



Mrs Shanthi Jeuland in a sari with her French husband, photographer Jose Jeuland, who is wearing a kurta. She said she has not seen people in Singapore wearing clothes from different cultures disrespectfully, and that she feels proud of her husband when he wears traditional Indian clothes. ST PHOTO: ALVIN HO

Cultural appropriation or appreciation? The S'pore view

Amid debate over an American teen wearing a cheongsam, ST explores issue's relevance here

Jose Hong

When 16 MPs wore saris for a Deepavali photoshoot for Tamil Murasu newspaper in 2016, its news editor Tamilavel said most of the Singapore Indian community "were positive and appreciative that non-Indian MPs appreciated their culture".

However, he added: "I had a minority telling me that this was cultural appropriation."

The issue hit the headlines again recently when 18-year-old American student Keziah Daum wore a traditional Chinese dress – called a cheongsam or qipao – to her prom night.

Assistant Professor Laavanya Kathiravelu, a sociologist at Nanyang Technological University, said "cultural appropriation" is a phrase "typically used when a majority or dominant culture uses a minority or non-dominant culture in a disrespectful and inappropriate manner, and often for profit. The appropriation of that culture also typically reinforces negative stereotypes of people from that group".

A common example is the wearing of feathered Native American headdresses to music festivals by non-Native Americans.

Traditionally, the headwear connotes responsibility and respect to an ethnic group that has historically suffered in North America.

Wearing them as decorations to light-hearted events without considering their history is often seen as offensive.

Fashion houses have been criticised for incorporating items of religious or cultural significance into

their lines, without representing the people whose culture those items belong to.

Earlier this year, Gucci's Caucasian male models wore turbans at a Milan Fashion Week show, attracting accusations that the label was using a Sikh religious symbol to profit while many Sikhs continue to face discrimination.

Clothes store Zara was also singled out for releasing a \$34 "check mini skirt" that looked almost identical to a sarong – but stopped short of using the term for the traditional South and South-east Asian garment.

The act of taking something from a less dominant culture and using it for benefit is often attributed to Western society.

However, Singapore University of Social Sciences' vice-dean and academic lead of the S R Nathan School of Human Development, Associate Professor Lim Lee Ching, said: "Singaporeans do not have 'imbalanced power dynamics' in the racial, cultural or religious sense that is at the heart of the present discussion."

"Sure, there are these issues in other Singaporean settings, such as politics or workplace hierarchies, but certainly not in the way that Westerners do because of their own historical baggage."

He acknowledged, though, that as a member of the Chinese majority in Singapore, he does not know how it feels to live as an ethnic minority.

Yet Mrs Shanthi Jeuland, a Singapore Indian, said she has not seen people here wearing clothes from different cultures disrespectfully.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with celebrating cultures other



Sixteen female MPs donned saris for a Tamil Murasu Deepavali photoshoot in 2016. Its news editor said most of the Singapore Indian community "were positive and appreciative" but a minority saw it as cultural appropriation. PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID



A model wearing clothes from the I AM DURGHA collection by designer Lisa Von Tang, who was inspired by a tour at the Asian Civilisations Museum, where she saw an exhibition featuring the Hindu goddess Durga. PHOTO: LISA VON TANG

than your own so long as you don't infringe on cultural boundaries."

Her French husband, photographer Jose Jeuland, wears traditional Indian clothes to cultural events, weddings and Indian festivals.

"I really feel proud of him when I see he accepts and understands the importance of dressing up appropriately for the event, and that he respects my culture and traditions,"

said Mrs Jeuland, 37, the founder of a public relations firm.

Mr Jeuland, 36, said: "It's about how you act when you wear the clothes. If you are respectful, you are fine."

Singapore-based fashion designer Lisa Von Tang is half Canadian and half-Chinese, and will release a new collection next month called I AM DURGHA.

"She got the inspiration for it at the Asian Civilisations Museum where she saw an exhibition featuring the Hindu goddess Durga."

"I became friends with my Indian guide and she later invited me into her home to go through more valuable Durga material," she said. "This spawned an amazing period of research into this goddess who I, as a non-Hindu, totally admire."

"A world where someone is trying to police where artists get inspiration from is a sad world indeed – particularly if it's art inspired by a reverence for cultural diversity."

"Many of my clients are Indian, whether from India, Singapore, Pakistan or the West; and one of them is actually co-hosting the upcoming I AM DURGHA show with me."

Human resources manager Elijah Raphael has an Indian father and Chinese mother, parents of two very different cultures. To make things even messier, he grew up in Bolivia and went to an American school.

She added: "For example, in the case of non-Indians wearing saris to an Indian wedding or during Racial Harmony Day celebrations, it is not seen as a form of cultural

and culturally appropriating from each other across the centuries."

Referencing the sombrero, a hat associated with Mexico, he said: "The person who wears a sombrero to a party, gets drunk, and pretends to speak Spanish is just mocking a culture and being disrespectful. That is not appropriation."

Mr Saiful Md Anuar, who has worked to strengthen intercultural ties in Singapore for almost 12 years through dialogues and youth mentoring, said: "Two elements define cultural appropriation – power relations and a lack of dialogue."

The 33-year-old paramedic said that because Singapore has emphasised the appreciation of other cultures for decades, and as its main races actively discuss racial diversity, he is not offended if a person wears clothes of a different culture.

"If a Chinese person wears the baju melayu or kurung, then I would say that he or she is trying to appreciate my culture," he said.

However, he added that cultural appropriation does occur in Singapore outside the "Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others" (CMIO) framework, raising the past examples of Singaporeans donning a "blackface", a demeaning caricature against African-Americans.

"Our idea of multiculturalism is still limited to CMIO, so Singaporeans can lack an understanding or appreciation of different cultures beyond that."

Sociologist Paulin Straughan said the notion of cultural appropriation does not apply very well to Singapore because there is not much "pure" about the different cultures here. "By the time our grandparents came here, they had already adapted somehow to Singapore," said the dean of students at Singapore Management University.

"And my mother, who grew up here, has a different knowledge of Chinese culture to my grandmother, who grew up in Canton."

"You must celebrate culture so that it stays a living culture. You have to allow people to live it in a manner that suits everyday life, which includes the notion of mixing and matching."

"Culture has to stay relevant in order to continue through the generations."

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Dos and don'ts of wearing traditional attire

When 18-year-old American student Keziah Daum wore a cheongsam to her prom in Utah, she caused an uproar, with critics claiming she was misappropriating Chinese culture.

The Sunday Times has consulted experts from Singapore's different ethnic groups to find out when wearing an outfit from another culture is acceptable – and how to do it properly.

CHINESE

In their book *Culture And Customs Of Singapore And Malaysia*, Dr

Jamie Koh and Dr Stephanie Ho say it is appropriate to wear apparel with bright and lucky colours – such as orange and red – or don the cheongsam or changshan (long shirt for men) during special festive occasions like Chinese New Year.

However, it is inappropriate to do so during grieving periods or funeral ceremonies, when dull colours like black and grey are more fitting.

MALAY

The baju melayu is a shirt with a stiff collar and trousers worn by

men, and the baju kurung is a loose blouse and skirt worn by women. Islamic tradition requires women to dress modestly and wear clothing that does not expose their bodies, apart from their hands and faces.

The baju kurung is a symbol of Malay heritage and is commonly worn from day to day and during festive or formal occasions. In Malaysia, the baju melayu is worn during official functions.

Non-Malays who don Malay apparel are seen as showing admiration for Malay culture.

Mr Hafiz Rashid, who has been a volunteer at the Malay Heritage Centre for three years, said: "The important thing when choosing to wear the traditional attire of a community is to do some research on the cultural symbolism behind it."

INDIAN

The dhoti, worn by men, is a loose cloth wrapped around the legs and knotted at the waist.

The sari is a long strip of cloth wrapped around a woman's waist and hung over the shoulder.

Southern Indians in Singapore might also wear a Punjabi suit – trousers accompanied by a long tunic – with intricate patterns.

Dr Laavanya Kathiravelu, a sociology professor at Nanyang Technological University, said that for non-Indians, "wearing" such culturally specific clothing in a respectful manner that shows appreciation for the Indian culture is appropriate."

She added: "For example, in the case of non-Indians wearing saris to an Indian wedding or during Racial Harmony Day celebrations, it is not seen as a form of cultural

appropriation but as a way of demonstrating admiration of another culture."

"It would be inappropriate to wear culturally specific clothing such as a sari or dhoti in a way that reinforces negative stereotypes of people of that culture."

"For example, wearing a dhoti to a costume party, where it is seen as an object of ridicule, is inappropriate and may cause offence to the community with which the clothing is associated."

Khoo Wei Jun