



## 'I Don't Believe in People with Single Identities'

By Akwe Amosu  
Addis Ababa

*For participants at the recent meeting of the Ford Foundation's Special Initiative on Africa, the topic of 'Citizenship and Identity' turned out to be challenging in unforeseen ways. Most people arrived with the intention of having a discussion about the practical problems Africans face in asserting their chosen identities and citizen's rights.*

*Yet it quickly became clear that for most, there were deeply personal dimensions to the debate. For some Africans, living in the diaspora had meant a loosening of the ties with home, leaving children born abroad without deep roots and with uncertain roles and rights; for others, being born into families combining different national identities, living in exile, being in an ethnic or racial minority had meant learning to negotiate painful issues and grow defensive layers to cope.*

*While at the meeting in Addis Ababa, Akwe Amosu talked to **Gerry Salole**, the Ford Foundation's representative in South Africa, about his reactions to the meeting and his own personal identity.*

### Who are you?

I call myself Ethio-Somali but I, in fact, have Oromo, Amhara, Somali, Maltese and Italian in my background. I grew up in a multilingual home — there were four languages at the dinner table. My family speaks a kind of patois of these languages that no one else understands. My father, although he was Ethio-Somali, grew up in Aden and India. My mother was born and grew up in Alexandria in

Egypt. My parents in the first couple of years spoke either Arabic or French to each other and taught their children English. So my sense is that I have a whole range of different identities and in different circumstances they're the ones I fall back on.

**During the meeting, you said something about shifting contexts determining which elements of your identity are uppermost at any given time. Now some people might hear that and say, "that's just the old idea of a rootless cosmopolitan, someone who really doesn't have a clear identity and just changes like a chameleon." I'm wondering whether someone who has so many facets to their identity must find it difficult to fit into a settled community because they are constantly open to other ways and ideas, whereas a settled community *isn't* constantly open to all things, it chooses to be one thing and not another.**

Well, a person who shifts identity according to different situations is using a very superficial 'situational' identity that changes. I think a *contextual* identity is one which is more layered, nuanced, much deeper; it's not that you can change from green to yellow but you can inhabit different contexts; many of my Somali friends, for example, get offended that I sometimes call myself an Ethiopian. But my sense is that I can't be a Somali if I grew up in Addis and this is the language that I speak and I have a different understanding of what an Ethiopian Somali is than they would have; so I think you have to pay attention to the historical and contextual relationships you have with different people. The fact, for example, that I am fascinated

with Ethiopian history is not a pretence, it's a real issue for me, even though I may not share in all the dimensions of what an Ethiopian is.

**There is a perception of Africa as a lot of discrete identities — you can identify a Maasai person because a Maasai is a Maasai, is a Maasai; he is not a Luo, or a Kikuyu and he certainly is not a Yoruba, or a Xhosa. But what you are saying is, “I’m an African but I have this range of shifting identities.” Can both those ideas of an African co-exist? Perhaps your reality is the more general one and the Maasai who is only a Maasai is the exception in today’s Africa?**

I suspect he's also got shifting identities — I don't think there are people with single identities. Our fathers may be tribesmen or herdsmen or spokesmen for their community; they're Kenyan in one context, Maasai in another, they're pastoralists in a third, they're fathers in a fourth... so the idea that we inhabit different identities and we bring them forward or emphasize one over another at different times is very natural and we all do it. It's an automatic process. I defy you to find anyone who is just one thing, inhabits one world, I think people are forever crossing those boundaries.

**But if what you're saying is true, why does it cause such anxiety and hostility in some people that one should have this contextual identity? Why is it not considered a great asset, a sign of hope for the future that these identities are available to a person? For me as a mixed race, mixed culture person growing up in Nigeria, I certainly picked up the idea that I was at a disadvantage; the people who were really able to plumb the deep wells of humanity and knowledge and wisdom were people who were rooted in one culture.**

That's interesting. My mother, for example, is a very encouraging person who made us feel very special, and yet she would sometimes articulate this “specialness” in ways that were very confusing to me — for example she kept telling us when we were kids (her English was and remains very idiosyncratic) that we shouldn't play with “half-castes”. And you know, as you grow up you begin to say to yourself, what's wrong with this woman? And I remember confronting her — I must have been

about 12 — and saying, “what *is* this, *I'm* a half-caste.” And she said, “oh no, no, you're not, your father and I are married!” And only then it dawned on me that she was really more concerned about illegitimacy than about race. She just used the wrong words. But I was confused nevertheless.

**So did she see such people as incomplete?**

She meant people who came from families where they didn't know who their father was! I'm not trying to justify her position, it was still wrong but it was also confusing and created lots of anxiety, at least, until we got it straight what she meant.

**But it does give some insight into what people fear when they try to avoid mixing...**

Yes. When you get to a certain age you say, “I am who I am, I can't change who I am for anybody else.” I can't pretend not to speak the languages I do, not to have — in my case — the insight into how say Ethiopians behave, simply because someone else wants me to be a Somali. I can't honour or respect one side of an understanding or context over another. In a sense you have to be true to yourself, otherwise it becomes very obvious that you really don't know who the hell you are. So when I talk about exchanging identities I don't mean pretending to be someone other than who you are. People get a clear sense of whether you are honest or *integral* to yourself or you're not.

**We've been sitting in a workshop all day talking and yet we've come out of it feeling energised. Why do we feel so good?**

For me it's the fact that you're used to going to meetings where either you don't agree, or you can't find a meeting point, or you can't get to substance; but in this instance we got to substance very, very quickly and found people who think along similar lines — not that you always agree but even the differences are handled in a particular way and that's very exciting and stimulating — you don't expect that resonance.

**But a cynic would say, well of course you feel that way, you're all liberal, well-educated people from ivory towers, of course you're going to have a good time!**

But then why doesn't it always happen? Why are meetings often so unproductive?

**Well, why do you think?**

Well I think it has something to do with the “open architecture” of the encounter, that this is not a constrained meeting and there's no one driving the agenda; another reason is that there's a new optimism emerging from people who have been working on these issues for a very, very long time and so there's some light at the end of the tunnel — a resonance with what the future holds, a feeling that one can do something about it and a feeling that one doesn't have to compromise in the way that one did 15 years ago. That's my sense of it.

**What about the selection of people at the meeting? Is that something to do with it?**

Must be. In this instance clearly that's been a critical part of it, but I'm not sure I know the answer to that. I wonder about it myself. Sometimes, you choose carefully and a meeting doesn't work. Why? Is it the chemistry, the way it gets started, an optimism of the spirit? Is it the fact that the chairman started us off in our group on very personal narratives, which meant that we got to substance in very personal issues very quickly? Is it who's managing the group and *how* it's being managed? In fact I think there were a lot of happy coincidences here.

**It was very striking going around the room that just about everyone had an 'identity history' including multiple and sometimes contradictory elements — did you sense that?**

Yes very much so. Another thing that I wondered about was how many of us knew each other, or knew *about* each other reasonably well before we came into the room and whether that made people feel safe. In one instance, the safety wasn't there; people didn't know each other and people got offended at the use of certain words. But mostly, we were allowed to get away with saying things we might not have been allowed to get away with in other places. So, in a sense, that element of trust is very important and it exists in that room. Now whether you can replicate that to the whole group of nearly 60 participants, I don't know.

**But if you can't, what are the implications? We intend to continue a dialogue online, drawing in others who are not currently involved, and there will be future face-to-face meetings. But can this kind of encounter be extrapolated to work on a much wider basis?**

You are asking a very hard question. I think the jury is still out. Can you have a conversation like this and then build on it outside the meeting? The test will be, does the e-mail version of this have resonance? Can you go beyond a community of people who deal with each other on a face-to-face basis — knowing when the other person is joking or smiling — and do it in writing? One of the problems with this process is that [at the start] we are doing the convening and we are not plugging into ongoing conversations; but now that the process is going, can we bring in newcomers with different perspectives? If it doesn't resonate with a much larger group of people than are here, then this is just an exercise, it's doomed. So that's going to be the real test.

**But how do you carry on a conversation across a continent? It takes major logistical effort and expenditure to get all these people here and hope they take all the risks implied in our conversation — about trusting each other and so on. Yet you seem to be saying we have to find a way to replicate that process, to be able to hold this kind of encounter every week over the coming year in order to begin to acquire some kind of mass.**

Well let's try looking at it a different way. What you asked was, how did this group's success happen? I thought it was because the chairman and others took us down a path where there was some commonality. My sense is that there are ongoing thoughts and issues [relevant to this project] out there and it's a question of having the antennae to ferret them out — we can tap into the issues that resonate with us. 📌

*More information about the Special Initiative for Africa, now known as TrustAfrica, is available at [www.trustafrica.org](http://www.trustafrica.org).*

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