

What do you imagine when you think of Ireland?

This month I took a trip to the country where I spent the majority of my childhood after recent conversations had enlightened me to the fact that the Republic of Ireland is an enigma to many. It seems that a proportion of people imagine endless rural landscapes with little going on other than its inhabitants drinking copious volumes of alcohol to distract themselves from their boredom.

Ireland is not very well known for its growing ethnic diversity. Statistically, ethnically Irish people are certainly the majority. However, most cities and towns have growing non-native populations who are not necessarily present in the minds of non-Irish people. But they are Irish nonetheless. Especially those who were born in the Emerald Isle.

Claire Enaholo was born in 2002, under the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act (1956) which stated that anyone born on the island was entitled to Irish citizenship regardless of their parents' nationalities. She also lived down the street from me making us the only Black girls of our ages in our entire housing estate.

On a surface level, it is easy to assume that growing up in a relatively small town in County Galway might have proven difficult for her - as a child of Nigerian immigrants - but Ireland often manages to subvert outside expectations.

The legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2015 and the election of the first openly gay Taoiseach (Prime Minister), who is also the first Irish government leader of Indian descent, in 2017, are just examples of some of the progressive moves that Ireland has made in recent years.

“Irish culture isn't just the stereotypes of St Patrick's day and drinking culture it's also very much about prioritising family and your peace. It is very community based and you really care about the people around you”, Claire says as we delve into the assimilation of Irish ideals into her family's Nigerian values. “My parents always said that in the house was Nigeria and outside was Ireland but even then, that wasn't true because they also became very engrossed in Irish culture.”

Quiet music plays as we indulge in takeaway and Claire glances out the window of her flat. We are in Phibsborough, Dublin – two and a half hours away from home in Tuam. “A lot of people grow up in the countryside and don't meet a lot of people unless they go to school in a town. But where I lived, I was able to be in sports or acting classes and meet a lot of different people.” Although she now lives in the capital city for university Claire does not feel removed from her Galwegian roots: “I don't think you can take the Tuam out of someone even if you put them in a big city.”

Ireland's native sports Gaelic football and hurling/camogie are very significant to the culture. “Gaelic football was a very big part of my childhood. I played it for like 10 years”, she says with a reminiscent smile. “And when you're a footballer, your whole town will follow you to watch you anywhere. When you play for your county, people will follow you all the way to Dublin.” Being part of a society where communities are often physically isolated from each other means that hometown pride is very important. It is quintessentially Irish to be connected to others through sport, art, language, heritage and proximity.

Irish identity transcends race and ethnicity because people focus more on values than on ancestral heritage. “I’ve had a lot of positive experiences with people telling me very firmly ‘*you are Irish. If you feel Irish, you are Irish.*’ I was born in Dublin and grew up here (in Ireland) my whole life. I studied the language in school. The only thing that makes me stand out is me being a Black woman”, Claire explains.

We hear a clapping noise approaching from the distance and Claire begins chuckling to herself. “It’s the horses”, she tells me. “This street is horse central. It’s worse during Christmas.” How Irish. Admittedly, I am not new to seeing horses on roads – even though it is less prevalent in Dublin. This prompts memories of living in the comparatively more pastoral Tuam.

While the Irish experience for immigrants is often agreeable, it is not completely removed from the negative experiences of those living elsewhere in Europe.

Claire begins recounting the story of a particular Gaelic football match in which she defended against the other team very well; “I never heard the comment but a father of the other team yelled something at me. So, my manager went over and a physical fight ensued. I only found out after the fact that I was racially abused. My mom didn’t tell me at the time and everyone wanted to shield me from the situation.” Irish racism often stems from ignorance and unfamiliarity rather than hatred or perceived superiority but that does not make it less significant.

“My mom went through a lot especially because she worked in the retail sector. people always assumed she didn’t speak English. She was a manager at the store and people would come up to her yelling ‘*rice*’ like she wouldn’t understand”, Claire says with a tone of incredulousness. “Growing up in Nigeria, my mom wasn’t used to being a minority. So, when she was for the first time it was confusing.”

It is of significance that history has led to principles that mean Irish people value unity over everything, even when discrimination exists in diverse settings. People may give an unfamiliar face a second glance, but contrary to popular belief, issues of high severity are usually rare.

“There is a Black-Irish news reporter who I recently saw and was so happy to see some representation. Her name is Zainab Boladale.” Boladale is the first person of African descent to work in the RTÉ (Radio Television Ireland) newsroom, representing the progression of Ireland’s growing non-white population.

It’s easy to see why Claire and thousands of other Irish people of colour love this country; “I want to travel the world and live in other places but Ireland will always have a place within me.”

Kemi Iruwa