

Should Hyphenated Americans Drop the Hyphen? | Unruly



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– by Alexa Goins

U.S. Presidential candidate, Bobby Jindal, has been making waves during his campaign with firm statements about “hyphenated Americans.” Jindal came out strongly against “immigration without assimilation” and has urged American transplants to “learn English, adopt our values, roll up your sleeves and get to work.” Jindal’s talks have offended many, but his story stems from a past of emigrating from India to the U.S. as a child. Whether Jindal’s remarks offend you or not, they do spark some interesting questions.

We are a nation of immigrants. Excepting Native Americans, every single citizen immigrated from

somewhere else or had ancestors who did. But at what point do you no longer identify as an immigrant from a homeland far away and become fully American? Is it appropriate to drop the hyphen and start identifying as American above anything else?

Theodore Roosevelt famously answered that question by stating, “There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else,” meaning, don’t split your loyalties between the U.S. and another country. Ironically enough, our nation is currently run by a “hyphenated American.” President Obama holds both American and Kenyan nationalities and has made it known that he is proud to be a self-proclaimed Kenyan-American. Finding a balance among two (or more) nationalities or ethnicities can be hard. Many minority Americans struggle with how to identify; among these, African Americans often oscillate between Black American culture and American culture at large. So it would seem that adding a third ‘homeland’ identity would make it even more difficult. We decided to delve deeper into this faction by speaking with two Kenyan-Americans about hyphenation in America.

Obama during a visit to Kenya in 1987

Kira Milligan grew up with American missionary parents and lived in Kenya for most of her life. “I definitely identify with differing aspects of each nationality/culture, but I would say the end result is a kind of blend that feels diverse but identity-less. My traditions and background is sort of a wild, untamed African version of American suburbia (if there can be such a thing),” Milligan said. She added:

I would not say that I feel discriminated against, but definitely alienated at times. Sometimes when Americans hear the unexpected answer, “I am from Kenya,” it puts an automatic barrier between us. Someone who I thought might be a future friend becomes a person who decides we have nothing in common. On the flip side, in Kenya, I would never be termed a Kenyan, but always acknowledged as an “mzungu” (white person) or ex-patriot (typically Europeans).

But what does it even mean to be deemed an “American?” Scholars and philosophers alike have attempted to define “American” time and time again with varying definitions. In a 2009 [Yale debate](#), it was established that an American possesses “respect for the democratic process, tolerance, and ambition.” But, it can go deeper than that. **Americans are also English-speaking, the most obese people in the world, and value individualism over collectivism. Would it be necessary for an immigrant to adopt all of these values to fully assimilate into American culture?**

We also spoke with Jeremiah Murila, a Kenyan student who is living in the U.S. for college. Murila’s views on assimilation and the hyphenated American are different from most. Murila pointed out that assimilation needs to be more of a learning process than a process of complete change.

Assimilation is such an intricate process. For some, assimilation is the main focus and it sometimes really damages their outlook on life. They constantly carry the weight of seeking to impress the proper image upon their peers. They find themselves in a tug of war between their natural tendencies and this desired

*persona. For some, they are forced into assimilation against their own will and find themselves progressing too quickly. These individuals tend to be very bitter toward the culture they live in because there is nowhere for them to find empathy or consideration of their situation. I enjoy assimilation when it is welcomed at the participant's desired tempo and there is an exchange of ideas. This is when the host is willing to gradually teach in a comfortable manner and also learn from the guest in a respectful manner. In conclusion, I would say that there can be damage or great success through the process of assimilation. **Assimilation is a continuum so you are never in either camp completely.** You simply spend more time in one or the other, for the most part.*

Perhaps, the problem isn't assimilation itself, but how we define it. Assimilation is currently defined as "the process by which a person or persons acquire the social and psychological characteristics of a group." By definition, this doesn't sound like something entirely negative at all. But, many have learned this word through a negative connotation, more similar to a process of complete change (Jindal's view). Only going by Governor Jindal's definition of assimilation is dangerous because it suggests that immigrants are lazy and unwilling to learn English or contribute to American society.

Murila explained that our approach to assimilation shouldn't be a game of American culture dominating Kenyan (or another) culture, but a process of growth and respect that goes both ways for the parties involved, a give and take. Diving deeper Murila said:

The governor should have presented his point through a more relevant platform because his approach, I feel, completely misses the mark. Many of the individuals who hold these titles want to show that they have another heritage that they are very much proud of as well. Assimilation is not a game of Top Trumps. It is not a method through which you completely filter out everything different. It is a method through which you learn to work together through your differences and learn to respect each other.

Kira Milligan offered a different view and simple solution for hyphenation and assimilation: let go of ethnic division and pride. "There is so much to be learned and appreciated about different cultures that I think it's time we kick nationalism to the curb and start treating each other like the neighbors we are on this planet."

Obama's recent visit to Kenya

What would "kicking nationalism to the curb" look like for immigrants in real life? Perhaps, it would mean taking in the American experience, but not letting it replace their experiences in "the old country." It would mean learning the language of their new home, as well as learning how to communicate and understand the people in their new home. **Supporting immigrants in their decision to keep their old values and traditions is more "American" than forcing them to adopt purportedly "American" values.** It goes along with those democratic values of tolerance and independence. But to assimilate as Governor Jindal describes would mean throwing away one's old life completely. That's simply not possible. We are all products of our experiences, you can certainly add to those experiences and grow and change from them. But you cannot subtract from what's happened to you, where you've lived, who you've known, etc. Attempting to do so could cause an identity crisis all on its own.

Maybe Murila and Milligan have a valid point, one that doesn't even have to do with politics, immigration, or government. Maybe living a "hyphenated life," a life as a Kenyan and an American can give you a more balanced view of the world.

The biggest thing we gleaned from our conversations with these Kenyan-American students was this: a hyphenated experience gives you a broader viewpoint. Assimilation aside, there's so much to be learned from other people and so much that other people can learn from us that changing yourself to fit into the mold of another culture is silly. While respecting another culture's customs is absolutely essential when visiting or immigrating to a new place, changing yourself completely to fit into another culture is almost like changing yourself in middle school to fit in with the popular kids: disappointing and painful.