

Overcoming and Adapting to Setbacks in Traditions

By:

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Abstract

This paper focuses on traditions and how international and first generation students have maintained and transformed their traditions to fit their lifestyles and limits at Boston University. We aim to learn more about the traditions of our diverse group of interviewees and learn about these tradition's importance in their lives. Additionally, we aim to understand how students of varying cultural backgrounds have been able to find shared communities, shut down misconceptions, and adapt to new traditions in Boston. Students from Singapore, Serbia, Thailand, China, Nigeria, Dubai, Eritrea, and India were interviewed in order to form a diverse pool of stories, traditions, and experiences.

Research Question

Boston University is a melting pot of different cultures and has students with varying backgrounds such as international and first generation students. Such groups of students have strong ties to their cultural background. However, being in a new environment may shape their relations with their traditions and might cause them to adjust in order to fit into school. This paper focuses on the question: How have both international and first generation American students adapted their culture and traditions in Boston?

Methods

College students of all years at Boston University were contacted to be participants in our interviews. They were either first generation American students or international students. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted remotely through zoom. The types of questions were broken down into three categories: assessing traditions, barriers in

tradition, and adapting to college. We asked the following questions although some may have not been in this exact order. In addition, the flow of our conversations allowed for other topics to be discussed and questions to be answered.

Assessing Traditions

- Are traditions important to you, why or why not?
- What are some traditions you grew up with?
- What holidays do you celebrate outside the US? How do you celebrate them?
- What identities are related to your traditions? I.e. religion or nationality or anything else, could be multiple for one tradition
- How has food played a role in your traditions?

Adapting to College

- Do you celebrate the same holidays in Boston? How do the traditions look different when you celebrate them in Boston?
- Have you been able to find a community of people in Boston who have similar traditions?
- What has your education taught you about your tradition here? Are they portrayed accurately and authentically?

Barriers in Celebrating Tradition

- Are there any traditions you haven't been able to carry on or don't want to carry on? Why?

- What were other people's attitudes towards your traditions? Do they have any stereotypes or misconceptions?
- Was it difficult transitioning to new traditions when you came here for school?
- How have your views of traditions changed from past generations? Example: taboos or superstitions
- Have you experienced people cutting you out because you have different views on traditions? (more or less traditional)

Interviewees

Participants	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
Interviewer	Miya Furukawa	Miya Furukawa	Victoria Bond	Proddy Sukcharoen
Length of Interview	21:22	24:10	24:57	11:06
Format	Zoom	Zoom	Zoom	Zoom
Countries Lived In	United States, Singapore	United States, Serbia	United States, China	United States, Thailand

<u>Participants</u>	<u>Participant 5</u>	<u>Participant 6</u>	<u>Participant 7</u>	<u>Participant 8</u>	<u>Participant 9</u>
<u>Interviewer</u>	Proddy Sukcharoen	Jason Li	Jason Li	Sherazed Sow	Sherazed Sow
<u>Length of Interview</u>	14:58	10:57	25:15	21:31	24:11
<u>Format</u>	Zoom	Zoom	Zoom	Zoom	Zoom
<u>Countries Lived In</u>	United States, Thailand, China	United States, China	United States	Eritrea, Dubai	Nigeria

Findings

Celebrating Traditions

Through our interviews, we found that all of our interviewees highly valued the celebration of holidays and traditions despite the differences in their origin. As core memories and cherished childhood experiences, traditions have become a part of their daily lives and have remained just as important, despite being in a new environment at Boston University. Aside from traditions, they have certain values and behaviors which were taught from their culture at a

young age. Coming to Boston University, they still hold these values and oftentimes try to express them here.

Traditions is a big part of African culture that is both taught and ingrained through practice. In her interview, Ariam brought up how her mother cooked eritrean food while they were in Dubai. Sometimes, she makes someone from Eritrea ship the ingredients to them for them to cook their traditional food during their special holidays. She named a few foods that they mostly make and how they share it together. Friday was considered as a family day where they would eat together and spend time together. Adelopa mentioned how back in Africa, respect was a huge part of the tradition which in a way is different from the US. Back where he is from, professors are considered as elders, people you owe total respect to and you should address them in a certain way like you cannot call them by their name. Age was also mentioned as being a big part of traditions, always respect people older than you even if it is just by month.

“Back in Nigeria, calling people sir and ma’am and not their first name. Cause right now we call them Professor *this*. I say hi professor and end it right there cause they don’t want them to be called by their names. I grew up like this and it is a big thing.”

Thai international student Ing has a different opinion on celebrating traditions than our other interviewees. Ing grew up in the Southern part of Thailand and moved to the US to pursue his higher education. He identifies himself as someone who doesn’t bound himself with any traditions because he feels that tradition is another word for “holiday,” something that he does not place a lot of value on. Ing claims that tradition to him relates to the cultural customs that he grew up surrounded by. One traditional custom that he holds very strongly of is the Thai

traditional custom of seniority: having a humble form of respect for anyone who is older than oneself. He states that this form of respect is very important to him because he has a lot of respect for his upperclassmen and elders. Upon coming to BU, he was glad to have found a Thai community in Boston where he could connect with his Thai peers and display his humbled respect for his “*roon p*”s (a word used to describe upperclassmen one respects). Ing finds this as a way for him to celebrate his tradition. More so from a customs standpoint than from a holiday standpoint.

“Amongst the Thai community I’ve found in the states, I still carry on the tradition of ‘seniority.’ For example, seniority in terms of giving initial respect before talking to them (seniors or upperclassmen). I also try to understand people’s thought processes in this too. I would say most of my Thai friends here have similar thought processes as I do...” (so it was not as challenging to carry on this tradition.)

Although Rhea was born and raised in Singapore, her family is from India and carries out many traditions from their background. One big holiday she discussed with great importance was Diwali, a 5 day celebration of light. Although her Indian traditions and holidays are important, living in Singapore has also allowed her to adopt many of the traditions from the country such as the Lantern Festival and Chinese New Years. These traditions have different origins, but there was a commonality between all: food. She talked about daal, Chinese moon cakes, and traditional Indian candies associated with Diwali that her family would have during the occasion. Food does not just play a role in Rhea’s holiday traditions, but also in her everyday traditions.

Rhea talked about being Hindi and how that has impacted the way she views foods such as beef and pork which she does not eat because cows and pigs are seen as sacred.

Stasi was born in Maryland but her family lives in Serbia where she has dual citizenship. At the core of Stasi's traditions and holidays is her religion. She was brought up Orthodox Christian and wanted to find a church here in Boston. Being able to find a community of Serbian people was important to her so she could continue practicing her language skills and be around people with shared values and traditions. Through that church and community she has been able to stay connected to her roots, enjoy traditional Serbian foods, and create a home here in Boston.

As a first generation American student, Samantha also stressed the importance of traditions in her life. Growing up in Massachusetts, Sam's family tried their best to maintain aspects of their culture. One aspect of showing the importance of family is celebrating events such as Chinese New Years. Relatives from all over gather together. It is a time for everyone to talk to each other, some who haven't seen each other in a long time and eat food together at night. The food included Chinese delicacies such as roasted duck, longevity noodles, and more. One thing that was vital to her was visiting the cemetery every year to pay respect to the deceased family members. Elders are given a huge significance in the family dynamics and it is important to continue to show that respect even in the afterlife. Sam states:

“This is specific to Chinese culture but we bring different food and present it to them. We also burn money so that they have money in the afterlife. That's something I remember doing when I was little.”

Barriers in Traditions

A common barrier in tradition was not being able to be with family and relatives as many celebrations were gatherings. Ariam and Adelapo talked about the importance of eating with their families every day back at home. But in school, they often needed to eat alone or with small groups of friends. They both ate with their hands as it is something common to do in their culture with their families at meals but could not be done at school where the cultural norm is on using utensils. Zirui mentioned how it took some time for her to find grocery stores and restaurants where she could get food that reminded her of home. She was so used to cooking with her family and although she does cook with her friends, it was not a replacement of the emotions that she feels when she is back home in her kitchen. Stasi and Rhea often called their parents during certain holidays to have that connection in these important events. This was their way of trying to maintain the tradition of celebrating with family. But there is a significant time difference (up to 12 hours) so it is hard to connect all the time. Rhea mentions how it just doesn't feel the same.

“But yeah, it definitely looks very different, feels very different. But I think that my parents do try to make it imp like special and make us feel important and included in those traditions, even though like my sister and I are at college right now would you say It was difficult transitioning from celebrating stuff with your family to hearing how they just talk about how that's impacted you.”

Samantha and Joyce discussed how their parents often led such traditions and celebrations as they themselves do not know how to perform every aspect of the events. However in school,

their parents are unable to provide that structure and guidance for carrying out their traditions which led to the inability of celebrating things fully. They needed to adapt certain parts so that they would be able to carry it out in a school setting.

There was also an issue of access to the things that are required to fully carry out the events. Samantha and Joyce talked about the cost of getting things like food as many of the authentic dishes are expensive and are not feasible for college students to purchase. Rhea and Stasi mentioned clothing as some traditional celebrations require specific clothing that is worn. They are able to have access to these clothes in their home country from parents and relatives. In Boston, it is both difficult to find culture specific apparel, and if there are, they are expensive as well. Ariam mentioned how to get access to ingredients needed to cook specific food, her mother must ask someone from Eritrea to ship it over. Even though Boston is a diverse city, it is not able to have everything from all cultures. Without such access, many of the interviewees had to adapt the way they approached certain practices and modify celebrations that required certain foods and clothing. Adelapo mentioned that even though he used to almost eat with his hands back home he was not able to carry it in school. Barriers in traditions are frequent especially when the individual is in a new different place with new norms.

Adapting to University

There is a distinct difference in how traditions are celebrated at school compared to the way it is carried out in the interviewee's home. Many participants needed to adapt the way they approach celebrations. This included substituting the authentic food for whatever is more readily available. Some participants tried to replicate the family aspect by calling their parents during important holidays despite the time difference. Most often, the interviewees are with their groups

of friends which helps with the socializing aspect of many of their traditions. Even if some people in their groups do not exactly know the traditions, the interviewees like to share this aspect of their background and teach their friends on what it is.

Almost all of the interviewees have actively sought out communities in Boston University where they can feel comfortable in. This includes cultural clubs around campus or finding friends that share similar interests and culture. Samantha, for example, discussed how BU's Chinese Student Association and the Asian Student Union has helped her feel more connected to her cultural roots. The student-run clubs were able to put on cultural shows and host food events that mimic some of the celebrations like Chinese New Years and Mid Autumn Festival. Stasis was brought up Orthodox Christian and wanted to find a church here in Boston. Through that church and community she has been able to stay connected to her roots and create a home here. She wanted to find a group of people that shared her beliefs and a place for her to actively carry out this part of her background. Zirui mentioned a lot about her ultimate frisbee team and how connected she felt in that community which was mostly international students from China like her. An interview of international students in the Southern United States showed similar adaptation strategies. The students joined many cultural clubs where they were able to share parts of their backgrounds, even if others were not from the same country¹. One difference in the study was that the international students sought out more English speakers or Americans so that they could practice and improve their English speaking skills to fit in more. Aside from the difference in language, the students in the study were similar to the interviewees of this paper.

¹ Hsiao-ping Wu, Esther Garza, and Norma Guzman, "International Student's Challenge and Adjustment to College," *Education Research International* 2015 (February 23, 2015): pp. 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/202753>.

One thing Mill brought up to discuss was that the size of the Thai community at BU is a lot smaller than she had expected. She has had to reach out to the Thai community from other schools in the surrounding area such as Northeastern University, Tufts University, and Harvard University. Fortunately, she does not regret doing so because she has been able to branch out to many more people who share the same culture, views, and mindsets. Stasi had a similar issue where she wasn't able to really find people who were Orthodox Christian. There is a Serbian Church that she tries to go to every Sunday but is a bit of a distance off campus. Regarding on campus groups she says she hasn't really felt that connection.

“Not that I know of. I don't think I've actually met one serving person on campus. So funny to me. but there's not a lot of us so it's not that surprising. I just have also generally found that a lot of my friends are very similar to their cultures, even though they're different.”

Even if Boston University itself does not have the means for some people to connect with others, people still try to adapt. Some people have found it easier to find groups of people with shared backgrounds compared to others. Almost all the participants have branched out to make friends from other cultures. They are still able to find a community in which they feel connected and comfortable in, even if they might not have the shared traditions.

Discussion

Among all participants, celebrations were a huge part of their traditions and how they can connect with their culture. Within celebrations, food was a significant factor and although the type of food varied greatly from each individual's background, the importance they held was constant throughout. A survey of international postgraduate students showed that home made food was able to provide emotional sustenance and stated as tasting better than similar food from local areas². Food reminds people of their home, family, and culture. Being in a new country has limited the ability to eat such food as many interviewees have pointed out. Whether it be the inability to afford it, make it, or just have access, this important part of their life has been limited. Many celebrations like Lunar New Years, Diwali, and Eritrea Festival cannot be celebrated to their full extent without the traditional foods being present.

Boston University can do a better job of promoting different cultures and making sure students feel a sense of belonging. Social media platforms such as the BU Instagram page, Facebook page etc., can be used to post more cultural content. This is to not only raise awareness for the different traditions celebrated globally but also to provide resources for students to connect with people who follow the same culture. A survey done on first generation students showed that many of them expressed the issue of faculty and administrative members not understanding their backgrounds and why the students face difficulty in learning³. This prevents the students from being able to learn in a supportive environment which is more suited to their needs. Similarly, an interview on faculty asked if they ever modified materials for international

² Lorraine Brown, John Edwards, and Heather Hartwell, "A Taste of the Unfamiliar. Understanding the Meanings Attached to Food by International Postgraduate Students in England," *Appetite* 54, no. 1 (2010): pp. 202-207, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2009.11.001>.

³ DeRosa, E., & Dolby, N. (2014). "I don't think the university knows me.": Institutional culture and lower-income, first-generation college students. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 10(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/D4102019237> Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0kj6m6r8>

students, many of whom said no even if the students had issue with the learning style⁴. Many international students come from places with different teaching styles and how classes are run. It is hard to adapt to a completely new learning system and requires faculty members to play a part in doing so. Some of the interviewees have mentioned that they have had to search up Facebook pages for their respective cultural community area in Boston. This was a challenging task since it was hard to determine the reliability of the online sources. Therefore, certain risks and insecurities were felt by some of the interviewees when they had very little resources given to them at the start.

Furthermore, more cultural studies can be incorporated into classes at BU. For example, introducing more foreign language classes that might reflect the minority population at BU. After some extensive research, we found that most other large colleges such as the University of Pennsylvania offer a broader range of language classes. Perhaps Serbian or Thai language classes can be added to the university's list of courses offered. Not only would this benefit the students, but it would also provide job opportunities for the native professionals in certain minority groups. This would be a win-win situation. In addition, Boston University already hosts some cultural days where the dining halls serve food from certain countries. This can be expanded upon where more diversity can be included. Students can input their opinions on which country can be hosted in the dining halls and this would give minority groups a bigger voice in promoting diversity. Boston University can also recognize more holidays and work to ensure that those who celebrate such holidays may need accommodations in class. This has been done to a small extent with Eid and Lunar New Year, but there are so many more. Such suggestions are just ways to make international and first generation students feel more included in the

⁴Susan Unruh, "Struggling International Students in the US: Do University Faculty Know How to Help?," *ATHENS JOURNAL OF EDUCATION* 2, no. 2 (2015): pp. 99-110, <https://doi.org/10.30958/aje.2-2-1>.

community. BU is known for its diversity and we can take steps to ensure that it becomes even more inclusive.

Conclusion

There is a collective agreement on the importance of traditions and their ability to help us connect with our culture and to each other. Whether it be through food, language, celebrations, or values, every aspect maintains the bond that people have with their background. Especially in a new environment, there is a desire to continue to make sure that bond is strong. Students coming to a new state for college stress the necessity of maintaining that relationship. This was true for the participants of this paper. Even with such a diverse background of interviewees in which each person has their own traditions, they uphold many similarities. They faced similar struggles in the school environment and tried to adapt in similar ways. It should be noted that Boston University has a very large student population. It is likely that some students do not feel the same way about traditions. Going to college may be a way for them to finally escape from their family and culture which they feel trapped in. But from this study and the interviewees selected, the idea of tradition is highly valuable. Students should try their best to maintain this part of their identity and schools like Boston University should offer assistance to make sure that every student has the ability to do so.

Citations

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