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TABLE OF CONTENT

Editorial	3
Liviu Warter	
Covid-19 across Cultures	5
Fons Trompenaars	
Culture Ain't What It Used to Be! Cultural Competence Reexamined in the Light of Contemporary Multidisciplinary Research	25
George Simons, Amna Ben Amara	
Christianity and Transhumanism	35
Mircea Gelu Buta	
Transhumanism in Psychology: The Attitude towards the Use of Chatbots in Psychotherapy and Ethical Implications	41
Tudor-Daniel Huțul and Adina Karner-Huțuleac	
Transhumanism in Performance Art	51
Andreea-Iulia Someșan	
Cultural Appropriation	59
Richard Marksbury, Walter Block	
Empirical Economic Ethics Research: Evidence Regarding Accounting and Statistics.....	67
Mihaela Bebeselea	
Organizational Integrity: Three Ethical Talmudic Principles That Should Influence Corporate and Personal Decisions	73
Hershey Friedman and Joshua Krausz	
Book Review	91
Aurelian Virgil Baluta	

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

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Abstract

Cultural appropriation, the borrowing of the mores, practices, culture, of one group by another, has come under heavy criticism in the modern era. The present paper is an attempt to right this balance by defending this practice. It is important that this be done since this is one of the important ways in which the human race can improve itself. What good will be the good of new innovations, inventions, if their benefits are confined to small areas? They will not be of widespread help if they cannot be more widely dispersed since that would constitute an unwarranted and unjustified cultural appropriation. The present paper is thus an attempt to improve the human condition by defending the transfer of improvements.

Keywords: Cultural appropriation; justice; hypocrisy; intellectual property

I. Introduction¹

During the long holiday season, stretching from Halloween through Mardi Gras, stressing over possible accusations of committing cultural appropriation should be the last thing on the minds of shoppers searching for the perfect festive costume or for those entertainers who must take into account the food they serve or the celebratory theme they might elect. However, selecting a culturally inappropriate costume, appetizer, or party theme could land the supposed culprit² into cultural appropriation purgatory.

The current and negative concept of cultural appropriation is a relatively new phenomenon. Its roots can be traced to America's universities during the early 1980s, when it emerged from academia's post-colonial revisionism movement. Sadly and within a short period of time, accusations of cultural appropriation spread to cuisine, music, musical instruments, clothing, religious beliefs, yoga, hairstyles, and more. How and why did this societal transition come about? After all, in today's United States, politicians proclaim constantly the value of diversity referring to it as "America's Greatest Strength", e.g., Obama (2012), Biden (2021), Hinton (2016), Kotyleng (2020) and Goldberg (2018)³. Elevating cultural diversity to the status of a strength, while condemning those who participate in impromptu cultural borrowing, are antithetical perspectives.

¹ The authors wish to acknowledge several important suggestions made to us by referees of this Journal. All remaining errors and infelicities are of course our responsibility, not theirs. We also thank Anthony Cesario for copy editing.

² Actually anyone found to be "offensive" by a member of a politically protected group.

³ When quoting US Senator Lindsey Graham's statement that diversity was America's greatest strength, Columnist and Editor-at-Large for the National Review Jonah Goldberg, stated Graham's comment on diversity makes "makes Mr. Graham the bazillionth person to proclaim some variant of 'diversity is strength'" (Goldberg, 2018). For critiques of this diversity movement see Bedford, 2021; Jonas, 2007; Kristoff, 2016; Lindgren, 2010; Morse, 2018

II. Cultural appropriation

Human society, or culture, progresses through two different but not necessarily mutually exclusive paths: 1) through independent invention, and 2) via diffusion (borrowing). While independent invention is rare, borrowing is common.

Throughout human cultural evolution, borrowing occurs when members of two or more different cultures come into contact with one another. This process is known as acculturation and it can be, and often has been, a peaceful process. Once this contact occurs, members of each group may be exposed to new technologies, beliefs, lore, weapons, cooking techniques, clothing or art. Once exposed to new cultural ways, members of each culture can choose to accept, reject or modify them. Since the first humans roamed the earth the process of contact-and-borrowing has taken place incalculable times. This human practice of borrowing generally took place peacefully and without a requirement of prescribed permission.

Acculturation can occur within the same ethnic group whose members may be culturally different, or between members of different ethnic groups (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). More often than not, acculturation has been a passive process. For example, if one member of a culturally-diverse ethnic group discovered that a piece of suitably formed clay could hold water, this knowledge would diffuse rapidly throughout the diverse ethnic group. Throughout their existence, humans have tended to be pragmatic as they searched for a “better mousetrap”. Human cultural evolution would not have progressed very far if bowing from other cultures was frowned upon and even sanctioned.

It is only when a dominant social group forces a subordinate group to adopt aspects of its beliefs and material culture that the routine process of acculturation becomes problematic. An example of forced acculturation is when a dominant monotheistic culture forces a subordinate polytheistic culture to accept its monotheistic belief system. In coerced acculturation, borrowing is no longer a choice; it is a requirement. Forced acculturation became commonplace when agricultural peoples expanded at the expense of hunting and gathering peoples and later through the practice of colonial expansion.⁴ All through the millennia of human cultural evolution, it has been voluntary acculturation, not forced acculturation, that has fueled the engine of human progress.

Yet somewhere along this evolutionary tale, appropriating (borrowing without formal permission), a cultural artifact, dress, belief, hairstyle, clothing, food, art, etc. from another culture became a moral sin and is at present to be condemned. It can now result in the exposed perpetrator being censored, shamed, shunned, dismissed from school or even fired from a job. Did Katy Perry commit an unforgivable sin when she wore a traditional Geisha costume at the 2013 American Music Awards, or was Perry simply trying to pay homage to traditional Japanese-Geisha culture? Perry's critics labeled her actions as a crass and insensitive display of cultural appropriation. In 2015 the student government association of the University of Ottawa canceled yoga classes, asserting they represented an insensitive example of cultural appropriation (Foote, 2015; Timpf, 2015; Coles, 2015).

Were these examples of cultural appropriation or cultural appreciation? Appreciating and then acquiring different cultural items and beliefs form the backbone of human evolution. Appreciation comes first. No one appropriates cultural practices that they do not initially appreciate. Every culture has practices that are not appreciated. These are not appropriated. “Emulation is the highest form of flattery,” according to folk wisdom. That is certainly true in this present context.

⁴ For the argument that colonialism has and had positive benefits, see Bauer, 1981, 1984, 1991; Bauer & Yamey (1957); Gilley (2018); Libecap (2012); Vasagar (2018).

Even though the term “cultural appropriation” was added in 2017 to the Oxford English Dictionary, it does not enjoy a widely accepted definition. During the 2019 Halloween season, a *USA Today* reporter sought out “experts” on cultural appropriation. One of those “experts,” Neal Lester, Arizona State University’s director of its Project Humanities, defined cultural appropriation as “taking elements of someone else’s culture without permission!” (Haller, 2002) The obvious question arising from Lester’s ludicrous definition is, from whom must one seek permission in a given culture? Suppose a child desired to dress up as Moana for Halloween, who is the designated warden of Hawaiian traditional culture. Must such a child’s parent seek permission from a full-blooded Hawaiian with chiefly status, or would a Hawaiian with commoner status suffice? Should such permission be in writing and notarized? Is Hawaiian culture for sale? “Expert” Lester’s definition of cultural appropriation is more than impractical; it is insurmountable. It is also insulting.

An alternative and commonly accepted definition of cultural appropriation states it occurs when “a member of a majority group profits financially from the culture of a minority group” (Britannica, 2021). This definition requires a two-step process: 1) determine that an act of cultural appropriation occurred, and 2) determine if the perpetrator is gaining financially from the act of appropriation. If a white child wearing a Native American costume for Halloween is not gaining financially from wearing the costume, how is that child guilty of cultural appropriation? One could surmise that many academics would have a problem with this definition, since any professor who is a member of the majority group would be prohibited from earning a salary for teaching courses about African, Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern or Native American cultures, societies, history, art, literature or cuisine. They earn salaries for doing so, after all. That day may come if we continue down the slippery slope of revisionist cultural appropriation. After all, revolutions often regress to the point where their advocates eat their own.

One of the highest profile cases of cultural appropriation arose at one of the bastions of our entire higher education system, Yale University. Erika and Nicholas Christakis, professors at the institution of supposed higher learning, lost their jobs since they questioned the opposition to cultural appropriation that swirled around acceptable Halloween costumes on campus (Nelson, 2015).

But this issue goes deeper than that, far deeper. If we are to expand on the “logic” of this movement, it would oppose for more than costuming at holidays. For example, consider the polio vaccine was brought forth by Jonas Salk and Albert Bruce Sabin. They were both white Jewish males. If those opposed to cultural appropriation were serious about their “philosophy,” all non-white, non-Jewish females would have to abjure this life-giving medicine. The argument against this, of course, is that they are not members of any downtrodden groups; therefore, they are fair game. Well, that is one chink in the armor of this viewpoint: it only applies to some groups, not all of us. If it is to be logically consistent, however, it must apply to all.

Let us consider jazz, and rap music. The leaders of both of these types of music were mainly black males. Therefore women, whites, Orientals, should be prohibited from listening to this type of composition.⁵

⁵ Were they not obviously in the “ruling classes,” since they were white males, no one not originating in Austria, or Italy should be allowed, by law, to listen to the music of Bach, Mozart, Vivaldi. Consider Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, also known as the “black Mozart” (<https://www.google.com/search?q=black+m Mozart&oq=black+m Mozart&aqs=chrome.0.0i355i512j46i512j0i512j0i22i3016.2440j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>). The latter should have been prevented from composing his music, and no one should be able to listen to it. Whites were first with baroque music. Who does this interloper think he is? In like manner, whites should be prevented from composing, singing and playing jazz and rap music. If this does not constitute a *reductio ad absurdum*, then nothing does.

We can take an even deeper look, askance, at this “philosophy.” What those who oppose cultural appropriation are really saying is that perpetrators of this evil deed are in effect stealing something from its initiators.⁶ What, exactly, is it that is being stolen? Is it money? No. Cars? No. What it is, precisely, is *ideas*. But property rights cannot be applied to mere ideas, because they are not scarce.⁷ Jones invents the bicycle. Smith sees it, copies it. Does Jones still have his bike? He most certainly does. Whereas if Smith stole Jones’ actual vehicle, Jones would no longer have it in his possession. This goes for other ideas, such as $2+2=4$, the Pythagorean Theorem, $E=MC^2$, water is H_2O .

Consider patents; they are an attempt to apply private property rights to ideas. If Jones takes out a patent on the idea behind his bicycle, it will be granted to him for a given number of years, depending upon the jurisdiction.⁸ However, if ideas were really akin to physical objects, in that they could be stolen,⁹ this would not be the case. Rather, they would be forever. Bicycles fit this bill. That bike can remain in the Jones family forever, via inheritance. No, ideas are very different than physical objects. The latter can be owned, not the former. But culture is clearly an idea, not a physical object. Therefore, “appropriation” of culture is not theft, whereas appropriation of physical objects most certainly is. The opponents of cultural appropriation are implicitly, and incorrectly, arguing as if they are the same.

III. Conclusion

Let us take one final hack at this viewpoint. It is based on language. It, too, is an idea, not a physical object. The opponents of “cultural appropriation” are arguing against it via the intermediation of language. In this case, they are using the English language. But where oh where did they learn that? Simple, they culturally appropriated it.¹⁰ But if cultural appropriation is akin to theft, they are in violation of their own principles in objecting to it, since they use language, which they culturally appropriated, in order to do this. They are thus hoist by their own petard. Or, to put matter more formally, they are guilty of a performative logical contradiction (Hoppe, 2006).

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⁶ Since it is justified, in their view, for blacks, women, the handicapped, etc., the LBGQ, to appropriate the culture of their victimizers, they are in effect saying that it is justified for this group to in effect steal from the other.

⁷ See on this Block (2013, 2020); Boldrin & Levine (2008); De Wachter (2013); Kern (2019); Kinsella (2001, 2008, 2011, 2012A, 2012B, 2012C); Long (1995); Menell (2007A, 2007B); Mukherjee & Block (2012); Navabi (2015); Palmer (1989).

⁸ For details, see:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=patents+are+time+denominated&oq=patents+are+time+denominated&aqs=crome..69i57j33i160.9919j1j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

⁹ If Smith breaks into Jones’ house, sees the plans for the bicycle and copies them, he is still guilty only of trespass, not idea theft.

¹⁰ We owe this point to Jonathan Lingenfelter.

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