

Your Cultural Attire

Conversations about appropriation sometimes miss the complexity of culture.

By Zahir Janmohamed

Many years ago, when I lived in Washington, DC, I was invited to a party to celebrate the end of the Muslim month of fasting known as Ramadan. Guests were asked to dress in what the host described as “your cultural attire.” It was an odd request—more fitting for a costume show than for a religious gathering—but I wanted to attend so that I could be around other Muslims like me. Still, I had no idea how to dress for the party. I was born and raised in California to Gujarati Indian parents from Tanzania, so I decided to wear what I thought back then best described my culture: a pair of khaki pants, an Oxford button-down shirt, and white Chuck Taylor Converse All Stars. My companion, a Malay woman who was born and raised in the Midwest, opted to wear jeans and a fitted Gap sweater. We took the elevator to the top of the host’s posh apartment building on Massachusetts Avenue, hitting the stop button every few floors to take in the view of our nation’s capitol. When we reached our destination, the guests greeted us with confused stares. Are you sure you are at the right party? Did you not read the invitation, their faces seemed to ask.

Most were dressed in what could be called traditional South Asian attire—knee-length shirts known as kurtas for the men, billowy and brightly colored salwar khamizes for the women. A few from Gulf Arab states wore ankle-length crisp white gowns called abayas. Some from Nigeria wore striking and shiny dashikis from Lagos.

I tried to defend my fashion choice by arguing that most of us in that room, at least those who were born and raised in the US, had been asked, at some point or another, to play dress-up at school, most often by our teachers. Weren’t we tired, I wanted to ask the room full of guests, most of whom were people of color like me, of having to “ethnicize” ourselves for the benefits of our mostly white teachers who insisted we had to dress a certain way to look, say, Japanese? I thought, perhaps naively so, that by wearing khakis that night I was trying to show that being an Indian American is about how I view the world, not about the garments that drape me.

But my argument fell flat—dude, just enjoy these kabobs, the others in the room suggested—so I decided to share my own experience of humiliation. During the Gulf War in 1990, when I was a freshman in high school, I was routinely asked by my teachers to speak about being an Arab. I was even asked to bring Arab food to class, even though I have no roots in that part of the world. In fact, I didn’t even know if there is exactly one type of Arab food, given the multiplicity of Arab identities. I would probably have preferred to talk about my love for Birkenstock sandals, given my style back then, but it was almost always the “ethnic” stories my teachers loved the most from me and other kids of color at my school.

That’s the thing about identity: sure I can claim that my identity is as a Lakers-loving Indian American but that was always trumped by my teachers—nearly all of them white—who insisted to the rest of my school that I was something and someone else. Here, wear these foreign-looking clothes. Talk about being Middle Eastern. And thank us for giving you the chance to speak.

Now, years later after that Washington, DC, party and particularly after having lived for two years in Portland, I finally see the other side: Wearing traditional attire was its own act of defiance, a way of reclaiming pride in clothes that many of us children of immigrants were ridiculed for wearing because they looked “exotic.” After all, my father and mother were born in British-controlled Tanzania and the very act of wearing their cultural garb before independence was seen as an act of rebellion, a way for them to push back against the colonial mindset that to dress “ethnic” is to be “uncivilized.”

As we huddled together for a group photo at the end of the party, my companion and I looked around, noticing the obvious difference in our clothing. Finally someone broke the silence.

"Would either of you mind being the one taking the photo instead of appearing in it?" a guest asked us in the politest manner possible.

I have been thinking of this anecdote recently, especially given the ongoing debate around cultural appropriation, which, broadly speaking, refers to when one cultural group—usually the dominant cultural group—adopts the food, music, or dress of another cultural group, often one that has been historically marginalized. An example of this might be a white guy rapping, given that rap music is traditionally a Black art form that emerged, in part, to talk about the very real experience of anti-Black racism in America.

But these days, the term cultural appropriation is bandied about so easily that it seems that anytime a person cooks a dish not from their own cultural background, someone is ready to cry foul. I have never been bothered by who does what so much as I am troubled by how people do things. I don't care, for example, if a white guy starts an Indian restaurant. However if that same white chef starts decorating his restaurant with stereotypical images of monkey gods, then that would trigger painful memories of white kids teasing me on the playground when I had little recourse to fight back, especially given that teachers often claimed kids of color like me needed to just "get on" with it and focus instead on our studies.

Part of the problem is that we spend too much time interrogating the term appropriation but very little time questioning what exactly culture is. At that party in Washington, DC, for example, was it not possible that those of us dressed up in Indian outfits were also overly ethnicizing our Indian identity while giving ourselves a pass because we ourselves were Indian?

In fact, I wish I had interrogated my own definitions of culture earlier. When I moved from DC to India in 2011 to work as a reporter, I thought rather foolishly that I might have better luck getting people to open up if I wore traditional Indian clothes like cotton kurtas. I was wrong. I was much more welcome into people's homes when I wore jeans and a polo. No doubt some of this was tied up with the way denim is often viewed as an upper-class fashion choice. But most Indians reminded me that residents of India's cities didn't wear traditional Indian clothes like they once did. Furthermore, by doing so, they pointed out, I was embracing an outdated understanding of India that doesn't really exist anymore. It is a curious thing about our changing world: Indian kids in India are fighting to get the latest Nike Flyknits while Indian American kids are scouring eBay to look for the latest curly toed mojari shoes with tiny mirrors on them. What, then, does it mean for something to be culturally Indian or culturally American?

And yet how we define ourselves can be rendered moot in an instant. I feel very American but I was often reminded that, in the eyes of others, I was not when I was at the grocery checkout counter in Portland. More times than I care to recall, the cashier got hung up trying to ascertain where I am "originally" from after seeing my name. The offensive part is not the curiosity but rather what is hidden behind the question: the implicit claim that I am not from the United States.

Of course this experience is not limited to the Pacific Northwest. A recent BuzzFeed report about Princeton University's application process found that admission officers wanted Latino applicants to have more "cultural flavor." A Latina applicant who writes about playing violin in her college essay might be scored lower than a Latina who writes about her love of observing, say, the Mexican festival of Dia de Los Muertos. It's absurd. It is also tragic.

One way to overcome this, perhaps, is to lean into expectations of what people—and let's be honest, mostly white people—think you are. I witnessed this with my friend, an Iranian American comedian, who often felt inclined to make jokes about being Iranian in the US because she thought that was what audiences wanted. She always resented doing this but she also knew it worked. On the other end of the spectrum is when one pushes back against his or her own culture and chooses to immerse oneself in another culture. This is the case with Aziz Ansari's Netflix series, *Master of None*—a brilliant romantic comedy about a young actor named Dev Shah. The show has been universally praised, and for good

reason. But a few have pointed out that the first few episodes of the second season smack of cultural appropriation.

It's a complex and messy issue. Ansari was born and raised in the US to Indian parents, and he has been outspoken as to how people of color are often stereotyped in Hollywood. The show is in many ways a response to that erasure and much of its cleverness can be found in how Ansari challenges the viewer to think differently about children of immigrants. Why can't he, an Indian American living in Italy, be into fine pasta and not, say, Indian masala dosas? But at the same time, Italians on the show eat pasta, drive chic Vespa scooters, and always dress in formal attire. In adding more complexity to his own identity, has Ansari stripped another group of theirs? And if an Indian American actor like Ansari can claim the identity of Italy aficionado, why is it different if a white person were to say, for example, he is a fan of Vietnamese culture?

Last year, I cofounded, along with chef Soleil Ho, a Portland-based podcast about food and race called Racist Sandwich. Since then, the number one question we have been asked by listeners is "Can white people cook this? Can white people cook that?"

I used to tell people that our podcast is not really about this question. When people persist, I say that one of the things I love to do is open up YouTube and try to make a dish from a part of the world that I have never been to myself. That answer never suffices and people find other ways to ask me and my cohost the same question: "Will you people of color tell us white people what we can do?"

It is a well-meaning question, but it is still odd. For one, it centers the discussion of food on white identity. A more challenging question, I would argue, is "Why are chefs of color not celebrated in the same manner as white chefs?" A related question is "Why are women chefs often described in gendered terms like 'homely' and 'motherly,' whereas male chefs are talked about as being 'bold' and 'hyper-creative'?"

No one likes to talk about these questions, and I suspect a reason might be that for all the advances we have made as a country, the ultimate power—the power of naming—still has not shifted. Those of us without this power are still forced to have our own interpretations about identity, history, food, even fashion be reduced to mere claims.

One solution, perhaps, is not only to listen to more voices—especially those of women and people of color—but also to interrogate our very ideas of who gets to speak and who is heralded as an expert.

A few months ago, while visiting my parents in April, I decided to interview my mom for the podcast. She had no idea what a podcast was and thought it was hilarious that we would pick "such a funny name" like "Racist Sandwich."

As an Indian woman born and raised in Tanzania like my father, she has often been made to feel by other Indians, in India and in the US, that her food—and indeed even her Gujarati dialect—is not authentic or pure. Her samosas, they say, are too crispy. Her spinach curry infused with too much coconut. She sometimes pushes back and reminds them that food changes and languages adapt as people migrate from one country to another.

Few want to hear it. I suspect one of the reasons is because identity becomes fortified when it is menaced, and often Indians in the diaspora find themselves ever more protective of their identity, especially as the targeting of Indians and other brown people in America continues to occur at an alarming rate.

Soleil and I released my interview with my mom on Mother's Day, and since then she has called me every few days to find out what listeners are saying and how many downloads we have amassed. Almost all the feedback I've received has been positive, with listeners gushing about her and her quirky sense of humor. But the one compliment she cherishes the most came from a well-known Indian chef who wrote me a two-line email: "Your mom sounds great. Can she teach me some Indian recipes?"

My mom nearly cried when she read that, as did I. We all want to fit in, especially by the group we feel outside of, and she and I share this desire. For her, it is the Indian community. For me, it is white America. The Indian chef's compliments meant so much to her because it is what I suspect she wanted

to hear all along, and perhaps what I wanted to feel too when I wore khakis and an Oxford shirt to that party: that I fit in and was welcome, even if I deviated from what others expected of me; that my claim also has merit.

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