"YOU'RE BLACK, NOT ASIAN"

How Culture Interest Affects our Identity

BY NYASHA OLIVER

Growing up in South London in the mid 2000's involved identifying yourself for who you are and fitting into secondary school. If you didn't have Bebo or MSN, make your school ties as "fat knots" and didn't have those little Nike bags, you didn't blend in. So imagine being a short black girl listening to Asian pop in a predominately Afro-Caribbean feared school that had people shook by the name of it.

I stood out.

Other girls at my school would always ask "Can you even speak the language?," "What if they're saying go suck your mum in the song?" or what I heard quite often "Are you trying to be Asian?"

Back then I didn't know compliments from insults so some of the questions I took in a positive way and looking back, I shouldn't have. What I didn't know then compared to now, was that the whole "Are you trying to be Asian?" issue, referred to how they saw me trying to conform out of society and media stereotypes. Everyone was confused that my interests were out of the ordinary. Stepping out of that box saw people in my year see me as strange, "not black enough" and trying to be a part of a culture I barely knew about at the time. Even family members thought it was going to be a strange phrase.

Pop culture is a window into escaping the real world and the norms in how others view us. As a teenager I enjoyed diving into watching shows such as Takeshi's Castle, Utaban and Star Golden Bell. I was just drawn to their entertainment style. I had an urge to learn their humour and language, but never had the urge to be a part of the Asian race that I had no relation to.

Even so, I felt proud and awesome to display some of my favourite artists like Dong Bang Shin Ki, Jolin Tsai and Morning Musume on my art and technology folder.

Unfortunately, my secondary school was described as being "ghetto" and known to start fights with other schools in the area." Anyone coming out of there was expected to be a loud, angry black girl. And even after finishing school, I was still referred to as "That Black girl who likes Chinese and Japanese things" during my teenage years.

So it got me thinking as I got older, that the idea of a Black girl (particularly from an African, Caribbean or Afro-Latino background) openly learning about another culture outside of their own would result in weird looks and it lead to me questioning myself. Like "can others like me appreciate a culture without being labelled negatively?" or Can other people who label Black women like myself just take a step back and think about their words?

Over the years, these questions stuck with me. I've noticed that the idea of a Black girl learning a culture outside of their own background (e.g. African, Caribbean, Afro-Latino) got me weird looks and questions.

It also emphasised the assumption that I must be into one aspect of the country and my interest was purely fetishism like following K-Pop idols. It's annoying because that one aspect of the culture such as Taiwanese dramas or Kawaii culture can really motivate a person to learn more about the country and culture further, it's just that the particular interest I had so happened to be the thing that made me so passionate to learn about Asian culture. Not everything is an obsession turned into fetishising the culture for the race.

When I started travelling and living in Asia, people still reacted the same way as when I was a teenager.

They told me they have seen Black people with the traditional media tropes especially in some homogenous countries such as Japan or Korea. People thought I was good at hairstyling, singing and athletics. It didn't help that they met people who lived up to these tropes and stereotypes notably from the military bases.

I felt even more encouraged to break these stereotypes.

When I lived in Japan, the locals had no expectations from me to know how to cook tempura udon and speak Japanese. It was just seeing race first, personality and skills second.

The generalisation and stereotyping as I lived in Japan was anticipated. It's a homogenous country with a complex culture of perfection and favouring Western colourism. So I expected at least the stares and the surprise.

But when it came to being challenged in my language skills and mannerisms to a point where it was getting tiring to keep up, I realised then that they saw me as an outsider whose identity wouldn't be accepted by them and they expected me to return home soon. People would still say "she can speak a little Japanese and doesn't know much" despite studying the language in sixth form and University.

Still, it didn't stop me. Because not everyone treated me like this both at home and in Asia. Early 2010's saw me make lots of friends who liked the same music, fashion and shows. Every time I got to speak in Japanese or Korean, I was encouraged to continue as the natives enjoyed helping me improve.

I felt welcomed and became more confident and motivated because of it.

My skills and knowledge are used at work, for freelance projects and at events. Even now, I feel proud to be the only Black-British female who speaks two Asian languages within my community..

My identity is something I've been trying to discover since my teenage years and recently, I've found it and I'm very happy being me. It's a challenge being a Black female in this world when your interests and personality do not "match" with the colour of your skin to others' perception. I believe as long as you know your identity and stay true to yourself, you should be able to know your worth in this merciless world. The best thing I am doing is ignoring the stereotypes and the way people perceive me to be. If I enjoy and like Asian culture, what's that got to do with anyone's business?

I want to be an example for other Black women whose interest in Asian culture will help mould themselves as it did me into a confident person. People should be happy with what they like and how it can help them for career and/or leisure purposes. As long as I am proud of who I have become regardless of past experiences in secondary school, I should not be afraid to show my interest confidently and positively and neither should anyone else who feels the same.

POP CULTURE IS A WINDOW INTO ESCAPING THE REAL WORLD