

The 2019 Christmas Cookie Contamination

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Every Christmas Eve, without fail, my grandma's old kitchen table is commandeered by plates of every Christmas cookie imaginable. The annual Collart Christmas Cookie Competition is not one to be taken lightly. Every family member is allowed exactly one (1) submission: a full plate of one type of Christmas cookie such that everyone present may sample some. A person will not qualify for voting if they do not try at least a bite of each cookie. There are four possible categories in which your cookie may eclipse the other entries: Best Look, Best Taste, Best Texture (a new addition—I thought it was a funny suggestion), and Best Overall. Despite the seemingly serious procedure I have described, there is always laughter, teasing, and joy. Dinner plates are cleared away from the giant, twenty-something seat table, and the air is filled with scents of sugar, cinnamon, hints of fruit, and a chorus of familiar voices. There's a fine line between intense, hostile competition and my grandma laughing at my cousin as he announces the winner for the "Best Lookiest" cookie. We have our unspoken rules and our own little traditions in place to put a leash on the usual holiday fervor.

Maybe it was for this reason that the cookie competition of 2019 was thrown for a loop. My cousin's wife from Russia entered the competition for the first time with a submission of baklava. Suddenly, instead of teasing insults and uproarious laughter, there were hushed whispers and subtle glances. "But baklava's not a cookie, is it?" "Does that even make sense for Christmas?" "Is this allowed in the competition?" Funny how all it took was a sweet honey and syrup pastry for my very American family to question everything. This incident begs the question of why such a seemingly insignificant variance from our family ritual was met with such a strong reaction. To what extent was this reaction warranted? What is it that defines one's culture? Where do we draw the line between tainting and adapting our culture?

I have always been one to play devil's advocate, just as I did on that fateful Christmas eve (much to my family's chagrin), but these are questions I have previously failed to answer. Kwame Anthony Appiah, a cultural theorist from Ghana, has much more successfully explored similar questions on a global level in his *New York Times* article "The Case for Contamination." As suggested by the title, some people are greatly concerned about the mixing of cultures and influences, especially from first-world countries, and whether we should be attempting to preserve them. "So why," Appiah asks, "do people in these places sometimes feel that their identities are threatened?" (33). Simply put, he suggests it's "because the world, their world, is changing, and some of them don't like it" (Appiah 33). Perhaps the same could be said about my family's own holiday traditions and one little platter of baklava.

The preservation of culture is a tricky subject, and not just because the preservation itself is difficult. Rather, the challenge is in determining what defines a unique, traditional culture and which parts should be preserved. This is the struggle that Appiah unpacks in his article. While both equality and differences among people are important, "we can't enforce diversity by trapping people within differences they long to escape" (34). A common subject of debate among different

beliefs is identifying this fine line between acceptance and resistance to change. Appiah, someone who grew up in the ambiguous gap between these two extremes, argues for “[a] tenable global ethics [that tempers] a respect for difference with a respect for the freedom of actual human beings to make their own choices” (52). In essence, we should strive to settle comfortably within that ambiguous gap at the junction of globalization and tradition while leaving room for individuality.

Appiah makes a point to discuss the role of “contamination” in the preservation and development of culture. This debate about culture I previously mentioned is a debate between two extreme sets of beliefs about contamination: the cultural preservationists and the fundamentalists. The preservationists speak of “the evil of ‘cultural imperialism,’” which surely refers to the contamination of cultures and traditions (Appiah 34). Appiah clarifies that they often speak of media influences, technology, and modern societal norms as factors that can potentially have adverse effects on diverse, traditional cultures. On the other hand, the fundamentalists believe in the homogenization of all people for the sake of equality (Appiah 34). These two positions represent the extreme, opposite ends of the argument on culture. The way Appiah sees it, true equality resides in free will, not in enforcement of preservation or change, regardless of supposed contamination.

Appiah’s use of the word “contamination” is an interesting choice. He leaves us with the impression that contamination means something much more complex than its usual negative connotations. Appiah describes how the authentic West African textiles that many people consider integral to culture originally came from the Dutch in the 19th century. What, then, are the cultural preservationists meant to make of “authentic” and “traditional” African garb? Just one of many examples of interwoven histories, he shows how easily “primordially authentic culture can be like peeling an onion” (Appiah 34). In his own experience at home, “The president of Ghana comes from this world, [...] born across the street from the palace to a member of the royal Oyoko clan. But [...] he went to Oxford University; he’s a member of one of the Inns of Court in London; he’s a Catholic [...]” (Appiah 32). Even the president of a country that people see as requiring preservation is a mix of cultures himself. He is the result of what preservationists consider to be this so-called “contamination.” Evidently, traditional “culture” is not actually an untouchable, pure entity, but rather one of many stories and facets. With these examples in mind, Appiah makes it seem as though our world’s infection of cultures isn’t quite so deadly. In other words, “contamination” can have its advantages, making “The Case for Contamination” a fitting name for his work.

It could be argued that this is all irrelevant simply because, “Baklava is NOT a cookie.” Or at least that’s what my family said when I told them what I decided to write about. This is partially true; it really is more of a pastry. But it followed the rest of the rules. Baklava likely originates from Turkey and Greece, where it was altered, and other neighboring countries eventually adopted their own versions (“The History of Baklava”). Now baklava is commonly served throughout the world during Christmas, Easter, Ramadan, and Rosh Hashanah—it’s a sign of celebration and light (Gaifyllia). Baklava is not by any means of “pure” origin considering its extensive history even as a Christmas dessert. But let’s consider gingerbread, a quintessential Christmas cookie that always makes an appearance in our own American Christmas cookie competition. According to the PBS article “The History of Gingerbread,” Greek and Chinese recipes were the first to exist, centuries before European recipes stepped into the spotlight. By the

time gingerbread made its way into American cookbooks, it was often as “soft gingerbread baked into pans” (Avey). In fact, I might feel inclined to say, “Gingerbread is NOT a cookie. Or at least not always.” Our family recipes do happen to be hard cookies, but the takeaway is that neither baklava nor gingerbread are “pure” treats that represent one, single culture or type of dessert. This is also not the first time we’ve had unusual, almost crossing-the-line submissions, although the riskiest one. So what is it about this particular incident that’s holding my family back from change?

Although he gives some hearing to cultural preservationists, Appiah ultimately dismantles this position, instead emphasizing the lack of purity in most things, such as in the examples of baklava and gingerbread. However, Appiah could be undervaluing the importance of preserving certain rituals. Trivial family games can’t exactly be equated to the erasure of entire cultural histories, but this is one of the only traditions my family adheres to, giving it a certain significance to us. This is especially true of rituals among those of us who don’t really feel as though they belong to a culture in the traditional sense. My entire family has little connection to any other historical cultures outside of our American lives. Because of this, our fabricated little traditions are our culture. Having this rough patch in our usually smooth-running holiday routine somewhat parallels what others consider “the intrusion of modernity on timeless, traditional rituals” (Appiah 32). But it might be worth noting that my family is from the Bay Area in California, a place known for being one of the most culturally diverse in the country. And while I would consider my family to be very open and accepting, this simple treat caused a more complex debate. Does this mean that our cookie competition has been reduced to an American, white-washed existence in which its own limitations are more important to us than the experience it provides us? This goes back to Appiah’s argument that people easily become uncomfortable with change and the unknown, and this is what spurs resistance. However, change doesn’t mean abandonment. Change can mean evolution. “Cultures are made of continuities and changes,” Appiah proclaims, “and the identity of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren’t authentic; they’re just dead” (34). My family’s Christmas cookie competition has only been in existence long enough to witness the addition of my favorite category. Otherwise, it has remained untouched. Maybe some pieces of baklava were precisely what my family needed to start considering greater expansion of our tradition. We already know that “tradition was once an innovation,”—change has to start somewhere (Appiah 34). Social norms that are now commonplace were once seen as unthinkable, once a collage of revolutionary ideas. So shouldn’t my family’s version of tradition be able to evolve similarly? As Appiah states, change is an integral part of life.

Culture is inherently subject to change and blending. Family traditions are a part of one’s own personal culture, and therefore also subject to change. Looking back at examples throughout history, it becomes evident that our traditions are defined by this evolution and expansion of ideas. However, this doesn’t mean that change comes easily. My family’s reaction to a variance from the norm wasn’t completely unwarranted. After all, our definition of that family tradition is a “cookie” competition. However, despite all the controversy, the results of the competition portray a different story. The Baklava won the category for Best Taste, regardless of the criticism it faced as an entry. Maybe we as people really are more open to changes in our traditions than we think. Our family tradition was not abandoned when we allowed this slight discrepancy to take place; it was adapted. This is the nature of culture. For one reason or another, practices and traditions slowly become “contaminated” by others, which allows for the advancement of one’s culture to take place. On the other hand, abandoning culture would look more like an all-encompassing, rapid desertion of the

expected. The line between abandonment and adaptation of culture really is more of a valley between the two that leaves room for self-determined evolution. As Appiah argues, change, especially in culture, is an integral part of life. And whether you define culture as a deeply historical family identity or merely as a set of family rituals, we recognize to some extent when change may be ready or even need to occur. While we haven't had the chance to experience another cookie competition due to the pandemic, I do plan on sharing this essay with my family before the 2021 competition commences. I imagine I'll at least get some laughs, but maybe I'll also manage to pave the way for evolution in our own definition of culture.

Works Cited

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