

Appropriation or Appreciation?

To have the opportunity to travel the world and experience all the wonderful cultures out there is an amazing thing. You leave the comfort of your own home and everything that is familiar to you, and thousands of miles later you're somewhere new, where the people speak a different language, eat different food – and wear different clothes.

Wearing the traditional outfit of the country you travel to is by no means a prerequisite, especially if you are travelling for a short period of time, which would most likely be referred to as cultural appropriation, a term that typically has negative connotations. However, if you move to another country to live there for an extended amount of time, would it not be logical to embrace the local culture in order to fit in? There are, of course, many facets to this concept of appropriation vs. assimilation. Incorporating foreign culture into your own life strengthens the relationship you have with local people. When an expatriate dresses in a sari or salwar kameez while going about their daily routine, it demonstrates an sense of compliance and respect for our culture. There are no laws stating that people who come to Bangladesh must dress in our clothing, and yet people do it of their own accord, knowing that they have the freedom to do so. Of course it is important to take into consideration the religious values of the country you are in. It would be inappropriate – although not prohibited – to wear revealing clothing in a country with a large Muslim population. It is a matter of respect and sensitive awareness above than anything else.

Textbook definitions of appropriation and assimilation can be cumbersome, and in order to simplify it, we must look at the key difference between the two: context. Nowadays in Bangladesh many women wear

the tip as nothing more than a fashion accessory when dressing up for special occasions such as weddings, despite it historically having a vast deal of cultural and religious significance for Indian women. When we see women wearing tips here, we do not see them being accused of cultural appropriation, because they are part of South Asia, and part of the same ethnic minority. However, a teenage girl wearing a bindi some 5000 miles away in America as part of her ensemble for a music festival can be construed as being offensive. Why? Because the context is removed, and therefore it becomes appropriation. It is not seen as a case of appreciating Indian culture, but rather taking a part of it to suit one's needs. Traditionally, the sari not only symbolised status and origin, depending on the style and the way it is worn, but it is also the epitome of femininity in the way it is draped around the body, accentuating the female figure. To live in Bangladesh and wear the sari as a mark of acceptance and inclusion is extremely different to wearing the sari as a fashion statement simply because it looks cool, while having no ties to the culture it comes from.

There is a danger of viewing traditional outfits from around the world as being costumes, due to their colourful and elaborate nature. Costumes reinforce stereotypes – we associate colourful feathery headdresses, also known as war bonnets, with Native American culture and although they are worn mainly for ceremonial occasions nowadays, they are still seen as items of great spiritual importance. Despite this, many people wear these headdresses as part of their Halloween outfits, which most people deem as being extremely insensitive and is cited as an example of cultural appropriation.

People associate kimonos with Japanese culture, and rightly so, but many don't realise that that the yukata is also a traditional Japanese outfit, and that the kimono or yukata you wear denotes things like your marital status, the region you are from and your age, so it is not just a case of buying any old kimono from a shop and putting it on.

Similarly, the colour of the Bhutanese kabney, or scarf, represents the rank of the person wearing it. An ordinary citizen would not be seen wearing a scarf any colour other than white, while the colour red is reserved for male members of the royal family. If you are going to dress up in traditional Bhutanese clothing, it's important to bear these things in mind lest you offend anyone. Costumes imply that these outfits are merely things to dress up in, and detract from the significance that they carry. How can you place saris and salwar kameezes in the same category as clown outfits and other items of clothing used for fancy dress? The latter can be referred to as costumes, and rightly so. Not traditional clothes. These are a part of our cultural identity, and should be worn by people willing to adopt that same identity and incorporate it into their own.

Cultural assimilation has several potential drawbacks in that communities strive to stay true to their cultural identities. Traditions become endangered due to assimilation in favour of newer ones in order to be able to merge into the majority. It is our duty to welcome people from other countries and educate them about our culture, rather than look down on them for trying to fit in. As multicultural as the world is right now, we still have so much to learn about the customs and traditions of other countries. It is imperative that we learn to appreciate the differences in a way that unites us, instead of appropriating and marginalising other cultures.

By Zahrah Haider

Embracing Diversity

Growing up, I didn't have many non-Muslim friends, not because I didn't want to be friends with kids who didn't belong to my faith but I simply didn't know many children who were Hindu, Christian or Buddhist. However, one of my close childhood friends was a Christian. For several years, she was my closest friend. But we fell out of touch after I changed my school. Invention of Facebook was some 15 years away, and not everyone had a phone at home or in their pocket in those days. I have often tried to look her up on Facebook but with no luck as of yet.

Jenny was my only close non-Muslim friend when I lived in Bangladesh. I do not feel comfortable using the term “non-Muslim” to describe my friend, but I am using it here because I deem it necessary for this article. After I moved to the United States, this scenario changed for good. America has given me friends from all major world religions -- Judaism,

Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Baha'ism, and of course, Islam. I count my blessings every time I think that I have friends belonging to various faiths and walks of life. My interactions with these people have enriched me as a person; these friendships continue to teach me that “we are humans first.”

Life abroad has taught me that there is so much we can learn from each other, but we make no effort to try mostly because we refuse to open our minds and accept other people for who they are. We want everyone to be like ourselves! As a result, we learn little from the people around us. Not only that, this refusal also feeds into our already prejudiced notions about other people, cultures and faiths. And it's a very dangerous attitude to have.

I believe that if someone respects my religion, I should respect their religion, too. I may not agree with their religious beliefs, but I have no right to disrespect them and

their faith. As the saying goes, to each his own.

I know how it feels to belong to the minority. When in the United States a Muslim man, woman or child is harassed or humiliated because of their faith, it hurts me. It hurts me and makes me sad and mad even though I know that most Americans do not hold fear, hatred and prejudice against Islam and its followers. But minority members tend to be more sensitive about race and religion than people belonging to the majority. It's only natural, and because it's natural it's important for the majority to protect the minority groups and be sensitive towards their faiths and values. I feel it's the responsibility of the majority to give the minority a sense of belongingness.

A man may belong to the majority in his own country, but he may or will certainly belong to the minority when he steps outside his country's border. Those who

have traveled outside their own countries may know this very well. When you travel to a new country, you know that you are a minority in that country because of your race, religion, language and/or nationality. It may sometimes even give you a feeling of aloofness; you feel that you don't belong to this place. It's not a good feeling. And if you ever experience this, it may help you realise how important it is to protect and respect the people who do not form the majority in your country.

We live in a globalised world, where it's necessary to accept the fact that there will always be people different from you. But our differences should not push us away from each other but remind us that this world is beautiful because it is so diverse. Just think how boring it would be if all people, countries and cultures were homogenous!

By Wara Karim