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A Guide to Understanding and Avoiding Cultural Appropriation

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Cultural appropriation is the adoption of certain elements from another culture without the consent of people who belong to that culture. It's a controversial topic, one that activists and celebrities like Adrienne Keene and Jesse Williams have helped bring into the national spotlight. However, much of the public remains confused about what the term actually means.

People from hundreds of different ethnicities make up the U.S. population, so it's not surprising that cultural groups rub off on each other at times. Americans who grow up in diverse communities may pick up the dialect, customs, and religious traditions of the cultural groups that surround them.

Cultural appropriation is an entirely different matter. It has little to do with one's exposure to and familiarity with different cultures. Instead, cultural appropriation typically involves members of a dominant group exploiting the culture of less privileged groups. Quite often, this is done along racial and ethnic lines with little understanding of the latter's history, experience, and traditions.

Defining Cultural Appropriation

In order to understand cultural appropriation, we must first look at the two words that make up the term. Culture is defined as the beliefs, ideas, traditions, speech, and material objects associated with a particular group of people. Appropriation is the illegal, unfair, or unjust taking of something that doesn't belong to you.

Susan Scafidi, a law professor at Fordham University, told Jezebel that it's difficult to give a concise explanation of cultural appropriation. The author of *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*, defined cultural appropriation as follows:

“Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. It's most likely to be harmful when the source community is a In the United States, cultural appropriation almost always involves members of the dominant culture (or those who identify with it) “borrowing” from the cultures of minority groups.

African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and indigenous peoples generally tend to emerge as the groups targeted for cultural appropriation. Black music and dance, Native American fashions, decoration, and cultural symbols, and Asian martial arts and dress have all fallen prey to cultural appropriation.

“Borrowing” is a key component of cultural appropriation and there are many examples in recent American history. In essence, however, it can be traced back to the racial beliefs of early America; an era when many whites saw people of color as less than human.

Society has moved beyond those gross injustices, for the most part. And yet, insensitivity to the historical and current sufferings of others remains apparent today.

Appropriation in Music

In the 1950s, white musicians borrowed the musical stylings of their black counterparts. Because African Americans weren't widely accepted in U.S. society at that time, record executives chose to have white artists replicate the sound of black musicians. The result is that music like rock-n-roll is largely associated with whites and its black pioneers are often forgotten.

In the early 21st century, cultural appropriation remains a concern. Musicians such as Madonna, Gwen Stefani, and Miley Cyrus have all been accused of cultural appropriation.

Madonna's famous voguing began in black and Latino sectors of the gay community. Gwen Stefani faced criticism for her fixation on Harajuku culture from Japan.

In 2013, Miley Cyrus became the pop star most associated with cultural appropriation. During recorded and live performances, the former child star began to twerk, a dance style with roots in the African American community.

 Robin Thicke and Miley Cyrus perform during the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards at the Barclays Center on August 25, 2013 in the Brooklyn borough of New York City.

Miley Cyrus and Robin Thicke perform during the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards. Theo Wargo/Getty Images

Appropriation of Native Cultures

Native American fashion, art, and rituals have also been appropriated into mainstream culture. Their fashion has been reproduced and sold for profit and their rituals are often adopted by eclectic religious and spiritual practitioners.

A well-known case involves the sweat lodge retreats of James Arthur Ray. In 2009, three people died during one of his adopted sweat lodge ceremonies in Sedona, Arizona. This prompted the elders of Native American tribes to speak out against this practice because these "plastic shamans" have not been properly trained. Covering the lodge with plastic tarps was just one of Ray's mistakes and he was later sued for impersonation.

Similarly, in Australia, there was a period during which it was common for Aboriginal art to be copied by non-Aboriginal artists, often marketed and sold as authentic. This led to a renewed movement to authenticate Aboriginal products.

Cultural Appropriation Takes Many Forms

Buddhist tattoos, Muslim-inspired headdresses as fashion, and white gay men adopting the dialect of black women are other examples of cultural appropriation that are often called out. The examples are nearly endless and context is often key.

For example, was the tattoo done in reverence or because it's cool? Would a Muslim man wearing the keffiyeh be considered a terrorist for that simple fact? At the same time, if a white man wears it, is it a fashion statement?

Why Cultural Appropriation Is a Problem

Cultural appropriation remains a concern for a variety of reasons. For one, this sort of "borrowing" is exploitative because it robs minority groups of the credit they deserve.

Art and music forms that originated with minority groups come to be associated with members of the dominant group. As a result, the dominant group is deemed innovative and edgy. At the same time, the disadvantaged groups they "borrow" from continue to face negative stereotypes that imply they're lacking in intelligence and creativity.

When singer Katy Perry performed as a geisha at the American Music Awards in 2013, she described it as an homage to Asian culture. Asian Americans disagreed with this assessment, declaring her performance "yellowface." They also found issue with the song choice, "Unconditionally," alongside a stereotype of passive Asian women.

The question of whether it is a homage or an insult is at the core of cultural appropriation. What one person perceives as a tribute, people of that group may perceive as disrespectful. It's a fine line and one that must be carefully considered.

How to Avoid Cultural Appropriation

Every individual has choices to make when it comes to sensitivity toward others. As a member of the majority, someone may not be able to recognize a harmful appropriation unless it's pointed out. This requires awareness of why you're buying or doing something that represents another culture.

The intention is at the heart of the matter, so it's important to ask yourself a series of questions.

Why are you "borrowing" this? Is it out of a genuine interest? Is it something you feel called to do? Or, does it simply look appealing and you're following the trends?

What is the source? For material items such as artwork, was it made by someone from that culture? What does this item mean to them?

How respectful is this to the culture? What would someone from that group feel about it?

Genuine interest in other cultures is not to be discounted. The sharing of ideas, traditions, and material items is what makes life interesting and helps diversify the world. It is the intention that remains most important and something everyone can remain conscious of as we learn from others.