

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND IMPERIALISM

Introduction

The subject of cultural appropriation continues to be debated in terms of what it means and whether it is a good or a bad thing. The real problem here is not about which side of the debate one chooses to support. Understanding both sides of this argument is the better choice, and it can only be achieved by investigating what cultural appropriation means within the 21st century. The required definitions here however are not limited to the dictionary meaning of the phrase in question (cultural appropriation). This paper focuses on the actual meaning of cultural appropriation in the context of the 21st century especially in the face of globalization, cultural imperialism and important westernization in most parts of the world. To address the conflict regarding whether cultural appropriation is a good thing or not, this paper will seek to establish whether cultural appropriation is the new form of imperialism in the 21st century, and what the effects of cultural appropriation are on the world's cultures.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'appropriation' as taking something without the owner's permission. Within some contexts, this would be called 'stealing' considering that the dictionary definition matches. It must however be considered, for this paper, that the contextual meaning for appropriation is not 'stealing'. Rather, it is 'borrowing'. The definition of culture is in itself a challenge to the possibility of stealing. Culture is defined as the way of life as embraced by the people in a given society. a collection of beliefs, symbols, values and practices unite people, as a society. This is why people cannot steal a culture but they can simply borrow it to suit their needs and causes. The challenge however is that borrowing a culture has its own negative effects on the culture. Cultures have been used to identify people in their societies since

the beginning of time. This means that a culture is a special identity, and an identity can be stolen.

Imperialism is a concept that has undergone numerous changes over the years to encompass a wide range of policies and practices that are both political and socio-cultural in context. Initially, imperialism was considered a political ideology aimed at creating global empires and advancing the national interests of a particular people. In its original context, imperialism can be defined in relation to the Nazi aggression where the Germans invaded other European countries, forcing their people into labor camps and claiming their capital in order to advance the Nazi cause throughout the continent. In a more social context, the United States has been seen spreading out a number of cultures like the fast food culture that has been witnessed growing exponentially in the Middle East and beyond. Generally, imperialism is a concept that entails wiping out one culture in favor of another dominant one. This often results in the extinction of one culture, as the people are absorbed into the practices and beliefs of the dominant culture.

The main question in the paper is whether cultural appropriation can be equated to imperialism as applicable in the 21st century. In order to answer this, there are two theories that can be used for both sides of the debate. These are the rational choice theory, arguing for cultural appropriation, and structural functionalism theory arguing against it. The rational choice theory supports the idea of cultural appropriation not being interconnected with modern day imperialism based on the motives behind cultural appropriation while structural functionalism looks at the effects of cultural appropriation on the culture in question.

Rational Choice Theory

According to this theory, individuals take up actions based on their rationality. They make choices that are directed primarily by their self-interest. This means that individuals generally seek to further their personal interests and can thus indulge in any activities that align with their self interests. Actions are thus simply a calculated means of achieving the set personal objectives as related to the individual's self-interests. One great believer of this theory is Jon Elster, who stated that within the rational choice theory, collective beliefs and desires have no impact on the individual. This indicates that the things people do, at an individual level, are not related to their societies. These actions are only indulged with the one intention, self-gratification and in some cases self-preservation. This denies the existence of collective aspects that define the society and in most cases, culture. This ideology makes it difficult to even support the very existence of cultural appropriation based on the idea that people do not act on the basis of a collective purpose. The definition of imperialism indicates that it is the spread of one culture with the aim of dominating over another. This would require having a large number of people from the dominant culture acting in a way aims to undermine and dominate the other culture. Cultural dominance in this case can be seen as a collective desire but based on Jon Elster's assertions the 'collective' does not really exist.

Structural Functionalism

Herbert Spencer and Robert Merton were strong believers of the structural functionalism, both of whom agreed that the society is a complex interconnection of systems that are largely complimentary and work together to reach given results. The results in this case can be seen as patterns in the society's beliefs and practices in contexts like religion, family and gender roles. From Herbert Spencer's ideas on structural functionalism, the society works like the human body, with different distinct parts that have their specific roles to play. Without any of

these parts, the body would encounter some difficulties in terms of functionality as a whole. Different individuals play different roles within the society. They have different specific or varied functions, and whatever they do reflects on or affects the other members of that society. When using this theory to explain cultural appropriation, one must note that whatever an individual does will affect other people as well. This means that regardless of why one is partaking in a given activity, they can be sure that it will have an impact on another individual in that society. The structural functionalism theory argues that cultural appropriation is a negative concept by showing how the actions of an individual like inappropriately mimicking one culture actually contributes to the loss of that culture regardless of what the intentions of the individual were to begin with. The use of an African American accent and language by Iggy Azalea has for example been seen to undermine the definition of the African American identity thus prompting African American artists like Nicki Minaj to criticize the act mainly because by using their style as a people, Iggy Azalea is corrupting the meaning of being African American and thus undermining what the accent means to the African American people.

What Is Cultural Appropriation In The 21st Century?

The Oxford definition of cultural appropriation has connotations of exploitation and dominance. This means that when cultural appropriation is involved, there must be a culture that suffers in away. The 21st century has been fortunate enough not to feature too many instances of colonialism and pre-historic imperialism as seen in the Nazi aggression among other situations when the stronger cultures were seen dominating and in some cases even leading to the extinction of the weaker cultures. It thus follows that there is a need to look at the events of the 21st century in order to identify what cultural appropriation means within this context. To

accomplish this, it is important to consider some of the cultures that have been heavily appropriated within the century.

Halloween Costumes

Halloween is a Christian holiday that is observed on 31 October each year in order to honor saints and the departed souls of loved ones. During this time, the religious people are known to pray and light candles for the departed souls. In popular culture however, Halloween is a holiday marked by trick or treating and dressing up in costumes, telling scary stories and generally playing divination games that are mostly associated with the pagan roots of the holiday. Halloween may be based on Christian beliefs but it has a lot of borrowed content from pagan and historically non-Christian practices like Samhain, a Celtic harvest festival. In the 21st century, Halloween is just another holiday for merry making and dressing up in interesting costumes while the children run around the neighborhood receiving candy and telling scary stories. Halloween costumes have been the height of cultural misappropriation in the 21st century. Popular costumes include sombreros and Mariachi outfits, Scottish kilts, and Mexican headdresses, dressing up like 'Sexy' Pocahontas or wearing a black face. When children dress up in their Halloween costumes, they often dress up like their favorite TV and fairy tale characters. Grownups on the other hand consider their Halloween costumes as some form of parody, or comic expression. This is what makes the use of cultural costumes for Halloween culturally appropriate. When an individual walks into a Halloween party wearing a Scottish kilt, it is automatically seen as a funny costume and not something that actually represents the Scottish heritage. Wearing a cultural costume at a time when everyone seems bent at making fun of one thing or the other shows an element of condescension in that the person wearing that costume is looking down on the culture in which that costume is meant to be worn. The sexy

Pocahontas costume is generally the worst kind of cultural appropriation when it comes to Halloween costumes considering that it distorts the identity of the Pocahontas and even degrades it by sexualizing it as a source of amusement.

Tattoos

Another popular 21st century concept is the use of Chinese characters in tattoos. The Chinese as a people consider their tattoos as a form of art aimed at reminding them of their identity. In ancient China, General YuehFei was tattooed by his mother after resigning from the army to remind him that he was sworn to serve his nation and not himself. The Chinese criminals were also marked with tattoos as a way of identifying them easily even when they were not incarcerated. People today however use Chinese tattoos as some form of Buddhist or Taoist symbol with deep messages. This is understandable in the context that Chinese characters are really beautiful and some Chinese symbols have a very deep and inspiring meaning, like the Ying and Yang symbol. Currently, a lot of people have tattoos of Chinese characters and most of them don't even know what their tattoos mean. In such a case, it can be appreciated that the individual with a Chinese tattoo is ignorant of the Chinese culture. When taking up a tattoo, people often think they know what it means but once translated by someone who can speak or read Chinese it often turns out to be very different and often inaccurate. The problem in this case is thus with the people to draw Chinese tattoos. If a client wants a Chinese tattoo, why is the tattoo artist drawing it if they cannot speak or read Chinese? There are so many Chinese tattoos that are considered as epic fails and there are also so many people who think their tattoos say one thing but in reality, they say something different and probably irrelevant or even insulting. In addition, these tattoos are being used differently and not in accordance with their original use in the Chinese culture.

‘Sweat Lodge’ Ceremonies

The sweat lodge is a spiritual tradition aimed at physical and spiritual purification and is originally practiced by the Native Americans. This tradition or ritual was actually prompted by the corruption of the European influences that brought out the need for natives to purify themselves and experience a sense of wholesomeness regularly. The sweat lodge was thus a place to repair any damages done to the individual’s mind and spirit by the maltreatment in the hands of Europeans and the introduction of alcohol and other evils that were traditionally not present in the lives of the Native Americans. The ceremony was conducted with the help of medicine men and women. Currently, sweat lodges are being used under numerous misleading pretexts like curing cancer and relieving stress. Recently, a famous author was arrested for encouraging people to partake in sweat lodge ceremonies, most of which lead to sweat lodge deaths due to misconceptions about the entire process of a sweat lodge ceremony. When a non-Native American practices the sweat lodge ceremony, it is a violation of the spiritual connotations of the Native American community. As a spiritual ceremony, faith is a pre-requisite and unless the individual believes in the same systems and values as the Native Americans, their participation in the ceremony constitutes cultural appropriation in one way or another.

Fashion

Most of the world’s cultures have a unique fashion that is used to identify them in the international context. The fashion industry has especially faced a significant amount of controversies with regards to the concept of cultural appropriation based on the fact that designers simply borrow fashion without considering the cultural background of the fashion that they are borrowing. Common pieces that have been borrowed in 21st century fashion include the Bindi, kimono, hijab, saree and the headdress. Numerous designers have attempted to use these

ideas to create a modern fashion but at the expense of the cultural connotations associated with the item being borrowed. When Selena Gomez wore a Bindi for example, the problem was not that she wore the Bindi but rather that she did not seem to have any interest in Hinduism or the Bindi's meaning to the Indian people. This creates room for wrongful associations that are misleading and thus offensive for the culture in question.

Music and Art

Recently, there were a number of online clashes involving Iggy Azalea, Nicki Minaj and a number of other African American artists about Iggy Azalea's accent and how she sings. Similarly, aboriginal artists from Australia were recently up in arms against artists who sell 'fake' aboriginal art thus undermining their efforts towards expressing their culture in its true form. In both cases, the problem is when an outsider uses concepts that are embedded in another culture within their work. This undermines the meaning and identity of the culture in question, thus limiting the people of that culture from using their cultural concepts in an authentic and meaningful way as originally intended. For Iggy Azalea, the main problem is that she is trying to sound like an African American artist when she is actually Australian. It thus becomes difficult for the African American artists to enjoy their heritage and keep representing their culture through their music when foreigners are doing the same thing.

All of the examples in this case show an instance in which an outsider copies a cultural practice and misuses it to suit their cause. From the Halloween costumes aimed at making fun of Scottish kilts to the fake African American accent used by Iggy Azalea and the sweat lodges that continue to kill a lot of people in the United States, copying a cultural practice without being fully aware or respecting its underlying connotations is inappropriate behavior. The actual effects of these actions are discussed below.

The Effects of Cultural Appropriation on Cultures

The rational choice theory dictates that the choices made by any one individual are as a result of some approach to self-interest. This means that when an individual wears a Mexican headdress to a Halloween party, it is simply because they want to project a certain look or be counted amongst the coolest people in the block. The problem however is that actions have consequences. Wanting to look cool in a Sexy Pocahontas costume is understandable, but what about the feelings of the actual Pocahontas people? What about the Scottish man who cannot wear his kilt to work because it is now a Halloween costume and wearing it to work would seem inappropriate and funny? It is important to look at the consequences of these actions in order to understand why they are wrong in the first place. Some of the major consequences of cultural misappropriation as discussed in this paper include cultural bias, cultural insensitivity and distortion of cultural identity.

Cultural Bias

Cultural bias refers to an underlying influence that limits interpretations to be influenced by assumptions that are culturally constructed. For example, white Americans have a tendency to judge everything that is different based on their cultural constructs. They for example define beauty as slim and blonde, while there are many beautiful Latino women who are bigger and have black hair. The connection between cultural appropriation and cultural bias is simple. Considering that the headdress is 'different' within the contexts of white America, it is being used as a Halloween costume to amuse the wearer and those who see them. this perspective is however only limited to the whites considering that the Mexicans cannot see the humor in wearing a headdress. To them it is a normal practice with cultural implications and thus worthy

of respect. Although cultural bias is in itself not a problem, it creates a context for imperialism by allowing one culture to feel dominant over another. While looking at the headdress as a joke, a white American is likely to think of the Mexicans as a primitive people with ‘silly’ cultural practices and unexplained beliefs. The Mexicans on the other hand will be affected in one of two ways. First, they may feel violated by the whites for making fun of a heritage that they hold dear. Most cultural practices in the modern world are known to unite a community and keep them strong especially in the face of difficulties. Making fun of them can thus be annoying at best. Another possible reaction would be discouragement. Seeing that the whites despise the Mexican culture, it is likely that the Mexicans would be discouraged from practicing their culture. If whites wear a sombrero to a Halloween party, it is highly unlikely that a Mexican would want to wear a sombrero at any time. The fact that it is a Halloween costume makes it funny and thus in some ways demeaning.

Cultural Insensitivity

When people do not know much about a culture, they tend to make many wrong assumptions that often lead to offensive conduct or remarks. When an American fashion designer incorporates the Mexican headdress in a particular design as was done by Victoria’s Secrets, it is in violation of the Mexican culture due to the concept of cultural insensitivity. The headdress in this context was used as an accessory aimed at lending a cultural finesse to the outfit that was worn by the model. The designer’s perception in this case was guided by the idea that a headdress in the Mexican culture is just an accessory that is worn to compliment an outfit. The reality however is rather not as simple. The Mexican headdress is considered a symbol of pre-colonial Mexico in its authentic and uncorrupted grandeur. The headdress was not worn by

commoners or average citizens but more by distinguished persons with significant power and respect amongst their people. The Mexican headdress was originally a sign of status, and using it in a Victoria's Secrets runway is insensitive towards the Mexican culture. Mexicans think of the headdress as a reminder of what Mexican leadership meant before colonialism and other invasions. At this point, it can be argued that the lack of accurate information about the Mexican headdress leads to its misuse and abuse by people who are not Mexicans. This also either angers the Mexicans or turns them away from their culture. If a runway model is able to wear a Mexican headdress, it is rather difficult to associate the same headdress with the power and strength that it symbolizes in Mexican history. If a young Mexican is given a headdress by Mexican elders today for example, they are not likely to appreciate it as much considering how common the headdresses have become and how they are being worn. The main problem with cultural insensitivity is thus that it actually demeans the culture that is being misunderstood by eliminating any important associations that the 'inferior' culture may have with their practices and beliefs.

Distortion of Cultural Identity

In China, tattoos were used to identify criminals or as a physical defamation to remind one of important values that they may be seen to forget. In America, Chinese tattoos are just another fashion fad that has for some reason endured more than ten years in popularity. In Mexico, the headdress is a symbol of power and strength and it is only worn by people who qualify in one context or another. In America, the headdress is simply a Halloween costume or a fashion accessory used to lend a cultural finesse on the runway. The definition of cultural identity is in many contexts limited to the sense of belonging that is defined by one's beliefs and practices in relation to a given culture. A Mexican is likely to identify themselves as Mexican

based on their ties with the Mexican culture. If the tie is based on definitions like the meaning of a headdress, it is likely to be severed based on the cultural appropriation of the headdress. When people no longer see meaning in cultural beliefs and practices because they have been misappropriated, they no longer identify themselves with their culture. They lose the ties that make them belong to that culture. Unfortunately, this does not mean that they are embraced into the dominant culture. Whether one believes in the power and strength associated with the headdress or not, if they are Mexican they will always be considered as foreigners by the whites. This means that after distorting the cultural identity of an individual, cultural appropriation leaves that individual as a cultural 'orphan' with no sense of belonging on either side of the cultural divide.

Cultural Appropriation and Imperialism: Establishing the Similarities

The rational choice theory looks at things from the perspective of an individual's rationality whereby the choices made by any one individual are a result of some approach to self-interest and not a collective desire as seen in imperialism. Imperialism often contends that the entire people within a given nation work towards the same goal, with in this case would be cultural dominance and the extinction or suffocation of another culture. This means that when individual partake in cultural appropriation they simply seek to further their personal interests and are thus not compelled by imperialist ideologies or purpose. Generally, this is understandable. But while actions of cultural appropriation are not seen entirely as a result of social indulgences or characters but rather as calculated outcomes of an objective related to the

In this case, the motive is not in question so it is the outcome of the action that is being criticized. Imperialism for example was not entirely aimed at alienating people from other cultures but rather consolidating capital and enriching the respective nations that practiced it.

Capital imperialism is often used to imply that the motivations were purely materialistic. The problem however is the effects. Some cultures became extinct and others remain close to extinction and thus struggling to be resurrected. This implies a similarity between cultural appropriation and imperialism. While both have rather descent motivations to begin with, they have devastating effects on the culture in question. When Victoria's Secrets chose to incorporate the headdress on the runway outfit for example, the designers may have seen it as a way of appreciating the Mexican culture and possibly appealing to the Mexicans in the audience. However, they mostly offended them by degrading the significance of a Mexican headdress as a symbol of power and strength. Similarly, when the Spaniards invaded Mexico they simply wanted a new source of raw materials and a place to make money, find cheap labor and exercise their political powers overseas. They did not have any cultural motives, and yet they left Mexico as a Spanish culture. Currently, it is impossible to think of Mexicans without considering their Spanish connection.

It has also been noted that cultural appropriation weakens or even breaks the ties that one may have with their culture. Imperialism created a lot of cultural disconnects as well. People who became assimilated into the dominant culture slowly forgot about their own culture for fear of the ridicule and despise that their original practices and beliefs attracted. Some Native Americans stopped practicing their spirituality and even changed from their communal lifestyle in order to adapt to the European influences of the colonialists. When people make fun of the Scottish kilt, they make it difficult for Scots to embrace their culture in the United States. And when they cannot wear their kilts, they lose touch with their Scottish heritage. Also, when the kilt is being ridiculed, it may seem like it is just the kilt that is under fire but the perception from the Scottish in question would be that the entire Scottish culture is being considered as

ridiculous. People do not like being put on the spot like this and it can be expected that the individual will stop trying to associate themselves with their heritage.

Like cultural appropriation, imperialism also leaves a lot of cultural 'orphans' in its wake. Despite speaking Spanish and even sharing some cultural concepts with the people of Spain, Mexicans can still not consider themselves as Spanish. They cannot be embraced into the Spanish community. But, Spanish are also not entirely Mexican seeing as they were heavily influenced by the Spanish colonialists. This left Mexicans at a crossroad where they did not trust their place in Mexican heritage but they could not be counted as Spanish either. With regards to cultural appropriation, it becomes clear by the day that most people are unable to define their cultural identity once they stop recognizing their culture as their own. A Navajo who cannot embrace Navajo culture due to the cultural appropriation of the Navajo concepts is not going to stop being a Navajo, but they will stop feeling like one.

Conclusion

For this particular paper, it can be seen that the theory of structural functionalism is more applicable when looking to explore the concept of cultural appropriation and its connection with imperialism. It was noted that cultural appropriation has a lot of effects that are similar to the ones generated by political and capital imperialism in the past. First, the motives do not dictate the outcome in either case. This means that regardless of how empowering an act of cultural appropriation is intended to be for the 'inferior' culture, it has negative implications that could include the extinction of that given culture. Wearing a Bindi for example may not have any negative motives but it undermines the association that a Hindu may have with the Bindi thus discouraging them from being proud of their heritage and its deep meaning. The conclusion here is thus that whether cultural appropriation is carried out with an innocent motive, it still remains

as destructive as imperialism. And while today it may not be possible to command a society to abandon their culture and practice another, the American public seems to have found a way to discourage people by laughing at their culture and making their beliefs look primitive and ridiculous. This means that cultural appropriation really is the imperialism of the 21st century.