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On Growing Up Multicultural

By Crystal Grace Ofori

Part 1

At times, I feel like I have a dual personality. Although I speak English at work and at school, at home I speak Twi, the language of the Ashanti tribe and a language that I have spoken since I was 8.

My parents, both Ghanaian, have always made sure that I knew where they came from and what their culture was. I am proud of being a Ghanaian American, but it wasn't always that way. Like many Americans with ties around the world, I am proudly bilingual and multicultural. However, at one point, I had a hard time mixing my inherited culture with my American one.



Crystal Grace Ofori lives in Washington D.C. She does traditional Ghanaian dance, and also wears Americanized clothing.

Part 2

I lived for four years in Ghana with my grandparents, who immediately initiated me into a culture I had only been privy to through my parents' lens. I was taught ideals that were similar to my American virtues: hard work, honesty, the value of family and pride in one's culture. But when I returned to American life at the age of 13, during that pivotal stage of adolescence and identity, I felt lost.

It was difficult readjusting to American teenage life. As teens were busy going to the mall and obsessing over different boy bands, I was trying to understand who I was and my new life. During this period, I shunned my Ghanaian culture and turned to everything American. I tried to painfully erase all the years that I had been in Ghana. I felt alienated and struggled to fit in because I wanted to be "regular" like the kids at my school. Like many hyphenated Americans, I was stuck in limbo between the life I was leading in America and another culture that seemed so distant.

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Part 3 → Gelareh Asayesh, an Iranian-American author, described these same challenges in her memoir *Saffron Sky*. She was trying to fit in while finding the bridge to go back and forth between her two cultures. “When I first came here, it was incredibly difficult,” Asayesh said. “It felt like stripping off one layer of skin and growing a new one.”

I laughed when she described how high school was a series of mini shocks to her system. I understood the yearning she had for life in Iran, just like I yearn for life in Ghana.

In her memoir, Asayesh illustrated her struggles and her eventual acceptance of her identity. “My goal has always been to assimilate America into my Iranian identity, rather than being assimilated,” she said. “The process, however, was one of pushing away from the old—before I realized how much it meant to me and sought to reclaim it.”

Part 4 → Now, I realize that having two cultures is a gift and should not be a burden. I used to bristle at the mention of my Ghanaian heritage or when my mother wanted to speak Twi in public. Now I find solace in the fact that I have another heritage to identify with.

I now keep both identities alive, taking joy in African traditions, clothing, customs, foods, speaking, and reading and writing the language. And I keep in contact with my family abroad. It is no longer a burden, because both cultures are intertwined in my daily life.

I realize that being Ghanaian American helps me stand out from the rest of the crowd just like other multicultural Americans. I agree with Asayesh, who said: “The world needs people who can inhabit skins other than their own.”

Crystal Grace Ofori worked as an intern in the Department of State’s Bureau of International Information Programs in 2009.

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