CMASS Celebrates Cultural Appreciation with Braids Event

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By Le Tran

On March 6, the Malcolm X Cultural Center hosted Braids—an event that discussed the history of braids and headwraps along with cultural appreciation versus appropriation—as part of a series of events intended to promote cultural appreciation. The series is organized by the Center for Multicultural Advancement and Student Success (CMASS), and it supports the CMASS mission of sharing cultural expression and pride.

Students led the event's presentation and dialogue, with the night beginning with a brief history of African hair braiding. The group spoke of how braiding is an ancient art that has long since worked its way through generations, with each tribe having their own unique braiding style and meaning. Sometimes braids can be ceremonial or a rite of passage, they said. In the United States today, braiding is often used as a form of self expression and empowerment.

Discussion commenced about how pop culture takes bits and pieces of different cultures without acknowledgment of the origins, which can sometimes lead to cultural appropriation. To decipher between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation—and to avoid the latter—the presenters suggested everyone ask themselves three questions.

1. Am I reducing this to a fashion statement?
2. Are people of this culture the ones who are profiting off of this?
3. Am I in an environment where this is appropriate?

The answers to these questions can help determine whether one is engaging in appropriation or appreciation.

In addition to this discussion, there was a presentation about the usage and history of headwraps and headscarves. In the United States, headwraps were used to oppress black slaves; since then, African-American women have reclaimed their headwraps and it now symbolizes resilience. Across the world, headwraps and headscarves are used for various reasons, whether it’s for culture, religion or hair health. A demonstration of different head wrapping styles followed.

The Cultural Appreciation series seeks to encourage participants to identify respectful ways to appreciate culture by examining history and participating in the traditional way of making a spiritual symbol, preparing food, styling hair or learning about the history of a holiday. The series continues with two upcoming events:

- **Sushi Rolls**: Wednesday, March 21, from 7-8:30 p.m. at Yuri Kochiyama Cultural Center in the Worcester Dining Commons
• **Cinco de Mayo:** Wednesday, April 4, from 7-8:30 p.m. at Latinx American Cultural Center on the second floor of Hampden Dining Commons

For more information, visit [https://www.umass.edu/events/cultural-appreciation-series](https://www.umass.edu/events/cultural-appreciation-series).

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