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Alternatives
The Changing Face of Europe
FOREWORD

IMMIGRATION.

THE WORD IS ON EVERYONE’S LIPS THESE days. In Singapore, citizens hear politicians deliberating on how to manage foreign labourers, permanent residents and their integration. Neighbourhoods become increasingly diverse, as people from China, India, Bangladesh and the Philippines converge on the nation’s shores.

It’s not that different from Europe. Over there, politicians are up in arms over an immigration situation that seems to be spiraling out of control – as migrants from the Middle East, Africa and Asia threaten to erode the European culture. On buses and trains, a litany of languages are spoken – to which nobody raises an eyebrow.

Life, it seems, is multicultural now. As native Belgian Marc Andre, a teacher to immigrants at the Brussels Intercultural Action Centre, says: “Interculturalism is a phenomenon. I don’t need to imagine what it means; we’re living it right now.”

Immigration is transforming the world, and every one of us is a part of it.

In Europe, this wave of economic migrants all started with the entry of foreign labourers half a century ago – akin to what Singapore is doing now with the calibrated admission of economic immigrants into the country’s workforce.

Which is why we packed our bags to travel halfway around the world to see how immigration has changed the social fabric of Europe – and how it might alter Singapore’s, too.

The three of us hit the streets of London, Berlin, Marseille, Brussels and Warsaw in one of Europe’s coldest winters ever, navigating narrow alleys with nothing more than photographs of Google Map screenshots in our phones, taken at an Internet cafe the night before. We went in circles around the cities’ convoluted streets lined with signs in unfamiliar languages, battling to complete interviews before sunset at 4pm.

We stopped strangers in their tracks, strained to make sense of three-way translations and survived forays into dodgy places.

All that, just to meet people willing to share their side of the immigration story.

There were many.

Passionate activists, staunch survivors, hapless refugees, worried parents, unhappy residents, disapproving politicians, critical academics, optimistic families, happy-go-lucky youths – we met them all; over 100 of them. Together they painted a picture of a continent in the midst of an intense transition, caught between the ups and downs of immigration.

We were outsiders reporting on outsiders. Strange, but sometimes it takes a fellow outsider to understand how it feels to be different. We were sneered at explicitly in a shopping mall. One man even raised a rude middle finger at us.

At restaurants without English menus, we had only the vaguest idea of what we had ordered until the food came.

For immigrants, this struggle is surely much worse. They face unfamiliarity in every aspect of their lives, from the workplace to their children’s schools, from taking public transport to figuring out how to pay their utility bills. And for them it is not a project; it is their life.

In ALTERNATIVES, we are not striving to be insider experts of the European situation. Rather, we aim to present a heartfelt look into its growing cultural diversity and how people are responding to that change.

It’s about their smiles, tears and fears. After all, these emotions apply not only to Europe, but are universal among us all.

— HUANG HUifen, LYNNETTE LEE and POON CHIAN HUI, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, 2010
“In France, and also in other countries, there are racist attitudes against the Maghreb and the blacks, like in many countries in the world. Here, it is also like that.”

— Wine shop owner Alain Bertoli, a Frenchman with Italian roots, on the irony of the ‘older’ immigrants in Marseille having racist attitudes towards newcomers.
Kicking when the sun goes down
In the day and till evening it is the famous Opéra de Marseille and its wide open space greets its patrons. When the doors are shut, migrant children come out to transform this cultural space into their very own street soccer court.
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WHEN YOUR CULTURE OFFENDS
What happens when one finds himself sticking out like a sore thumb in a foreign country?

CROSS CULTURAL LEARNING

BORN WITH A NEW SOCIETY
Immigrants in Brussels take the first step towards becoming a functional citizen

WASABI IN WARSAW
Czechen refugees get a taste of Japan in Poland

TRICKY ADAPTATION
NEW LIFE IN BRUSSELS
TRIGGERED DEPRESSION
How Filipino Lecinda Beligun overcame her arrival blues

SURVIVORS
'MY ELDEST SON, WHO WAS 14 AT THAT TIME, WAS KILLED'
Heda Debrowa recounts her harrowing experience in Chechnya, Russia that brought her to Poland

'I FELT INJUSTICE, AND INJUSTICE IS VERY DIFFICULT TO BEAR'
Witold Brzosek Zriska chose to make a career out of helping fellow migrants

COMMUNITY LEADERS

THE ACCIDENTAL LONDONER
How Polish editor Mieczyslaw Cerasty Obokodowski ended up in London

MIXING IN BERLIN
Berlin-based Turkish deejay Hasan Togrulka gets in the groove of bringing people together

ON THE COVER AND ABOVE: GRAPHICS BY LYNNETTE LEE
Immigration is poised to redefine the European native. New blood from the Middle East, Africa and Asia as well as fellow European Union states are altering cultures, lifestyles, economies, society and policies. It’s a seismic shift within Europe that could either break new ground or open an abyss that plunges the continent into an identity crisis.
The headscarf A woman in a headscarf walks across a grocery in the Berlin suburb of Kreuzberg in Germany, which is known for its high concentration of Turkish immigrants.
Nam’s angels Catholic Vietnamese in Warsaw, Poland, gather their families for mass in the Matki Bozej Ostrobramskie on Christmas day
Snow dance Social worker Marina Hulia of the Polish Association of Legal Education (far left, with red spectacles), sings and claps for Chechen refugee Milarna Debirowa, 11, as she demonstrates a traditional dance from her homeland Chechnya, Russia. The group is waiting for a bus in central Warsaw to go to a Japanese restaurant for a sushi-making activity.
Kindergarten kids at KOMSU in Berlin take a break from their daily dose of fun and games to enjoy a freshly cooked lunch with their friends and teachers. KOMSU advocates intercultural balance, with all playgroups containing an equal number of native and migrant children.
Storm in the calm  Café manager Süçuran Demiraran, 48, tells her story of what it means to be an immigrant from Turkey. Pictured here at her workplace in Berlin—a café not only for relaxing but also a place where immigrants from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, as well as Germans, flock to for intercultural exchange.

PHOTO: NURIA LING
‘Where You Feel Accepted - That’s Where Your HEART is’

Globalisation has created a new rank of transnational citizens – migrants and their children who straddle two cultures, two lifestyles, two identities. Their search for a home away from home is intertwined with coming to terms with who they are, and seeking acceptance from the people around them. Can any one find a true home overseas?
Six years ago, Sükran Demirkan’s 26-year-old daughter Canseri returned home from a job centre in Berlin, Germany, with a startling question for her mother: “Should I take off my headscarf?”

“I told her no, because that’s who you are,” said the 48-year-old German-Turkish café manager, who is Muslim. “How would you feel if you were asked to take off your headscarf for better job chances? She feels lost, and not accepted.”

The incident did not surprise Demirkan, whose parents came from Turkey when she was seven years old. She too, has been asked many times by German acquaintances when she will stop wearing her headscarf, a symbol often associated with conservatism and in recent years, Islamic radicalism.

“I’m sick of people asking. Sick of trying to integrate,” she said with brutal honesty. “People tell me that I’m not German enough.”

Such a cultural collision is a thorny, but inevitable dilemma that comes with immigration. And for the European Union (EU), the situation seems to be reaching saturation point.

Before 2002, net migration into the EU had never exceeded the million mark. But from 2002 to 2007, it ranged between 1.64 and 2.03 million per year, according to statistics agency Eurostat.

This also means that in recent years, immigration has contributed more to EU’s total population growth than natural increase. In fact, net migration in 2008 was almost three times higher than the rate of natural population growth.

With a significant number of migrants from Islamic countries – Turks and Moroccans head the list of foreigners from outside of the EU – it’s no small matter when they bring along beliefs that seem frightening to many Europeans.

Joachim Bolot, a 66-year-old retiree who lives in the migrant-populated area of Neukölln in Berlin, recounts an unpleasant encounter during the recent Eid holiday, also known as hajj or the Festival of Sacrifice for Muslims. “I was putting away the garbage downstairs, but when I opened the lid of the garbage container, I saw a sheep’s head staring back at me,” he said. “Immigration is a bad thing – their culture is so different.”

But it could simply be a fear of the unknown.

“When you behave differently, people are scared... scared of another culture,” said Demirkan.

Yet, having Muslims in their midst should not be new to most Germans – the country first opened its doors to Turkish guest workers back in the 1960s, as part of an economic bilateral agreement. Then, Turkey was facing high unemployment, and Germany, devastated by World War II, needed extra hands to rebuild the nation. But things took a turn for the worse when the guest workers programme was scrapped in 1973. But remaining Turkish workers were still allowed to bring their families over, making Germany their permanent home and suddenly, the Germans had to grapple with living alongside people with habits and beliefs that are a world apart from their own.

Even so, it took more than 30 years for the German government to pass a law on immigration and integration, which they did in 2005, said Saiter Cinar, a German-Turkish politician with the Turkish Berlin-Brandenburg Union.

“Till the end of the 1990s, the political ideology was that Germany was not an immigrant country,” he explained. “Nobody talked about what should be changed in the education system if
Merkez Masjid: Men reading the Quran in the Merkez Masjid mosque in Berlin, Germany, after evening prayers.
they were to have tens of thousands of children from another culture, another religion, who speak another language.

“T’ve been in politics for over 30 years, and I say that I don’t know why we couldn’t go one step further to accept this immigration.”

Close-Knit or Cut-Off?

But even countries that recognise their significant migrant population are caught in a quandary.

Take Great Britain, a nation that is no stranger to multiculturalism, thanks to its colonial past. Today, its capital, London, teems with ethnic diversity – to the point that it would be peculiar to only see Caucasians on the city’s crowded streets.

The years of immigration have also left a mark on the cityscape. Brick Lane, in east London, is also known as “Banglatown” – and it’s not difficult to see why. Streets are lined with shop signs for Bangladeshi cuisine, banks and clothing stores, many with Bengali translation. There is even a park with a replica of a famous monument that is in Bangladesh, the Shaheed Minar, which commemorates the Bengali Language Movement.

The good thing about such diversity is that ethnic minorities feel comfortable living in London, according to British-Bangladeshi Jamal (Abdul Quayum). The 39-year-old, whose grandfather came to Britain during English colonial rule of what was then India in 1934, runs the well-known grocery Taj Stores at Brick Lane with his two brothers.

“All’s fine here – no racial discrimination or anything of that sort,” said Jamal, who is married with two sons aged 12 and nine. “To be honest, we call ourselves British-Bangladeshis but we consider ourselves more British than Bangladeshis, you know?”

But such migrant enclaves are sometimes referred by the locals as ghettos – a term that evokes gritty images of America’s crime-rampant neighbourhoods where drug pushers, prostitutes and homeless people roam the streets.

While Britain has yet to reach that perilous stage, the banding of migrant communities remains undesirable for some because it appears to be encouraging isolation, not integration.

Several politicians, such as David Cameron – leader of UK’s Conservative Party – have publicly denounced these detached communities.

In a 2006 speech, he vowed to “ban Muslim ghettos” so that migrants will be obliged to interact with people outside of their community.

The right-wing, anti-immigrant British National Party (BNP) is going further. Richard Barnbrook, who represents the party on the London Assembly, thinks that migration should be halted completely.

“There has to be a total freeze on migration because we don’t have a lot of resources,” Barnbrook said, adding that exceptions can be made for asylum seekers as their lives may be in danger. “As for illegal immigrants – kick them out.”

Barnbrook, who is on the Barking and Dagenham council, backs his case by describing how migrants have caused frustration for the locals in east London.

“Migrants create antagonism within the community; they remove employment and housing, and have no desire to integrate,” he said. “It creates frustration, frustration leads to anger, and anger will lead to violence.”

Even European citizens, like the well-established Polish community in London, feel the heat.

The economic recession is partly to blame, said Jan Mokrzycki, vice-president of the Federation of Poles in Great Britain, which oversees Polish organisations in the country.

“The general sentiment towards migrants in Britain has been improving in the past few years,” he said. “But with the recession, the right-wing parties are beginning to start a rise of nationalism.

“The British are thinking, I am losing my job because a Pole has got it – why should he get it when I have been here all my life?”

The latent tension is an ominous signal to many immigrants that their search for home might be far from over. British-Bangladeshi Jamiar Miah, 47, admits that he feels insecure about his family’s future, despite having UK citizenship.

“If anti-immigrant parties come into power, I’d start to worry,” said Miah, who works as a chef at an Indian restaurant. He came to London in 1991 for an arranged marriage to a Bangladeshi woman, who was already a British citizen. They have five children aged between two and 21.

Last June, the BNP won two seats in the recent European Parliament elections, and Miah continued: “If the BNP comes to power, they might just one day say, all immigrants, get out of my country.”

If that happens, he will have little choice but to take his family back to Bangladesh.

We Need Them, But We Don’t Want Them

Yet Europe cannot do without immigrants. With an ageing population – currently, half of the EU’s population is 40 years old and above – they are needed to bolster the continent’s economy.

More importantly, immigrants take jobs that the locals do not want, said Mieczyslaw Cezary Olszewski, a long-time London resident and manager of The Polish Times, a weekly publication for the Polish community there.

“People are saying to get rid of the migrants – it’s rubbish,” he said. “Hotels, restaurants, factories and farming would collapse in two weeks! Covered in dust and dirt.”

It will get harder to make a case for keeping them out, too. A report on ageing by the European Commission projects that in 2060 the EU will have more than
Taj Stores

Jamal (Abdul Quayam), 39 (left), who runs Taj Stores, the oldest Bengali shop in London, with his two brothers says he does not face racial discrimination.

Little Bangladesh

Brick Lane in east London is called ‘Banglatown’, thanks to its large community of Bangladeshi immigrants who have filled the streets with ethnic shops.
Overcrowding  Too many people, too few shelters as people thronged a bus stop in Berlin to wait for the rain to stop

FAST FACTS

GERMANY
Population: 82,329,758 (July 2009 est.)
Population growth rate: - 0.053% (2009 est.)
Net migration rate: 2.19 migrant(s)/1,000 population (2009 est.)
country comparison to the world: 39
Ethnic groups: German 91.5%, Turkish 2.4%, other 6.1% (made up largely of Greek, Italian, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish)

UNITED KINGDOM
Population: 61,113,205 (July 2009 est.)
Population growth rate: + 0.279% (2009 est.)
Net migration rate: 2.16 migrant(s)/1,000 population (2009 est.)
country comparison to the world: 40
Ethnic groups: white (of which English 83.6%, Scottish 8.6%, Welsh 4.9%, Northern Irish 2.9%) 92.1%, black 2%, Indian 1.8%, Pakistani 1.3%, mixed 1.2%, other 1.6% (2001 census)

POLAND
Population: 38,482,919 (July 2009 est.)
Population growth rate: - 0.047% (2009 est.)
Net migration rate: - 0.47 migrant(s)/1,000 population (2009 est.)
country comparison to the world: 106
Ethnic groups: Polish 96.7%, German 0.4%, Belarusian 0.1%, Ukrainian 0.1%, other and unspecified 2.7% (2002 census)

BELGIUM
Population: 10,414,336 (July 2009 est.)
Population growth rate: + 0.094% (2009 est.)
Net migration rate: 1.22 migrant(s)/1,000 population (2009 est.)
country comparison to the world: 50
Ethnic groups: Fleming 58%, Walloon 31%, mixed or other 11%
“If you import a machine, the machine works and that’s it – it does not bring cultural baggage. Whereas the migrant is not only bringing labour, he is also bringing his traditions, customs, and habits.”

—Antonio Cruz of Brussels-based Migration Policy Group and the editor of Migration News Sheet, a monthly publication that covers issues on immigration and asylum

FRANCE

Population:
- Total: 64,057,792
- Note: 62,150,775 in metropolitan France (July 2009 est.)

Population growth rate:
- + 0.549% (2009 est.)

Net migration rate:
- 1.48 migrant(s)/1,000 population (2009 est.)

Country comparison to the world: 48

Ethnic groups:

—Source: CIA World Factbook 2009

twice as many elderly than children, so having working-age immigrants to plug the labour gap seems like a perfect solution.

Unfortunately, it’s not that simple because migrants are more than just work drones, said Antonio Cruz of Brussels-based Migration Policy Group and the editor of Migration News Sheet, a monthly publication that covers issues on immigration and asylum.

“If you import a machine, the machine works and that’s it – it does not bring cultural baggage,” he explained. “Whereas the migrant is not only bringing labour, he is also bringing his traditions, customs, and habits.”

However, many nations have turned a blind eye to this. Now, they face a sizeable immigrant population, making integration trickier than ever.

“It was a matter of laziness and incompetence,” said Cruz bluntly. “Europe is reaping what it sowed – years of regrets.”

Belgium is one such country. Foreigners flocked there as guest workers back in the 1950s. And those who decided to stay for good – Italians are the largest group, followed by Moroccans, French and Dutch – were left to their own devices until the 1990s, when policymakers finally decided to take action.

But it may be a case of too little, too late. The lack of adaptation programmes, such as language classes, meant that many new arrivals over the years have remained disassociated from the mainstream society, said Severine de Potter, a policy officer at the Centre of Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism in Brussels.

And even those who did take part in integration courses may find themselves none the wiser. “The courses may not be well-adapted to their reality, in terms of different languages and cultures,” she said.

Faced with language limitations, many migrants have resorted to doing undeclared work, said Sabine Craenen, who runs the Organization for Undocumented Workers in Brussels.

Policy restrictions haven’t helped, either. In Belgium, a job is considered legal if it pays at least €1,400 per month (US$2,800), the national minimum wage. But that would be an unusually high salary for the low-skilled work that inexperienced newcomers tend to go for, said Craenen, so they fall beneath the “legal” threshold.

Sociologist Sylvie Carbonnelle, a senior researcher at the Free University of Brussels, identified another grim future impact: migrants may end up retiring without sufficient pensions.

“Migrants age, like everybody else,” she said. “So, the important question is, how can these migrants live when they age?”

This is yet another pertinent issue for Belgium, where almost half its population has migrant roots. De Potter also notes that immigration is gaining ground with the induction of new member states Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. In recent years, arrivals from these countries have exceeded those from Morocco and Turkey.

Add the 40,000-odd arrivals for family reunification and the 43-percent rise in asylum seekers last year, and it seems that Belgium, like many of its neighbours, is set for an identity shift.

“We cannot escape from other cultures,” said de Potter. “National identity has become a very hot topic, and a sensitive one.”

The Changing Face of Europe

Identity is certainly a subject of heated debate in the maritime city of Marseille, France. Its distinct Mediterranean or Provençal culture has faded in the past century with the influx
of North African immigrants from former French colonies, such as Algeria and the Comoros. Today, less than half of its population is indigenous French.

Last November, Algeria’s qualification for the World Cup was marked with such jubilation that Marseille’s usually quiet roads were clogged with honking vehicles when Algerians took to the streets en masse.

“There were Algerian flags everywhere, and traffic jams – for a moment, I thought, where was France?” said Nimesh Kumar, a resident who witnessed the scene.

Yet, by today’s modern standards, such events should not be that surprising.

“We live in a globalised world, what do you expect?” said Craenen. “Immigration is a fact of life – we just have to deal with it.”

**Building Bridges, From Within**

The good news is, some are already doing so.

Christine Kulakowski, director of Brussels Intercultural Action Centre, is taking the first step to eradicate prejudices that hamper immigrants from settling into their new homes. “Prejudices make it more difficult for migrants to find jobs, to find places to stay,” she said.

Hence, the centre offers courses to kickstart intercultural interaction, such as by training people how to launch their own intercultural initiatives. Such a typical class consists of 15 people, including migrants from war-torn African nations like Djibouti and Congo.

Theonille Kaytesi, 49, from Rwanda, has no regrets taking up the two-year course. Speaking in halting English, she said: “When I arrived here, I had so many difficulties with integration; I cannot do so many things. This course can help me help someone else.”

Immigrants chipping in to guide fellow newcomers is also a feature in the Berlin suburb of Kreuzberg, which has a large proportion of Muslim immigrants, particularly from Turkey.

There, 10 bilinguals from countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Morocco visit the homes of about 360 immigrant families to help them with problems encountered in their everyday lives.

Examples include translating government
Learning the language

To get a job, immigrants in Marseille take up French language classes like the free ones offered at the Centre of Innovation for Work and Social Changes.

Poorer nations such as Ukraine and Russia.

Justyna Frelak, head of the Migration and Development Policy programme at the Institute of Public Affairs, a public policy think-tank in Warsaw, likens Poland to a “bus stop on the way to richer EU countries”.

And while Poland can look to its more experienced neighbours for solutions – and mistakes – to learn from, Frelak points out that it is not that easy to adopt their measures.

“The challenge is that our social policy in general, not just for immigrants, is very limited,” she said. “Also, awareness of the special needs of migrants is still quite low – many Poles are still not that aware of the difference between migrants and refugees.”

It’s no wonder that Krzysztof Fininski, a board member of the Polish Association of Legal Education (PSEP), fears that Poland may end up repeating the mistakes of others.

He describes how PSEP, which helps excluded groups, had to step in when teachers hired by the government failed to turn up for classes to teach refugees Polish.

“No one was interested in monitoring those teachers,” he said. “This administration is living in a paper reality – on paper, people are joining the classes; on paper, everything is perfect.”

In addition, Frelak thinks that the government needs to rethink its integration programmes for non-EU citizens, because they simply “don’t work”.

“The integration programme is very limited in terms of getting new qualifications,” she explained. “For example, some of the training is in Polish – so if you don’t know Polish, it’s useless.”

One bright spot here is that the government is set to revamp its integration policy this year.

“The new policy will cover all things related to immigration, such as entry and exit of migrants, integration and re-integration of returning Polish migrants,” said Katarzyna Ozyranowska of the Migration Policy Department, Ministry of Interior and Administration. Sipping a cappuccino in a newly opened café in the heart of Warsaw city after work, she added that the depart-

letters, sorting out landlord disputes, and addressing questions related to job searching, banking and health.

They are part of a project called Muslims help Muslims with Integration that operates under Nachbarschaftshaus Urbanstrasse, or Neighbourhood House – a centre that aims to improve welfare in the district.

Roping in long-time migrants into integration projects has its advantages.

“People trust us more,” said Scham Najimi, 55, a Lebanese who has been in Germany for more than 20 years. “We talk to them in their mother tongue, and we can relate to them, having also gone through similar experiences.”

Fellow project member, 50-year-old Keti Qafmolla from Slovenia, added that helping others has helped her to feel more at home.

“I feel more integrated – for example, I can speak German better now,” she said with a smile.

Natives, too, are beginning to warm to outsiders. Lasse Loose, 22, has gone the extra mile to learn how to speak Turkish. He attends weekly lessons at Humboldt University in Berlin, and most of his classmates are also Germans.

“I play soccer, and have a lot of Turkish teammates,” said Loose, who lives in Kreuzberg. “But I don’t understand them, so I don’t talk to them.

“Everybody is asking the immigrants to integrate, but we should also make the step too – and language is the strongest bridge.”

Starting Early, Staying Ahead

These are certainly sterling examples for new EU state Poland to follow.

Since gaining European membership, at the same time as enjoying the benefits of its own citizens working in wealthier EU countries and bringing that wealth home, the country is seeing more immigrants, for its position at the fringes of the EU makes it an attractive destination for bordering and
“Sometimes, my mother is a little confused when my wife doesn’t call her every day – but that’s because Germans raise their children differently, to be independent.”

— Volkan Timur Seyhan, 26, a German-born Turkish football player, who married a German woman explains the cultural differences between his wife and his mother. He is pictured above (right, in orange shirt) during a soccer game, with his team that has both German and Turkish players in Berlin, Germany
International sport
Volkan Timur Seyhan, 26, (foreground, in orange jersey), runs for the ball during a regular soccer game on Saturday. He plays for the THC Franziskaner Football Club, which has a mixture of German and Turkish players.

“Preserving our culture is important,” said retiree Mustafa Yildiz, 65, who came to Germany 41 years ago. “In Turkey, we have a saying that if you know your past, you will know your future.”

Such dilemmas toss up conflicting sentiments on whether Europe could truly be their home.

“I don’t know where my heart is,” admitted Demirkan. “Where you feel accepted – that’s where your heart is.”

The problem is this acceptance is hard to find even in their home countries. “In Turkey, I also don’t feel accepted because people are jealous of my economic status,” she said. “People are saying, you left, you took another culture, you’re German now.”

But for Yildiz, it’s simple. “We’ll never be German - always Turkish,” he said.

Volkan Timur Seyhan, 26, believes that it’s possible to be both. “I’m German but with a Turkish spice,” he said with a laugh.

The football player often finds himself caught in the middle from time to time – for a good reason.

“My wife is German, my parents were born in Turkey, I was born in Berlin,” said Volkam, who has a six-month-old son.

“Sometimes, my mother is a little confused when my wife doesn’t call her every day – but that’s because Germans raise their children differently, to be independent,” he added.

But not everyone can juggle multiple cultures.

In fact, staying true to one’s roots can be a hindrance to establishing a future, as it leads to vicious circle of always having to put Turkish language and practices first, said Demirkan.

To her, finding a home overseas is a battle that can no longer be won.

“Five years ago, I couldn’t imagine going back to Turkey – but now, I can,” she said solemnly. “Because I don’t feel comfortable here any more.”

Caught Between Two Worlds
Still, these actions to embrace immigrants into and within the European fold may not be enough to win over their hearts.

Indeed, even what defines an integrated citizen is ambiguous, as Demirkan points out: “By integration, what do you mean? Through language? Blending in? Doing your work? Paying your taxes? Forgetting all roots? Read, eat and dress like Germans?”

And if fitting in means they have to give up their original cultures, many will be reluctant to do so.
Dim Sum Dinner

Su Wen Shan, 30, was introduced to her French husband Ankri Norbert, 47, *(left on the cycling machine)* through her Paris-based brother-in-law who showed him her photograph in 2005. Norbert took a liking to her and they started corresponding through email every week. Despite the language and geographical barrier, Norbert would translate his love letters from French to Chinese and email them to her. A year later, he went to China to meet her. They got married in 2006 and decided to settle in Marseille for its tranquil suburban lifestyle. She obtained French citizenship in 2007 and now works as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant. Su has been attending French lessons at Alliance Française and is now able to converse with Norbert in French. While food may be a way to a man’s heart, Su does not cook Chinese food for Norbert as he is on a strict organic diet. “I cook Chinese food only for myself, and dare not eat McDonald’s or Norbert will divorce me,” she said in jest.
Starting a new life overseas involves adopting another language and lifestyle. Vietnamese \textbf{Dang Thu Huong} and Indian \textbf{Ilankumaran Soundarya} went opposite ways to come to terms with who they are today. Dang chose to embrace the host nation’s culture, while Soundarya sees the importance in staying true to his roots.
When Vietnamese immigrant Dang Thu Huong attended school in Poland for the first time in 1991, she was shocked that her teacher asked for her opinion.

Having been schooled under the communist regime in Vietnam where no lessons went by without reciting the philosophies of communist leader Ho Chi Minh, she was used to being told what to think.

“If we have some poems, we can’t say what we think about them. Usually the teacher tells us that we have to think this way, that this poem means this,” said Dang, 28, who is now a general practitioner living in Warsaw, Poland.

“I was shocked that I was someone important and my opinions were valued as a human,” she added as she recalled the time when her family migrated to Poland when she was 10.

But the former class chairman in Vietnam who once led her class in singing the communist, or ‘red’ songs, quickly used her experience to her advantage.

She topped the class in Mathematics, a subject that most Vietnamese are good at as it involves techniques that one can learn by heart.

Soon, her Polish classmates were asking her to solve sums, while they helped practise her Polish.

Similarly, her transition into adulthood was smooth sailing. She gets along with her Polish colleagues and is now dating a 31-year-old Polish political scientist.

“They don’t do anything that makes me different. Even if they do, they are curious of my culture and see me as someone interesting, and not as an alien,” she said.

But Dang’s story is a unique one. Gesturing to the café where she was having dinner, she said in resignation: “Many Vietnamese in Poland are afraid to sit in such restaurants because they are afraid of being caught by the police for being illegal migrants.”

“But I am free, I can do everything I want. I am legal. So I am happy compared to most of the Vietnamese who are illegal.”

Hence she sees the need to help the underprivileged Vietnamese.

When she’s off-duty, she is a volunteer translator at a migrant centre set up by Catholic group Divine World Missionaries in southern Warsaw. Most of her work involves accompanying Vietnamese migrants to hospitals to help them to translate the doctor’s diagnosis.
Family Portrait Ilankumaran Soundarya, wife Sudha and their daughters dress up for this family photo at their two-room flat in Marseille’s city centre.

Born French, feels Indian

Ilankumaran “Kumar” Soundarya, 29, tugs at his hoodie jacket, picks up his cricket bat and takes his spot on the barren hilltop field. Three rusty white metal rods are erected in the rocky soil as replacements for wickets to demarcate a makeshift cricket pitch. Gusty winds tear at the broken nets that lie in a limp pile between goalposts, though no one seems to notice. Instead, all 10 men have their eyes on the bowler, who is about to bowl the worn-out ball.

The scene is repeated every Sunday in Acidic, a half-hour bus ride from Marseille’s city centre.

The players? Ethnic Indians who came to the French town to work. “They are like family,” said Kumar, who hails from former French colony Pondicherry.
Daily meal
To maintain the authentic flavours of the Indian cuisine, Sudha, 26, goes to a Chinese supermarket for her spices and other Asian ingredients.

Having a ball
Ilankumaran Soundarya, 29 (in blue, holding the bat) and his friends get their gear out for an afternoon cricket game at a deserted soccer field.
In respect  The family’s altar table is kept in a cupboard and is usually locked, except for special occasions when it will be opened for prayers. The black-and-white photo on the far left shows Kumar’s father.

The father of two girls aged four and two, also admits that he feels more at home in India than in France, where he has been living for the past 10 years. But fate had the last word. His parents opted for French citizenship when India reclaimed Pondicherry, and he kept that status by default.

“Maybe it’s my destiny; when I was born I was automatically French so there was no option for me,” said Kumar, who is unemployed.

But that’s about as French as he gets.

Scents of curry fill the rooms of his modest flat in the city centre, while a Bollywood show plays on his 30-inch television. A narrow wall cabinet in the living room reveals shelves of colourful Hindu religious artefacts. His 26-year-old wife, Sudha, her long hair in a single braid against a reddish-brown sari, stirs a large pot of dhal on the crowded stove in their airy kitchen.

“We haven’t forgotten our culture; we were brought up in India,” said Kumar. “Till now, the kids haven’t learnt anything about the French culture — once they start to go to school at around five, six years old, then they’ll start getting in it.”

True enough, both children only speak Tamil. Moreover, neither parent has any French friends. Instead, they are surrounded by fellow Tamils who gather to celebrate Indian festivals like Deepavali, the Festival of Lights.

“There are many Tamil families here,” he said. “We will go to one person’s house to celebrate.”

With a strong sense of community in Marseille, both husband and wife were able to settle down in no time. “I missed India a little bit at the beginning, but now I have settled down. My friends are Tamil mothers; it’s easy to integrate. Marseille is good,” said the soft-spoken Sudha, who arrived in 2005.

Her husband agrees. “The government takes care of people, even when you are unemployed,” said Kumar, who receives social benefits of €1,200 per month ($2,400), as well as €170 per child. His family also gets free medicine and free public transportation, and they only pay about €20 to €30 per month for rent. They do pay taxes though, he added.

But the couple does not wish to live solely on government benefits. “It’s still better to work or the government won’t give pension,” said Sudha, who is planning to learn French and get a job as an accountant or a teacher to utilise her economics degree, which she obtained in India.

“European countries, France is better than any other,” she added with a smile.
OLE! A Turkish boy and German girl pop into the games room of KOMSU, an intercultural childcare centre in Berlin, Germany, for a round of foosball, or table football.
Educate to integrate

Europeans are learning a new subject
Reader-friendly

German retiree Martha Bockstette, 61, encourages eight-year-old Ercan Gencmehmetoglu, a Turkish migrant, in reading German books as part of an after-school reading programme to polish his German-speaking skills.

At a university’s bar in London, the usual merrymaking and clinking of glasses was silenced by an angry voice.

“Oh my god, how can you do this? How can you provide alcohol at a nightclub to children who are learning?” exclaimed a man.

He was part of 21 ethnic minority parents, together with their children, on a tour conducted by the Ethnic Minority Achievement Services (EMAS), an organisation that helps minority students excel in their studies.

As part of EMAS’ Aim High project, which advocates the importance of higher education to ethnic minority parents, parents are invited to tour the universities so that any misconceptions could be addressed.

It was observed that many ethnic minority children, especially the girls, did not enrol in universities due to low aspirations and parents’ fear of their child being led astray.

This puts the children at a disadvantage as they do not have the qualifications to compete in the job market and often end up on the lower rungs of society.

Back at the bar, Rahma Samater, the manager of parental involvement and targeted projects at EMAS, broke the silence: “If a child doesn’t have everything here, obviously they will travel to somewhere else. When you provide it here, you are limiting the traveling. So by the time he walks from the bar, the dorm room is there, he can have enough sleep, and wake up fresh.”

Eventually, the parent accepted her reasoning.

“With parents visiting universities, we can preempt the assumptions they have, said Samater as she recalls the incident which took place a few years ago.

“Particularly for those who are foreign to the country, they won’t feel that their child might lose their identity, culture and everything they have.”

EMAS’s concept mirrors one European solution to integration: Overcome all barriers to education.

Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government agencies like EMAS have rolled out intensive programmes to reach out to migrant parents, educating them about education systems and equipping them with the knowledge to coach their children using their mother tongues.

Children are given help in their studies and in boosting their self-esteem – which helps to raise confidence in their abilities to excel.

For example, London-based project, Our Languages, promotes learning of mother tongues to reinforce minority students’ cultural identity and pride, while EMAS also has an Ambassador’s Project that helps African and Caribbean children develop leadership skills.

The story repeats itself all across Europe as countries do their best to integrate immigrants, using education as a key.

In Berlin, Germany, the Association for New Education mails regular letters packed with information to migrant parents on how to raise a child from an infant right up to school-going age, in their specific mother language.

At the same time, German retiree Martha
Like most preschoolers, five-year-old Ali does not want his mother, Cemile Aktürk, to leave his sight and has to be comforted by her. The 28-year-old Turkish woman, who came to Germany in 1998 to marry a German-Turk, sends her son to KOMSU for its multicultural learning environment.

“We only change is to push kids into schools...without a job, there is no talk of integration. We should look at the next generation.”

— Arnold Mengelkoch, the migration representative in the district office of Neukölln, Berlin, a majority Turkish district

With no education, there will be no integration, said Arnold Mengelkoch, the migration representative in the district office of Neukölln, Berlin — a majority Turkish district. “The only change is to push kids into schools, to help them make the jump from low to high-skilled jobs. It’s better to educate the kids, rather than integrating the adults — without a job, there is no talk of integration. We should look at the next generation.”

To accomplish that, socio-economic issues need to be tackled, says Friederike Terhechte of the Network on Integration by Education in Berlin. “It’s not just about the language background, but also their social rights. Germany is one of the worst countries where success of education...
In some schools, you can have 90 percent Turkish children, and they will speak in their native tongue. If it is 50-50, they will need German to talk to one another, yet speak in Turkish too. It’s a chance for kids to see the world in another way.

— Gerd Ammann, director of KOMSU Intercultural Childcare Centre, on the importance of maintaining a balanced mix in schools

depends on your societal situation. If you are rich, you will have a good education. If you are poor, you will have a bad education. Migrants usually belong to the lower half,” she said.

The problem stretches to the next generation.

“Parents don’t have a perspective on education because there is high unemployment. It is not a high priority for them,” Therhecë added. “So if a child’s grandparents and parents did not have a proper job, he will not have proper aspirations.”

For some, the streaming system in Germany also marks a death penalty on their future at the fourth grade.

At the tender age of 10, the students’ path to either a university degree or a vocational education is decided when they are streamed into three different types of secondary schools – Hauptschule, Realschule and Gymnasium.

Hauptschule is the lowest level secondary school which leads to vocational education, while Realschule leads to apprenticeship, or if the student is outstanding, an eventual university education.

Gymnasium is the best form of secondary education as it prepares students for university entrance.

Migrant students are more likely to end up in lower-level schools, said Saffet Cinar, spokesman for the Turkish Berlin-Brandenburg Union.

Based on the 2006 International Primary Literacy Survey which assesses reading and comprehension capabilities of fourth graders in Germany, he noted that “teachers were giving more recommendations for children from academic families for higher level schools than for children from worker’s families.”

Hence, while all parents want the best for their children, their social background can hold them back, said Therhecë.

**Balanced Mix Helps Performance**

This social disadvantage perpetuates through segregation of schools. Since most European Union countries do not place restrictions on the migrant-native ratio, school intake is determined primarily by neighbourhood demographics. It becomes de-facto that schools in poorer districts will have more migrants.

“Segregation starts happening through default,” said Zrinka Bralo, executive director of London-based Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum.

“Immigrants buy cheaper housing, or are living in social housing clusters, so through economic means, they start clustering. And if you have many Asian families and one white family, the white family tends to move out. Hence, you get a neighbourhood that is predominantly Asian, and a school that’s Asian too.”

According to EC-supported research unit Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training’s 2008 report on education strategies for integrating migrant children, the socio-economic background of fellow students influences the learning of minority and low-income students.

Conversely, the more advanced their peers are, the better the minority students did.

So it becomes a vicious circle of poverty, immigration and low academic expectations.

That is why Turkish mother Cemile Aktürk, 28, sees the importance of sending her five-year-old son, Ali, to KOMSU, an intercultural childcare centre in Kreuzberg, Berlin, where there is an equal ratio of Turkish and German children aged five months to six years old.

“There is a big problem in Kreuzberg where there are only one or two schools with a balanced mix of Turkish and Germans. Hence, students speak mostly Turkish in school. Their German will suffer. So I like KOMSU,” said Aktürk, who came to Berlin to marry a German-Turk in 1998.

KOMSU’s concept is to expose children to diversity. For instance, religious festivals like Ramadan and Christmas are both observed. Halal food is served to Muslims, while games are played in different languages. Two preschool teachers – Turkish and German – are attached to each class of 17 children.

“The basis of the concept is that no group can be more than 50 percent. There’s a balance and it is very important,” said director of KOMSU Gerd Ammann. “In some schools, you can have 90 percent Turkish children, and they will speak in their native tongue. If it is 50-50, they will need German to talk to one another, yet speak in Turkish too.”

The result is racial tolerance. “It’s a chance for kids to see the world in another way. It’s very important to get to know that others can be different. We promote acceptance,” he added.
Run with me Vietnamese migrant in Brussels, Tran Thi Ngoc Diep, 34, picks her seven-year-old son, Daniel Verheyden, from school every day. Parents need to recognise the importance of education to their child's integration.
Morning rush A typical morning onboard the Berlin U-Bahn, the capital's underground train, gives a glimpse into the city's cultural diversity.
When your culture OFFENDS

What do you do when you arrive in a country with totally different cultures and beliefs?
Best pals Vietnamese Tran Thi Ngo Diep, 34, shares a laugh with Belgian good friend and neighbour Truus Roesems, 38, while her seven-year-old son Daniel Verheyden watches on.
WHEN VIETNAMESE TRAN THI NGOC DIEP arrived in Brussels in 2001 to marry her Flemish husband, she had a culture shock. Not only were Belgians speaking in Dutch – which rendered her French lessons in Vietnam useless – they greet each other with three kisses on the cheeks.

“I felt weird giving three kisses to people,” said the 34-year-old mother of two sons aged seven and two who came from a conservative Asian background, “but I have to do it because I live in Brussels. I feel accepted when I accept their culture.”

She also signed up for Dutch language and social orientation courses with local integration office Brussels Onthaalbureau, and through the office’s help, she obtained a diploma in childcare training in 2006. She now works as a kindergarten teacher and speaks Dutch, English, German and French – as well as Vietnamese.

Her outgoing personality has earned her many Belgian friends. Truus Roesems, 38, her neighbour and godmother of her younger son said: “If I have any problem, the first person I will call is Diep.”

Tran’s success is an act of will. Many migrants, like Tran, face alienation when they arrive in a foreign country. Their cultural practices accentuate their differences from the natives.

This has been heightened by the surge in migration from both the European Union (EU) and non-EU states in the last decade. According to EU’s statistical office Eurostat 2008 population report, there are 30,779,000 non nationals out of the total population of 497,431,000 or 6.2 percent living in the 27 member states, a 42 percent increase since 2001. Migrants – including their descendents – from non-EU states made up 19,476,000 or more than half of the foreign population.

Out of these, Muslim migrants from Turkey and Morocco constitute the largest population of foreigners, with Turks making up 7.9 percent and Moroccans at 5.6 percent. Most of them live in Germany, France and Spain.

This floodgate of migration has provided greater grounds for cultural friction as migrants import their cultures into the host nations, which may be at odds with the natives’

Policy makers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have reacted by offering help in assimilation. For instance, the European Commission has the Integration for Third Countries Nationals funding programme that helps in integration programmes for migrants from non-EU states. In Neukölln, a majority Turkish-populated district of Berlin, Germany, over 70 NGOs deal with migration. Most of the language classes in Europe are also offered to migrants for free.

So much for the help at arrival. What do migrants do when their culture offends?

While some quickly assimilate by learning the language and adopting the host culture, others retreat into the security of their ghettos, insulating them from contact with the native society. This highlights the popular idea that it is the migrant’s responsibility to integrate, and not the natives’ job to adapt.

As Sabine Craenen of Brussels-based migrant worker rights group Organisation for Undocumented Workers explained: “Europe still does not see itself as a migration country. We have to protect our culture.

“It is very much a European idea that we have one culture and it always has to stay the same. People can come, but they need to adapt to our culture. We don’t need to adapt to them.”

Sing the Same Tune

Learning the language is a way to adapt. “How can you blend in if you don’t speak the language? It’s like if I were to go to Singapore, and I can’t speak English or Mandarin, how can I do anything?” said Idriss Aurane, 26, an English-to-French instructor at the Centre of Innovation for Work and Social Changes (CIERES), an NGO that provides free language and social orientation courses to migrants referred by a job centre in Marseille.

“Obviously I have to get trained, learn the language, and motivate myself to learn properly so that I can eventually find a job,” he added.

Chinese migrant Ivy Fang Hong plans to improve her French by taking lessons and applying to a university by September this year. “If I want to live in France, I’ll definitely have to adapt to everything about it. If not I will not be able to integrate,” said the 29-year-old who relocated to her French husband’s hometown in Marseille after tying the knot in 2009.

They met while her husband was working in China in 2005. Her husband, who loves Chinese culture, also communicates to her in Mandarin and learns Chinese cooking from her.

Yet the reality is that the migrants can never be French. “The French will always employ a French person who can speak English, but never an English person who can speak French,” said 30-year-old CIERES student Kim Littler, who has a hard time finding a job in Marseille. “It’s just the whole French pride thing. They are very proud and they like to protect themselves.”

Littler used to be a chef in Australia, but he relocated to Marseille to be with his French girlfriend. The two met while working for the same company
in London last year and decided to move to her hometown in Marseille last July after their work contracts ended. He is currently unemployed and is not receiving any social welfare benefits.

**Dress Like Us**

To minimise the physical differences, some migrants choose to disassociate themselves from visual symbols of their culture. For example, some immigrant Muslim women choose not to wear the hijab, or headscarf.

“The headscarf in Germany is associated with religious radicalism. It is not compatible with a democratic society, and this is how the German society feels,” said Ulrike Seay, 48, a German research laboratory assistant. “If you wear a headscarf, it demonstrates that you do not want to be a member of a democratic society.”

But personally, the Hessen native does not see any issues with the headscarf. “They can wear whatever they like. It doesn’t matter,” she said with a laugh, adding that she has a lot of interaction with Turkish students in her university laboratory and enjoyed a Turkish wedding she once attended.

Krzysztof Fininski, a board member of the Polish Association of Legal Education in Warsaw is even more direct. “Everyone is afraid of an Osama bin Laden next door,” he said.

Turkish language teacher Rezan Jenaiz, 40, does not wear her headscarf and considers herself a modern Turkish woman. She is also dating a German. She migrated to Berlin in 2001 as she did not want to be confined to the traditional roles of a Muslim woman in Turkey; and wearing the headscarf is one.

“In Turkey, it is still a closed society. It is really hard to say whatever you want and discover yourself, especially if you are a woman,” said dark-haired, bespectacled Jenaiz, who is dressed in jeans and a grey sweater, like any European woman of her age.

**Deeper into their Comfort Zones**

There seems to be safety – and confidence – in numbers, too. Antonio Cruz, editor of the monthly *Migration News Sheet* published by Migration Policy Group, a think-tank in Brussels, said migrants who form the majority tend to stick to themselves.

They also display ostentatious signs of their religion and culture in search of an alternative identity. The Muslims are usually cited in these cases since they form the largest group of migrants in Europe, a result of policies that allowed waves of migration through family reunification.

Muslim men tend to prefer marrying women from their home countries as they are seen as untainted by the western culture.

There are 15 to 20 million Muslims among some 497 million people living in the EU, and this number is expected to double by 2025, according to the National Intelligence Council, a United States-based public policy think-tank.

“When I first came here 30 years ago (from Macau), I hardly saw women in the streets with veils. Maybe it was because they were numerically very weak, so there was pressure on them to integrate,” Cruz said.

It is a different story now. “The attitude to accept the host country’s way of life is not taken up by immigration populations that are numerically very strong. They set up their own communities, create their own lifestyles and even form their little ghettos. This is not something that is characteristic of Asians, blacks or Muslims. It’s human nature,” said Cruz.

The ghetto phenomenon is also prevalent among descendants of migrants who were born and raised in the host countries.

“It is a serious identity crisis because the migrants don’t feel that they belong here, or the home country of their parents,” Cruz added, “so they try to form a group and wearing a veil is a form of identifying themselves to a particular group.”

Arnold Mengelkoch, the migration representative in the district office of Neukölln, Berlin, frowns upon such behaviour.

“Immigrants should adapt to German society – not isolate themselves – while keeping their own language and culture,” he said.

But integration is a two-way street, said Zrinka Bralo, the executive director of London’s Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum, an organisation coordinating dialogues and partnership with migrant NGOs in London.

“People are pushed into isolation, and that has happened in Northern England where you have Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities that did not integrate. When you are integrating, you have to be integrating into something. If the host community is closed to you, you can’t integrate,” she said, adding
that it is very difficult to blame one party for the cultural clashes. “It’s like divorce, there’s always two sides to the story.”

**Time is the Best Mediator**

Yet the cultural clashes are mere teething problems while both parties adjust to the alien cultures.

Time will smoothen the friction.

Once the natives accept that immigration will not stop, and that immigrants are vital in sustaining Europe’s aging population and work in menial jobs shunned by locals, they may be more tolerant.

Such tolerance is already taking place in Brussels, the heart of Europe. “10 years ago, the authorities would not announce over the radio that Ramadan has started and Muslims need to fast,” said Christine Kulakowski, the director of Brussels Intercultural Action Centre that offers courses that aid integration.

“Now the media is talking about it when before that, nobody knew. People were scared of the killing of sheep during the Eid holiday too. But now they understand that it is part of Muslim culture. The authorities have also given them space to do the sacrifice, so they don’t have to do it in their houses any more,” added Kulakowski.

Descendant of Turkish migrants to Berlin Imge Tak, 15, thinks that cultural clashes and discrimination is a thing of the past.

“I’ve never felt discriminated. There was never a person who said to me you’re a Turkish and it is a bad thing. People at my age find it normal to have more people who are not Germans in their class,” said the spunky teenager who sports shoulder-length blonde hair and attractive blue eyes. With her looks, she could be easily mistaken for a German.

“So I think the cultural clash is more with the older people, and this generation now is more comfortable with differences. It’s not that they have accepted it, it’s just that it is so normal that they don’t think about it,” said Imge, whose best friend is Chinese-German.

Hasan Togru, a German-Turkish deejay and political activist based in Berlin, believes that the fourth generation of migrants will be assimilated.

“Migrants had to take three steps to be where we are now. For the first generation it was working in the factories; for the second generation, it was going to school, and maybe open businesses; the third is to develop a new culture. And by the fourth, it will be integrated,” he said.
Blessings for All
Devotees at the Church of Saint Vincent de Paul in Marseille, France, come from many different cultural backgrounds.
CROSS
Cultural Learning

Getting around in a foreign country can be tough for immigrants, especially if they have little clue about how things work and are still unfamiliar with the native language. Organizations across Europe, such as Brussels Onthaalbureau and the Polish Association of Legal Education, have created programmes to help new arrivals get up close and personal with the host nation’s culture, paving the way for them to settle into their new homes.
Green lights up A fresh morning greets the city of Berlin as students, workers, mothers and their children come out to enjoy the sun on one of the warmer days in winter.
BON with a new society

Disco lights dazzle a crowd grooving to pop music at a Brussels community club on a cold December afternoon, while a symphony of foreign tongues plays in the background. A Tibetan woman in a turquoise silk dress embossed with dragon motifs shyly claps her hands to the rhythm. Next to her, a bespectacled Muslim woman in jeans and headscarf dances with two Caucasian women. In the centre, an Iraqi man charms the crowd with his sleek Persian moves. But this is not a typical nightclub scene in Brussels.

Living it up. Graduates from BON’s integration programme enjoying an evening of performances and fun.
Zen rapper (Above)
Ex-Tibetan monk Tupten Dhundup, 26, escaped from political oppression in Tibet in 1998 and spent 10 years in India before seeking asylum in Brussels in 2008. He gave up his monkhood in India to seek pleasures of love. He harbours hope for Tibet’s independence, which inspired him to produce an album based on it.

The people are among 250 migrants celebrating their graduation from a six-week social orientation course by the Brussels Onthaalbureau (BON), an organisation that provides integration programmes for migrants on the Brussels society, Dutch language, career advising and social participation.

“We help people integrate under the notion of civic integration,” said director of BON, Eric de Jonge. “I think everybody in Brussels should be equal. You can’t be equal if you are a newcomer and you don’t know how this region functions.”

Started in 2004 in accordance with the Belgium integration decree which mandates migrants to join integration courses, BON’s vision is to help migrants function as independent and useful members of the society.

Using a three-step approach, migrants are recommended to attend a six-week social orientation course followed by a Dutch language course.

Simultaneously, a counsellor is attached to them to help them with practical issues such as housing and career advice for a year.

When they have finished both the Dutch language and social orientation course, they will be matched to a career course that will prepare them for work in a suitable industry.

The impact of BON is far-reaching. In 2009, 625 people were awarded the integration certificate for regularly participating in the full integration programme, which are held in 11 different languages. The migrants are grouped according to their language and level of education to make sure illiterates are not left behind.
Back at the graduation party, Tibetan refugee and BON participant Thupten Dhundup, dressed in his Tibetan garb of white high-collar shirt and chuba, a wrap-around cloth tied at his waist, takes the stage to perform a Tibetan folk song.

Hitting high notes with ease, the 26-year-old is a crowd favourite. After all, he is the lead singer in a self-produced album called The Rays of Sun and Moon, a compilation of politically charged songs on hopes for Tibet’s independence.

After his performance, he changes into baggy jeans and t-shirt, accessorised with a metal chain and bandanna, a far cry from the yellow robes he wore when he was a monk 12 years ago.

As a monk, he faced persecution from the China authorities and fled to India in 1998 to seek political freedom.

“I believe in Dalai Lama, and always pray to him. If the China police sees his photograph with me, they will ask me why and arrest me,” he said. “Tibet is not free.”

In India, he gave up his monkhood for pleasures of love. Yet, he had no legal status there.

He sought asylum in Brussels and arrived in 2008.

Dhundup is grateful for BON’s help in his settlement needs. “I like BON so much. I learned the law of Belgium, what you can do and cannot do,” he said.

Though he feels that the natives may look down on him, all that matters is that he is legal now.

“I don’t care how the public views me,” he said, “I’m happy as long as the authorities have accepted me as a refugee.”
Wasabi in Warsaw

PHOTOS: NURIA LING
IT'S 11AM, AND A SIGN ON JAPANESE
restaurant Sushi Momo's glass doors says
"closed". But a glance into the warmly lit
interior of the Warsaw restaurant tells a different
story. Children roll and slice sushi under the
watchful eye of a black kimo-n clad chef. Across
the room, another group folds miniature origami
cranes using plain notebook paper. The five boys
and three girls, aged between nine and 14, make
a din as they do so, oblivious to the remarkably
snowy weather outside that has temperatures
dipping below -10°C.

Every now and then, someone dashes to the
kitchen sink with an awful look on his face (after
unknowingly wolfing down too large a chunk of
fiery wasabi). Chopsticks are just about everywhere
as the children fight to get a firm grip on them. Most
end up eating their lunch – cucumber sushi, fried
chicken and rice – either with their fingers or with
an improvised method of holding the chopsticks.

It’s a strange sight, and it gets even stranger –
the children aren’t Polish, but Chechen refugees
from Russia. Yet they are speaking Polish, albeit
imperfectly, as they try to complete the tasks.

This excursion on December 21 last year was
organised by Marina Hulia of Polish Association of
Legal Education (PSEP) to allow refugees to get to
know Warsaw better.

Called I Hate Tomato Soup – in reference to
Poland’s well-loved dish that many refugees find
unpalatable – the project helps to put a smile on
the faces of refugee children, who are too poor to
splurge on such outings.

And speaking Polish is part of the game. “There
is one rule – they must speak only Polish. If a child
asks a question in his own language, I will not
answer,” said Hulia, who is from Russia.

By making the children practise speaking Polish
outside the classroom, these activities have the
added benefit of helping them adjust to Polish
society, she added.

With rose-tinted spectacles and short blond
hair beneath a multicoloured striped beanie
hat, the energetic Hulia explained that Japanese
restaurants suit the Muslim Chechens as halal
restaurants are a rarity in Poland, where traditional
dishes include pork dumplings and sausages.

PSEP volunteer Monika Golebiowska added
that children also get to learn about international
cultures in an interactive way. In addition to hands-
on activities, they sit through a brief lesson at the
start of each session. For this outing, they were
shown pictures about Japan, such as its famous
landmarks, traditional costumes and cuisine.

“It’s good for them to know this, because some
kids initially thought that sushi was a Polish
national dish!” she said with a laugh. “Today, all of
them are trying sushi for the first time; for some,
it’s the first time they ever saw sushi.”

This explains why they mistook the wad of
green wasabi as an innocuous garnish. Ramzan
Abdurahmanow, 14, was one who fell victim. “I
only took a pinch, but it’s too strong – my whole
face is burning!” he said, much to the laughter of
the other children.

Sushi Momo (Clockwise from left) 14-year-
old Ramzan Abdurahmanow (in grey shirt) bit
off more than he could chew when he swallowed
a wad of spicy wasabi; meanwhile, the other
Chechen refugee children try their hand at two
signature Japanese activities – folding origami
cranes and making cucumber sushi - while the trip
organiser, Marina Hulia (above, in red spectacles)
also joins in the fun
New Life in Brussels Triggered Depression

For most cheery Filipinos, the word ‘DEPRESSION’ does not exist in their vocabulary. So 53-year-old Leonida Beligon found it hard to accept that she was suffering from depression when she came to the capital of Belgium in 1988.

She and her two daughters came to join her husband, who was working as a butler in an ambassador’s residence.

Faced with mounting problems of loneliness, unemployment and dashed dreams, Beligon often fell ill. She had hallucinations of working in her old job as an accountant in Manila. Her doctor suspected she was suffering from depression and put her on anti-depressants for about two years.

The unhappiness started in the first few weeks in Brussels. “I was very happy to be together as a family, but after a few weeks, the happiness and excitement disappeared,” said Beligon. “I felt as if I was left alone in the middle of a desert. I became so lonely. I could not understand what people were saying. I could not even go to the supermarket because I was always fearful.”

This was aggravated by her illegal status in Belgium. Beligon overstayed her tourist visa and as a result could not get subsidy for her hospital bills when she gave birth to her third child a year later.

Her status also barred her from employment as an assistant accountant at one of the embassies. Though she passed the interview and was offered a monthly salary of €800 ($1,600), the offer never materialised. “They told me that they should offer the work to a Belgian national first,” she said.

Forced by financial constraints, especially with the arrival of their third child, Beligon had to work as a domestic helper at an ambassador’s residence instead to supplement her husband’s income of €600. The mismatch of qualification became the catalyst to her depression.

To overcome it, she had to constantly remind herself that her salary in Brussels is much more than what she would have earned as an accountant in Manila. She also kept herself busy by learning French and joining a migrant’s association where she found support from people who were in the same boat.

Her determination paid off when her application for regularisation was granted in 1999. She and her three children – aged between 21 and 25 – are now Belgian citizens while her husband is a permanent resident. She is also cured of her depression.

Though the ordeal of being a vagabond is over, Beligon still does not know much about Belgium culture. “I am not really integrated. I only know about Belgium culture through my children,” she said. She still works as a domestic helper at an ambassador’s residence.

Ironically, she worries that her children are too integrated and uses Filipino movies to remind them of their roots. “My children don’t know where they come from and this will affect their self-identity,” she laments.
I could not understand what people were saying. I could not even go to the supermarket because I was always fearful.

—Domestic Helper Leonida Beligon, 53, (below, in grey coat) recalls her initial experience in Brussels, Belgium

No more blues Filipino domestic worker in Brussels, Leonida Beligon, 53, (right, in grey coat) is in good spirits as she shares a laugh with her church friend after attending mass during Advent.
SURVIVORS
War survivors HEDA DEBIROWA, 43, and ZRINKA BRALO, 41, fled their home countries of Russia and Bosnia in search of a better future – only to be met with a flood of unexpected obstacles. The women recount how they picked up the pieces to start anew and rebuild their lives in a foreign land.
‘My eldest son, who was 14 at that time, was killed. I simply didn’t want to stay there any more.’

— Heda Debirowa, 43, from Chechnya, Russia
“My village in Chechnya was bombed during the second Chechen war in 1999. When my house was hit, I managed to escape. I found a wooden box, and I was collecting some of my possessions that were on the ground when the Russian soldiers shouted, “Go away, woman, there is a bomb!”

When the soldiers set the bomb off, I had nothing left. Even the single wall of my house that remained standing after the first bombing was completely destroyed. I didn’t even have a place to start rebuilding.

But of course, the fact that my house was gone was not the only reason I left Russia. My eldest son, who was 14 at that time, was killed. I simply didn’t want to stay there any more. My brother and sister also died. There was a huge feeling of loss.

And I wanted to protect my other children. I have four daughters who are now aged 17, 16, 12 and 11 years old, as well as a nine-year-old son.

So, I decided to leave and came to Poland.

I came to Poland without my husband, who beat me all the time.

In fact, there was violence against me every day of our marriage. So I simply paid to get a certificate that he’s dead. The man doesn’t exist for me any more. I’ve bombed my memories of him, like how those people bombed my home.

It’s tough as a refugee in Poland. Each time I leave the house and am on the bus or the tram, or on the street, I’m being called “dirty gypsy” due to my outfit. Because in Chechnya, the tradition is that if you’re married, you have to cover your head. Once, in another town in Poland, two Chechen women were beaten up and called “Taliban terrorists”, all because of this headscarf.

It’s also difficult to find a flat to stay. Even if you can, the landlord would charge three times more – because the Polish people, they don’t want to rent their flats out to us. Getting a legal job was a problem. Many Chechens, even if they are allowed to work because they managed to get refugee status or tolerated status, are working illegally.

In Chechnya I never cried, but here, I felt so hopeless. No one wants to help.

Last December, I got my own room for the first time. Before that, I was living with my friends on goodwill.

It’s just one room, very tiny – only eight square meters. And I live there with my three youngest children. There’s no kitchen, only a small oven in the hall. There’s a bathroom, but it’s also very tiny. But it is good enough.”
Small room, big home  Heda Debirowa, 43, seen here with her three children aged nine to 12 at their eight square-metre home. Where the sofa Heda is sitting on is also the bed for the whole family.
I’m a refugee from Bosnia, and I came here to London in the middle of the war in 1993. Because my city was under siege, I didn’t have a choice as to where I was going. So, I came here with one suitcase, with my brother and his wife and child. But they later left for the USA, so I was here by myself. I was 24 years old.

‘I felt injustice, and injustice is very difficult to bear.’

— Zrinka Bralo, 41, Bosnian, in London, UK
The reason for not leaving with my brother’s family was because our mother was still in Bosnia. I wanted to stay in Europe — it’s a difference between a 10-hour flight and a two-hour one to visit her. My mother didn’t want to leave as she doesn’t speak English, and the city’s too big for her.

But I, too, never really wanted to leave my country. There’s always a sadness, and a loss, about leaving by force. The situation of starting from zero — it’s liberating, in a sense — was difficult in many aspects. Because you lose all your reference points. You don’t know anything, or anyone. And nobody knows you.

Refugees are also not allowed to work, so they are dependent on state benefits, which are very basic. Currently, one gets about £35 per week ($74) — which is horrific. Accommodation-wise, it’s very substandard. And if they refuse, they get nothing. For many people, it’s also very humiliating to be verging on poverty.

To start off, I applied for political asylum. I was refused. I had to put up a fight for three years — go to the courts, appeal and appeal — and in the end I won.
Personally, this made me feel very rejected, because I had to struggle to stay here. I felt I wasn’t believed. I felt isolated. And angry, because I felt injustice, and injustice is very difficult to bear.

I felt like my life was ruined, and I had no say in it. And it wasn’t only ruined back in my country, but also in Britain, which was supposed to be a safe country for me. It left me with a sense of uncertainty that’s not very easy to cope, that takes a long time to live with.

It also left me with a lack of trust in people. On a personal level, it did a lot of damage. At the same time, it is survival.

For example, at a job interview, with a name like mine, I have to be at least three times better than other people. I hate the fact that I have to be three times better. But at the same time, I love the fact that I am three times better! Such contradictions are things that I constantly experience on a daily basis.

I went on to complete a master’s degree in media and communications at the London School of Economics, and worked as a broadcast journalist for three years. I made a documentary on companies engaging in illegal doings, filming undercover. We had to get lawyers to look at what we filmed to make sure there wasn’t any libel – it was a complete nightmare. So, I didn’t enjoy the experience at all. I decided I didn’t want to be a journalist any more.

At that time, I was also working with the Bosnian community in London. Most of them came here as wounded, or from concentration camps. I started as a translator for them, but I was also learning – fast learning – about the system of this country.

Coupled with my own experience, I understood that the system was more about legalities, rather than the truth of what had happened. This is where the system betrays many people. Lots of people get refused on technicalities. They tell the courts about their suffering and injustice, but they failed to focus on legal reasons, which tend to differ from commonsense reasons.

In fact, it’s not unusual for people to wait six, seven years to get a positive decision. I know someone who has waited for 11 years. In comparison, mine was a speedy decision.

Hence, I made the switch to help migrants, which I have done for the past 15 years. Currently, I am the executive director of Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum. The work is much tougher because you tend to see a lot of suffering, and it’s extremely frustrating when you can’t help them.

But at the same time, if you manage to help somebody, it’s extremely rewarding. The difference you make is a very powerful intervention in these people’s lives.
COMMUNITY LEADERS

Leading by example can be as effective as any other method of integration, as two successful migrants, Polish editor NIECZYSLAW EZARY OLSZEWSKI and Berlin-based Turkish deejay NASAR TOGBELA in London demonstrate.
A different Pole Mieczyslaw Cezary Olszewski, 49, editor of The Polish Times, loves London for its laissez-faire life and does not believe in communism.

The Accidental Londoner
Mieczyslaw Cezary Olszewski
If you want to achieve something, whether you are a migrant or not, you have to believe in yourself and respect other cultures because in 20 years’ time, migrants will have trouble getting along with each other here.

— MIECZYSŁAW CEZARY OLSZEWSKI, 49, editor of The Polish Times, a free newspaper in London, UK, for Polish migrants like himself

With dreams of owning a flat in Poland, a young Mieczyslaw Cezary Olszewski packed his bags and went to London for work in 1989. Like many young Poles that time, he had heard of fortunes to be made there. Though he started out as an electrician, he had his sights set on becoming a financial advisor. He read finance books and soon picked up shrewd investment skills and landed a job in the finance sector.

After saving enough money, he bought a flat in Poland. But he never returned home.

The political transition in Poland at the turn of the decade meant he was returning to high unemployment and instability.

“Even my family told me not to return,” said Olszewski, 49, who is now the editor of The Polish Times, a free weekly magazine for the Polish community in London with a circulation of 40,000.

Instead, 2009 marked the 20th anniversary of his stay in London. “When you have short-term goals to earn money, you may settle for something small. But when the machine starts rolling, you can’t stop. After five to six years, you feel like a Londoner, and when you return to Poland, you don’t recognise it anymore,” he said.

While the facade may change, Poles are still stuck in the communist mentality, lamented Olszewski, who is the father of two children aged 20 and 16. They were born in Poland but joined him in London in 1990.

“Communism is just crap. It is not an option,” he said and complained that many Poles view migrants like him as tax evaders and do not respect him.

The situation in London is more accepting.

“They don’t approach us with a huge magnifying glass to see our faults. London is easy-going and cosmopolitan. I don’t feel like a foreigner.”

With the ascension of Poland into the European Union in 2004, London soon became a magnet for more migrants and an enterprising Olszewski saw a need to provide information to young migrants.

From a struggling black-and-white four-page magazine, he successfully revamped it—with the help of newly-hired journalists and graphic designers—into a sleek 84-page full-colour magazine in 2005.

Defending the influx of Polish migrants, he said: “We don’t dilute the British culture. We enrich it. For instance, we brought in Polish sausages. The sausages here are like rubbish.”

However, he stressed respecting other cultures.

“If you want to achieve something, whether you are a migrant or not, you have to believe in yourself and respect other cultures because in 20 years’ time, migrants will have trouble getting along with each other here,” he warned.
DJ with a cause Hasan Togrulca (above, in headphones), better known as DJ Aldi in the club scene, spins at The Cake Club in Kreuzberg, Berlin

Once a nomad roaming the mountainous region of southeast Turkey, deejay Hasan Togrulca, now uses music as a unifying tool across Germany
The dance floor at the Cake Club in the lively Berlin district of Kreuzberg erupts with energy as the partygoers raise their arms and groove to a new Turkish-German fusion song.

Over at the deejay console, a Turkish man with wild, chin-length brown curls pumps his fists in the air and closes his eyes to appreciate the music he has just mixed. He punches a few keys on the console skillfully and turns up the music volume.

It is hard to imagine that Hasan Togrulca, better known as DJ Aldi, is a self-taught deejay who had never seen a television or radio or used electrical appliances until he was 14.

Sick of a life as a nomad roaming the mountains of southeast Turkey, Togrulca came to Germany to live with his uncle when he was 14. He was dazzled by the city charm.

“In my home village, we had no electricity, no television, no radio. But here, there were cars, television, and development of everything. I felt like I was in wonderland,” said Togrulca who does not know his real age, or even his real name.

When his uncle registered for his passport, he had 15 other children to fuss over so he forgot Togrulca’s real name and birth date. He simply registered his birth date as 10th November, the day when founder of modern Turkey Mustafa Kemal Atatürk died. His uncle also gave him a random name. “Every day is my birthday,” said the deejay, who estimates his age as somewhere between 35 and 50.

The moniker DJ Aldi represents a social cause. Aldi is a supermarket chain frequent by Turkish migrants for its affordability. In the 1980s, people used ‘Aldi’ as a deragatory term for Turks, a mockery of them being poor. Now, Togrulca uses the name to convey the sarcastic message that Turkish migrants can be successful too.

“There are migrants with big success stories. Some of them became very wealthy businessmen. Some writers and filmmakers also developed a new culture here,” he said.

“We came as guest workers and brought a lot of culture such as music and food with us. It makes Germany richer. Now, the winning point for Germany is its diversity. You can meet people from all cultures and go to restaurants of all countries,” he added.
Final say.

"There are positive and negative sides of immigration. Diversity can be enjoyable, but I don’t welcome it anymore. London can’t welcome everyone. We are not as crowded as Singapore, but we are getting there."

–Iain Mcdonald, (right in blue) 45, British

"The biggest mistake is not asking ourselves what do our differences mean to us, what are the positives, and what we can learn from each other. Because different cultures and religions have different ways of bringing up children and we need to be interested in the other point of view.

–Christian Schoenfelder, 62, Deputy Managing Director of Association for New Education which provides multilingual parenting letters

"I traveled a lot and met many foreigners abroad. I was a foreigner in other countries and knew how a foreigner felt. Hence I want to help people who are in Poland, who don’t know Poland. Poland may be a difficult place for those who don’t know Polish."

–Karolina Lebek, 24, counsellor at the Association of Litigation, which helps migrants with legal issues

"I feel French, and I say I’m French, but I’ll never forget my roots. I’m more French, but I got some Algerian background and I embrace it, even if I don’t know the language."

–Idriess Aurane, 26, an English-to-French instructor at the Centre of Innovation for Work and Social Changes (CIERES), which provides free language and social orientation courses to migrants referred by a job centre in Marseille

"We wanted to help refugees, as we saw that they had a big need, but there are no professional lawyers helping them. It is easy to find attorney for migrants, but for asylum seekers, there are no law firms to help them, no attorneys specializing in asylum seeker law in Poland."

–Agnieszka Gutkowska, 29, coordinator at the Association of Litigation on the vision of her organisation

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The Delegation of the European Union to Singapore

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