

MY POOR RICH COUNTRY is a country of contradictions; a small patch of land on the western hemisphere just north of the equator where the only seasons we get are the rainy season and the rainier season. There is no winter, autumn or spring, but an eternal, wet summer. Meteorologists even refer to this region as the “rain forest” even though all one gets to see from the ground is a jungle; a concrete jungle with treacherous paths of asphalt that often lead to nowhere, and tall trees with barred windows that provide refuge from the ever burning sun and the unforgiving creatures of the night.

My country is not only blessed with rain, but also with floods and mudslides that claim the various offerings that the tribespeople humbly make to the God of Rain. Huts that they call houses and four-wheeled beasts that they’ve learned to tame are the most common tributes offered on his visits. Sometimes, though, the rain bringer can only quench his insatiable thirst for misery with the petty lives of the tribespeople themselves; a sacrifice for which at least we have been blessed with vast plains of enviably fertile land.

Coffee, wheat, rice, corn, fruit and meat are some of the rewards we have earned in exchange for our suffering. We learned to harvest these gifts and began to export them to faraway lands to help feed other nations and increase the wealth of our own. In time, however, our chieftains decided that it was unwise to work the land ourselves and this decision brought famine, hunger and poverty to our once great cities. For us, it was a lesson in humility.

In their infinite wisdom, our chieftains then proceeded to abuse the generosity of the God of Rain by also paying homage to the God of Lightning through the construction of some of the most powerful dams in the world. A good idea, perhaps, but this sinful act of defiance might have been what turned the gods against us, because now, despite our endless affluence of resources, our poor rich cities enjoy regular service interruptions of both water and electricity. We wanted to build a dam nation and damnation is exactly what we got. These deficiencies now remind

us of the perils we have brought upon ourselves as a result of our arrogance.

Another one of our seemingly endless resources is oil; that viscous substance over which the richest and most powerful countries in the world pick fights with one another. As unfathomable as this may seem, in my poor rich country, one litre of bottled water costs more than one litre of gasoline. And yes, we are talking about the same patch of land that’s known as the rain forest. That’s how much oil we’ve got. Not that this puts us ahead in any way, but at least we get to brag among those who are less fortunate than us. This is yet another one of our blessings.

Although we may know little of Greek mythology, I’m sure the Greek Gods would feel right at home among my people. Why? Because in my poor rich country, people will pray to anyone and anything from a jug of milk to the king of the underworld, or even the almighty himself, also known as the President of the Republic. They will light a candle to the ghost of the headless rider for revenge, to the spirit of an aboriginal queen for love, to the bones of our liberator for justice, to the purse of Saint Greedy for the numbers of the lottery, or to the Department of Immigration of Saint USA for a visa. Yet, our latest census recorded that ninety-eight percent of the people in our polytheist society consider themselves Christian.

Then comes what may very well be the most interesting of all of my country’s contradictions; our ability to party despite whatever it is that’s going on around us. In the past twenty years, the armed forces have been unleashed onto the population on several occasions and we have witnessed three military uprisings against governments that were elected democratically. We have also earned the right to brag about having one of the highest murder rates in the world and our society has been split into two seemingly irreconcilable factions that might just as well start gearing up for a civil war. Yet, the University of Michigan’s World Values Survey, after compiling data for the same twenty years, recently listed my poor rich country as the world’s third happiest.

Our controversial revolutionary government has enjoyed the highest approval rating ever recorded in our democratic history, and at the same time, it has also witnessed the birth of the strongest opposition movement and most impressive anti-government demonstrations ever assembled on a national scale. This leads me to conclude that either we like filling out polls with answers that blatantly oppose our true inner feelings or that we have an uncanny ability to make fun of our own misery. Perhaps we are such a proud society that revealing the way we really feel about ourselves could be interpreted as a sign of weakness or perhaps we are just shameless chameleons all too used to adapting to our environment regardless of how inhospitable it may have become. I am inclined to believe that the latter is truer, but if we are happy enough to laugh about our own suffering, then how truly happy can we say we really are?

That, of course, is not a question I plan to answer here because where I'm from, we would just make some kind of joke about it and forget the question was ever asked. That's probably why we can be ranked among the happiest people in the world . . . because we laugh and forget, like happy drunks that we are. That's right, my people also drink, and they do so enough to put 18th century pirates to shame. In most other countries, drinking is usually associated with disappointment and sadness, but in my poor rich country, drinking is associated with celebration and joy. More than that, drinking can also be a symbol of social status, as in the case of whiskey, for example, where drinking a glass can make the poorest man feel as rich as King Midas himself. Wine is what you offer your guests when you want to show off, and beer is what you would offer them when you've poured yourself the last glass of whiskey and your guests are too ruffraff to notice that stirring the ice cubes with your index finger is not really something that rich people do. Yet, in my poor rich country, nobody is an alcoholic. Alcoholism is that illness people in other countries get when they can't handle drinking with the same mastery that we do. We can drink every day, all day and night, without getting drunk. Therefore, we are not drunks;

much less alcoholics. Alcoholics need help. What we need is more whiskey.

Another one of the attributes that characterize the society in which I grew up is our love for one another regardless of the colour of our skin. Racism is only mentioned as a problem that "other" less enlightened societies have, and to even hint that there is the slightest level of racism on our own turf is plain ludicrous, even if there's not a single man who doesn't drool whenever a blonde walks by and even when all grandparents want their grandchildren to be white; so much that when a child is born "whiter" than expected, the parents are congratulated by all their family and friends for "improving the race".

In my poor rich country, a typical racist; I mean, a typical non-racist (since there is no racism in my country) is a person who considers you to be black only if you're darker than they are. If you're exactly as tan as they are, or half a shade lighter, then you're white. Thus, everybody is always at the very bottom of a colour chart where milk white is the coveted top spot. Yet, this is the same country where being called a "negro" by one's lover is considered one of the highest forms of flattery. That's because the word negro, in my poor rich country, is a synonym for friendliness, strength, good rhythm and sex appeal.

Perhaps the most appropriate term that could describe the complex social structure in my land of contradictions is not polytheism, alcoholism, classism or racism, but sectarianism. We boast of being unique and free from the shackles of pluralism, but all of us, whether by accident or design, form part of a clan, tribe or pack of some sort. We also love subdividing other groups of people into smaller groups just in case they are unable, or unwilling, to place themselves where they rightfully belong. In any social situation, whether it is dinner with the family or a fun game of monopoly with friends, there is always an alpha male (a role often played by a female), a rival, an heir, a queen, a mistress and a slave or two. We jump back to ancient times and our primitive instincts take over our conduct even when we make every conceivable effort to suppress

our natural urge to ignore countless centuries of natural selection. It is always easy to place other people in their respective clans and distinguish the roles they play in them, but it is not nearly as simple to recognize one's own role in the clan in which we find ourselves trapped.

Since I may end up having to live in exile for the rest of my existence, I dare say that what we have as a society is an inferiority complex; one that we try to disguise as a superiority one. It is not easy for me to make this verdict as an expatriate, but after having lived so many years abroad, I would like to believe I have gained a certain level of detachment that has allowed me to see more clearly that our greatest weakness may very well be the fact that we try too hard to maintain an image that we lost a long, long time ago; an image of grandeur, affluence, progress, stability, and of course, superiority that we know in our hearts we can no longer afford.

I have become convinced that we live in a perpetual state of denial, just like those three little monkeys that cover their mouths, eyes and ears, but with the exemption that we do not cover our mouths nearly as often as we should.

Fortunately, there is one tiny shred of national pride that we can still hold on to. We still produce beauty queens and it is hard to imagine that we will ever stop doing so, as my country is utterly obsessed with beauty; so much that parents dream of having baby girls so that one day, they too can become Miss Universe. In other countries, some of which may be arguably more developed, parents dream that their children may one day become the next president or the next prime minister. But this is not the case where I come from. In my poor rich country, the ultimate aspiration for a girl is to become a beauty queen and the ultimate aspiration for a boy is to become a professional baseball player. This right here is perhaps a lot more than I originally intended to share about the way our society functions, or rather, about the way it doesn't.

For a country so obsessed with beauty, it is hard to sit at a traditional restaurant and witness how the cooks prepare the dishes that my people devour on a daily basis.

Everything is deep fried, refried, and fried yet again . . . in last week's oil. Words like carbohydrates and calories are curse words thou shalt not mention at the table, and yet, I cannot remember meeting a fellow national who ever admitted suffering from high cholesterol. That is probably because in my poor rich country you cannot "suffer" from high cholesterol, as high levels can only indicate that you "enjoy" the benefits of a good diet, a good spouse, a good mom, or all of the above.

My poor rich country is a country where even though everybody is starving, it is hard to find someone who you wouldn't call fat. It is a country where even though nobody has any money, not even for their most basic necessities, the malls are packed at all times every day of the week. It is a country where a used car is worth significantly more than when it was new because there are no cars anywhere anymore, even if it takes you three hours to drive to work despite the fact that there aren't any jobs either. It is a country where depositing money in the bank is just as good as throwing it in the fire and where buyers bribe car salesmen to close the sale quickly, because buying a vehicle is the only way to secure the family's lifesavings. It is a country where nobody can afford to get married, but where happy couples book limousines for their weddings several months in advance to ensure their availability. It is a country where going out after dark is to put one's life on the line, but where all nightclubs open late and close early in the morning because people like to party all night, every day.

Oh, it is great to come from a poor rich country! I get to see the world with ever inquisitive eyes, and it fills my heart with joy each and every time I see something as bewildering as people crossing the street at their own pace without turning their head to the left, then to the right, and then to the left again, because they know, they just do, that there's nothing to fear. Apparently, in the developed world, drivers understand that pedestrians have the right of way. They also understand that traffic lights are not last year's Christmas decorations. It also fills my heart with joy when I

see that soldiers in the developed world earn their respect by behaving as model citizens, that police officers are respectful and help people in need, and that all other public servants strive to provide the services offered by the departments they represent.

For a person born and raised in a developed nation, these are nothing more than mere expectations. But for us, the ones who come from poor rich countries, these are nothing short of mindboggling miracles that inspire us to feel, each and every day, truly fortunate for having the privilege of experiencing such greatness in the rich countries that opened their doors to us.

I was completely baffled when I learned that apparently some of the richest countries in the world have the highest rates of suicide. How can this be? If people are fortunate enough to be born and raised in the same rich countries that gave us the opportunity to experience life at its fullest, how is it then possible that so many of their citizens become so depressed that they opt to pull the plug on their life? I always imagined it would be the exact opposite, because in my poor rich country, most of us pursue a life abroad precisely because we want to stay alive!

Depression, sadness, sorrow, misery; these are feelings that any rational scholar would attribute to the population of a nation like my own. But yet, we have the nerve to rank among the happiest people on Earth! Could the difference then be that rather than falling into such levels of depression, we, the ones who survived the tribulations of growing up in a third-world country, develop a series of defensive mechanisms that protect us from joining the ranks of those who just can't take it anymore?

Sometimes I think that perhaps what we all need is a simple reality check; an internship program of unknown length as a citizen of an underdeveloped nation. We would be faced with the same challenges as the locals and this would allow us to experience what it's like to really feel fear, anger, sadness, love, pain, joy . . . but on a scale that would have otherwise been impossible had we remained safely sheltered under the protection of home sweet home.

Nothing tests one's will to live more than the fear of death itself. Running through a cloud of tear gas on a street where students, teachers, professionals, policemen and soldiers exchange lead is nothing short of being an exhilarating experience. Hearing the dry echo of a firing weapon sharpens our senses, getting mugged at gun point and surviving to tell the story is liberating, successfully evading a bullet is redeeming, spying on unidentified troops as they storm the neighbourhood brings the community together, and trying to find out when the next coup d'état will take place will always keep everyone entertained. Life in a poor rich country can indeed be difficult, but it is always exciting! And it is this excitement what has taught me to appreciate the infinite value of what some might consider "the dull life" of the developed world.

What a privilege it is to be able to live in a first-world country! A country where the government is at the service of the people and where everybody can live in peace with one another; where everybody can study, where everybody can afford to start a family, where everybody can succeed, where everybody can grow old, and where everybody can live happily ever after. I may live in such a wonderland now, but it will take many more years for me to finally grasp that this fairy tale has become my new reality.

An old friend of mine; one we could call a "privileged citizen" of a developed nation, was fascinated by the culture of my people. He loved our customs, our food, our music, our dancing, our language, our climate, our cheap gasoline and especially our beauty queens. He wanted to travel to my country with me, but I had already gotten too used to "not" having to look over my shoulder, or dress down to stay clear of thugs, or change the way I communicate, or the way I move, or the way I breathe, or the way I think. For better or for worse, I had already become too unaccustomed to the pace of life in the third world to be able to go back, and I didn't quite feel like turning into cannon fodder just yet. Therefore, I told my friend to forget about it. He was patient, though, and in the meantime, he learned my language, and did so incredibly fast. He also learned the ways of a

third-world Jedi and proved to me that he was ready for anything. He even managed to find us cheap plane tickets to make sure I couldn't say money was the issue. I hadn't seen my parents in several years, so what the heck, I thought. How bad could it be to spend just a few days in the country that gave me my first passport?

So, I went ahead and made plans for a four-week visit, but managed to stay only two. I just couldn't stand it. The omnipresent poverty, the incessant feeling of insecurity, the rampant violence, the stench of fear, and especially the unprecedented level of anger among my "happy" people was simply too overwhelming for me. It broke my heart to see so much misery in a place that was once so great. And it also made me feel terribly guilty for having been able to make a life abroad while so many others, perhaps even more deserving, never had the opportunity to leave. Yet, while my stay could easily be described as a traumatic vacation, my privileged European friend had the best time of his life!

Several months later, he quit his job, packed a few shirts in a backpack and moved to my poor rich country because there, he said, he felt free and happy. Since then, he has been a victim of violence, he has had a gun put to his head, he has witnessed abuse of power, and he has felt fear. But when I ask him why he remains there when he could just as easily return to Europe, he tells me that my poor rich country is the one place on Earth where he actually feels alive!

During my fifteen-year "internship" in my poor rich country, I was constantly faced with contradictions that kept my mind busy trying to make sense out of everything in life. I developed a somewhat controversial habit of making fun of society, highlighting insanity, opposing demagoguery, questioning authority, challenging bigotry, and making radical analogies that tend to border the absurd. These habits may have a tendency to spark a plethora of politically incorrect arguments each time I'm given a chance to speak, but my goodness, do they make for entertaining conversation!

Oh, my poor rich country is full of contradictions indeed! Like a powerful magnet, it is capable of attracting the most unlikely of individuals, while at the same time, like a powerful magnet, it is capable of repelling with an overwhelming force those of us who share its polarity. Nevertheless, I have my country to thank for having found my true home abroad and for having enjoyed the privilege of becoming a proud citizen of the world.

Graduating from my third-world internship gave me the opportunity to experience my life abroad as if it were a joyous adventure. And despite the many ups and downs of living life as an immigrant, I am satisfied with the notion that my life would not have been as "happy" had I not been born in my poor rich country.