

A Coconut by Any Other Name

By Rishwa Amin



Coconut, banana, sell-out, FOB ... ever heard of these terms? "Coconut" and "banana" applies to students whose parents immigrated to the United States and do not know how to speak their parents' native language. They're brown or yellow on the outside, but white on the inside.

F.O.B. is short for Fresh Off the Boat and refers to students who came here only a few years ago. The idea of dating outside their race or going to a keg party is completely foreign to them.

The coconuts call the FOBs prudes who need to lighten up, and the FOBs are angry that the coconuts and sellouts have no respect for their heritage and have forgotten "where they came from."

From both sides, these labels are stupid. They're just another way for the people of the Asian community to remain divided. Heritage can mean so many things to so many different people. It is time to realize that both the American and Asian cultures influence our thinking in every way. To completely disregard people as being "too American" or "too Asian" is to deny the richness of each culture.

When my family moved to the United States, we were hoping for some of the same things that any family from a third-world country hopes for. For us, their children, my parents wanted to open the door of opportunity that was closed for them. We began by doing some of the same things that every immigrant family does: learning English and attempting to adjust to a new culture were among the top two. For me and my brother, my mother hired a tutor who sat down with us every day with an English dictionary to teach us new vocabulary words. My parents spoke our native tongue at home because, though they understood English, they could not speak it very well.

Growing up in the United States as a teen-ager was a little confusing at times. At home we spoke Gujarati, had Indian dinners, celebrated Indian holidays and only entertained Indian friends and family. I was never allowed to go to a person of another color's house. Jennifer's slumber party or the prom was completely out of the question.

Going to school was like entering a completely different world. My American friends went from the same culture at home to the same culture at school. But for Asian immigrants, school was in a different language, with different ideas. I only experienced the ideals of freedom and liberty that this country aspires to during the school day. When I went back home, it was as if I were returning to India.

Then came college, and all of a sudden my parents were nowhere to be seen. I was completely thrown into the American culture head-first.

Now that I'm in college, I go from dorm to class and speak English all day. I have to make decisions about whether to drink or not because my parents, as well as traditional members of the Indian community, would disapprove. I find that the friends I choose are important because, if hang around only American people, then I am "selling out," but if I hang around only Indian people, then I am not keeping my options open. Joining groups like Sangam and finding Indian friends becomes important so that I will feel like I am trying to hang on to a semblance of my heritage. The crazy thing is, my friends and the people in Sangam are almost as confused as I am.

This is where terms like coconut, banana, sellout and FOB come in. Is it possible to be too much, or not enough a part of one's culture? What does it mean to be considered a person who does not take pride in his or her race or acts too much like an Asian stereotype? Are you too Americanized when you wear jeans and a t-shirt, or is the line drawn at not knowing how to speak your parents' native tongue? Where are the limits?

My question is, what do these terms mean? Does that mean that a person is acting too American, or too Indian? Where you are

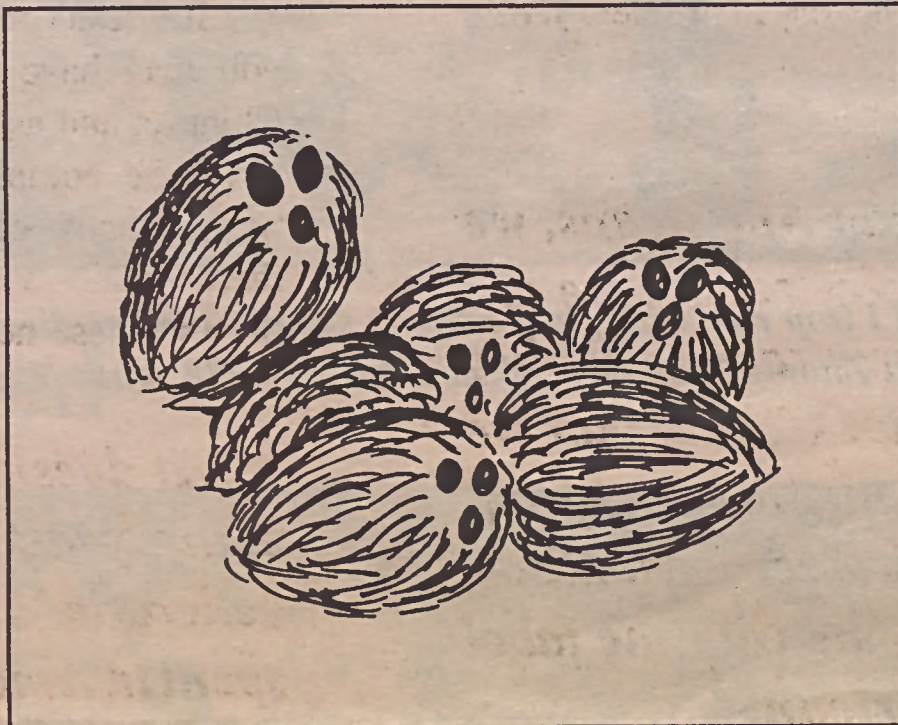
from could refer to the place where you were born. But if you were born in one country and then raised in another, like I was, then the lines become blurred. The ideas and concepts that I have been introduced to since I have lived here are completely different from what my parents believe in.

Growing up in the United States has introduced immigrants to ideas like marriage outside the culture or the empowerment of women.

In the Indian culture, the idea of marrying outside of your own race is not accepted. Am I going against my heritage when I believe that not being able to date outside my race has racist overtones to it? My parents would think so.

What about the rights of women? Typically, not only Indian but also Asian cultures emphasize the submissiveness of women. The theory of "power to the woman" is a Western idea. Am I going against my heritage when I believe that a woman is every bit as equal to a man, even though my culture says that a woman is one notch below? My parents would think so.

Going back to India for the first time this summer after 13 years was an eye-opening experience. Before the trip, I believed that I was



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Indian even though I had lived here for such a long time. I was from India, and being raised here did not matter, because India was my home and my country—not the United States.

Living there for three months, I felt as if I were living in a foreign country. The daily customs were different. I was not allowed to do anything that went against Indian ideals. Suddenly, I was not allowed to wear shorts and a t-shirt. My hair had to be tied up. Yes, I spoke the language fluently, but with an American accent. My cousins made fun of the way I said certain phrases or words. Hinduism was always practiced in our home, but it was much less orthodox because it was practiced in the United States, far away from its native environment.

After the trip, my borders were redrawn. Remembering where you come from is more complicated than how you dress or the people you hang around. The only thing that labelling people in this way accomplishes is a division within the race. Traditional Indians are angry at second generation Indians because they do not know how to speak their native language. But if the child was raised here, and the parents did not encourage the child to speak the native language, who's fault is it?

In order to have an interest in your heritage, you have to feel some sort of connection to it, either spiritual or physical. People who were not born in their parents' native countries should not be given guilt trips about not knowing enough about their heritage.

The culture in which you choose to integrate is a personal choice. People who choose different aspects of each culture should not be made to feel guilty or have a label stuck on them, because it is a choice that they have made. Perhaps they do not agree with some of the ideas of their native culture. As first- and second-generation college-educated immigrants, we must stop throwing each other into boats and fruit baskets. We must look beyond the clothes and the friends we make. These terms only boil down to childish name calling.

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