Germans, then the result is an 'identity crisis'. Miranda, who has a German mother and Nigerian father, expressed how she is confused with her identity. She narrates that she does not feel accommodated in both Nigeria and Germany. It is such challenges that mean Afro-Germans are faced with an identity crisis both in Germany and Africa.

## Identity, Religious Faith and Resource Allocation and Job Opportunities

The questions that Afro-Germans are normally asked remind them about identity. Joseph Maluleke (not his real name) born in Germany and married to a black wife born in Germany indicated that:

The questions are sometimes loaded with xenophobia as some of his neighbours are fully aware that his parents were born and bred in Germany. My parents have only known Germany as their home and there is no other home but our neighbours keep on asking us such questions. If they don't ask us, they ask our children so as to laugh at them when they say they are Germans. This is the same at work where it's not

easy to interact with other Germans without being made to feel that we don't belong to Germany and we are a burden to the national economy. The social attitude is of 'us' and 'foreigners' who take our job opportunities and strain the social services of Germany.

The FES research found that, more than 30 percent of the people that were interviewed agreed with the statement that, 'foreigners come to abuse the welfare state,' and this was backed by the centre-left Social Democrats. Interestingly, around 35.6 percent of the people said that in a limited job market 'one should send foreigners back home' and they also claimed that 'too many immigrants put Germany in danger of being overrun'. According to the Allensbach poll commissioned by the *Financial Times Deutschland*, 55 percent judged that migrant groups have "cost significantly more financially and socially than it has yielded economically. Migrants were poorly educated and had more children". More than one third of the population believes Germany is indeed becoming 'dumber on average' because of immigration, as controversially claimed by the Germany Central banker, Thilo Sarrazin. Thilo Sarrazin further revealed his anti-immigrant stance, though aiming primarily at Turks and Arabs, in his controversial book entitled: *Deutschland schafft sich ab-Wie wir unser Land aufs Spiel setzen*, or "Abolishing Germany: How We're Putting Our Country in Jeopardy." Thilo Sarrazin argued that poorly educated and unproductive Muslim immigrants made Germany 'more stupid'. Even though many politicians condemned Sarrazin's position, polls showed that public support of his views was growing in Germany. Critics feel that the target on Turks and Arabs is motivated by Islamophobia and that this fear negatively brands all immigrants as a threat to German life. A study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation think-tank showed that more than 30 percent of people believed the country was being 'overrun by foreigners' and roughly the same number thought that some 16 million of Germany's immigrants or people with foreign origins had come to the country for its social benefits. It is such claims, unsubstantiated by research findings, that make Afro-Germans feel excluded from mainstream society. Thilo Sarrazin fails to interrogate German policies in light of immigrants or people with immigrant roots, particularly Afro-Germans. That attitude has led to unimaginable effects on the identity of the 'self' in most Afro-Germans and there have been complaints about job opportunities where adults with foreign ancestry or foreign names find it difficult to be absorbed into the white-collar job market. In general most Afro-Germans find themselves doing the odd-jobs and unskilled casual work (even though these people have good qualifications) that are shunned by German locals. Of late, the federal government can be commended for drafting a law that seeks to improve the recruitment and employment of immigrants. By the government's own estimate, some 300,000 underemployed immigrants could turn to professions for which they were trained. According to Christal Morehouse, senior project manager at the Bertelsmann Foundation:

Many foreigners don't presently have the right to let their credentials be assessed. The new law will do away with that dead-end street, which is really a trauma because people are stuck in limbo even though they have qualifications for good jobs'.

This has led critics to argue that the general attitude towards immigrants could be a carbon copy of German state nationalism, which might be interesting when related to the variations in understandings of German-ness and the broader Afro-German. The debate on the status of immigrants can be extended to include Arab Moslems though we do not have space in this article for that.

## Conclusion

In order to solve the problems of identity crises or challenges, host societies must create a milieu of integration. Mainstream society needs to be trained and taught about integrating other people who have chosen to permanently become part of their society. It is our understanding that the German public space, particularly the role of politicians, clergymen and women, must take a leading role when it comes to what is publicly said in relation to immigrants. Politicians should realize that as much as they speak to their local German audience; their remarks, as in the case of the Chancellor Merkel that ‘multiculturalism has failed in Germany’, are echoed around the world. People take into consideration their ‘identity’ by looking at how they are regarded in public by mainstream society. German mainstream society must be made realize and understand the benefits of diversity and tolerance, to see them as an opportunity to develop and not as a burden. Mainstream society needs to recognize the contributions of Afro-Germans and other immigrants. It is trust amongst citizens that can lead to the development of nations.

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