

## ITALY AND THE NEW ITALIANS: AN INTERVIEW WITH MIGRANT WRITER KOSSI KOMLA-EBRI

Interview by *Maëva Kokodoko* for European Alternatives

Translation by Danielle Moodie

June 2011

<https://euroalter.com/it/italy-and-the-new-italians-an-interview-with-migrant-writer-kossi-komla-ebri/>

Italian doctor and author, Kossi Amékowoyoa Komla-Ebri was born in Togo (Tsévié) on 10 January 1954 and has written various books concerning immigration in Italy. He has been recognised time and again for his work and social commitment to promote intercultural exchange between Italy and Togo, and Africa in general.

**Maëva Kokodoko:** You arrived in Italy in 1974. Was coming here easier in those days than it is today?

**Dr. Kossi Komla-Ebri:** In those days it was more like an intellectual immigration so people did not have the same aggressive attitudes towards us as they do today. There was still this idea of African missionaries that the Italians had heard about but didn't really know.

When I arrived in Bologna, I remember it was the Greeks that people disliked. No one wanted to rent their houses to young people fleeing the military dictatorship in Greece and there were so many prejudices towards them that many people did not think the country would ever be allowed into the European Community. Attitudes towards us were quite different: people were curious. Many Africans came to Rome to study or on a pilgrimage so it was a different sort of immigration, and there were only a few of us anyway. These factors (intellectual immigrants and limited numbers) aroused curiosity and interest. There was no aggressiveness.

**M.K.:** You have travelled around Europe a lot. Compared to other countries, do you think that Italy is behind in terms of integration? What does integration mean? Is it assimilation, multiculturalism, interculturalism or something else?

**K.K.E.:** Italy is behind for the simple reason that it did not have a colonial experience after the Second World War, unlike Great Britain and France who both developed a closer relationship with people from other cultures because of their colonial experiences. It is only recently that Italy, essentially a country of emigration, became a country of immigration. Until 25 years ago, it was the Italians who were leaving, going to countries like the US, Belgium and France... Immigration in Italy is a fairly new phenomenon, even though it is now a structural phenomenon, not one of emergency as people seem to think. The problem is that Italy hasn't decided which path to integration it wants to follow. As far as integration goes, I like to play with the phonetics of the word "integration". For me it is an interaction between our different identities so it's about making our different cultures interact. To give you an idea, it is not a building where I can say "Italy is a multicultural building". Let's put the Africans on the first floor, the Asians on the second... This is how you would end up with a very ghettoised building. Or seeing as we are all in the same building,

but I am the owner, you must forget what you are and be like me. This would be an assimilating building.

There is a third way which is, in my opinion, the solution: we all come out of the building and meet up in the square where we develop relationships with each other at the same level and try to make our different cultures interact. Interaction is the most important factor: encouraging and allowing the phenomenon of social and cultural inclusion.

**M.K.:** The proposed Granata/Sarubbi law favours the normalization of birthright citizenship and would therefore modify the now obsolete 1992 law. Do you think this would constitute a decisive turning point? Are Italians ready to recognise this new Italy?

**K.K.E.:** Italians will never really be ready, but this is the way to go. There are too many Italians with a residence permit. They are de facto Italians because they were raised in the Italian culture and have often never had any other cultural basis. They were born here, or came under family reunification, and were fed by the wolf of Italian culture.

As such, there are two elements to consider: from a purely theoretical point of view we have to ask ourselves if there is such a thing as an Italian. What is the Italian identity? It is actually easier to find a Calabrian, Apulian or Genoese identity than it is to find the Italian one. We have to pinpoint what exactly constitutes the Italian identity, what it is that makes someone Italian. Is it knowing the language? Being born on Italian soil? If so, then the law is going in the right direction. It is necessary to grant an outright recognition of immigrants' rights, especially the right to citizenship. Up to now, they have been asked to merely respect their duties but at the same time they have continually been denied their rights.

The very fact that Italians continue to call us extra-comunitari indicates that they do not recognise our right to citizenship. I have lived here for 37 years so why is it that when I go out on the street, a fourteen year old boy still refers to me as extra-comunitarian? Because the idea that he has of an extra-communitarian, the image that he has, is one of a caricature. Many people say: "but Kossi it's only a definition, the Swiss are also extra-communitarians." Yet, the average Italian's imagination does not work like that. If I ask an Italian on the street who is an extra-communitarian they will never include the Swiss or Americans. For example, a radio presenter speaking recently about the Strauss-Khan case in the US referred to the waitress as extra-communitarian, even though there they are all non-EU citizens!

In this sense Italy has a long way to go. This law is essential. It will change the political status of immigrants in this country. The right to vote is vital to bring change to Italy.

**M.K.:** Second generation Italians are Italian, or Italo-togolese, Italo-senegalese, Italo-somali... Should these differences be reduced, or safeguarded in order to improve integration and cohesion?

**K.K.E.:** Hypothetically speaking, I think that if we bear in mind the notion of "diversity management", pluriversity, or pluri-identity if you prefer, is a source of wealth. The richness brought about by the presence of European Africans is something that has not yet been understood in Italy. However, as a general approach, this is one of the philosophies that we are currently bringing forward: the concept of diversity in the future of Europe.

One must not start from the concept of multiculturalism, but rather from the concept of intraculturalism as conceived by Balkan poet Nebojsa Vilić. If multiculturalism is a body with different points, intraculturalism is different bodies with one point in common. First of all, I think we should start from the things that unite us in order to be able to benefit from those that

differentiate us. We have to rediscover a relationship with the other as an individual, as a person. If I accept the other as a person, then it doesn't matter if he is red, green or yellow. First and foremost, I see his humanity.

**M.K.:** "It is necessary to deconstruct the negative image of Africa that exists in Italy." Do you think that the Italian media are responsible for the fear and mistrust that Italians harbour towards Africa and Africans?

**K.K.E.:** Of course. Above all, the work of the media revolves around making headlines: good news or bad news. Which Africa do they talk about all the time? It's the Africa of the Ebola fever; the Africa of children dying from starvation; the Africa of missionaries coming to help; the Africa with tribal wars and cannibal dictators. There is always a negative image. No one ever talks about the Africa that is being built, the Africa that is constantly trying to fight for survival. And then there are even the politicians that say "Milan is dirty, like Africa". It's tiresome because this is where the general image that people have of Africa comes from; it derives from what they read and hear. This image is still so vivid today that when my wife and I got married 25 years ago, her friends asked her: "But what does he eat?" They must have been convinced that I ate boiled elephant knees! The exotic or rather erotic image of an African man with a huge member, or of virgin Africa with her forests, where one can return to nature: Africa is never accepted for what it is. This not only harms Africa's reputation but also that of Africans, because inevitably we become the savages.

So we, the "differently visible", as I call it, suffer as a result of this image.

**M.K.:** What role should the Italian institutions and African immigrants play in the promotion of African culture?

**K.K.E.:** First of all, I think the institutions need to understand one thing, not just about Africa, but in terms of the entire discourse on immigration: we need a foundation of common values in order to live together. However, these values must not be decided by natives alone, but with the help of new citizens. Among the founding values, that of equal opportunities is particularly important. I do not want to think that my children will face discrimination in the future job market because the surname on their CV is Komla-Ebri rather than Brambilla or Rossi.

We Africans and we of the African Diaspora must understand that even here we are agents for progress; agents for progress of Africa and of knowledge on Africa. It is we who can open the door to our culture. Africa has certain cultural values that today's Europe could do with, like respect for the elderly, who are valued in Africa, they are more than just vegetables left in retirement homes. Or the holistic view of life where man is not considered a mere machine but viewed within the context of his relationship with nature, which he must respect.

The real crises in Europe today, what they are calling identity crises, are nothing more than a crisis of values.

**M.K.:** In one of your speeches you said that "culture forms the backbone of Africa." Do you think African immigrants should use this as the basis of their contribution to society?

**K.K.E.:** Yes, because the immediate line of attack is, first and foremost, increasing knowledge and awareness of African culture. People need to stop thinking that there is no such thing as an African culture simply because we do not have a written culture. As Professor Cheikh Anta Diop explained, the culture of oral tradition is culture. Immigrants are vehicles of culture. It would also be valuable for us Africans, and particularly for second-generation children, to retrieve the values and elements of our culture of origin. We, as a network of the African Diaspora dream of creating 'homes of

African culture': we would like to create these centres in large cities and provide equipment, films, books and slides so that there is a way to get to know the African culture.

**M.K.:** You anticipated my last question. If you could deliver a series of proposals favouring intercultural exchange between Italians and Africans, what would they be?

**K.K.E.:** Yes, I would definitely say African culture centres. Another thing would be to create meeting places to get to know each other through literature, writing and theatre. We have proposed a series of meetings in Milan with "Africa Mix" as a theme: a live event with short films, literature, slides, debates on the history and current affairs of Africa...not just rhetoric. Africa Mix also allows us to show people what the links are between Africa and Europe. We do not have to make a cultural smoothie, but maybe a fruit salad. In a fruit salad you have a hint of peach, the taste of sweet bananas and the bitterness of lemon, but all the flavours complement each other.

**M.K.:** You are a married doctor with two children and you are well integrated in Italy. For the most part, your life is that of a "model immigrant". And yet you haven't stopped there: books, conferences, seminars, scientific research, school classes, radio, and association memberships in Italy and abroad. Do you think that immigrants who have integrated in Italy have a sort of duty towards others? What triggered your desire to react? What made you go from Doctor to Doctor-Migrant Author?

**K.K.E.:** Out of principal, I believe that one cannot live life on the bench. If I want to be part of society, and claim to be integrated and included, then I have to act. Otherwise it would be like going to play football and staying on the bench when I have to go on the pitch to play the game. If I'm on the bench, all I'm doing is insulting the referee and shouting at the players, I'm not participating. In order to be an integral part of this society, one has to be committed. People have to work together towards the growth of that society.

This is a criticism that can often be directed to immigrants. Many of them come here with the idea of leaving again, and don't take part in society. Immigrants should be part of the Italian Blood Donors Association and join the Red Cross. It is important because it is through such social activity that they will really achieve integration. People recognise that the blood you give is red like theirs; it is blood that will save lives. You are not just a parasite of this society. Social and political engagement is essential if you ask to be integrated. You can't just sit there and say they don't want us, they don't love us; this is playing the victim. Many Africans live as if they were in Africa. Physically, they are here, but mentally they are in Africa: they eat like they are in Africa, think like they are in Africa...always saying that sooner or later they will go back to Africa. What they are forgetting, and this is profound, is that years of their lives are going by, wasted, and they haven't made themselves useful in Africa or in their host country. They have to get up off the bench and pave the way for future generations.

If the Italian government has no capacity to make provisions, sooner or later we will have the same situation as in London or France with the "banlieux"; and everyone will ask "how? They were at school with our children, they seemed so integrated." Yes, but it was a superficial integration.

There is no need to wait for them to give us this integration. If it is given, it can be taken away. Integration must be won.

**M.K.:** Do you want to add a conclusion?

**K.K.E.:** You have to go beyond appearances. In this country we are always judged by our appearances. So much so that when I am in hospital, wearing a shirt (that I'd say whitens me a little), I am a doctor and I have relationships with different people. When I take the shirt off and go out onto the street I go back to being a street vendor. Judging me for my appearance alone is one of this country's limits. But we shouldn't wait for that to change gradually, we have to work as well, we have to help Italians take this step forward, because, unfortunately, given the current economic situation, Fortress Europe is building barriers against the South. The barriers are not against the East. It is us, the 'differently visible' who are being targeted. Because, in a few years the others dissolve into Italian culture as the Greeks and Albanians have done (It is with difficulty that you recognise an Albanian today) and the Romanians will too. But we Africans will always be visibly different, so we have to set out different means of integration so that it is not always based on appearances.

**M.K.:** Thank you

**K.K.E.:** Thanks to you.