

Unity blossoms among German blacks

Diversity coming slowly to nation haunted by racism, suspicion of outsiders

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BERLIN When Miriam Tafadal moved from Frankfurt to Berlin four months ago, the 25-year-old social worker was pleasantly surprised to find a large group of Germans who shared her black roots.

The young black German woman said it was a relief to find friends in the larger city who were not suspicious of her German and Somali heritage.

"In public opinion there are only foreigners and Germans, and ignorance prevails," Ms. Tafadal said. "It is extremely annoying that whenever you meet somebody for the first time they want to know after three sentences where you are from and why your German is so good."

She is one of about 43,000 black Germans and Africans celebrating the 10th Black History Month in Berlin. The event offers a series of parties, discussions and workshops in Berlin, a city long associated with Nazi racism but now home to an increasingly diverse population.

During Black History Month many of Germany's 400,000 blacks have enjoyed a sense of solidarity despite their minority status in a nation of 80 million people.

Although relations between Germany and the African continent date to 1684 when the first official visit of an African prince from West Africa to Berlin took place, blacks in Germany have always been too few to form a strong community.

It also has been difficult for them to find a secure place in a country traditionally suspicious of outsiders.

In discussions during Black History Month, many talk of the constant pressures they face: the feeling that they always have to excel just to be considered for a job, the lack of access to their heritage and the repeated shock they feel when people who were friendly on the telephone turn away upon meeting them.

"You will never be fully accepted," said Abi Krieg, a mechanical engineering student who enthuses about the two years he spent in Paris and Oxford, England, where the large black communities provide more support.

Mr. Krieg says the increasing willingness of large companies to employ people of an ethnic background other than German is nothing but an exercise in political correctness. And he is acutely aware that there are areas in Berlin controlled by neoNazis where it is not safe for him to go.

Older black Germans celebrating Black History Month remember how the small, closely knit black community was attacked by Hitler after the Nazis came to power.

The Nazis sterilized about 400 children born to white German women and black men in an effort to keep the white race "pure" and sent about 2,000 black Germans to concentration camps.

Theodor Wonja Michael, 74, said the neoNazis who now threaten blacks do not pose the same threat, though there has been a backlash against blacks since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Mr. Michael survived the Nazi era by working in the legendary UFA film studios in Babelsberg just outside of Berlin. Despite their racist ideology, the Nazis romanticized Africa in movies and employed blacks in films such as *The Baron of Muenchhausen*.

"The Nazi Reich has come to an end, and the so-called neoNazis do not pose a political danger in my point of view," he said. "But I thought we had long overcome the nationalistic undertones."

He does not believe German society can be changed by laws designed to help blacks. Instead he advises young people to join political parties, be active in public life, fight attempts to marginalize them and to be aware of their roots.

For a long time, this meant an uphill battle because blacks were also linked to the notion of defeat in Germany.

At the end of World War I, Germans felt degraded when the victorious French troops sent their colonial regiments including many blacks to the Rhineland.

Thirty years later, blacks again participated in Germany's liberation from the Nazi regime, and many remained stationed in the country with the U.S. Army.

In 1952, when more than 3,000 black children started school, Parliament discussed sending these children "back to their fathers' country." It was to be characterized as a humanitarian gesture designed to save them from the cold climate

"Many of these kids were illegitimate, the children of victors and had a black father on top of that," said Paulette ReedAnderson, an AfricanAmerican historian who has lived in Berlin since 1983. "Their existence was always tied up to defeat, and they have never been talked about or explored in German society."

"As a black, you have to be assertive," said Ian Douglas, a dancer from Barbados who has made Berlin his home but proudly relates his Scottish heritage. "We know where we are from, and therefore we can laugh at our mistakes."

With his teacher Mark Headly and Ms. ReedAnderson, Mr. Douglas has contributed a performance called "nilreB" Berlin backward to this year's Black History Month celebrations.

While a narrator tells the audience about the history of blacks in Germany, the dancers perform scenes from everyday life. The international ensemble attempts to show that a peaceful coexistence is possible.

At the end of the show, the narrator proclaims, "We have a history we need not hide."