

## **My Kurta: Making the Strange Familiar**

Christopher Sorrentini

Clothing is not just something we wear. Just by looking at what a person is wearing, you can form an opinion of them. It can identify us, show a glimpse of who they are, where they are from, what religion they may practice, what stage of life they are celebrating. The list goes on and on. Clothing is just one aspect of a person's culture that can be passed on to another person who is not from the same culture. The best example I can think of is me. I am Puerto Rican/Italian born in America and my partner is West Indian born in Guyana. Being in a bicultural relationship, we have learned many different parts of each other's culture including clothes used in weddings and religious ceremonies. Two years ago, I bought my own kurta and travelled to Guyana for the first time to celebrate my brother-in-law's wedding.

A kurta is a loose-fitting long tunic that goes down to knee length but can be shorter and originates from India. It can be worn on formal occasions or can be worn for everyday use depending on how the kurta is decorated. Informal everyday use kurtas are plain and may or may not have a design embroidered. If it does have a design, it is usually just around the collar and is very minimal and does not stand out much unlike the formal kurta. Formal kurtas are decorated with designs that stand out such as the one I own. They also have jewels or beads on the embroidered design along the collar and at the bottom of the sleeves. The sleeves of the kurta remain the same width and do not narrow like the button-down shirts used in suits we are used to wearing at weddings. Because of its loose fit, it is extremely comfortable to wear.

My kurta was made for formal use. It is red with blue designs on the fabric. There is a gold felt material that is stitched around the collar and is embroidered with many different colored beads, or "jewels". The same design is also stitched at the cuffs of both sleeves. The tunic comes down to knee length and I wore it with a peach-colored drawstring pajama style pants. It was bought at a store that sells Indian clothing such as kurtas and sarees that is located on Jamaica Ave in Queens. When I tried on the kurta at the store, it fit me perfectly. The material was light, so I was not overly hot in the Caribbean weather that Guyana has when I wore it at the wedding but the tunic itself

has a bit of weight to it. Despite it being a little heavy it was still wonderfully comfortable to wear. It was also comfortable because the pajama style pants were also made from a thin material and is also loose fitting.

I was told that many of the kurtas that were in the store were made in India and brought here from the shop owner or the workers and others were made in the shop. Because my kurta has no labels, its origins are unknown. One thing I noticed while shopping for my Kurta is the need to preserve the originality of the designs. Many of these shops do not allow pictures to be taken for fear that their work will be copied by a competitor. Traditionally, only men wore kurtas, but it has now become a unisex garment. The woman's version is called the kurti and it is shorter than the men's kurta.

As you might have guessed, the kurta and other parts of the Hindu culture that some, if not most, people from Guyana follow originates from India. "When a large number of people migrate from their regions to other people's region then culture also migrate with them" (Kumar 2018, 188). Indians first came to Guyana when slavery was abolished in the early eighteenth century. The plantation owners need a new group of people to work in place of the now freed African people. "Many of them were lower-caste Indians, sometimes existing in a state of virtual slavery in their own country, who were glad to flee their landlords and creditors for the prospect of a new beginning in a new land" (Gale, pg 322) and they also brought with them their culture. The country was under British rule until it declared its independence in the 1970's. The population of Guyana also consists of Afro-Guyanese, Portuguese, Chinese, Amerindians, and other races. and each of them contribute to the Guyanese culture however, most of the population is of Indian heritage and the most practiced religion is Hinduism.

The kurtas use varies depending on the region. People in India can be seen wearing it on a more regular basis. In NYC and in Guyana, it is mostly used as formal wear. In Guyanese Hindu culture, the kurta is mostly worn during religious ceremonies called Pujas also known as a Jhandi. A Puja is a religious ceremony in which a priest, called a pandit, recites Hindu scriptures and helps with the rituals performed during the ceremony. Pujas are done to mark a special occasion like a birthday or wedding. Indian

clothes like the kurta and saree are typically worn by the family performing the ritual but the guests can also wear them too.

I have learned more about the history of not just the Kurta but of its origins and its migration to Guyana. I have also learned that there are many different types of kurtas as well and its origins can be traced back to their area of origin based on the style. Researching the kurta has not changed my thinking or relationship with this object but has brought my connection with my partner's culture much closer. Many of my partner's family were shocked that I already knew much of the customs since I have practiced them before. They only knew of me because of video chat conversations via Facebook. They were even more shocked to see that I knew how to dance to Soca and Chutney music. Hindu weddings are not like American weddings. There are religious rituals that occur throughout the days leading up to the wedding. I was only able to view a few of them. In the first ritual I witnessed, the groom's side of the family took a short walk from their home and brought offerings to burn by the trench. At this point during the pre-wedding rituals, the bride and groom are not to cross paths. This was difficult to arrange because both families lived on the same block. The bride and her family lived two houses down across the street. Because of this the bride's family had to walk around the block to the same area after my family was done. The second pre-wedding ritual I saw is called Haldi. This ritual involves both the bride and groom being covered in a turmeric paste that is applied by the pandit and family members. It is believed that the paste will keep them protected from any "evil eye". They are not allowed to wash it off for a few days and they are supposed to use this time to reflect before the wedding. The third pre-wedding ritual involves the bride getting henna tattoos painted on her hands and feet. Other women attending the wedding also have their hands and feet painted as well. The wedding itself was a beautiful sight to see. On the days between these rituals, there are parties in both homes. On the day of the wedding the men were dressed up in their suits or kurta or in a suit. The woman all dressed in their saree. Looking at the people viewing the wedding, you can see their clothing full of different colors. The bride and groom were under a gazebo like structure and it was decorated with many different colored flowers hanging from the roof. The day after the wedding, they had a typical American style wedding reception at the groom's house which was where I was staying.

I was not able to sightsee as much as I would have liked to because the rituals and celebrations took place most of the time I was there, but I intend to explore the country further the next time I am able to travel back. I would love to see more of the country my partner is from to deepen our connection and to see more similarities and differences both of our cultures have. Doing so would make a strange place more familiar.

## Resources

Hardy, Michele A. "India." In *Encyclopedia of National Dress: Traditional Clothing around the World*, edited by Jill Condra, 312-325. Vol. 1. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013. *Gale eBooks* (accessed December 15, 2020).

[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3161700040/GVRL?u=cuny\\_laguardia&sid=GVRL&xid=5a780a0f](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3161700040/GVRL?u=cuny_laguardia&sid=GVRL&xid=5a780a0f).

"Hindus of Guyana." In *Americas*, 3rd ed., 322-326. Vol. 2 of *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life*. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2017. *Gale eBooks* (accessed December 15, 2020).

[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3648200178/GVRL?u=cuny\\_laguardia&sid=GVRL&xid=09f8db49](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3648200178/GVRL?u=cuny_laguardia&sid=GVRL&xid=09f8db49).

Kumar, Manoj. "Cultural Migration from Pakistan and Impact of these Cultures on Northern Haryana after the Partition of India", 188-189 Vol. 5 Issue 1. Jan-March 2018, [http://www.ijrar.com/upload\\_issue/ijrar\\_issue\\_647.pdf](http://www.ijrar.com/upload_issue/ijrar_issue_647.pdf)