

The necessity of cultural appropriation

Not long ago the singer Lily Allen referred to herself as *'guilty* of cultural appropriation' in making her video of 'Hard out here'. Looking further to see what she and other people really mean when they use this term, I found a surprisingly wide range of definitions – everything from simple cultural exchange to the exploitation of the cultural values of another race, whether for the purposes of ridicule, profit or mere entertainment. But I was struck by this fact: at all levels, the phrase 'cultural appropriation' is constantly used in a negative light, as something to be avoided.

Don't get me wrong: I am well aware that the use of emblems of another culture can often lead to ridicule and offence: the tradition of white performers 'blacking up' to perform is clearly inappropriate and demeaning. I also should stress that I have no doubt that those who use the term generally are trying to emphasise a sense of respect for others. However, the consequences of a world in which cultural appropriation is morally wrong are alarming. I don't think people who use the term have properly thought it through.

Let's start with the simple side of the problem. Wikipedia starts its article on the subject with the statement that 'cultural appropriation is the adoption or use of elements of one culture by members of another culture'. Obviously, if cultural appropriation were merely borrowing or adopting tropes and styles from another culture, it would be unreasonable to say it was wrong. Without such cultural exchange we would not have a great many great works of art. For instance, we would not have Kurosawa's versions of Shakespeare's plays, nor American versions of Kurosawa's films. If it was morally wrong for white Westerners to perform ancient Chinese music, on the grounds of cultural appropriation, it would also mean it was wrong for those of Chinese ancestry to play Bach. In fact, I would not be listening now to Bach's cello suites performed by the brilliant Yo-Yo Ma, who is of Chinese descent.

Such cultural borrowings by members of one group from another are not an issue. The problem lies rather in the connotations of certain forms of cultural borrowings because of the political messages they contain. A website called 'Everyday Feminism' (<http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/06/cultural-appropriation-wrong/>) puts it in these words: 'A deeper understanding of cultural appropriation also refers to a particular ***power dynamic in which members of a dominant culture take elements from a culture of people who have been systematically oppressed by that dominant group.***' [*The bold characters and italics are the website's, not mine.*]

Such a definition might go some way to explaining why Lily Allen felt that she needed to apologise for borrowing elements of black culture in her music video, if she felt that she was representative of a dominant and oppressive group. But you don't need to think about it for very long to start to feel uneasy about the moral rectitude of this interpretation. For a start, members of an aggrieved party have to feel that they have been the victims of injustice (the domination of another group) *before* there can be a suspicion of 'cultural appropriation'. They aren't independent judges. Nor are their sympathisers. At the same time, the offenders need to recognise that they are a dominant group and that they have acted oppressively. These things are not cut and dried. There is likely to be a very large grey area in which there is a perception of wrongdoing but no actual crime.

These are just problems in applying the concept, however, they don't come close to the insidiousness that quietly lurks within the concept itself.

Consider the piece of music that I mentioned above, Yo-Yo Ma's performance of Bach's cello suites. Something about Bach's music breaks down the cultural divide between East and West. If music can help us to cross cultural frontiers, then playing the music of other cultures must be considered among the most beneficial creative acts imaginable. The same goes for Shakespeare's

plays. I don't care if the actors are from the Sahara or Siberia: like Bach's music, Shakespeare's plays are a gift to the whole world, not just to those of European descent.

Now, if the works of Bach and Shakespeare may be considered a gift to the world, then why should anything produced by a cultural minority not be regarded as potentially in the same terms? Why should only artistic creators working in the mainstream Western tradition be appropriated by other cultures and everything else have to remain isolated on the periphery? Why, let's say, could not a black trumpet player change music history as much as Bach? Why cannot a Japanese filmmaker change the ways in which films are constructed? Except that when the black trumpet player and the Japanese filmmaker are Louis Armstrong and Akira Kurosawa, it is not seen as 'cultural appropriation' but of 'having influence'.

Here the truth is out: if only a few people do it, it's called 'cultural appropriation' but if everyone does it, it's called 'having influence'. Thus to use the term 'cultural appropriation' is actually to belittle the ethnic original. It implies that that piece is unlikely to have a significant impact on the Western cultural mainstream.

This is just the beginning of the intolerance that lies within the idea that cultural appropriation is always wrong.

When an element of minority culture is taken up by the mainstream, it takes on a force of its own and enriches everyone. For example, the blues is a form of music that came out of the southern states of America in the early twentieth century. It was developed by black people, ex-slaves and the descendants of slaves, many of whom had worked on cotton farms. To say that no one should sing the blues unless they are black and American is absurd. It would be like saying you have to be a cotton-picker and a slave descendant to do so: the cultural context for the music has moved on. What's more, to say that we still should not 'appropriate' the music of black cotton pickers would be to say that Rock and Roll should be condemned as an act of

‘cultural appropriation’. No, rock and roll – and the freedom of youth expression connected with it – should all be *celebrated*. Cultural appropriation in that case has enriched us all – black and white – and has helped break down some of the barriers which the original ex-slaves had to found raised against them.

If something is morally wrong and the wrongdoing is directed exclusively at your own minority ethnic or cultural group, it is morally incumbent on you to object. Therefore to say ‘cultural appropriation’ is always wrong is to suggest that the victims of that appropriation are morally obliged to object to it. It follows that they are lacking integrity if they do not. If you are a native American and you do *not* object to people dressing up in feather headdresses, it might appear to some that you are not properly part of your cultural group (through no wrongdoing of your own). Thus to say that cultural appropriation is always wrong is tantamount to the cultural straitjacketing of minorities – in that it raises the expectation that they will defend their own culture and not adopt that of the mainstream. No such expectation is raised against members of the ‘dominant group’, who are free to be disloyal or loyal to their ethnic group as they see fit. The extreme cultural rigidity of such a world is alarming, and it does not empower members of the minority group even if it attempts to show respect for them.

You can carry on like this. The uses of kayaks and wigwams by people that oppressed Eskimos and native Americans fit the description of cultural appropriation. The administration of the wealthy Olympic Games is surely a cultural one-in-the-eye for the impoverished Greeks, who invented them. The Roman Empire was guilty of perhaps the greatest act of ‘cultural appropriation’ of all time when it took the core beliefs of a minority Middle Eastern cult after centuries of repressing its members. However, no one would argue that Christianity did not benefit hugely from the Romans appropriating their faith and form of worship. Anyone who has studied medieval Europe will be aware that for a thousand years the Roman Catholic Church was the only international force trying to maintain peace between kings and lords, and to promote

moral values and education, and to further the idea that men should help the poor and needy. In that sense, an act of ‘cultural appropriation’ was an immense benefit to a whole continent.

For all these reasons, cultural appropriation is not something to be associated only with cultural elements such as blackface and reggae: in its wider forms it is essential to the social wellbeing of the world. The key to it all is respect. It is not the cultural appropriation itself that is the problem, it is the lack of respect that underlies the crass or derogatory use of symbols from another culture.

Therefore, with great respect to all concerned, I will deliberately commit my very own act of cultural appropriation in ending this short essay. These words rightly belong to a Jew – a minority oppressed by dominant groups if ever there was one – but in my opinion they constitute the best response you could possibly make, should you ever feel that you yourself have been the victim of cultural appropriation.

Turn the other cheek.

Ian Mortimer, 4 Dec 2016