THE COMMON THREAD

ISSUE 8

FRAMING MY CULTURAL IDENTITY



Art by Gabi

Our founding vision is: "There is magic in collaborative community storytelling and that magic leads to more people feeling accepted and valued."

~ The Common Thread team <3



★ Where is Your Home?

Have friends from all over, am internationally grown
But I struggle with the answer "Where is your home"?
Born in one country, growing up in another
Being asked to pick sides, this is life, not "Would you rather?"
Using multiple languages while speaking a sentence
Sometimes enjoying my unique identity other times craving acceptance
Going back "home" and experiencing reverse culture shock
Switching between various ways to act, eat, walk and talk
Exposure to so many cultures and places
I have many sides, personalities and faces
I say it's not goodbye, it's see you soon
Months go by before we catch up on Zoom
The memories I have lived and loved
The experiences that run through my blood
Each one is a special part of me
It makes up my story and journey
It is not complete, it continues to be told
One very important fact, one truth it holds
I am proud to be an adult third culture kid
Of this identity I never wish to be rid

- - Kru Gurm

★ PYP Third Culture Kids Tell Us About Their Identity

SUMALEE AND HANNAH

Austria and Japan

the Netherlands and Canada

What five words would you use to describe your culture?
Hannah: **Peace, welcoming, hope, inclusive, love.**
Sumalee: **Happy, welcoming, social, kind, enjoyable.**

Where do you consider home?
Hannah: **I would consider it here, because I've lived in Thailand for a long time and it's become my home now.**
Sumalee: **Same!**

In what ways do you connect with your cultures?
Hannah: **Joy and food.**
Sumalee: **Definitely family and food.**

What would you teach people about your culture?
Hannah: **I would want them to know just some facts about my country and mostly the history of it.**
Sumalee: **The history of my country and the food about my country.**

What is something special about your culture that you love?
Sumalee: **Everyone's always very social and they always say hi to you no matter what.**
Hannah: **I'm from Japan and there's a lot of food, and food brings us together. That's a saying!**

★ Interview with Isabel (G12)

Italy, Tanzania and the US



How has living in multiple countries influenced/impacted your cultural identity?

For me because I grew up living in many places, my identity and who I am is shaped by a combination of the cultures. I am from Italy, Tanzania, and the US, but I have also lived in Uganda, Malawi, Laos, and Thailand. That's seven countries. Growing up, I have picked up various different characteristics or traits, allowing me to combine pieces from each culture to create my own 'unique culture and identity'. I think that's really beautiful.

Me and my family also celebrate various occasions that might not be traditional for one place, but it's a combination of special traditions or manifestations of various places, in order to create what we find the most beautiful and the most comfortable way for us to celebrate it as a family.

What challenges have you faced in balancing multiple cultural influences?

I think sometimes it's hard because my family has a culture of being from different places. Sometimes that culture is different, and navigating how you can be yourself and carry your own culture in a country that does not share it can be quite challenging, whether that's in terms of the way you greet each other or the way that you interact. Sometimes you will not be able to see eye to eye with someone, not out of malintention but purely because you do things differently. I've had to navigate to keep my own cultural identity while respecting the culture that I'm surrounded by. However, balancing multiple cultural influences has also helped me grow my perspective and build on my understanding.

Do you feel that having a multicultural background has given you an advantage in any way?

I really love my multicultural background and wouldn't want it to be any other way, because I believe in the beauty of culture. To be able to represent and embody so many different cultures that are unique in their own way is really special, as not everyone gets to say that. I am proud to be able to represent so many different cultures. Overall, I love my identity as a combination and a mix of other cultures.

What's in a name? ★ Kru Wambui

My name is Wambui and it comes from the Kikuyu tribe in Kenya. In our tribe we believe that at the very beginning, the origin of mankind was that God created Gikuyu and Mumbi. And Mumbi literally translated to 'the creator'. The story I'm telling surrounds the theme of strong women and women being the origin of everything. The origin was Gikuyu and Mumbi had 9 plus daughters, and we say nine plus because we're not allowed to count in exactness. They prayed to God for nine men to come and marry nine women. The partners created the clans of the world. Wambui created the Ambui clan. We believe that this is the origin of mankind. There usually is repetition in the naming system. So not only am I 'wambui', the origin of mankind, I'm also a boy daughter of Garre of the Ajuran clan. When you go out there and introduce yourself you say, "Hello, my name is...", it's not just about you. It's about your origin and your identity, on how it's tied to who you belong to. So if I was to introduce myself not only would I say who I am, I would say I am a boy daughter of Garre of the Ajuran clan, and I would tell you that I have a strong lineage. And it's not in a way viewed by the world as ownership. It's the pride of who you are and who your people are. It's me telling you that these people are my people and these are my clan and my family. Even to the extent of saying this is my home.

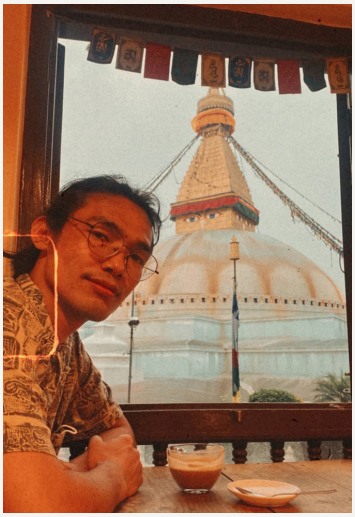
How has your experience as an international teacher shaped your identity?

What has been so far is either reforming or reshaping of new things that I've learned outside of home, but also going back and relearning having to see home from a person who misses the visits. It gives me strong appreciation for the little things in Kenya. For example Kenyans are absolutely beautiful and they're good dressers. Going back I realized they mix n match, they want to look good at all times.

What parts of your identity do you wish people understood better?

I wish people understood better, the strength in the name. Because I do have an English name. I don't use it, but I do have it. And it's such a conflicting story because it was the easiest line of defense to refuse to use foreign names and rather be inspired to use your own. There's a big shift in my generation moving from past rules, to being proud of African names, using them in spaces not limited to just family settings but formal events. So This is the part I reclaimed when I came to this school. I decided it's not going to be a mixture of some part of this and some part of that. It's quite confusing. Even my mom got confused at first, but now she's getting used to the fact that people call me 'Wambui' everywhere.





★ Khun Sonam's Identity

I come from the northern modern region of Nepal. Even though I was born here, I mostly grew up in the capital city. Within that, I grew up in a very specific area - a neighborhood surrounded by Tibetan culture, language, religion, and ways of life. The monastery is in an area that's a mix of Tibetan and local cultures, which is already very diverse.

I would say I was exposed to a mixed cultural environment. I grew up with my mom, who was a refugee, and I went to a school mostly populated by kids from the Himalayan region. So my roots are quite diverse. Right now, I've traveled around the world, and I would say I'm still growing. I'm always open to learning about different cultures - not just learning, but also embracing change and growth.

You did UWC. How do you think that experience of going to a new place and meeting new cultures shaped your cultural identity?

I would describe it as a turning point in my life. Before UWC, I grew up in a boarding school with 500 to 600 students, which was already quite diverse. I was exposed to many foreign volunteers and different cultures. I was learning about understanding others, collaboration, and dialogue.

But going to UWC was on another level. Imagine 200 students from 95 different countries in one year, living in a completely new country. Living in a room with four other people from different countries exposed me to so many perspectives - different lifestyles, cultural backgrounds, histories. Each individual brought their own personality.

It opened my mind and heart. It showed me that the world is so much bigger, with so many possibilities. It was a humbling experience that challenged my own beliefs and values. I learned to hold things lightly because of this exposure.

The UWC experience was structured beautifully. We always had opportunities to reach out to others, to listen, to share, and to learn. Yes, we had issues - students from countries with different histories, religions - but these weren't seen as problems. They were opportunities for dialogue and engagement.

Would you say you are really attached to your cultural identity? Do you feel a strong connection that makes you want to share it with the world?

That's a great question. There are many things about my culture that I value and that have taught me a lot. But because of my exposures and travels, I've learned to understand my cultural identity differently. I respect it as part of me, but I'm not fixated on it.

I'm not criticizing those who deeply hold onto their cultural identity. For me personally, the more lightly I hold these parts of my identity, the better I can open my mind and heart to different cultures. At the end of the day, it comes down to which parts of culture you want to incorporate into your identity.

Traveling, meeting new people, engaging with new ideas - no matter how different or contradictory - is so important. Cultures, languages, and histories develop over long periods, bringing experiences and wisdom. Not everything is right, especially as time changes, but there's value in learning and experiencing.

I value my own culture, but I see my identity broadly. It's about balance. There are aspects of my culture I disagree with, and that doesn't mean I don't value it. As a person and an educator, I recognize that some things might not be right when considered in the current context.

Embracing Culture ★ Afraa

Libya

Growing up in a culture different from my own was an experience that led me to lose touch with my Libyan Identity. Usually people associate culture with the superficial aspects of what makes a community, such as clothing, food, and celebrations. However, I have come to realize culture is way more than the outward appearance of an ethnic group. I was actually fluent in the traditions, customs and practices of my people but it was the inner layer of my home country's social life that I wasn't aware of and I was quite frankly completely clueless of. I loved our national dishes, but did I live up to the expectations of mastering the Libyan cuisine? I felt elegant wearing my traditional costume, but did I understand the intricate designs and complex wrapping techniques of the garment? I spoke the language but i didn't know the slang, nor the underlying meaning of contextual expressions. I knew how to kiss women's cheeks but I never knew how to respond to their never ending blessings. I wasn't able to keep up with conversations about my relatives that I never met, and actually secretly mixed up their names. There was no doubt i was perceived as an outsider, I held the passport but i didn't hold the license. I couldn't pass the test of society as I was de attached from everything that connected me with my home.



After moving back to Libya, I realized I was oblivious to everything that would allow me to fully integrate back to society. So I lived a portion of my life being an observer. I attended weddings, but I didn't dance. I accompanied my mom to gatherings, but i didn't interact with the other kids and just sat by her side. I drove around the streets of Libya and stayed in the car, watching, listening, understanding and absorbing people's way of life. Once I felt confident enough, once I knew the basics, I began socializing once again, at a smaller range, with my close cousins, with my friends from school, until I was able to fully embrace my roots.

But even then, there was still and will always be something inherently different about me from others, but I have come to accept those parts of me and have utilized them to excel and succeed, just like coming to this school. After moving back to Libya for so long, it became natural for me, so every day life was nothing to appreciate, it was regular, it was the norm. But then traveling once again far away from my home, all the way to the U.S., I started reflecting back on all the little things that I wished were there with me. Like how i wished there were accessible bidet's 😭 after leaving the very thing you dedicated your whole life on mastering, you begin to feel the connection you once lacked, the feeling of fulfillness in your own identity and beginning a new chapter of shared appreciation. Spreading your knowledge and exchanging all the pieces that make up you and everything you came with. I felt happy knowing i am able to represent my people, I knew enough about them that I wasn't hesitant about answering questions.

Sometimes people focus too much on all the things they hate about their culture. I decided to embrace my culture in a way that doesn't define me, but is a part of me. I chose to practice all the parts of my culture that reflected my beliefs, while understanding all the other parts of my culture that don't align with my beliefs and still holding the same respect for those values. I chose a path that doesn't fill my heart with hate, but a path that allows me to analyze the reasons behind cultural backgrounds and the experiences that led to their establishments. When looking at culture i encourage everyone to approach it with an open mind, with an understanding of post colonialism, authoritative manipulation and the negative publication of people across the world. Just like all youtube clickbait says "I didn't trust the media and actually booked a flight to Libya".

★ Sofia's African Dance Experience

Venezuela

"I always say in my CAS portfolio that for me it felt so powerful the first time I see you guys dancing, when we were having like this …. for in August or September. The first time I see you dancing as a group I saw the magic and power in every single step that you guys did - and I was like "OMG, I have to join this. Like, I'm going to be so stupid if I don't join this club." That's what I thought. So that's what I did, and I think it has been the best decision I have ever made since I've come to Thailand. Kuchesa made me happy every single time I was there. There was no class I didn't feel the magic and the power of dancing together as a community, and to dance to these amazing Afro-beat songs. When talking about my experience connecting with the African dance, well, back home we dance, we dance a lot, but I have never been in a dance class. And also, I think my country Venezuela, it was colonised by the Spanish, and then a lot of people from Africa came to the state in those times. So we have a lot of roots from African cultures. So I thought, "Oh, I have to join this", so I can also connect with this part of my culture that I was not able to connect with back home because I was not that born to. So, I saw Kuchesa as an important opportunity to see this other part of myself or to kind of like explore this other part of my roots. I think since the first time I was there in the first class, it was amazing.





How comfortable I was feeling even when I was dancing with people that I didn't know, that I didn't know if they were going to judge me if I was going to do it okay — If I am enough a good dancer — you know what I mean? I felt so stressful, and I was so stupid because the class was amazing! And everyone was so supportive, and for me it felt natural. Like, since the first beat of the Afro song that we danced to for the first time, it felt natural. Like, for me, everytime I went into Kuchesa, it felt like everything was right because I was able to connect in such a good way with the music. Cause, in many ways it's kind of similar to the music we hear back home, but also like the community made me feel so comfortable, and even dancing in front of other people like we did in Festive Fair… Yeah, I don't know, it made me fall in love even more with the Afro beat. That's why I wanted to be a part of Kuchesa, not just as a dancer but also as someone that could share this message and share this feeling, and that's why I applied to be a part of Kuchesa. I'm really grateful I got to be one, and I have this goal and feeling and desire to keep this vibe of community and art all together through Kuchesa and through dance. That's what Kuchesa represents to me."

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ISSUE 8

BLUE TONGUED

POEM BY JULIA 611



A silver tongue trills,
Sing sweet symphony,
Light, airy, the sound cascades from the sky,
Regale me with tales, and give me wings to fly.
A silver tongue lets me forget,
Of earthy sounds, of losing bets,
Clouds have no worries, like
Wind has no care.

Even so, a blue tongue hisses,
Smells, forked tongue flickers.
Her voice don't travel far, beckons me home,
From early sun, sit on warming stone.
Here I have cares and worries,
Tucked in by the eastern shores, shared with my people
Here I am grounded in veg gardens,
Snacking on snails and slugs.
And while the white-tongued bird,
Circles overhead, lures me,
To free you, it clicks
Maybe birds get trapped in cages,
But blueys roam the lands,
Where tongues with no venom,
Are our greatest weapons.

QUESTIONS

TO SPARK CONVERSATIONS

Have you ever felt like you don't fully belong to a culture that is supposedly "yours"? How did you navigate that feeling?

★

Do you think it's possible to deeply value your cultural roots while still embracing new cultural influences?

★

What specific foods, traditions, or experiences help you feel connected to your cultural heritage?

★

If you were to create art (like Gabi's cover illustration with multiple faces) representing your cultural identity, what would it look like and why?

1 topic / 1 issue / 6 weeks