

# ***IDENTITY AND CULTURE: "WHERE ARE YOU FROM?"***



# Tala's Journal

## The Beginning of the Journey

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

— Mary Angelou



## *The Dilemma of Belonging: “Where are you from?”*

Humans possess an innate sense of curiosity; as a civilisation, we crave discovery, development, and innovation. The foreign attracts our attention and desire for knowledge; unfortunately, for many it also draws a sense of fear and apprehension due to the unknown. Cultures, similarly, provide us the aforementioned characteristics and a great sense of self, an "us" that lies as a cushion to fall upon in times of uncertainty. Our culture, language, nation, and surroundings provide a clear guide of "right" behaviour and characteristics we desire to embrace, but, for some of us, they are a reminder of the limitations of our perspectives and the narrowness of our worldview. Additionally, they might serve as a reminder of our foreignness; as we embrace other cultures, our identity becomes an intricate fusion of various influences, of "us", a fusion that breaks away from expected norms and homogeneity. As a diaspora kid, I lacked the sense of cultural security my peers embraced growing up in their home country; I was too Venezuelan for my family back home in Syria and too Syrian for my friends in Venezuela. Moving to Sweden at the age of 16 solely exacerbated the feeling of foreignness; in addition to the two cultures of my childhood, I became entangled in additional new norms and traditions that ultimately positioned me as the ultimate dilemma of belonging. Whenever I'm presented with the inquiry of 'Where am I from?', I freeze in fear. What should I answer? How will they categorise me? Will I be part of "us" or "them"? That ultimately leads me to a tiringly repetitive speech:

***"My parents are Syrian, I grew up in Venezuela, and currently live in Sweden. I attended an English high school and thus feel more comfortable speaking either English or Spanish, as my Arabic is at a primary level."***

# The Dilemma of Belonging: “Where are you from?”

To make matters worse for myself, I'm from a minority religion called the Druze, so whenever the question of 'Where are you from?' is followed with 'What religion do you practise?', a question I get more commonly than I would like, I have to proceed with another speech that goes as follows:

***"Well, I am a Druze, which means that we only believe in God and do not pray to any prophets. We are an intricate mix of Hinduism—the concept of reincarnation—Judaism—with Jethro as our main figure—and Christianity—with emphasis on morality—and notably, ancient Greek philosophy—which encompasses the vast majority of our holy books. However, I grew up attending a Catholic school and church, with Venezuelan Catholic traditions as central to my life. But if you want me to be more honest, I believe religion is political and largely flawed, and now I feel uncomfortable."***

People certainly do not enjoy—nor appreciate—the speech, as it reminds them of the limitations of their worldview and presents them with an alien—me—to which they might struggle to relate and properly communicate with on the basis of their background. Consequently, I grew to perceive my intercultural identity as a disadvantage, a reminder of my lack of belonging in the communities I love. This feeling of discomfort and alienation can be isolating, leading to a sense of disconnection from one's own cultural roots and a struggle to find acceptance within one's communities. My identity became a battleground in which I constantly felt torn between embracing my diverse heritage and conforming to societal expectations.

This internal conflict shaped my experiences and interactions, causing me to question where I truly belonged and how I could navigate the complexities of my identity. Beginning my studies in an international high school permitted me to comprehend the commonality of identity crises among diaspora communities, fostering a sense of solidarity and understanding among peers who shared similar struggles; nonetheless, my uncertainty did not completely disappear. Deep down I continued to envy those who appeared to effortlessly address questions regarding their cultural/national identity, without further complications or internal crises.

In 2023, however, I finally had the opportunity to acknowledge and embrace the fluidity of my identity through a week-long leadership camp in Germany—the International Student Leadership Institute (ISLI)—in which I immersed myself in various cultures and traditions. The institute hosts over 150 students from across Europe and the U.S., encouraging young adults to become tomorrow's culturally competent leaders—underscoring the essentiality of cross-cultural collaboration and comprehension. Nominated, alongside a classmate, by the school due to our distinguished grades, demonstrated leadership skills, and interest in global affairs, I found myself challenged to step out of my comfort zone—I felt it was unfair for me to be a representative of Sweden in the camp setting while not possessing enough "Swedishness" to fully embody the role. Thus, with great nerves and uncertainty, began my journey to ISLI in the beautiful German countryside of Oberwesel.

# The Journey to Cross Cultural Enlightenment

ISLI was an extraordinary mixture of cultures and backgrounds from across Europe and beyond – cultures that stood as complete opposites to my own. From my German peers' emphasis on morning group runs and bread in every meal to the Belgians' humour and singing during evening gatherings, I was constantly immersed in new experiences. Despite feeling like an outsider at first—an impostor among the natives of the region—I quickly realised that diversity was not a barrier but rather a strength that brought us all together in unexpected ways. Through various presentations, activities—including rewritten songs, creating dances, speeches, and short acts—and discussions, the ISLI reagents, who were alumni of the programme, inspired us to question our perspectives and encouraged us to embrace the differences that make each of us unique. That's when I became familiar with the concept of cross-cultural communication—the process of acknowledging the similarities and differences among cultures in order to ensure effective interactions and mutual comprehension. Instead of tiptoeing around our differences, we were encouraged to confront them, engage in thoughtful discussion, and ultimately embrace them as a source of strength. The reagents shared presentations on their countries and experiences, showing us how ISLI had helped them embrace each other's cultures and transform into global citizens, motivating us to embark on the same journey.



## Posters



The poster, my classmate and I created to represent our school and permit our peers to learn more about it.

## Discussions



In ISLI we had daily and varied discussions, enabling us to learn more about each other's perspective.

## Games



Alongside my peers, we played various games, and challenges to increase our familiarity with each other.

## Presentations



The Regents provided various presentations on leadership and diversity, supplying us with the necessary tools to become understanding global citizens.

# The Journey to Cross-Cultural Enlightenment

Regardless of the reagents' encouragement, the first two days I remained nervous, going into a panic whenever I had to explain to my peers that unlike them, I'm not originally from the nation I was supposed to represent; the nerves were exacerbated as I saw their confused expressions and indirect questioning of my ability to accurately represent a country I wasn't born in. Upon providing the aforementioned identity speech, I was met with further confusion by some and understanding by others—particularly those who are second-generation immigrants themselves. I felt forced into various labels of foreignness; questions regarding my journey to Sweden, the war, and the "primitiveness" of my parent's country; and the "hunger" and "insecurity" of my adoptive home country came by—fortunately not often, but the pain they created remained. A particular memory I hold from those two days is when a peer from the Czech Republic referred to me as an 'exotic' inclusion in the group during a bonfire—an experience that initially deepened my sense of isolation and disconnect. While the group remained silent at first, over time, as discussions on cross-cultural communication and global understanding unfolded, they began to express their discomfort with such remarks. This was not only in response to my situation but also by reflecting on and challenging similar instances from their own lives.

Similarly, I discovered my own narrowness; regardless of having been raised in a multicultural environment and embracing the best of each of my cultures, I still remained ignorant and passive in many aspects—I was too engaged in my own status as an outsider rather than actively seeking to understand and empathise with others' experiences and perspectives. This realisation came as my Czech peer, who had initially referred to me as "exotic", later opened up about her own struggles regarding stereotyping of Eastern Europeans—stereotypes I was well familiar with but did never truly challenge. Sitting together exchanging experiences and slowly narrating facts about each other's cultures—so different, yet so familiar, with similar dishes and family jokes—I recognised for the first time that while my pain was valid, I had overlooked the fact that others were also negotiating invisible battles of belonging. What began as a moment of alienation gradually transformed into a shared space of vulnerability, where our stories intersected and taught me that genuine cross-cultural communication requires humility, empathy, and the willingness to move beyond our own hurt.



# Tala's Journal



Similarly, I discovered my own narrowness; regardless of having been raised in a multicultural environment and embracing the best of each of my cultures, I still remained ignorant and passive in many aspects—I was too engaged in my own status as an outsider rather than actively seeking to understand and empathise with others' experiences and perspectives. This realisation came as my Czech peer, who had initially referred to me as "exotic", later opened up about her own struggles regarding stereotyping of Eastern Europeans—stereotypes I was well familiar with but did not truly challenge. Sitting together exchanging experiences and slowly narrating facts about each other's cultures—so different, yet so familiar, with similar dishes and family jokes—I recognised for the first time that while my pain was valid, I had overlooked the fact that others were also negotiating invisible battles of belonging. What began as a moment of alienation gradually transformed into a shared space of vulnerability, where our stories intersected and taught me that genuine cross-cultural communication requires humility, empathy, and the willingness to move beyond our own hurt.

From there I took the time to get to know more about each other's backgrounds, traditions, and perspectives, realising that true understanding comes from actively listening and engaging with one another. This experience challenged me to expand my worldview and embrace the beauty of diversity in all its forms. My German peers taught me the beauty of "luften"—opening the window during the day to let fresh air in, both literally and metaphorically; my Dutch friend showed me the beauty of the Netherlands beyond the stereotypes, and my Finnish roommate shared the importance of mindfulness and intention in daily life. Similarly, after leaving my shell, I taught them the beauty of Swedish fika, the Venezuelan importance of joy and humour, and the Syrian tradition of hospitality and generosity. These cultural exchanges not only enriched our lives but also deepened our understanding and appreciation of each other's backgrounds, creating lasting bonds that transcended borders and language barriers.

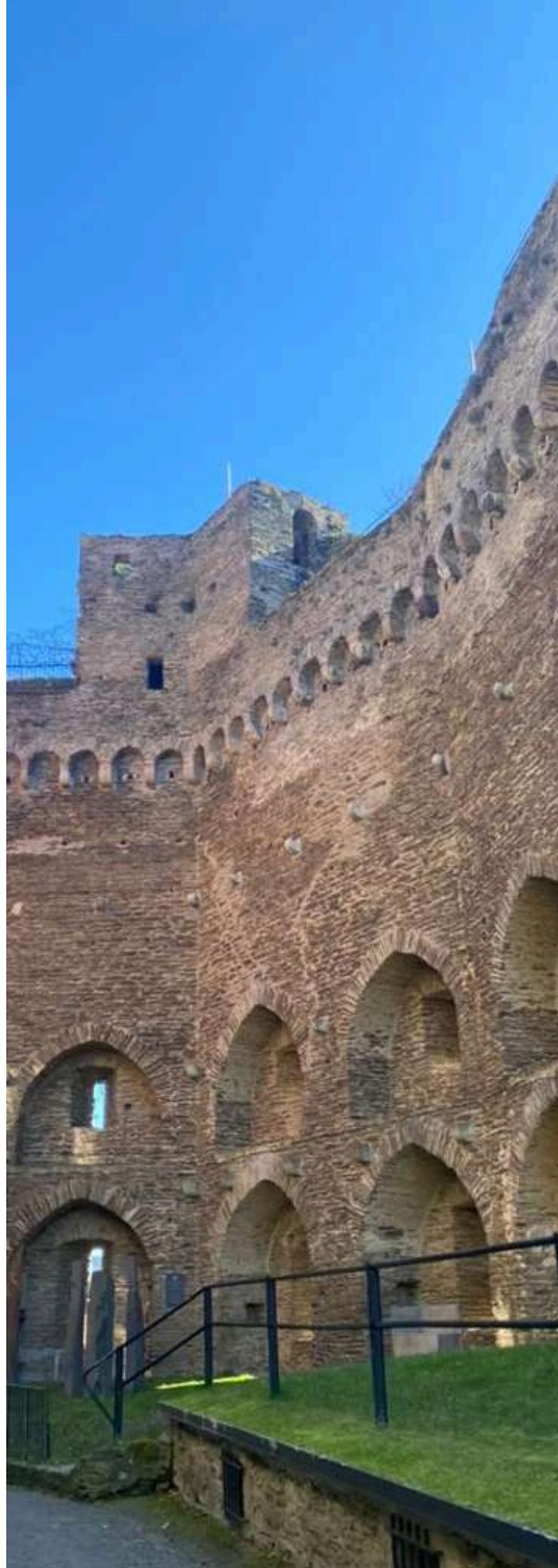
The reagents' presentations and activities provided an invaluable foundation, but it was my peers' genuine drive for connection and understanding that truly solidified the impact of our cultural exchange. While the structured sessions taught us concepts of cross-cultural communication, it was during the unplanned moments—sharing meals, laughing over language mishaps, exchanging stories late into the night—that these lessons became real. In those instances, cultural differences ceased to be abstract ideas and instead became lived experiences of friendship and empathy. These moments reminded me that while programmes can provide the framework, it is the people themselves, with their openness and willingness to learn from one another, who breathe life into the vision of global citizenship.



# *“Where am I from? Everywhere:” The Conclusion*

ISLI was more than just a programme; it was a turning point in how I perceived myself and the world around me. The initial struggles of isolation and difference evolved into recognition that diversity ought not to be regarded as an obstacle but rather a strength, and that genuine connections come from vulnerability, empathy, and the courage to ask and listen. I left with more than friendships that crossed borders; I carried with me a renewed sense of belonging, a greater appreciation for the richness of human experience, and an unwavering commitment to foster inclusivity wherever I go. In many ways, ISLI did not solely teach me about global citizenship and cross-cultural communication; it allowed me to live it. So, if you ask me 'Where am I from?' now, the answer is quite simple: I'm a global citizen, embracing the beauty of each of the cultures I encounter. I'm Syrian, I'm Venezuelan, and I'm Swedish, but more importantly, I am me, and that should be enough.

***Hej då! Adiós! Goodbye!  
Ma'al'salama!***





## International Student Leadership Institute

# ISLI

Oberwesel, 3 March 2023

We hereby certify that *Tala Al Cham* participated in the 39<sup>th</sup> International Student Leadership Institute (ISLI) held during 26<sup>st</sup> February to 3<sup>th</sup> March 2023 in Oberwesel/Rhein, Germany.

The above-named participant was selected by her/his school to attend this Institute based upon her/his leadership and language skills.

The ISLI prepares students for their role in an increasingly interdependent world by providing them with an international framework for the collection, processing, application and evaluation of a broad variety of leadership-related issues.

The goals of the Institute are:

- to provide participants with information necessary for initiating and managing leadership roles
- to provide participants with systematic practice in leadership skills
- to impart and develop leadership methods in all aspects of teacher/participant and participant/participant relationships
- to provide intercultural experience for the participants and an opportunity to work in a truly international environment.

Participants of this Institute were students from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands and Sweden. English was the conference language for all presentations and group activities.

Tom Rubbens  
Board of Regents ISLI 2023