

Bunad and *Kimono*, recovering tradition or crisis of identity?

Becky Klein

Mentor: Prof. Kari-Anne Innes, Ph.D.

The traditional costume of those nations which have them is an important element of its citizens' cultural identity. Some nations have national costumes with specific messages, gendered or otherwise, while others do not. One example of a strong national costume with a long history is the Norwegian *bunad*, or the traditional clothing worn by Norwegian men and women over the centuries. The *bunad* has developed specific particular characteristics within smaller regions throughout the country. A Norwegian person's cultural heritage can be deduced from observing their *bunad* and its particular design and style elements. Japan also has a strong historical national costume, the *kimono*. This costume was similarly worn by both men and women, but in the last century has generally only been worn by women. The *kimono* has also traditionally played a specific role in communicating information about the wearer. Both costumes have recently experienced changes in significance within their societies impacting their use and wear. I will evaluate the historical development and role of national costumes, both Norway's *bunad* as well as Japan's *kimono*. Why did a national clothing identity develop in both nations, and what are their meanings? What are the cultural elements contributing to their re-development?

While national costumes are sometimes regarded as irrelevant and old-fashioned, perhaps even seen as a symbol of anti-feminism¹, they communicate valuable information about their wearers and need not be considered a double bind or crisis of identity but rather as recovering tradition. National costumes like Norway's *bunad* and Japan's *kimono* are works of art, often highly desired and valued by both those who procure them and those who observe them, whether male or female. Additionally, they are usually well known beyond the borders of their homelands as recognizable symbols of cultural identity and even claimed by those of similar ethnic background but living in other countries. National costumes like the *bunad* and *kimono* are still used regularly in positive cultural celebrations and hold an important role in reclaiming cultural identity in a world where diversity and pluralism pervade.

¹ See Goldstein-Gidoni, page 361, for an explanation of the extensive "corrections" made to the perceived faults of a woman's body when dressing in a *kimono*.

The term *bunad* refers to the national and regional costumes of Norway worn by both men and women (Eriksen 26). A man's *bunad* consists of dark knee-length pants, a long-sleeved white shirt, a colorful vest with buttons up the front (sometimes a double row), a jacket, wide-brimmed hat, with stockings and dark leather buckled shoes. The design and appearance of women's *bunader* can be far more varied than men's, but the common elements include a long-sleeved white blouse, embroidered skirt and vest, stockings, and buckled shoes. Sometimes a woman will also include an apron, headwear, or silver or pewter brooch or earrings. She may also have a clasped pouch hanging at her waist via a belt in lieu of a purse or handbag. The differences in style are most easily seen in the details of the vest, as far as how it is cut, but colors and fabrics used to construct each piece as well as the embroidery chosen for each piece can vary widely. The most well-known *bunad* style is the Hardanger bride; she wears a very particular silver crown on her head which is specific to residents of Hardanger, and her apron has a very specific pattern of embroidery (Norwegian National Costumes).

The word *bunad* is an Old Norse term meaning "clothing" revitalized during a period of strong nationalism in the early twentieth century. Author and activist Hulda Garborg was fighting for Norway to have its own symbols of identity during the time it won its independence from Sweden in 1905 (Eriksen 26). Until that time, appreciation for and wearing of these costumes had declined, and she recognized it as a way to help solidify the young nation's identity. Norwegian scholar and author Thomas Hylland Eriksen states, "Although *bunads* have been a common sight on festive occasions, not least on Constitution Day, for generations, they have become increasingly common during the last two decades" (27). Garborg's effort was

successful, as the number of people choosing to own and wear a *bunad* has continued to grow ever since her book was published.

To illustrate the increasing popularity of owning and wearing one's own *bunad*, Eriksen writes, "It is estimated that more than 60 percent of Norwegian women have a *bunad* (Aagedal 2002) and a growing, but much smaller number of men. In total, about a third of the population owns a national costume" (27). It is an expensive endeavor, however, and many women sew and embroider their own *bunader* in order to save money. Professor Ann Schmiesing shared information about the cost in a 2003 article, stating, "Although a kit including the fabric, stamped-on pattern, and embroidery thread costs between \$500 and \$700, a professionally embroidered *bunad* complete with jewelry and other accessories can run between \$4,000 and \$5,000" (4). The effort and hours put into these creations makes them valuable in families, whether personally or professionally created, and regardless of their economic situation, a family will make the effort to obtain a *bunad*.

There is a catch when desiring to obtain and wear a *bunad*, however, in that it must be registered in order to be considered official. An organization lightheartedly known as the *bunad* police, the *Bunad- og folkedraktrådet*, "The Bunad and Folk Costume Council ... is a state-funded advisory body under the ministry of culture" and exists to aid in this endeavor (Eriksen 27). *Bunad* designs must be submitted and accepted in order to be considered authentic. The main purposes of the Council according to their official website are as follows.

- *Arbeide for å framme, verne og vidareføre bruk og framstilling av bunader og folkedrakter i Noreg, som eit uttrykk for kulturell identitet og som berar av særeigne kvalitetar* (Work to promote, protect, and propagate the use and production of *bunader*

and folk costumes in Norway, as an expression of cultural identity and of distinctive qualities)

- *Vidareføre og videreutvikle arbeidet med å gi råd om og stimulere til økt forståing for tradisjonell draktskikk som grunnlag for dagens bunader* (Continue and further develop the work of advising and stimulating an improved understanding of traditional costume as a basis for today's *bunader*)

- *Formidle kunnskap frå arbeidet og om fagfeltet* (Communicate knowledge of the work and the field of study)

- *Sørge for sikring, lagring, formidling, utvikling og vedlikehald av dokumentasjonssamlingane* (Provide security, storage, dissemination, development, and maintenance of documentation collections)

- *Vere sekretariat for det statlig oppnemnde Bunad- og folkedraktrådet* (Be the secretary of the state-approved Bunad and Folk Costume Council)

It is abundantly clear that Norwegians are proud and protective of their cultural heritage, as evidenced by the strictness with which they manage rights to *bunader*. I first learned about the importance of the *bunad* from my husband's family, as well as how seriously the Norwegian government takes their authenticity. My mother-in-law, Ellen Lyngso Klein, has possession of the *bunad* constructed and sewn by her mother, Esther Johanna Lyngso Christiansen; it is a family heirloom. In a recent conversation, Ellen relayed to me that when Esther was constructing the *bunad*, she almost wasn't allowed to purchase the approved fabric from the authorized merchant because she wasn't born in Norway. Esther was finally successful in her purchase after explaining to the merchant that she was fully Norwegian and her parents only happened to be out

of the country at the time of her birth. A number of Esther's family members had emigrated to the United States, and her parents were visiting at the time she was born. When Esther was three years old, they returned to Norway and lived there for fifteen years, during World War I and the aftermath. She always had a very strong Norwegian identity and was always proud of her cultural heritage, which she passed along to her children. This Norwegian pride is likely due to the nation's struggle for independence from Sweden, which was only achieved in 1905.

Many countries, like Norway, have a history of national costumes, and some perhaps are not as well known. Another example of well known national costume is Japan's *kimono*, which, like the *bunad*, has seen a resurgence in popularity during the later part of the twentieth century. The *kimono*, in its simplest form, is a floor-length robe that wraps closed in front of the wearer and is tied shut with a waistband called an *obi*. It is known for having voluminous sleeves, with a neckband across the top of the back, and is frequently made with beautifully dyed, painted, or embroidered fabric. Sometimes the design on the fabric tells a story, so that the *kimono* is not only clothing but also in essence a book. *Kimono* for centuries were worn by both men and women, but now are primarily only worn by women (Goldstein-Gidoni). The most elaborate *kimono* of the Edo era had many layers of robes on top of each other, sometimes even preventing the wearer from being able to walk (Cliffe 14).

Most people recognize the *kimono* as part of the Japanese culture, and the word itself means "something to wear" (Assmann 360). It has been worn by men and women throughout recorded Japanese history, though the appearance and elements have changed over time. In modern times, men rarely wear *kimono* and typically wear Western style clothing such as suits. Japanese scholar and *kimono* fashion historian Sheila Cliffe shares research conducted by

anthropologist Kon Wajiro on separate occasions in 1925, 1933, and 1951 showing that the vast majority of men were already dressing in Western clothing, while women were very slowly switching from Japanese traditional clothing to the Western style (49-50). Ironically, Cliffe explains that *kimono* was considered unpatriotic clothing during World War II “because it used too much cloth” (56). While cultural identity was important during the war, it was demonstrated in other ways besides wearing traditional clothing.

After the war, *kimono* sellers realized that Western dress had the potential to eradicate the traditional clothing. Around half of Japanese women (and growing) wore Western clothing, and fewer knew how to correctly wear *kimono*. Professor Sheila Cliffe explained that the cultural importance of *kimono* diminished and it “gradually became confined to its role as formal wear for weddings, ceremonies, and marking rites of passage, and to the world of Japanese culture and arts, such as the theater, the tea ceremony, and flower arranging” (Cliffe 62). Other scholars like Japanese sociologist Stephanie Assmann recognized that “the *kimono* is at risk of dying out due to the fact that many women in contemporary Japanese society do not know how to wear a *kimono* properly” (370). Dressing schools began over fifty years ago in the hope of inspiring more Japanese women to appreciate and wear them more frequently. The effort has helped, as *kimono* sales increased again until 1985 (Cliffe 63). At that time, sales decreased again for a few years, but a rebirth of popularity in Japanese culture during the 1990s and into the new century triggered a rebirth of sales, and more people were buying them again. Globalism was on the rise worldwide during this time, and people in other cultures developed an insatiable desire for Japanese culture, from electronics to pop culture to *kimono*.

Geisha and *kimono* scholar Liza Dalby writes, “The capacity of clothing to convey information is enormous. Its messages are silently and efficiently broadcast to other members of society, who are all equipped by cultural knowledge to read its codes at a glance” (7). But what information is conveyed by a national costume? The first and most obvious fact is indicating national identity or ethnic heritage by simply being worn. Another level is communicating to others within the same cultural group more specific information about social status, economic status, marital status, profession, geographic location, gender, and much more. Another message a national costume may send is that of desired affiliation with a particular group, perhaps by someone with mixed familial ethnicities or the simple desire to be part of a preferred cultural group. Indeed, these two costumes are well known beyond the borders of their homelands as recognizable symbols of cultural identity and are even used by those of similar ethnic background but living in other countries.

For some, national costumes may have an association with years past when gender-based roles were more traditional and not as liberated as modern times. Even within the past century, women traditionally served in the home: raising children, preparing and serving meals, cleaning the home, ensuring the husband was comfortable and cared for. Husbands went to work and earned the income by which the family had lodging, food, and the comforts of daily life. By invoking ideas related to sensibilities that are no longer as widely practiced, the wearer of a *bunad* or *kimono* may be seen to be saying, “I appreciate tradition, and enjoy old-fashioned ways of life, and wish to immerse myself more fully in it.” Alternately, since perceptions of women worldwide have grown more diverse, someone who appreciates a national costume yet is afraid of or hesitant to wear one may not be allowing their true personality to be fully expressed. There

is no reason to necessarily assume that a person who appreciates historical artifacts or other evidence of ancient culture solely believes in antiquated rules about gender roles. This is a double bind, where neither extreme is correct or desired. Instead, the truth and reality lies somewhere in the middle.

Japanese Studies lecturer Stephanie Assmann recognizes another double bind in her article, and states, “A person makes a deliberate statement by refusing to wear a *kimono* at all. But a person not only makes a statement by wearing a *kimono*, but also, through the manner in which a *kimono* is worn, a person expresses an opinion about the *kimono* as a national and cultural symbol” (373). The same can be true of people choosing (or not) to wear the *bunad* or any other national costume.

Nathan Joseph, who studied the sociology of clothing, states “the dress of other nations and cultures has long been used by groups ranging from Bohemians to upper-class elites to express the allure of the distant and mysterious” (187). In fact, choosing to wear either a *bunad* or *kimono* reveals quite a bit about the wearer, perhaps the most obvious being the financial well-being of the owner. Both national costumes are quite expensive to obtain and/or produce, so owning a *bunad* or *kimono* shows a certain level of financial acumen. This is quite important in some cultures, especially for the Japanese. Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, in her research on *kimono* and construction of cultural identities, explained that “having the economic means to dress one’s daughter in an expensive *kimono* for her coming-of-age ceremony is still considered important for the public image of the modern Japanese household” (359). This shows that while both diversity and pluralism of clothing styles are present, the traditional Japanese costume is still an important element of cultural identity.

Additionally, national costumes like the *bunad* or *kimono* often require certain cultural knowledge about how to wear them, accessorize, comport oneself, and so forth. Other cultural traditions, such as Japanese floral arranging and tea ceremonies, are often regarded in a similar way. Assmann explains, “The ability to master traditional Japanese arts presupposes a distinctive education and sets people who have accomplished this ability apart from the majority of Japanese people in contemporary society who do not know how to wear a *kimono* or how to practice a tea ceremony” (372). The *Bunad* and Folk Costume Council is a manifestation of how Norway desires to manage this particular element of their culture.

The *kimono* is often more well-known by a wider audience of people, because Japanese culture is generally more well-known now than Norwegian culture. A number of feature films with references and storylines relating to Japanese culture have been released in recent decades. Additionally, the growth of the internet has made it much easier for people to be exposed to other cultures as well as share their own experiences. It is not uncommon to see photos floating around social media of Americans wearing national costumes from other cultures. For example, one person may visit Japan and take a photo wearing a *kimono*. Or perhaps someone attends a *Syttende Mai* (Seventeenth of May, Norway’s Constitution Day) celebration at home or abroad and wears a *bunad*. The person viewing these images may react differently depending on their perspective; they may be impressed or offended. It’s possible that wearing the national costume of a culture not your own could be seen as cultural appropriation.

A final piece of evidence that *bunad* and *kimono* are important for reclaiming cultural identity is that they are both used regularly in positive cultural celebrations in Norway and Japan. In both cultures, wearing the traditional national costume is now seen as a positive statement,

especially on national holidays, religious holidays, and at cultural celebrations, and both the *bunad* and *kimono* enjoy the privilege of being used for these occasions. Professor of German and Scandinavian Studies Ann Schmiesing explains that “*bunader* ... are worn not only on Constitution Day but also to christenings, confirmations and weddings, at Christmas, and they are recognized as full formal dress for any official function” (2). *Kimono* also enjoys the privilege of playing a role in death. Noted *kimono* scholar Liza Dalby explains that “The occasions that call for *kimono* are crucial ceremonial points in the life cycle--birth, marriage, and death. ... Graduations, the coming-of-age ceremony (January of one’s twenty-first year), entrance rituals for school or company, retirement ceremonies, and New Year’s Day are all good times to observe Japanese women displaying their Japaneseness” (118). She also states that there are some non-ceremonial occasions where wearing a *kimono* is accepted, like cultural events such as “flower-arranging, tea ceremony, classic theater, dance, or music” (119). By wearing traditional costumes for an increasing number of everyday events, the Japanese are reclaiming their cultural identity.

National costumes aren’t an anachronism, though they do remind us of rich cultural histories. Norwegians and Japanese people are proud of their heritage and choose to wear *bunads* and *kimono* to demonstrate that pride and reclaim a cultural identity that at one time was decreasing. Families in both cultures make sacrifices in order to obtain a prized and beautiful piece of their cultural heritage, and know that wearing them for cultural celebrations will unite them with other members of their culture no matter their geographic location. *Bunads* and *kimono* are crucial elements of staying culturally grounded in a diverse world where pluralism is the norm.

Works Cited

- Anawalt, Patricia R. *The Worldwide History of Dress*. New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007.
- Assmann, Stephanie. "Between Tradition and Innovation: The Reinvention of the Kimono in Japanese Consumer Culture." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, vol. 12, no. 3, Sept. 2008, pp. 359-376. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.valpo.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=34107738&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
- Barnard, Malcolm. *Fashion as Communication*. Routledge, 1996.
- Bradshaw, Angela. *World Costumes*. A. & C. Black Ltd., 1954.
- "Bunad – Norwegian Traditional Costumes." *My Little Norway*, 5 Dec. 2009, mylittlenorway.com/2009/05/bunad-norwegian-traditional-costumes/.
- Cliffe, Sheila. *The Social Life of Kimono: Japanese Fashion Past and Present*. Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017.
- Dalby, Liza. *Kimono: Fashioning Culture*. University of Washington Press, 2001.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. "Keeping the Recipe: Norwegian Folk Costumes and Cultural Capital." *Focaal*, vol. 2004, no. 44, 2004, doi:10.3167/092012904782311308.
- Goldstein-Gidoni, Ofra. "Kimono and the Construction of Gendered and Cultural Identities." *Ethnology*, vol. 38, no. 4, 1999, pp. 351–370. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3773912.
- Gradén, Lizette. "Fashionordic: Folk Costume as Performance of Genealogy and Place." *Journal of Folklore Research*, vol. 51, no. 3, Sep-Dec2014, pp. 337-388. EBSCOhost, doi:10.2979/jfolkrese.51.3.337.
- Joseph, N. *Uniforms and Nonuniforms: Communication through Clothing*. Greenwood Press, 1986.
- Klein, Becky Belmont, and Ellen Lyngso Klein. "Conversation with Ellen Klein." 16 June 2018.
- Leoussi, Athena S. "The Ethno-Cultural Roots of National Art*." *Nations and Nationalism*, vol.

10, no. 1-2, 2004, pp. 143–159., doi:10.1111/j.1354-5078.2004.00160.x.

Norsk Institutt for Bunad Og Folkedrakt, Bunad Og Folkedraktrådet, 2009,
www.bunadogfolkedrakt.no/.

“Norwegian National Costumes.” *Norway, All Things Considered.*,
www.norway-hei.com/norwegian-national-costumes.html.

Schmiesing, Ann. "Norway's Embroidered Bunader." *Piecework*, vol. 11, no. 1, Mar/Apr2003,
pp. 30-33. *Art Full Text*, EBSCOhost,
[ezproxy.valpo.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aft
&AN=505038958&site=ehost-live&scope=site](http://ezproxy.valpo.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aft&AN=505038958&site=ehost-live&scope=site).