

# Definition of Cultural Appropriation

## What It Is, Why It Matters and How to Avoid It

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Cultural appropriation is when someone takes or uses elements of a culture to which they do not belong and does so without the permission or consent of those who do belong to the culture. In the context of the United States, cultural appropriation most often happens [across racial lines](#) and features white people taking and using elements of a culture from people of color, though not exclusively.

Use of the term and discussions of the phenomenon have become more common in recent years, especially in digital media and in online forums.

Katy Perry, Miley Cyrus, Iggy Azalea, model Cara Delavigne and the Kardashian/Jenner/West clan and many others have all been accused of cultural appropriation.

## A Sociological Definition of Cultural Appropriation

To truly understand cultural appropriation and why it is wrong we first have to understand [what culture is](#). Culture, in a sociological sense, is quite broad, and refers to the practices, beliefs, ideas, values, traditions, rituals, language, speech, modes of communication, material objects, and performances that are central to the social life of any given group of people. To whittle it down, you can think of culture as all the things a group of people think, do, and make.

Appropriation is defined as the illegal, unfair, or unjust usage or taking of something that belongs to someone else. So, when someone is accused of cultural appropriation, they are accused of taking or using elements of a culture to which they do not belong.

In the examples listed above, Katy Perry performed [as a Geisha](#) at the American Music Awards in 2013; Miley Cyrus has become known for twerking during performances -- a style of dance with roots in West Africa and more recently associated with southern hip-hop music; and Kortney Kardashian threw a birthday party for her niece North West that was dubbed "Kidchella" and featured North in a suede fringe dress and moccasins and Khloé Kardashian wore a feathered headdress while tipis adorned the property.

## Cultural Appropriation and Race

"But, wait," you might be thinking, "the U.S. is a melting pot of cultures. We all use and enjoy aspects of others' cultures all the time. What's wrong with that? And why is it that it is mostly white people who are accused of this?"

These are important questions because they give us the opportunity to breakdown the difference between assimilation and appropriation. Throughout U.S. history, because [whites and their ways have been, and still are, perceived as normal](#) -- as the default of what an "American" is -- those framed as other (people of color and newly arrived immigrants) were and are [socialized](#), pressured, and in some cases even forced to adopt the dominant culture of the U.S.; a culture defined by whites. Social institutions, like media, education, politics, the judicial system and the police, and peer groups and community leaders [incentivize assimilation](#) into the dominant culture by punishing and ostracizing those who do not assimilate. The adoption of the dominant culture by racially and ethnically marginalized groups is forced and required, in the sense that it is necessary for inclusion in society, and in some cases historically and today, physically forced.

Cultural appropriation, by contrast, is not required or forced. It is a choice, and as such, it is an [expression of privilege](#). While people of color are forced to adopt elements of mainstream white culture, white people can sample at the buffet of other cultures at their leisure, picking and choosing what they wish to consume.

This is an important distinction, but it doesn't adequately explain why so many people are angered by cultural appropriation. To grasp this, we have to use [the](#)

[sociological perspective](#) to put it into historical context, critically analyze the practice, and probe its implications.

## Today's Cultural Appropriation in Historical Context

Critics of cultural appropriation point out that it is not a new phenomenon, but actually a modern day continuance of centuries of theft of land and resources by white people from people of color.

[The colonial era was defined by these practices](#), which were justified by [the racist belief](#) that people of color were less than human. Imperial powers and the wealth of nations today were built on these practices using this justification.

Troublingly, the act of reducing a culture to a wearable or performative trend today serves to obscure the racial injustices and atrocities members of that culture have suffered and continue to suffer at the hands of those in power.

This is readily apparent in the fashion industry, where styles of dress or patterns from Native American cultures, for example, are appropriated, mass produced, and sold for profit. This is especially upsetting to the groups from which items or practices are appropriated when they have special significance. An unnamed author eloquently explains [in a must-read essay](#):

*...'appropriation' often occurs without any real understanding of why the original culture took part in these activities or the meanings behind these activities, often converting culturally significant artifacts, practices, and beliefs into 'meaningless' pop-culture or giving them a significance that is completely different/less nuanced than they would originally have had.*

Critics also point out that, often, what is appropriated is acceptable for white people to do or wear, but when practiced or displayed in its home culture, is marginalized, ridiculed, or even viewed as a threat. For example, several years ago scarves in the style of the keffiyeh, [a popular headdress in some Middle Eastern countries](#), became a fashion trend and was suddenly wrapped around the necks of the young and trendy across the U.S. Yet, this happened at a time of heightened [xenophobia and hate crimes](#) against Middle Eastern, Arab, and Muslim people (and those thought to be so) within the U.S. While the keffiyeh is trendy in the dominant culture, if a man to whom it is culturally native wears it as a headdress in the U.S., as it is meant to be worn, he is marked as different and threatening, perhaps even a "terrorist."

Similarly, writer [Sierra Mannie recently called out white gay men](#) for appropriating the dialect and mannerisms common among some Black women, while those very same Black women are often ridiculed and marginalized for those practices by members of the dominant culture. In many cases they are even barred from accessing jobs and education because of how they speak and interact. For some white gay men this is a fun and funny thing to do; for some black women, it is a cross to bear in a [systemically racist society](#). The same critical analysis applies to noted twerker, Miley Cyrus.

The unfair and unjust nature of cultural appropriation today often boils down to the disconnect between cultural symbols and their politics. White people can appropriate cultural elements and enjoy them simply as style, fashion, aesthetic, or as a performance made humorous by the disjuncture between the performer's race and that implied by the performance (i.e. white gay men speaking like Black women, the white duo behind the Thug Kitchen cookbook, and white teens throwing up "gang signs" and mean mugging in selfies).

People of color do not have this luxury. For them, culture is always, already political. It was political during the colonial era when it was used as evidence of the "white man's burden" to "civilize" them. It was political when indigenous American children were stolen from their families and shipped to boarding schools, stripped of their culture, and forcefully assimilated. It's political when children of recent immigrants are ridiculed for eating "stinky" and "weird" food in the school cafeteria. It's political when little Black girls are sent home from school because their hair "is a distraction," or when Blue Ivy, daughter of Jay-Z and Beyoncé, is described as "unkempt" because her hair is in its natural state. It's political when school boards ban ethnic studies courses, books by non-white authors, and the speaking of languages other than English in classrooms.

## Can Cultural Appropriation be a Form of Respect?

Despite this, some argue that they appropriate cultural elements in order to express their admiration for the culture, or to honor it. In response to that, our anonymous writer offers this:

*Cultural appropriation is not an acceptable way to honor, respect, or appreciate People of Color. If you wish to honor, respect, or appreciate Black people or Black culture, then you should learn how to recognize, confront,*

*and dismantle systematic racism instead of appropriating dreadlocks, a symbol of the wearer's commitment to Jah Rastafari and Black resistance to racism. If you wish to honor, respect, or appreciate Native people or Native culture, learn how to listen to Native people when they identify very real problems (and how to confront them) faced by Native people today, such as astronomical suicide and alcoholism rates on reservations or the continued theft of Native lands by resource extraction companies.*

There are, however, acceptable ways to "honor, respect, or appreciate" people of color and their cultures. They all begin with, [as Jarune Uwujaren puts it](#), "engaging with a culture as a respectful and humble guest, invitation only." This is the difference between sharing and appropriating -- being offered to partake (and doing so respectfully), as opposed to simply taking. [Brownturage and Mojuicy write](#) that they are willing to give a pass to those who appropriate in order to educate others meaningfully and passionately about the culture from which the item or practice comes, or for those who are participating in a religious or cultural event. So, there are some instances in which cultural appropriation is not deeply problematic, but they are few and far between in today's cultural landscape.

## How to Avoid Cultural Appropriation

So, before buying that cool "ethnic" or "unique" piece, or adopting someone else's dialect or cultural practices, ask yourself these questions, courtesy of [Brownturage and Mojuicy](#):

1. What culture does this style reference, and what is my relation to that culture?
2. Why am I wearing it?
3. Who made the product, and who's selling it?
4. How accurate/respectful is it to the source?

If you don't know the answer to these questions, or if when answered honestly they reveal some heavy historical, racial, political, or economic implications, it's best to move on living your life without that item or practice.