A 24-year-old university student studying history, born and raised in Nicosia.

Meli: Hey! I'm doing a project where I talk to people about their culture and experiences—while sketching them. Up for it?

Participant: Sure, why not?

Meli: So, what's something that's been on your mind lately?

Participant: Hmm… I guess just how small this place feels sometimes. Like, I love Cyprus, don't get me wrong, but it's like… you can't escape your own history here. Everyone knows everyone, and there's this sense that nothing really changes.

Meli: Do you mean socially or culturally?

Participant: Both. Socially, it's like… everyone's in each other's business. Which can be good—it makes things feel close, but also… suffocating. Culturally, there's a lot of pride in our traditions, but at the same time, we don't always let things evolve. It's like you have to fit into a certain idea of what it means to be Cypriot.

Meli: What do you think makes someone "truly Cypriot"?

Participant: (Laughs) Oh, I could say something easy, like, "If you drink frappé and argue about politics, you're Cypriot." But honestly? I think it's about carrying a mix of nostalgia and stubbornness. We hold onto things—memories, traditions, even grudges. And I get it, because history has made us that way. But I also wish we could let go a little more.

Meli: Let go of what?

Participant: The idea that things have to stay the same. That we can't change certain traditions, or that if you challenge them, you're somehow less Cypriot. Like, I love our culture, but I also want to be able to define it for myself, not just inherit it.

My Notes:

I guess just how small this place feels sometimes. Like, I love Cyprus, don't get me wrong, but it's like… you can't escape your own history here. Everyone knows everyone, and there's this sense that nothing really changes.

Culturally, there's a lot of pride in our traditions, but at the same time, we don't always let things evolve. It's like you have to fit into a certain idea of what it means to be Cypriot.

When im asked what makes someone truly Cypriot, my responce is to think that oh, "If you drink frappé and argue about politics, you're Cypriot." But honestly? I think it's about carrying a mix of nostalgia and stubbornness. We hold onto things—memories, traditions, even grudges. And I get it, because history has made us that way. But I also wish we could open up to new things more, and let go of the idea that things are better when they stay THE SAME. That if you challenge tradition or traditional notions and ways of life then you are somehow less Cypriot. Or less Greek. I love our culture but i also want to define it for my self. Not just inherit it.

A 27-year-old international student from Brazil, studying architecture. Grew up in São Paulo and has lived in London for two years

Meli: I'm asking strangers about culture and belonging—while sketching them. Want to join?

Participant: That sounds interesting! Yeah, let's do it.

Meli: So, if you could tell the world one thing right now, what would it be?

Participant: Hmm… I think I'd say, "Slow down." Everyone here is always rushing. It's like London runs on stress.

Meli: Yeah, it's definitely fast-paced. How does that compare to where you're from?

Participant: In São Paulo, life is also busy, but there's more warmth in daily interactions. Like, you talk to strangers more, people check in on each other. Here, I feel like everyone's on their own mission. Which is exciting but also lonely.

Meli: Have you ever felt like an outsider here?

Participant: Every day. Not in a bad way necessarily—it's just that London makes you realize how small you are. Back home, I felt part of something. Here, I feel… replaceable. Like, if I left, nothing would change.

Meli: Do you think people here are connected to each other?

Participant: Not really. It's like we all share the same space, but not the same experience. You sit on a packed tube, shoulder to shoulder with people, but nobody acknowledges each other. I find that strange.

Meli: Is there something that makes you feel at home in London?

Participant: Yes, like the people ive met here that trully see me and that are my chosen family. Also ive found its important for me to occasionally visit Spaces that allow me to step into and revisit my culture even just for a while. Like Brazilian restaurants or events organised by the community. The moment I step inside one, everything changes—the music, the way people greet each other. It reminds me that I do belong somewhere, even if it's just for an hour.

My notes:

If i could tell the world one thing right now i think id say "Slow down." Everyone here is always rushing. It's like London runs on stress. In São Paulo, life is also busy, but there's more warmth in daily interactions. Like, you talk to strangers more, people check in on each other. Here, I feel like everyone's on their own mission. Which is exciting but can also feel lonely... Yes, I do feel like an outsider, Every day but Not in a bad way necessarily. it's just that London makes you realize how small you are. Back home, I felt part of something. Here, I feel… replaceable. Like, if I left, nothing would change. It's like we all share the same space, but not the same experience. You sit on a packed tube, shoulder to shoulder with people, but nobody acknowledges each other. I find that strange.

I do feel at home when im with the people ive met here that trully see me and that are my chosen family. Also ive found its important for me to occasionally visit Spaces that allow me to step into and

revisit my culture even just for a while. Like Brazilian restaurants or events organised by the community. The moment I step inside one, everything changes—the music, the way people greet each other. It reminds me that I do belong somewhere, even if it's just for an hour.

A 22-year-old student studying psychology. Born in Cyprus but has a mixed background—one parent is Cypriot, the other is from Lebanon.

Meli: Hey! I'm doing a project where I talk to people about their culture and experiences—while drawing them. Want to join?

Participant: Sounds cool! Yeah, go for it.

Meli: What's something that's been on your mind lately, do you have anything to express in relation to Cyprus or your life here?

Participant: Honestly? Just figuring out where I fit. I've always felt a bit in between—like, I'm Cypriot, but I'm also not *fully* Cypriot, you know?

Meli: What makes you feel that way?

Participant: My dad's Lebanese...I grew up with both cultures, and they have really strong similarities, but people here always focus on the Cypriot side. Like, I speak Greek, I do all the things a most Cypriot do, I think like they do, I behave like they do, but I dont share the history of this land the same way they do so sometimes i can feel left out.

Meli: That must get frustrating.

Participant: Yes! It can be, i honestly feel so much respect for our history and for our struggles, our country has been through so much, but i also am unsure if I even have the right to feel for this place as much as others do, since half of my family aren't really from here.

Meli: If you had to describe your personal sence of culture in one word, what would it be?

Participant: *Complicated.* (Laughs) But also… *resilient*. No matter what, Cypriots find a way to keep going. And I think that's true for me too.

My Notes:

Honestly? I am still figuring out where I fit. I've always felt a bit in between cultures. I'm Cypriot, but I'm also not *fully* Cypriot... If that makes sence.

My dad is Lebanese... I grew up with both cultures, and they are similar in many ways, but people here always focus on the Cypriot side. Like, I speak Greek, I do all the things a most Cypriot do, I think like they do, I behave like they do, but I dont share the history of this land the same way they do so sometimes i can feel left out.

i honestly feel so much respect for our history and for our struggles, our country has been through so much, but i also am unsure if I even have the right to feel for this place as much as others do, since half of my family aren't really from here. If i could describe my personal sence of culture with one word it would be 'COMPLICATED' but also 'RESILIENT'. No matter what, Cypriots find a way to keep going. And I think that's true for me too.

A 25-year-old student from Nigeria, studying film. Has been in London for three years.

Meli: I'm doing a project where I talk to people about culture while sketching them. Interested?

Participant : that's a unique concept! Yeah, why not?

Meli: When was the last time you felt truly seen or understood within your culture?

Participant: Hmm… probably never, honestly. Here, I feel like people only see the version of me that fits their idea of what a Nigerian should be, and back home the rules are even more strict.

Meli: What do you mean?

Participant: It's like, people expect me to either be super loud and confident, or they assume I grew up in some kind of struggle. But Nigeria is massive, and we all have different experiences. I'm just a guy who loves film, but I feel like I have to 'perform' an identity here.

Meli: Do you think it's easier or harder to make genuine connections in London compared to back home?

Participant: Harder, definitely. People are friendly on the surface, but deep connections take time here. It's like you're always networking instead of actually bonding.

Meli: What's something you wish more people understood about your culture?

Participant: That it's not just one thing. Like, people hear 'Nigeria' and think of Afrobeats, jollof rice, or Nollywood. But there's so much more—different ethnic groups, traditions, ways of seeing the world. We're not just a monolith. I my self feel like i have something entirely new to offer that doesn't revolve around tradition or this image. I am my own person, you know!

I feel like people only see the version of me that fits their idea of what a Nigerian should be, and back home the rules are even more strict. It's like, people expect me to either be super loud and confident, or they assume I grew up in some kind of struggle. But Nigeria is massive, and we all have different experiences. I'm just a guy who loves film, but I feel like I have to 'perform' an identity here.

In London it feels like yes, people are friendly but its on the surface. Deep connections take time here. It's like you're always networking instead of actually bonding with another person.

I wish people understood that my culture is not just one thing. People hear 'Nigeria' and think of Afrobeats, jollof rice, or Nollywood. But there's so much more, different ethnic groups, traditions, ways of seeing the world. We're not just a monolith. I my self feel like i have something entirely new to offer that doesn't revolve around tradition or this image. I am my own person, you know!

A 28-year-old studying fine arts. From kokkinochori lmao.

Meli: I'm talking to people about their cultural experiences—while drawing them. Want to join?

Participant: Sure, that sounds interesting.

Meli: What's something about Cyprus that you wish more people understood?

Participant: People from the villages are like stuck in time, so you can technically go to a village and meet a Cypriot with the mentality of a grandma at only 20 years old! I grew up in a village, so i think i can say that!

When i met people from abroad, I realized how truly different my experience was from other people my age.

Meli: In what way?

Participant: In my village, everything is slower. People talk to each other—like, really talk. You can't just walk past someone without saying hello. Everything takes place in the real world, sure we have the internet now but when i was a teenager it wasn't really that prominent in my area, I mean my classroom in school was like 7 kids! Villages have a super small population nowadays, i think the schools are even closing down.

Meli: Do you miss that? The lack of internet culture nowadays, the closeness... the mentality.

Participant: Yeah, sometimes. But honestly the internet thing is now inevitable even with children in villages. I also like the slight increase of independence I have now that i moved to the city. In the village, everyone knows your business. Here at uni, theres so many more people here than im used to and they dont really care as much about my business.

Meli: If you had to teach someone one unwritten rule about Cypriot culture, what would it be?

Participant: Im going to speak particularly about my village, but i think one rule is to work hard and share with your close ones and neighbours, one day they will repay your kindness when you need it most!

My Notes:

In Cyprus, people from the villages are like stuck in time, so you can technically go to a village and meet a Cypriot with the mentality of a grandma at only 20 years old! I grew up in a village, so i think i can say that! It was only when i met people from abroad, I realized how truly different my experience was from other people my age.

In my village, everything is slower. People *talk* to each other—like, really talk. You can't just walk past someone without saying hello. Everything takes place in the real world, sure we have the internet now but when i was a teenager it wasn't really that prominent in my area, I mean my classroom in school was like 7 kids! Villages have a super small population nowadays, i think the schools are even closing down.

Yeah, sometimes. But honestly the internet thing is now inevitable even with children in villages. I also like the slight increase of independence I have now that i moved to the city. In the village, everyone knows your business. Here at uni, theres so many more people here than im used to and they dont really care as much about my business.

Im going to speak particularly about my village, but i think one rule to fit in with Cypriot culture is to work hard and share with your close ones and neighbours, one day they will repay your kindness when you need it most!

A 21-year-old British-Indian student, raised in London.

Meli: Hey! I'm asking people about their cultural experiences while sketching them. Want to join?

Participant: Yeah, that sounds fun.

Meli: What's something that felt completely normal to you growing up, but then you realized it's not the same everywhere?

Participant: Eating with my hands. I grew up eating Indian food at home, and it's totally normal. But I remember bringing food to school once, and some kid looked at me like I was from another planet.

Meli: That must've been weird.

Participant: Yeah, it made me super self-conscious about little things—like, should I explain my food every time I bring it? Should I change how I eat? It's a small thing, but it makes you aware of how different cultures exist in the same space but don't always mix.

Meli: Do you feel more at home here or in your family's culture?

Participant: Somewhere in between. London is home, but I also feel like I have to *switch* between identities. In British spaces, I feel too Indian. In Indian spaces, I don't feel 'Indian enough.'

Mel: What's something about London that would surprise someone who's never been here?

Participant: That you can live here for years and still not feel like you belong. It's this weird paradox—you're surrounded by so many cultures, but that also means nobody really stands out. Sometimes I wonder if that's a good thing or not.

Meli: It truly can feel like that sometimes...

Participant: I also feel like aspects of western ideology don't really match with my upbringing and I'm torn between criticizing my culture or criticizing its criticism. For example, my therapist advised me to set boundaries with my parents, and to put more distance between us, to avoid them invading my personal life and decisions as an adult, due to what she describes to be their harmful and "controlling" parenting style. However, my culture revolves around family, connection and openness, so distancing my self from my family would really deprive me of aspects of my culture that i feel are integral to my identity. I really feel conflicted between what I want to support and what I want to enact.

My Notes:

It's a small thing, but small things I do in my day to day suddenly stand out in london, and it makes me aware of how different cultures exist in the same space but in my experience they don't always mix.

I feel at home somewhere in between. London is home, but I also feel like I have to switch between identities, like a have a dual personality. In British spaces, I feel too Indian. In Indian spaces, I don't feel 'Indian enough.'

The thing about London is you can live here for years and still not feel like you belong. It's this weird paradox—you're surrounded by so many cultures, but that also somehow nobody really stands out and no one is unique enough. Sometimes I wonder if that's a good thing or not.

I also feel like aspects of western ideology don't really match with my upbringing and I'm torn between criticizing my culture or criticizing its criticism. For example, my therapist advised me to set boundaries with my parents, and to put more distance between us, to avoid them invading my personal life and decisions as an adult, due to what she describes to be their harmful and "controlling" parenting style. However, my culture revolves around family, connection and openness, so distancing my self from my family would really deprive me of aspects of my culture that i feel are integral to my identity. I really feel conflicted between what I want to support and what I want to enact.

Meli: *"Hey! So I'm doing this little project where I talk to people about culture and identity while drawing them. Is that something you'd be up for?"*

Participant: *"Yeah, why not? Sounds alright."*

Meli: *"So I've lived in the UK for almost five years now. Here in London theres a mix of cultures, but people can still integrate into the more local culture. Do you think there's something that makes someone a Londoner culturarly?"*

Part icipant : *I feel like being British generally is mostly about pretending everything's fine when it isn't!*

Meli: *What do you mean by pretending everything's fine?"*

Participant: *"Just, like… we could be having the worst day ever, and if someone asks how we are, we're still gonna say, 'Yeah, not too bad.' It's like an unspoken rule, you just don't overshare unless you really know someone. And even then, probably not."*

Meli: *"Yeah, I've noticed that! So do you think British people are naturally more reserved?"*

Participant: *"Kind of, but I don't think it's about being cold. It's just… we don't do big expressions of emotion in public, really. Like, we'd rather make a joke about something than talk about it seriously."*

Meli: *"So humor is a big thing then?"*

Participant: *"Yeah, but not in, like, a loud way. It's more about making fun of ourselves and each other. If a British person takes the piss out of you, that's actually a good sign. It means they like you."*

Meli: *"I see...What's something about British culture that you think people don't understand?"*

Participant: *"That we're not cold, we're just awkward. Like, if someone bumps into me, I'll probably say sorry. We just default to politeness, but at the same time, we avoid unnecessary conversations. Like, don't ask me how my day is if you don't actually want to hear about it."*

Meli: *Would you say there's anything about British culture you actually love?"*

Participant: *"The pub. Not even just for drinking, but because it's like the one place where people actually talk to each other. Like, outside of that, we keep to ourselves, but in a pub, suddenly everyone's your best mate."*

Meli: *"So the pub is like the great social equalizer?"*

Participant: *"Exactly. It's one of the only places where it's normal to chat to strangers."*

Meli: *"Alright, last question! if you had to sum up British culture in one word, what would it be?"*

Participant: *Reluctant and genuine!*

Meli: *Amazing. Thanks for chatting with me!"*

Particiopant: *"No worries. Looking forward to the drawing."*

My Notes:

I feel like being British generally is mostly about pretending everything's fine when it isn't. Just, like… we could be having the worst day ever, and if someone asks how we are, we're still gonna say, 'Yeah, not too bad.' It's like an unspoken rule, you just don't overshare unless you really know someone. And even then, probably not. It's just people are a bit more reserved, we don't do big expressions of emotion, really. Like, we'd rather make a joke about something than talk about it seriously. It's more about making fun of ourselves and each other. If a British person takes the piss out of you, that's actually a good sign. It means they like you.

I feel like if I could tell people one thing its that we aren't cold, we're just awkward. We just default to politeness, but at the same time, we avoid unnecessary conversations. Like, don't ask me how my day is if you don't genuinely want to hear about it.

Meil: I'm doing a project where I talk to people about their cultural experiences, while sketching them. Want to join?

Participant: Sure!

Meli: What's something normal in Cyprus that would surprise someone who's never been here?

Participant: That we're obsessed with coffee, but not just *drinking* coffee—*sitting* for coffee. You don't just grab a coffee to go. You sit with your friends for *hours* and talk. Ive lived abroad for a while and people will just buy a beverage, drink it, and leave!

Meli: Yeah, I've noticed that too! Things generally move a bit slower here. Is that something you prefer now that you've experienced both?

Participant: Yes and no. It's nice that people take time for each other, but also, sometimes I miss the efficiency of other places. Like, if I just want a quick coffee, I feel *rude* leaving too soon. Or if I want a process dealt with quickly and efficiently... Cyprus isn't as organised, people usually go more with the flow.

Meli: Since you've lived abroad, do you feel more connected to Cyprus now or less?

Participant: Both? I appreciate it more, but I also see its flaws more clearly. Like, I love the warmth of Cypriot people, but I also feel like there's a lot of pressure to conform. It's like, if you do things differently, people *notice*.

Meli: If you could bring one thing from another country to Cyprus, what would it be?

Participant: I wouldn't change a thing! At the end of the day, colder countries have better organisation, colder people, colder environments, fast paced lives. Warmer countries, have warmer people, warm environments and slow paced living. You have to choose which you prioritise and live the way you chose!

My Notes:

we're obsessed with coffee, but not just *drinking* coffee—*sitting* for coffee. You don't just grab a coffee to go. You sit with your friends for *hours* and talk. Ive lived abroad for a while and people will just buy a beverage, drink it, and leave! ! Things generally move a bit slower here. It's nice that people take time for each other, but also, sometimes I miss the efficiency of other places. Like, if I just want a quick coffee, I feel *rude* leaving too soon, Or if I want a process dealt with quickly and efficiently then ill be at a disadvantage because Cyprus isn't as organised, people usually go more with the flow...

Now that ive experienced different ways of life and culture I appreciate my own more, but I also see its flaws more clearly. Like, I love the warmth of Cypriot people, but I also feel like there's a lot of pressure to conform. It's like, if you do things differently, people *notice*.

When i really think about it tho, I wouldn't change a thing! At the end of the day, colder countries have better organisation, colder people, colder environments, and fast paced lives. Warmer countries, have warmer people, warm environments and slow-paced living. You have to choose which you prioritise and live the way you yourself have chosen.

A 23-year-old student.

Meli: I'm doing a project where I talk to people about their cultural experiences while drawing them. Want to join?

Participant: Sure!

Meli: What's a piece of wisdom from your culture that you carry with you?

Participant: "Family is everything." That's what I grew up hearing. And it's true—I wouldn't be here without my family's support. But sometimes, that expectation feels heavy.

Meli: In what way?

Participant: Like, I'm in university partly because I *want* to, but also because it's what my parents expect. In my family it just wasn't acceptable for me to not pursue anything academically so I had to choose and act accordingly.

Meli: Thats interesting... What would you have chosen to do if you didn't pursue your bachelors?

Participant: I wanted to do something with nails or makeup, but I love my family and they have struggled so much to offer me an option they didn't have, so for me it was a one way street. However I also wonder sometimes if I grew up somewhere else, like back in their home country for example, would I have made different choices?

Meli: That's a big question. Do you feel like London gives you more freedom to explore that?

Participant: Yes and no. I have more *options* here, but the sense of responsibility is even stronger because of how much they sacrificed for me to be here...I have to really work hard on excelling in order to make this all worth my parent's struggle.

Meli: Thats admirable and I really hope you can also do what you love through this! Now if you had to describe your personal sense of your culture in one word, what would it be?

Participant: *Loyalty.* Whether it's family, friends, or faith, I don't take relationships lightly. I will always think of my self and others the same.

My Notes:

Family is everything." That's what I grew up hearing. And it's true—I wouldn't be here without my family's support. But sometimes, that expectation feels heavy. I'm in university partly because I *want* to, but also because it's what my parents expect. In my family it just wasn't acceptable for me to not pursue anything academically, so I had to choose and act accordingly.

If I had all the freedom in the world i think i would want to do something with nails or makeup, but I love my family and they have struggled so much to offer me an option they didn't have, so for me it was a one way street. However, I also wonder sometimes if I grew up somewhere else, like back in their home country for example, what i would've chosen to do.

I am still extremely grateful for my parent's hard work, they provided me with more *options* here, but the sense of responsibility is even stronger because it was such a sacrifice...I have to really work hard on excelling in order to make this all worth my parent's struggle.

If i could use one word to describe my own personal sence of culture it would be *Loyalty.* Whether it's family, friends, or faith, I don't take relationships lightly. I will always think of my self and others the same.

(*A 22-year-old Italian student studying architecture.*

Meli: I'm doing a project where I talk to people about culture while sketching them. Want to join?

Participant: Sure!

Meli: What's something about London that surprised you?

Participant: We were just talking about it but, people *queue* for everything. Like, you could be waiting for a bus, and people will naturally form a line. In Italy, we just... figure it out haha.

Meli: What's something you miss from home?

Participant: Talking to strangers! In Italy, if you're waiting in line, someone will start a conversation with you. Here, if you try that, people look at you like you're crazy.

Meli: Do you think people here are more distant?

Participant: Not necessarily distant—just more private. It's like, everyone has their own little world, and they don't want to disturb anyone else's. I have tried to socialise, and hold dinners at my flat with other students but the conversation just never rolls, I am trully trying to extend my circle outside of just mediterranean or latin people but those are the people that trully try to get to know you in a cheerful way in my experience. Like during a dinner they will all talk to eachother and provide this warm welcoming feeling and this loud chatter and noise! My girlfriend is British but she is like this and we all joke around that she is the least British, British girl to ever exist.

Meli: If you could bring one thing from Italy to London, what would it be?

Participant: I would go back in time and introduce to them the *aperitivo* culture. Sitting outside with friends, having snacks, drinking wine... Taking every opportunity to have a discussion and an intimate chat! I would love to be able to truly talk to some of these people...

My Notes:

In Italy, if you're waiting in line, someone will start a conversation with you. Here, if you try that, people look at you like you're crazy. Its not that people here are more distant, its that they just seem more private. It's like, everyone has their own little world, and they don't want to disturb anyone else's. I have tried to socialise and hold dinners at my flat with other students but the conversation just never rolls, I am truly trying to extend my circle outside of just mediterranean or latin people but those are the people that truly try to get to know strangers in a cheerful way in my experience. Like during a dinner they will all talk to each other and provide this warm welcoming feeling and this loud chatter and noise! My girlfriend is British, but she is like this and we all joke around that she is the least British, British girl to ever exist.

If i could, I would go back in time and introduce to them the *aperitivo* culture. Sitting outside with friends, having snacks, drinking wine... Taking every opportunity to have a discussion and an intimate chat! I would love to be able to truly talk to some of my classmates...