

To have Roots and wings

About Ethnic communities and Young Cosmopolitans in Germany

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This report on the role of ethnic communities in Germany, especially in its cities, is embedded in the Cultural Conference of the CIOFF which deals with invisible cultural heritage and traditions of minority cultures. The regional and cultural context of the Sorbs – one of the four national minorities of Germany – makes the well adapted frame of the conference. My reflections deals with another perspective of ethnic communities in Germany: with communities which are result and part of migration.

In case You have read the title of my lecture: “To have roots and wings”, You may have thought about the improbability and well-nigh impossibility of combining these two attributes in one object, even in one human being, as one would submit they obstruct each other.

Some days ago I came across this metaphor “roots and wings” in the thesis of a young academic from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Irena Grgic. Last year she did her PhD in Munich with the topic: “Individualized Ethnicities: The meaning of the ethnic component for young intellectual migrants.” (Grgic 2013). Standing behind that complicated title is the contemplation and recognition of a whole generation of young Germans who are – self-confidently – expressing their specific identity. It is the result of manifold experiences: being marginalized, being deprived of equal chances with a non-bourgeois background, and –often – living in poverty, not being able to stand their ground, to joyfully live the multitude of concepts of life, of traditions and narratives, playing with ethnic patterns and sometimes even being hurt by them - and therefore refusing them.

On the one hand one finds in this self-definition “old patterns” – like “home” or ethnicity, in its traditional meaning. On the other hand one finds new internalized concepts of value, informed by globalizing world. They question old categories as well as their new standing as intellectuals distinguishing them from the rest of their ethnic groups, because of the level of education and achievements.

Between these two poles – the time-worn meaning of home and ethnicity on the one side, the new need of distinction from the ethnic group on the other side – there are evolving identities, which bring together the old and the new, the global and the local.

30 years ago, Irena Grgic probably would have lived in a poor accommodation for “guest workers” together with other women from Yugoslavia, cooked with them traditional food, and perhaps danced or sung in a folklore group of the Bosnian cultural society in the Yugoslavian or Bosnian community.

Today, she is junior professor, competing for a job at the university and well-connected in Munich’s intellectual and artistic circles, together with people from America, from Spain, Croatia, Greece, Palestine, watching French films and dancing tango. In the same time she holds onto the recipes of her Bosnian grandmother, and singing songs from her home in her mother language for her little sons. She spreads out her wings, but is very aware of her roots. However, only if and in the moments when she wants to – not, if others urge her to.

I have introduced Irena Grgic to You in order to take you with me to the intercultural Germany of the year 2014. Irena is one of 17 Million individual men and women of very different ethnic origins, who (or whose children) have been changing and shaping the country for more than 50 years.

I was asked to reflect today about the ethnic communities in Germany – the role they are playing, and the importance they have today. For a long time the communities were regarded as the “organized and organizing body of migration” and its core of identity in the outland. Today a remarkable change is going on – and this change will be my subject of today.

The qualification for this reflection is my job as director of cultural affairs in one of Berlin’s city districts – Neukölln, for 30 years. Neukölln, 320 000 inhabitants, is one of the German hot spots of poverty and migration. I struggled a lot for the acceptance of “my” citizens; I fought for an understanding of cultural policy of inclusion and participation.¹ I noticed a lot of change and development during these 30 years – in relation to the politics on a national and global scale. I noticed change in the approach to education and religion, to politics and society, to poverty and economic

¹ S. Kolland 2012

life, to neighbours and colleagues. In my district I had to deal with people from more than 165 Nations. Most of them have a Turkish, Polish, Balkan and Arab (Palestinian) background, a remarkable percentage comes from Africa. In some neighbourhoods, the migrants make up more than 60 % of the population (and in some primary schools up to 90%). A lot of them have been in Berlin for a long time, but the ever increasing flow of refugees to Germany confronts us with new challenges – in the years after 1990 from the Balkans, today people from Syria, Iraq, different parts of Africa, Sinti and Roma from Romania..

Germany has about 80 Million inhabitants. 20 % of them – about 17 Million, have no German origin²; most of them came after 1950 as Migrants (guest workers and some refugees) in a relatively homogenous country. Today, many of them have German passports, a rising number of their grown up children call themselves proudly “New Germans”. One third of Germany’s children have a migration background, in urban areas like Neukölln this amounts to 80 %. Many of the migrants have decided to stay as Germans – so with a German passport - in Germany, and since the year 2000, when the law for citizenship was changed, it is not as hard to get it anymore. Even the last hurdle, the right of dual citizenship, is going to be solved. This has been a very important and sensitive subject, for finally it may give migrants and their children the adequate legal framework for their multiple identity.

In light of 17 Million migrants the tiny groups of “national minorities” are not in evidence: The Danish, Frisian, Sorbs and the German Sinti and Roma make altogether 180 000 people, well defined and respected in the constitution and protected by specific rights.³

In Berlin, Frankfurt or Hamburg, however, they are not visible. But whoever looks for cultural diversity in Germany, will find it exactly there, in the big cities, in the diversity of migration. There the migrants live, sometimes concentrated in certain districts or streets or neighbourhoods with an own urban life of ethnic economy, smell, color and sound of different cultures, and often accompanied by poverty. You will meet Turks,

² Migrationsatlas. Hg.: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, Nürnberg 2013
 Online verfügbar unter: <http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Publikationen/Migrationsatlas/migrationsatlas-2013-08.pdf>

³ Basic documents:
http://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Broschueren/2010/natmin.pdf?__blob=publicationFile

Poles, Bosnians, Greeks, Arabs, Indians, Russians, Africans and Vietnamese.. But mostly they work – like the “native” Germans – and together with them in factories, in the offices, in hospitals, in schools, in science labs, in restaurants, in the cleaning staffs, in shops, as craftsmen in their workshops, drive garbage trucks, play in symphony orchestras, organize communication and commerce, increasingly as eligible expat. In our towns, yet, you will not find Turkish, Arab, Vietnamese, Polish or Russian neighbourhoods, they are, regarding ethnicity, mixed.

When we have to deal with ethnically shaped communities we feel sometimes they are raddled by the struggle for respect and recognition of a minority group in an alien, distant majority society. But this sensation is diminishing.

In the following minutes, I will deal with the role and function of communities in society, as part of urban culture, I will reflect about the people who need communities and about those who cut the bonds.

Communities: It is In German – and I think in English, too, - a very weak, spongy term. We use it – as an English term – for a group of people within the population which is connected by a common identity feeling. They keep the difference. We talk about the “Gay community”, the community of medieval music, a religious community, the ”scientific community”, a political community. But mostly we use it in the meaning of “ethnic community”, unified by a common national origin, a language, culture and ethical values. .

Now we get at a crucial point in the perspectives of the future identity of Germany and its attitude towards migration: Do we all see our future colored, multicultural and shaped by people of very different cultural and ethnic background, or will the “first nation” Germans stay attached to a – generally – ethnically homogenous country with a dominant Western-Christian culture and values (“Leitkultur”) with some islands of colored ethnic communities?

A few years ago Germany declared herself a “Country of migration”, accepting a new reality shown in the numbers of statistics – more immigrants than emigrants. In the last 150 years number of Germans emigrated. In consequence, labour power was missing. Almost 60 years ago the first “guest workers” came to Germany after contracts had been made between governments. Unnoticed, the country changed from a largely monocultural social being to an immigration country with a variety of

cultures which were expected to make themselves inconspicuous. They were given the choice of either assimilate or to go home. In the course of years these expectations turned into today's recognition of the new variety and diversity as valuable asset for all citizens. The new official terms "Welcoming Society and Culture of Recognition" reifies that change which aims further than green card presenting.

Having said this, one should not think of this development as a linear process. A lot of factors create today a heterophony and asynchrony of life styles. Social situation, education, ethnic background, gender, cultural positioning between tradition of origin and transcultural processes of innovation, arrangement in between the generations, demographic and geographic factors influence this process and the positions of those who are looking for future in and on behalf of this country. The current discussion is fiercely held by the political and the academic community. Our President Gauck recently has put forward as new "Leitmotiv" the "Unity of the different". By adopting this guide line, which encompasses society as a whole and not only – like before – the newcomers, he declared as matter of course diversity, change transnational identities and multiplicity of feelings of belonging.

The foundation of this indeed very important new self conception had been laid by an important change of paradigm: The people who immigrate are not more considered anymore as a burden, as a problem, but perceived as a gain. The gain is the new potential of intercultural competence. This is how one should like to have it, but – sad to say - , the reality is lagging behind. But we got some ideas of realization: To care for equal chances in all spheres of life. And many of the younger generation want to foster it: The last century of German history was overshadowed by an excess of a disastrous sense of national identity finding its saddest expression in racial delusions and an unimaginable annihilation of human life. Many of my generation, who were born after the war, regard the opening of our country to migration and the European integration the most effective means to prevent that to happen again.

After 1950, when the first "Guest Workers" came, they were confronted with a rather homogenous crowd of Germans. Though recruited as "guests" their lives were characterized by social exclusion. Without any connecting language, life style, urban neighbourhoods they felt cut off from their roots and rejected, accompanied by German xenophobia. Their immediate answer was the formation of ethnically homogenous groups in order to practice the same language, the same food, the

same leisure time interests, often and the same religion. This was the founding date of the afore mentioned ethnic communities, I'd. groups of those who were longing for solidarity, confraternity and home. And sometimes they did it with colorful festivities, admired by the German aborigines.

Sometimes, in the beginning, it just was the supporters of a certain football team, who behind closed curtains – certainly without women –kept their established habits of playing and drinking, others founded choirs, music and dancing ensembles and organized education of the juniors, cared for costumes, celebrated together national or in Germany uncommon festivities like the Islam Sugar Feast [Eid al-Fitr], the „New Roz“ of the afghans, Kurds and the iranians, or the Ter-Tiruvila-Feast of the tamale hindus. Other gathered around social counseling centers like the greek “To spiti” or the “Rice Drum” for the Vietnamese. After 1990, the Vietnamese East-Berlin community founded together a big ethnic market for Asian products. The Afghan cultural center organized terrific help for their refugee compatriots and establishes continuously help convoys to their home... Some offered language courses for their children, like the tamales or groups within the Arab community, the Hindus are building a temple, and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community has built a mosque. Some of these communities achieved remarkable results in the care for their cultural heritage they brought as invisible luggage, especially concerning music and dance. Legendary became the efforts of the Korean nurses who came in the 60ths to provide drum classes and language lessons for their children to satisfy the expectations of the grandparents at home. Likewise, it was a signal to their country of origin to care for their heritage. Sometimes the work of the communities was supported by their embassies, but, in other cases, disturbed, for example the work of the Arab culture association, founded by opponents and refugees from Iraq.

Even though the experience of exclusion was constitutive for many of these groups, many of them had enough self-consciousness, and step by step they were regarded as “speakers” of their compatriots and became importance for representing interests. The German cities invited these communities who were regarded as strong and well organized to take part of an advisory board of migrants ,first on the local, in the meantime even on a national level. In some cases these boards work very well, like in Stuttgart, in other cases they are an alibi decoration. They have no legally fixed

rights and duties. Of course the importance starts growing with the citizen's right of voting: The migrants became a relevant factor of urban political life.

The relationship between politics and administration, of course, was influenced by global conflicts. So, after 9/11, the German politicians and administration stopped undifferentiated any support for Arab communities. Today, suspicion increases because the German authorities are afraid of Satanists. The Greek economic problems kicked a dent in the local relationships there between Greek communities and German. But, too, quite trivial conflicts arose: The care for dance costumes might reach a remarkable amount of money, and the dance ensembles asked for German state financial support. But the government decided not to promote its costs any more. Justification: The folklore groups just care for their homeland traditions and not for dialog with the culture and the people of the new home.

In the national and local integration charters in general support for single ethnic communities is no more foreseen. As a result, the folklore festivals disappeared step by step and because the youngsters had no more interest; the "International Garden" movement, where the elder migrants found a piece of home, increased.

The lack of interest for the world outside the own community was. The self-gating ethno-centrist attitude was unfortunately the case for a good deal of the ethnic cultural organizations. The self-gating ethno-centrist attitude was very problematic for somebody like me, who tried to establish a dialogue of cultures among all the communities of my district. Arranged by the state – and I was in this context „the state” – there was no interest in communication. It works much better if migrants invite for dialog themselves. This seems to me an appropriate and successful way to a diverse society: To enter into dialog with pride, but also with curiosity in confronts of the otherness and strangeness – not to neglect or weaken it, but to make feel it less strange – and it will be less strange. And these dialogs have to be supported by the local administration and politicians.

The implementation of the international debate around "cultural diversity" and the experience and expertise of the ethnic communities had very clear and tangible consequences for the elaboration of a political and practicable strategy in Germany, too. Step by step it became clear that the UNESCO's struggle for cultural diversity

not only meant the protection of national minorities in the Andes Mountains but the interdependence and interaction of human rights in urban multicultural societies. Emphatically underlined was the necessity of arguing out conflicts and minority positions caused by migration inside of the society.

Its consequences for the ethnic communities: They can be seen as a cultural experience which gains its future potentials by conserving, refining and assuring itself in the otherness and self-othering. It stimulates *appétit* from the differences of world culture, which takes the ethnic communities as model of ethnic-cultural self organizing seriously. They attract people who cherish their social conventions, their history, language, their cultural heritage, perhaps their religion so highly that they want to assure themselves of the common fundamentals, far away from their origins. And they need solidarity and family closeness of their compatriots.. Often this belonging is based on lessons learnt by exclusion, loneliness and xenophobia. Time after time in the 2nd or 3rd migrant's generation, in the context of looking for identity, burgeons the desire to explore and to strengthen the roots of their family, their ethnicity and culture (especially when they are confronted with the defamation "You have no culture" or "You do not belong to us", or who are not allowed to enter a trendy disco because they look different). In particularly extreme situations , it might give rise to a mindset akin to a hostile bunker mentality und Ghetto behavior.

But mostly the activists of these community islands do tremendous work for their compatriots and are able to manage networks between near and far away landscapes. They are often partners in the communal structure of participation and in the negotiation process of a democratic society. Yet, the so-called "intercultural dialog", based on the idea of expressing and in consequence - tolerating the difference, may strengthen exclusion: Its starting point is otherness, and its task is to express that otherness – and perhaps achieving common interests. But integration?

Big question mark.

Anyway – many of them have and use the incomparable big chance to safeguard and keep alive a wonderful treasure of world culture: mother language. Besides the cultural tradition, science knows very well about the importance of knowing well one`s first language. The German education system cares not at all about, it is just the strength of the community – besides the family – keeping it alive for the children. A long and very exiting debate – too long to discuss it here.

The emphasis of the mother tongue, yet, is only successful as long as it is accompanied and embedded in a friendly learning context of the majority language which appreciates the mother tongue - and vice versa.

In spite of the awareness of the important role of the communities, the respect of family traditions and the sometimes welcomed sense of home, more and more young people of the 2nd or 3rd migrant generation distance themselves from the community orientation. They look for a new freedom and try to liberate themselves from the peer pressure exerted by their ethnic, religious or political group.

Academics attest this tendency to social processes of individualisation and effects of globalisation. Migration – in correspondence to globalisation – does not take place in bigger or smaller ethnic or geographic flows any more but in individual movements.

This entails a dissolution of group identities and of communities shaped by homogeneity, who had been constitutive in now. The development goes on to a “super – diversity” (Steven Vertovec⁴) with a high degree of inner complexity. It is composed by people who experienced patchwork-identities a lot and very different imprinting by family, tradition, social level, education, ethnic and social context. They, millions of individuals, have to find their own way. The young generation, convinced of their powerfulness opts for transculturality hoping to have gained a possibility to leave behind the injuries and handicaps, without re-ethnification and heteronomy, and to take over responsibility and decisive power. And the German authorities gave them this power in a Berlin state theatre.

For this group is represented– especially in Berlin – in the “postmigrant theatre”, as an expression of self-empowerment. In the field of the arts they are very successful, their playground Maxim-Gorki-Theatre was right now proclaimed “German theatre of the Year”. A young Lady, Shermin Langhoff, with Turkish origins, had become artistic director – a migrant woman: a success never seen in German’s theatre.⁵ Her team, starting in the neighbourhood of the Kreuzberg Turkish community dissociate themselves in a very decisive way from their origins and discard any community orientation. They show disregard for cultural origins and imprintings as well as to

⁴ S. Vertovec: Super-diversity and its implications. Ethnic and racial studies, 2007

⁵ <http://www.zeit.de/kultur/2014-08/theater-des-jahes-gorki>

traditional and well-established power relations. They rely on their creativity and their intercultural competence.

The artists give a strong impulse to the German theatre and took a step towards the realization of the independence of the mind of a new generation. However, there is an element of violence in it: in order to gain independence they try to uproot themselves.

I tried to hint at the considerable transformation taking place in the intercultural scene in Germany. The role of the ethnic communities, which for decades was so important for the development of a common life based on respect of diversity, is under threat to be levered out by globalization and their impact on migration. The society and its citizens have become diversified; their wishes and longings have changed: The “old homeland”, geographic fix point of desire, changed to a moveable and flexible dream of **homes**. The identities become multiple, not orientated towards a traditional tableau anymore, now they are informed by transculturality.

To be sure, their journey is not a straight one: They oscillate between a adventurous “we leave behind everything” and between a looking for comfort and familiar safety in tradition and ethnic group. If the community applies pressure, it does not stand a chance of surviving their ideas and conventions. But I think, however, there are big tasks waiting for the community isles, and – I am convinced – still indispensables: They have to find a mode which keeps them attractive for those who want to test their wings, metaphorically speaking. And it is not an easy endeavor at all, to keep both their roots alive and to emancipate themselves from a static and mostly conservative community.

The development of the Afghan community left [a lasting impression on](#) me. 40 years ago, when the first flow of refugees after the Russian invasion reached Berlin, some Berlin-based Afghans founded the “Afghan Culture Association”. They tried to find shelter for the refugees – the role of Afghanistan as playground in the world politics brought continuously new people without the necessities of life. But they also tried to offer a bit of home by providing culture, music, talk.

Last year they looked for new ways – and asked for fundings from the cultural budget. Together with a young Polish stage director members of the Afghan

community they developed a “theatre parcours” called “Afghanistan mon amour”⁶, visiting remarkable Afghan places in Berlin: a tea room, a carpet store, an alteration tailor, telling about escape, exile, fight for a new life, losses, hopes, loves. They made visible the new life in Berlin, the roots and the wings. They gave an insight on their loss and showed their potentials, they presented their traditional and contemporary culture with the method of documentary theatre. The parcours ended in a much too small ballroom, and the result was, indeed, transcultural and not exclusive in an ethnic way: Of course the not-afghan partners and friends took part of the event. The dance and music elements covered Tango, belly dance, hip hop till Pashto Attan-il-mili and Bollywood-Fake. Participating were old and young people, men as well as women. It was not a celebration of home folklore, but lively culture of today, which was constituting home for this evening.

The young people, who were responsible for this evening and guided through it, were full of respect for the old leaders, but made their job at their own will, they will continue their work in the cultural center as much as they find time besides their jobs as teachers, technicians, tailors, carpet traders, hosts. They seem to belong to a community of new cosmopolitans. And they will have both roots and wings – it is already visible, and it is no contradiction.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7EIEPxr1Y>