The case for contamination

By emphasising to developing countries the importance of preserving certain cultures, the west is telling people what they should value in their own traditions, argues **Kwame Anthony Appiah** in an extract from *Cosmopolitanism*, released later this year. Adjacent are photographs taken by **Tué Greenfort** and **Katie Holten** taken during the RSA Arts & Ecology trip to Ghana in November 2005

I'm seated, with my mother, on a palace veranda, cooled by a breeze from the royal garden. Before us, on a dais, is an empty throne, its arms and legs embossed with polished brass, the back and seat covered in black-and-gold silk. In front of the steps to the dais, there are two columns of people, mostly men, facing one another, seated on carved wooden stools, the cloths they wear wrapped around their chests, leaving their shoulders bare. There is a quiet buzz of conversation. Outside in the garden, peacocks screech. At last, the lowing of a ram's horn announces the arrival of the king of Asante, its tones sounding his honorific, *kotokohene* or 'porcupine chief'. (Each quill of the porcupine, according to custom, signifies a warrior ready to kill and to die for the kingdom.) Everyone stands until the king has settled on the throne. Then, when we sit, a chorus sings songs in praise of him, which are interspersed with the playing of a flute. It is a Wednesday festival day in Kumasi, the town in Ghana where I grew up.

Unless you're one of a few million Ghanaians, this will probably seem a relatively unfamiliar world, perhaps even an exotic one. You might suppose that this festival belongs quaintly to an African past. But before the king arrived, people were taking calls on cellphones, and among those passing the time in quiet conversation were a dozen men in suits, representatives of an insurance company. And the meetings in the office next to the veranda are about contemporary issues: HIV/Aids, the educational needs of 21st-century children, the teaching of science and technology at the local university. When my turn comes to be presented, the king asks me about Princeton, where I teach. I ask him when he'll next be in the States. In a few weeks, he says. He's got a meeting with the head of the World Bank.

Anywhere you travel in the world – today as always – you can find ceremonies like these, many of them rooted in centuries-old traditions. But you will also find everywhere – and this is something new – many intimate connections with places far away: Washington, Moscow, Mexico City, Beijing. Across the street from us, when we were growing up, there was a large house occupied by a number of families, among them a vast family of boys; one, about my age, was a good friend. He lives in London. His brother lives in Japan, where his wife is from. They have another brother who has been in Spain for a while and a couple more brothers who, last I heard, were in the United States. Some of them still live in Kumasi, one or two in Accra, Ghana's capital. Eddie, who lives in Japan, speaks his wife's language now. He has to. But he was never very comfortable in English, the language of our government and our schools. When he phones me from time to time, he prefers to speak Asante-Twi.

Centre of power

Over the years, the royal palace buildings in Kumasi have expanded. When I was a child, we used to visit the previous king, my great-uncle by marriage, in a small building that the British had allowed his predecessor to build when he returned from exile in the Seychelles to a restored but diminished Asante kingship. It is now a museum, dwarfed by the enormous house next door – built by his successor, my uncle by marriage – where the current king lives. Next to it is the suite of offices abutting the veranda where we were sitting, recently finished by the present king, my uncle's successor. The British, my mother's people, conquered Asante at the turn of the 20th century; now, at the turn of the 21st, the palace feels as it must have felt in the 19th century: a centre of power. The president of Ghana comes from this world, too. He was born across the street from the palace to a member of the royal Oyoko

Tué Greenfort, November 2005, Elmina Harbour, Ghana: "All the boats in the harbour are decorated with national flags and colours and often with religious slogans. The American flag is a common sight there, as is the Danish flag. I found the sight of flags linked to a formerly repressive state and a modern superpower confusing, but they are really just there to 'cheer up' the appearance of the boats."

"The enclaves of homogeneity these days – in Asante as in Pennsylvania – are less distinctive than they were a century ago, but mostly in good ways"

clan. But he belongs to other worlds as well: he went to Oxford; he's a member of one of the Inns of Court in London; he's a Catholic, with a picture in his sitting room of himself greeting the pope.

Changing times

What are we to make of this? On Kumasi's Wednesday festival day, I've seen visitors from England and the United States wince at what they regarded as the intrusion of modernity on timeless, traditional rituals – more evidence, they think, of a pressure in the modern world towards uniformity. They react like the assistant on the film set who's supposed to check that the extras in a sword-and-sandals movie aren't wearing wristwatches. And such pursuits are not alone. In the past couple of years, Unesco's members have spent a great deal of time trying to hammer out a convention on the "protection and promotion" of cultural diversity. (It was finally approved at the Unesco General Conference in October 2005.) The drafters worried that "the processes of globalisation… represent a challenge for cultural diversity, namely in the view of risks of imbalances between rich and poor countries." The fear is that the values and images of Western mass culture, like some invasive weed, are threatening to choke out the world's native flora.

The contradictions in this argument aren't hard to find. This same Unesco document is careful to affirm the importance of the free flow of ideas, the freedom of thought and expression and human rights – values that, we know, will become universal only if we make them so. What's really important, then, cultures or people? In a world where Kumasi and New York – and Cairo and Leeds and Istanbul – are being drawn ever closer together, an ethics of globalisation has proved elusive.

The right approach, I think, starts by taking individuals – not nations, tribes or 'people' – as the proper object of moral concern. It doesn't much matter what we call such a creed, but in homage to Diogenes, the fourth-century Greek Cynic and the first philosopher to call himself a 'citizen of the world', we could call it cosmopolitan. Cosmopolitans take cultural difference seriously, because they take choices individuals make seriously. But because difference is not the only thing that concerns them, they suspect that many of globalisation's cultural critics are aiming at the wrong targets.

Yes, globalisation can produce homogeneity. But globalisation is also a threat to homogeneity. You can see this as clearly in Kumasi as anywhere. One thing Kumasi isn't – simply because it's a city – is homogenous. English, German, Chinese, Syrian, Lebanese, Burkinabe, Ivorian, Nigerian, Indian: I can find you families of each description. I can find you Asante people, whose ancestors have lived in this town for centuries, but also Hausa households that have been around for centuries, too. There are people there from every region of the country as well, speaking scores of languages.

But if you travel just a little way outside Kumasi – 20 miles, say, in the right direction – and if you drive off the main road down one of the many potholed side roads of red laterite, you won't have difficulty finding villages that are fairly monocultural. The people have mostly been to Kumasi and seen the big, polyglot, diverse world of the city. Where they live, though, there is one everyday language (aside from the English in the government schools) and an agrarian way of life based on some old crops, like yams, and some newer ones, like cocoa, which arrived late in the 19th century as a product for export. They may or may not have electricity. (This close to Kumasi, they probably do.)

The long arms of commercialism

When people talk of the homogeneity produced by globalisation, what they are talking about is this: Even here, the villagers will have radios (though the language will be local); you will be able to find a bottle of Guinness or Coca-Cola (as well as of Star or Club, Ghana's own fine lagers). But has access to these things made the place more homogeneous or less? And what can you tell about people's souls from the fact that they drink Coca-Cola?

It's true that the enclaves of homogeneity you find these days – in Asante as in Pennsylvania – are less distinctive that they were a century ago, but mostly in good ways. More of them have access to effective medicines. More of them have access to clean drinking water, and more of them have schools.

Katie Holten, November 2005, French Ambassador's residence, Accra: "My first day in West Africa. We arrived sweaty and dusty to the glamorous opening of Art in the Garden, an exhibition by the Ghanaian Foundation for Contemporary Arts. Uniformed sailors from the French Navy mingled with socialites from Accra, a local band played and a performance was laid on by dancers from the National Theatre. Works of art were intriguingly displayed on and in trees around the garden."

Where, as is still too common, they don't have these things, it's something not to celebrate but to deplore. And whatever loss of difference there has been, they are constantly inventing new forms of difference: new hairstyles, new slang, even, from time to time, new religions. No one could say that the world's villagers are becoming anything like the same.

So why do people in these places sometimes feel that their identities are threatened? Because the world, their world, is changing, and some of them don't like it. The pull of the global economy – witness those cocoa trees, whose chocolate is eaten all around the world – created some of the life they now live. If chocolate prices were to collapse again, as they did in the early 1990s, Asante farmers might have to find new crops or new forms of livelihood. That prospect is unsettling for some people (just as it is exciting for others). Missionaries came a while ago, so many of these villagers will be Christian, even if they have also kept some of the rites from earlier days. But new Pentecostal messengers are challenging the churches they know and condemning the old rites as idolatrous. Again, some like it; some don't.

Above all, relationships are changing. When my father was young, a man in a village would farm some land that a chief had granted him, and his maternal clan (including his younger brothers) would work it with him. When a new house needed building, he would organise it. He would also make sure his dependants were fed and clothed, the children educated, marriages and funerals arranged and paid for. He could expect to pass the farm and the responsibilities along to the next generation.

Changing times

Nowadays, everything is different. Cocoa prices have not kept pace with the cost of living. Gas prices have made the transportation of the crop more expensive. And there are new possibilities for the young in the towns, in other parts of the country and in other parts of the world. Once, perhaps, you could have commanded the young ones to stay. Now they have the right to leave – perhaps to seek work at one of the new data-processing centres down south in the nation's capital – and, anyway, you may not make enough to feed and clothe and educate them all. So the time of the successful farming family is passing, and those who were settled in that way of life are as sad to see it go as American family farmers and whose lands are accumulated by giant agribusinesses. We can sympathise with them. But we cannot afford to subsidise indefinitely thousands of distinct islands of homogeneity that no longer make economic sense. Nor should we want to.

Freedom to choose

Human variety matters, cosmopolitans think, because people are entitled to options. What John Stuart Mill said over a century ago in "On Liberty" about diversity within a society serves just as well as an argument for variety across the globe: "If it were only that people have diversities of taste, that is reason enough for not attempting to shape them all after one model. But different persons also require different conditions for their spiritual development; and can no more exist healthily in the same moral, than all the variety of plants can exist in the same physical, atmosphere and climate. The same things which are helps to one person towards the cultivation of his higher nature, are hindrances to another… Unless there is a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable." If we want to preserve a wide range of human conditions because it allows free people the best chance to make their own lives, we can't enforce diversity by trapping people within differences they long to escape.

Even if you grant that people shouldn't be compelled to sustain the older cultural practices, you might suppose that cosmopolitans should side with those who are busy around the world 'preserving culture' and resisting 'cultural imperialism'. Yet behind these slogans you often find some curious assumptions. Take 'preserving culture'. It's one thing to help people sustain arts they want to sustain. I am all for festivals of Welsh bards in Llandudno financed by the Welsh arts council. Long live the Ghana National Cultural Centre in Kumasi, where you can go and learn traditional Akan dancing and drumming, especially since its classes are overflowing. Restore the deteriorating film stock of

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Tué Greenfort, November 2005, Fort St Jago, Elmina, Ghana: "This photograph is taken from the fortress in Elmina on the coast of Ghana. It shows the harbour and lagoon. Just visible, towards the back of the lagoon, is the compound where salt is manufactured by evaporating sea water. For me, the image is a pretty good representation of the complexity of the place and its history."

“Nowadays everything is different. There are new possibilities for the young in the towns, in other parts of the country and in other parts of the world”

early Hollywood movies; continue the preservation of Old Norse and early Chinese and Ethiopian manuscripts; record, transcribe and analyse the oral narratives of Malay and Masai and Maori. All these are undeniably valuable.

A question of authenticity

But preserving culture – in the sense of such cultural artefacts – is different from preserving cultures. And the cultural preservationists often pursue the latter, trying to ensure that the Huli of Papua New Guinea (or even Sikhs in Toronto) maintain their ‘authentic’ ways. What makes a cultural expression authentic, though? Are we to stop the importation of baseball caps into Vietnam so that the Zao will continue to wear their colourful red headdresses? Why not ask the Zao? Shouldn’t the choice be theirs?

“They have no real choice,” the cultural preservationists say. “We’ve dumped cheap Western clothes into their markets, and they can no longer afford the silk they used to wear. If they had what they really wanted, they’d still be dressed traditionally.” But this is no longer an argument about authenticity. The claim is that they can’t afford to do something that they’d really like to do, something that is expressive of an identity they care about and want to sustain. This is a genuine problem, one that afflicts people in many communities: they’re too poor to live the life they want to lead. But if they do get richer, and they still run around in T-shirts, that’s their choice. Talk of authenticity now is just telling other people what they ought to value in their own traditions.

Not that this is likely to be a problem in the real world. People who can afford it mostly like to put on traditional garb – at least from time to time. I was best man once at a Scottish wedding, at which the bridegroom wore a kilt and I wore kente cloth. Andrew Oransay, the islander who piped us up the aisle, whispered in my ear at one point, “Here we all are then, in our tribal gear.” In Kumasi, people who can afford them love to put on their kente cloths, especially the most ‘traditional’ ones, woven in colourful silk strips in the town of Bonwire, as they have been for a couple of centuries. (The prices are high in part because demand outside Asante has risen. A fine kente for a man now costs more than the average Ghanaian earns in a year. Is that bad? Not for the people of Bonwire.)

Besides, trying to find some primordially authentic culture can be like peeling an onion. The textiles most people think of as traditional West African cloths are known as Java prints; they arrived in the 19th century with the Javanese batiks sold, and often milled, by the Dutch. The traditional garb of Herero women in Nambia derives from the attire of 19th-century German missionaries, though it is still unmistakably Herero, not least because the fabrics used have a distinctly un-Lutheran range of colours. And so with our kente cloth: the silk was always imported, traded by Europeans, produced in Asia. This tradition was once an innovation. Should we reject it for that reason as untraditional? How far back must one go? Should we condemn the young men and women of the University of Science and technology, a few miles outside Kumasi, who wear European-style gowns for graduation, lined with strips? Cultures are made of continuities and changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren’t authentic; they’re just dead.

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Project information

Arts & Ecology is a programme supporting the work of the arts in examining and addressing environmental concerns in an international arena. It explores the current practice of artists, writers, architects and film-makers through a series of conferences, publications and projects that look at local and global projects that attempt to communicate, challenge and sometimes propose solutions to pollution, waste and loss of natural habitats.

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Tué Greenfort, November 2005, Elmina, Ghana: “I visited the small coastal village of Elmina with Justice Amoah, a local city planner and participant in the CoZSSA II conference. We were accompanied by a journalist [pictured, in the white shirt] from the local newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*, who had written an article about the lack of teaching materials at the village school. We delivered all the clothes, books and writing materials that had been donated as a result. After I introduced myself to the class and the villagers who had gathered around the school, a student from the class wrote my name on the blackboard.”